



## Positive direction

India must ensure greater transparency in talks with China

The 23rd meeting of the "Special Representatives" (SRs) of India and China – National Security Adviser Ajit Doval and Chinese Foreign Affairs Minister and Senior Politburo member Wang Yi – was a milestone in the restoration of ties since October this year. Although the meeting of SRs is a stand-alone process, meant to look at the broader boundary dispute and resolve differences over the 3,500 kilometre-long Line of Actual Control (LAC), it had been paused since the military standoff in 2020. There were a few firsts too: the two men meeting in their capacities as SRs since 2019, although they have held talks in the interim; such a high-level visit to China and also Mr. Doval travelling to Beijing since 2020. This indicates that the decision to hold the SR talks, as mandated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping during talks in Kazan in October, is a signal that with only LAC disengagement completed, New Delhi is willing to move ahead on other mechanisms for talks with Beijing, without waiting for the next processes of de-escalation and de-induction. The two sides have agreed to restart the Kailash-Manasarovar Yatra from India, border trade in Sikkim, and data sharing for trans-boundary rivers. Other suspended ties, including direct flights, business and student visa liberalisation, and journalist exchanges, are also understood to be under discussion. On the boundary question, the Doval-Wang talks yielded what the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs termed as "six consensus", and the Ministry of External Affairs referred to as "positive directions" in its release. These involve continuing to implement the LAC de-escalation process; revert to the SR process on resolving the boundary issue according to the Eleven-articles set out in a 2005 agreement; strengthen Confidence Building Measures at the border and cross-border exchanges; enhance coordination of the SR process, and the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs to follow up agreements and to hold the next Doval-Wang talks in 2025 in India.

The optics and the messaging of the SR meeting indicate a certain momentum in re-engagement after four years of serious military tensions, and the suspension of regular contact, although bilateral trade continued to thrive. The meeting comes just ahead of 2025, that marks 75 years of diplomatic relations, and a likely visit to China by Mr. Modi as he hosts the next SCO summit. While restoring the links is important, it is necessary to strike a note of caution so that the situation caused by the amassing of troops and LAC transgressions by the PLA in 2020 is not repeated. The government must also ensure more transparency in its conversations with Beijing over the future steps in normalising ties, the dismantling of buffer zones, restoration of *status quo ante* to 2020, and mechanisms for future deterrence against aggression at the India-China boundary.

## For survival skills

India must have survival-at-sea training in schools and workplaces

The Mumbai boat tragedy is a wake-up call for improving marine safety. A busy port, a naval dockyard, the Mazagon dockyard, fishing boats, and a popular tourist destination – the Gateway of India, a launching pad for tourist boat rides – are all located in the same area. Merchant ships and naval vessels jostle for space with tourist and fishing boats, creating a congested and potentially hazardous environment. Sea trials of a new craft involving testing it under the most stringent operating conditions to determine whether machinery and hull are safe and seaworthy. Typically, sea trials for merchant ships are conducted in open waters. However, the naval speed boat that collided with *Neelkamal* is typically housed inside a naval ship and launched only for operations. This means it must be tested for maximum speed and manoeuvrability in shallow waters, possibly ruling out open-sea testing. During sea trials, machinery and controls are often subjected to strenuous conditions, increasing the likelihood of failure. On Wednesday, such a failure likely occurred, leading to the collision. *Neelkamal* is an old-fashioned V-shaped wooden boat prone to capsizing if it takes on water, though it will not sink. When the accident occurred, pilot boats from the port rescued around 100 passengers, most of whom were wearing life jackets, which are a proven defence against drowning. Unfortunately, those who could not hold on to the capsized boat or were not wearing life jackets did not survive.

An inquiry will determine whether the boat was carrying more passengers than its capacity and if there were enough readily accessible life jackets. It is necessary to establish guidelines for life jackets that can be donned quickly and easily, even by panic-stricken individuals, without being prohibitively expensive. Tragedies such as the 2009 Thekkady boat disaster have raised significant awareness in Kerala about the importance of life jackets. However, this incident serves as a broader reminder that sea or water transport is fundamentally different from road and rail travel. The sea – and even deep freshwater bodies – remains an inhospitable domain for humans. Without assistance, drowning or hypothermia is likely. In Scandinavian countries, where the sea is an integral part of daily life, survival skills for the water are taught to everyone. It may be time for India to incorporate survival-at-sea training into schools and workplaces, alongside first aid and other life-saving measures, to foster greater awareness and preparedness.

Many in Sri Lanka closely tracked their President Anura Kumara Dissanayake's recent visit to India. The ceremonial red carpet welcome he received from Indian President Droupadi Murmu and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, his various engagements, and, importantly, the joint statement issued by the two governments, drew much notice in the local media.

It was Mr. Dissanayake's first state visit abroad, after he won the presidency in September this year, and the ruling National People's Power (NPP) won a spectacular two-thirds majority in the general election in November. India was hosting not just one of Sri Lanka's most powerful Presidents but also a leftist leader from a party (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna - JVP or the People's Liberation Front) that once furiously opposed India and its perceived "interventionist" role in Sri Lanka.

Much has indeed changed in India, Sri Lanka, and in India-Sri Lanka relations. The JVP is not the same today, as the story of its rise to state power reveals. Neither is Sri Lanka, whose political landscape stands radically altered in ways few imagined possible two years ago. Analysts are yet to fully decipher the astounding victory of the JVP-led NPP, especially in the island nation's north, east, and the hill country that are home to the country's Tamil, Muslim and Malayala Tamil minorities. India's priorities, too, have seen a marked shift, as New Delhi remains preoccupied with countering Chinese influence in the neighbourhood.

### Changing Indian interests

While everything else changes, Sri Lanka's long-pending national question remains, with all past governments in Colombo failing to deliver a definitive political settlement. India's past involvement as an arbiter of Tamil rights, for many in Sri Lanka, set high expectations for its influence in more recent decades, including the post-war years since 2009. In an interview to this daily in 2022, late Tamil leader R. Sampanthan said "India has a special duty" in ensuring that the spirit of the Indo-Lanka Accord of 1987, and the 13th Amendment to the Sri Lankan Constitution born out of it, are fully implemented. Except, Indian interests today are evidently different.

The joint statement issued by New Delhi and Colombo on December 16, 2024, offers a reality check. The 34-point document, titled 'Fostering partnerships for a shared future', and spanning political, economic, and strategic cooperation, makes no reference to the pending political solution, or post-war reconciliation, or Tamil aspirations. The only power sharing that finds mention is in a proposal for a high-capacity grid



Meera Srinivasan

interconnection between India and Sri Lanka.

However, in his remarks at the joint press conference, Mr. Modi said, "We hope that the Sri Lankan government shall fulfil the aspirations of the Tamil people. And that they shall fulfil their commitment towards fully implementing the Constitution of Sri Lanka and conducting the Provincial Council Elections." He did not reference the 13th Amendment.

Mr. Dissanayake framed the issue differently. He said, "People from all the Provinces – North, South, East, and West – representing diverse communities and various walks of life contributed to this mandate. As a leader entrusted with such an important responsibility by my people, I clearly understand that the essence of democracy lies in the coexistence of diverse political views and groups."

The NPP's poll manifesto includes an assurance to hold elections to the provincial councils, now defunct for over five years, and enact a new Constitution based on wide public consultations. President Dissanayake, too, has made the pledge more than once. But his government is yet to spell out its own vision for a durable political solution.

The NPP has consistently avoided the language of the "13th Amendment" that till date carries the baggage of "Indian imposition" for the country's Sinhala-Buddhist majority, and likely triggers discomfort for the JVP party base. In a recent column, 'NPP in Power: Possibilities for Post-War Reconciliation through Civic Nationalism', Sri Lankan political scientist Jayadeva Uyangoda observed that the NPP shuns both the "devolution discourse" introduced by India, and the "liberal peace discourse" of conflict resolution, reconciliation, and peacebuilding, promoted by agencies of the United Nations, global and local rights groups. He wrote, "The NPP does not seem to want its agenda for inter-ethnic peace and reconciliation in Sri Lanka to be seen as a continuation of what it sees as 'failed' past attempts."

### Contentious amendment

The controversial 13th Amendment continues to evoke mixed, and often strong, reactions among Sri Lankans. Even the Tamils are divided over whether it is a necessary but insufficient measure of power devolution, or a problematic legislation that tamed historic demands for federalism. The last time that the 13th Amendment went out of focus was when the Maithripala Sirisena-Ranil Wickremesinghe administration (2015-19) attempted drafting a new constitution. The effort failed, but Mr. Dissanayake has said his government would build on the draft.

It is true that two main formulations of the past have not proved successful for the Tamil people.

The joint statement issued by New Delhi and Colombo during the Sri Lankan President's India visit reveals the neighbours' current preoccupations

It is also not hard to see why the JVP may be wary of using either discourse. But the Tamils who contributed significantly to the NPP's big win are justified in seeking greater clarity on what the government has in mind for them. Fifteen years after the end of the civil war, they are still doggedly chasing the truth about their forcibly disappeared loved ones. They are still fighting to reclaim their land held by the military. They are still struggling to rebuild their livelihoods shattered in those years of bloodshed and mass destruction. They still do not have a say in how their provinces, setback by a devastating war, should be reconstructed.

The government's promise of national integration or a unified "Sri Lankan identity" can be evaluated only based on its specific policies to address war-time accountability, political agency, and meaningful development in the north and east. A new political order may now be at the country's helm, but old questions will not go away.

The recent elections have given Mr. Dissanayake and the NPP rare national momentum and unprecedented legislative influence. The government now has a real chance to reimagine the political solution through people's post-war realities.

### State of the Tamil polity

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka's Tamil polity, too, faces a big challenge. After the electorate delivered a clear message to the regional Tamil parties in the recent polls – the NPP beat them in all but one district in the north and east – the Tamil polity is struggling to regain its voice.

After habitually looking to the international community to push for Tamil rights, the Tamil political leadership is now forced to confront its own failure. Those counting on India would do well to understand that the Tamil question is no more an issue that serves a domestic political compulsion or provides diplomatic leverage to New Delhi. It is time they recognised India's waning interest and influence on the Tamil question. Besides, they must ask if India has any moral standing to ask another country to treat minorities better.

The Tamil polity's core strategy of engaging western powers dominating UN bodies, India, and the Tamil diaspora has clearly not yielded substantive progress on the ground. To remain relevant and rebuild credibility, the Tamil polity appears to have little choice but to reorient itself to the people it seeks to represent. The Tamil people in Sri Lanka have reminded their leaders, who were busy talking to actors elsewhere for years, to listen to them now.

meera.srinivasan@thehindu.co.in

# Crimes against humanity and an obtuse Indian stance

On December 4, 2024, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) adopted a resolution approving the text of a proposed treaty governing the prevention and punishment of crimes against humanity (CAH treaty). This marks the beginning of the negotiation process among states for the conclusion of a CAH treaty. This resolution comes five years after the International Law Commission submitted the draft text of a CAH treaty to the Sixth Committee – the primary forum for considering legal questions in the UNGA. This development is a landmark in the international community's quest to combat impunity for CAH.

### There is a gap in accountability

Alongside genocide and war crimes, CAH are among the grave international crimes which the International Criminal Court (ICC), established under the Rome Statute, seeks to punish. Importantly, genocide and war crimes are also governed by dedicated treaties, i.e., the Genocide Convention of 1948 and the Geneva Conventions of 1949, respectively. However, CAH are governed only under the Rome Statute, which includes specific criminal acts such as murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation, torture, imprisonment, and rape committed as part of a "widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, with knowledge of the attack". CAH were first codified in the 1945 London Charter establishing the Nuremberg Tribunal to investigate and prosecute the crimes committed in connection with the Second World War, and later in the statutes of the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia, and Rwanda. However, there is no dedicated treaty for CAH yet, creating a gap in terms of accountability in the legal architecture of international criminal justice. There are three reasons justifying the need for a CAH treaty.



Varsha Singh  
Assistant Professor  
at the National  
Law University,  
Jodhpur, Rajasthan

India's response to a 'crimes against humanity' treaty aligns with its aversion to the Rome Statute and the International Criminal Court

First, the jurisdiction of the ICC covers a limited number of states, making it challenging to punish perpetrators of CAH in non-member states. Second, the Rome Statute and the ICC only address individual criminal responsibility. A dedicated CAH treaty would allow for holding states accountable under international law for their failure to prevent the commission of CAH, as is the case with the Genocide Convention of 1948. For instance, in 2019, The Gambia filed a case before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) against Myanmar for alleged violations of the Genocide Convention against the ethnic Rohingya population. A dedicated CAH treaty would create an obligation for state parties to adopt administrative, legislative, or judicial measures to prevent the commission of CAH. Failure to meet this obligation could become the basis for the ICJ's jurisdiction if the CAH treaty so provides. Third, a CAH treaty presents an opportunity to enlarge the scope of CAH to include, as suggested by various states in the Sixth Committee, starvation of civilian populations, gender apartheid, forced pregnancy, the use of nuclear weapons, terrorism, exploitation of natural resources, and crimes against indigenous populations.

### India's stand

India is not a party to the Rome Statute and has consistently objected to the ICC's jurisdiction over issues such as the powers of the ICC prosecutor, the role of the UN Security Council under the Rome Statute, and the non-inclusion of 'use of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction' as a war crime. Further, India has argued that crimes committed only during armed conflicts – and not those committed during peacetime – should be considered CAH. Moreover, India does not favour the inclusion of 'enforced disappearance' as an act that can

constitute CAH. Instead, India advocates for the inclusion of 'terrorism' as an act amounting to CAH. India's response to a CAH treaty aligns with its aversion to the Rome Statute and the ICC. For the last five years, since 2019, India has consistently argued for an 'in-depth study' and thorough discussion on the need for a dedicated treaty. India's stance at the UNGA reflects its scepticism that a CAH treaty might duplicate the already existing regime under the Rome Statute. Further, India takes issue with the exclusion of 'terror-related acts' and the 'use of nuclear weapons' from the definition of CAH in the proposed treaty. Most importantly, reiterating that it is not a party to the Rome Statute, India has stressed at the UNGA that national legislations and the jurisdiction of national courts are more appropriate fora for dealing with CAH and other international crimes.

### Lead the way

Currently, India does not have domestic legislation prohibiting international crimes. In 2018, Justice S. Muradhar of the Delhi High Court in *State vs Sajjan Kumar* observed that "neither crimes against humanity nor genocide have been made part of India's criminal law, a lacuna that needs to be addressed urgently". Nonetheless, there is little or no debate on the need for such laws in the domestic legal and policy spaces. The recent amendments to the criminal law were a missed opportunity to include these crimes in the penal law. This is inconsistent with India's own insistence on the primacy of national and territorial jurisdiction for dealing with CAH. India should incorporate CAH and other international crimes into its domestic law, even if it is not a party to the Rome Statute, and lead the way in ending impunity for grave human rights violations – a role that befits a true *Vishwaguru*.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### In Parliament

Just what is happening to our elected representatives? Are they street fighters or political representatives? The much vaunted debate on the Constitution of India was a waste of time. Instead of a well-thought-out and dignified review of the Constitution, Indian cricket has bid farewell to a true legend ('Sport' page, December 19). From spinning webs around the world's best batsmen to his astute cricketing intellect, Ashwin redefined

fought well and dignity was never bruised. Our politics and their practitioners have plumbed low depths. T.C. Narayan, Bengaluru

### Leaving on his terms

With R. Ashwin's retirement, Indian cricket has bid farewell to a true legend ('Sport' page, December 19). From spinning webs around the world's best batsmen to his astute cricketing intellect, Ashwin redefined

off-spin bowling. His staggering achievements, which include invaluable all-round performances and strategic mastery, have left an indelible mark. Off the field, his engaging YouTube channel and mentorship of young talent showcased his passion for nurturing the next generation. Salutations to him for choosing to respect the legacy of Anil Kumble by retiring gracefully, even when he had much potential left. A student of the game and a

leader on and off the field, Ashwin's legacy will inspire generations. L.S. Hareesh, Chennai

Ashwin will be remembered as one of the toughest competitors with a sharp

cricketing brain. He would have made an astute captain. He was willing to re-invent himself. He left on a high note and in the right way where everyone was left asking 'Why?' Subash Balakrishnan, Mississauga, Ontario, Canada

It is very unfortunate that Ashwin had to make an unceremonious exit from international cricket – this is the perception. He has had a rough journey throughout his career. In every match, he had to prove his position in the team. S. Venkateswaran, Chennai

### Corrections & Clarifications

The caption of a standalone photograph titled "Honouring the bravehearts" (inside pages, December 17, 2024) erroneously identified the Chief of the Army Staff as General Manoj Pande. It should have been General Uday Desai.

The Reader's Editor's office can be contacted by telephone: +91-44-2845.827/28576300. E-mail: readerseditor@thehindu.co.in



## NEWS IN NUMBERS

### Strength of Odisha's new Armed Police Reserve Force

**131** The Odisha government has set up a company of Armed Police Reserve force to strengthen wildlife protection in Similipal Tiger Reserve. The purpose is to bolster anti-poaching efforts, protect wildlife and forest resources, maintain law and order within the reserve, a notification said.

### Indian companies meeting U.K. Prime Minister Keir Starmer

**13** Prime Minister Keir Starmer hosted a delegation of 13 Indian companies on what the British government described as a "curated visit" to enhance the bilateral partnership and boost investment flows. The visit follows Starmer's meeting with PM Narendra Modi on the sidelines of the G20 Summit.

### Norway central bank keeps policy interest rate on hold

**4.50** in per cent. Norway's bank held its interest rate unchanged at a 16-year high of 4.50% on Thursday, and said it plans to start cutting borrowing costs in March next year. The Norwegian monetary policy stance contrasts with other Western central banks.

### Number of casualties due to Cyclone Chido in Mayotte

**31** France's President Emmanuel Macron arrived Thursday in the Indian Ocean archipelago of Mayotte to survey the devastation that Cyclone Chido wrought across the French territory as thousands of people tried to cope without the bare essentials such as water or electricity.

### Rise in German exports to United Kingdom

**5.30** in per cent. German exports to Britain are growing faster than to any other country among the G20 nations due to an ongoing gold rally, according to preliminary data from the German statistics office.

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# The political crisis in South Korea

Yoon Suk Yeol's presidency reached a breaking point with his controversial declaration of martial law on December 3, which was overturned by the National Assembly; his impeachment by the Assembly on December 14 has now set the stage for a prolonged legal battle in South Korea's Constitutional court

## WORLD INSIGHT

Sandip Kumar Mishra

Nine days after coming to power, Democratic Party president Moon Jae-in appointed a new Chief of the Seoul Central District Prosecutors' Office on May 19, 2017. The new Chief was able to indict two former Presidents belonging to the main conservative party in South Korea — Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye. Mr. Moon and his party were impressed and in June 2019, the protagonist was appointed the Prosecutor General of South Korea. The Prosecutor General was Yoon Suk Yeol, who later became the President of South Korea and is now a key figure in the current political crisis, having been impeached by the National Assembly on December 14, 2024.

## How it started

Mr. Yoon was playing a key role in the Moon Jae-in administration, but it was announced on August 9, 2019, that Cho Kuk would be the next Justice Minister. Mr. Cho had studied at the same university as Mr. Yoon, with Mr. Yoon being a few years his senior. After learning of Mr. Cho's nomination, Mr. Yoon reportedly approached President Moon expressing his disapproval. Mr. Moon, however, appointed Mr. Cho on September 9, 2019.

Mr. Yoon used his Prosecutor office to reveal several corruption charges against Mr. Cho. Allegations against him included that he plagiarised his writings, that an institute run by his family evaded taxes, and his family invested in illicit business activities, his daughter submitted false documents related to academic achievements. His wife was charged and later sent to jail for four years. All this led to huge protests by conservative party supporters demanding Mr. Cho's removal. Finally, he resigned after just 35 days in office.

The incident led to a contest between the Moon Jae-in administration and Mr. Yoon. Mr. Moon avoided taking any undemocratic means to remove Mr. Yoon from his post, but subsequent Justice Ministers under his administration tried to settle scores with Mr. Yoon. On November 24, 2020, Justice Minister Cho Mi-ae suspended Mr. Yoon, accusing him of ethical violations and interference in key investigations. However, Mr. Yoon challenged the suspension in court and was reinstated.

Interestingly, Mr. Yoon, who was considered close to the Democratic Party and instrumental in the indictment of two conservative Presidents, became a hero among conservative party supporters.

In various opinion surveys, Mr. Yoon had the highest popularity among all the existing conservative leaders, and suggestions became strong that if he became the conservative party's presidential candidate, he might be victorious. Conservative supporters were very hurt by two of their former Presidents in jail — one of them Ms. Park, who was the eldest daughter of Park Chung-hee whom the conservatives adore as a major Korean leader. The conservative supporters thought Mr. Yoon would be the right leader to teach Moon Jae-in and his peers in the Democratic Party a lesson.

Mr. Yoon grabbed this opportunity and resigned from the position of Prosecutor General on March 4, 2021, and announced his presidential candidacy in June 2021. He officially joined the conservative People Power Party (PPP) in July 2021. Despite making several political blunders, careless and controversial



**Right on:** A protester, wearing a mask of impeached Yoon Suk Yeol, performs in a mock prison during a demonstration calling for Yoon's ouster in Seoul, on Thursday.

remarks, and lacking political experience, Mr. Yoon was selected as the PPP's presidential candidate in November 2021. He had a difficult battle against the Democratic Party's Lee Jae-myung but defeated him in the March 2022 presidential elections by a margin of less than one percent.

## Two Koreas in South Korea

Over the years, the divide between conservatives and liberals in South Korea has become very sharp. Generally, conservative party supporters tend to be older, less educated, wealthy businessmen, and residents of Gyeongsang North, Gyeongsang South, and Gangwon provinces. Young, more educated, middle-class, people coming from Jeolla North and Jeolla South Provinces are more inclined towards the liberal party. In a way, the division is not only ideological but also generational and regional. In recent years, young males in South Korea have also moved towards conservative parties, as they feel that ultra-feminism has ruined traditional gender and social relations. For the conservatives, authoritarian leader Mr. Park Chung-hee who is considered to be the main architect of South Korea's economic development is the source of inspiration and, for the liberals, Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun are the leaders who brought democratisation to the country. Conservatives are typically pro-American, more accommodating toward Japan, and confrontational towards North Korea. Liberals, on the other hand, advocate for greater autonomy in South Korea's foreign policy (while maintaining the U.S. alliance), are critical of Japan's rising assertiveness, favour engagement with North Korea, and seek better relations with China.

The divide has been further accentuated by the prevalence of social media. In the tenures of the last five Presidents, there have always been street protests, affecting the smooth running of the country. Polarisation between the two groups has led to vendetta politics, where each new administration seeks to implicate and punish its predecessors on charges of corruption or illegality. It has led to a situation that all the previous Presidents of South Korea belonging from both conservative and liberal parties have been either exiled (Syngman Rhee), killed (Park Chung-hee), had jail sentences (Chun Do-hwan, Roh Moo-hyun, Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye), charged for corruption (Kim Dae-jung and Moon Jae-in) or committed suicide (Roh Moo-hyun).

## Presidency under Yoon

In March 2022, Mr. Yoon was elected as the President of South Korea. However,

his popularity ratings were very low, hovering around 20%-30%. His inexperience and incompetence in politics became evident early in his tenure. Rather than working on South Korean domestic and foreign policies in a deft, nuanced manner, he started using broad strokes. Most acts and policies were announced as 'big moves'.

For example, he tried to reach out to Japan despite the popular mood in South Korea not favouring it and Japan not making any concessions. He did not oppose Japan releasing the Fukushima nuclear power plant water into the sea, a decision disapproved by over 70% of South Koreans. He attended the annual summit meeting of NATO which was the first time by any South Korean leader. He visited Ukraine and indirectly supported it. He announced an Indo-Pacific strategy and opted for a tit-for-tat policy towards North Korea. All these 'bold moves' were not only disliked by liberals but also by most of the Korean people, especially those who believe that South Korea is a middle power and should not get into great power politics. His foreign policies strained relations with Russia and China while allowing North Korea to strengthen its ties with both nations.

In another 'bold move', he announced the doubling of seats for medical students, which were frozen for more than a decade. His approach to targeting Opposition leaders, combined with the heavy-handed use of prosecutors and police, further deepened public unease. Meanwhile, the South Korean economy, which was already facing problems in the post-COVID phase, was negatively affected. Moreover, his wife's conduct and allegations of several corruption matters, including the 'Dior bag scandal', made him more unpopular.

This led to the growing unpopularity of Mr. Yoon and his party PPP. In the National Assembly elections in April 2024, six Opposition parties secured 192 seats out of 300 seats, which led to a huge problem of governance under Mr. Yoon. The Opposition started asserting against the President's policies, his appointments of close friends to important positions in government, and demanded a special probe on charges against his wife.

## What lies ahead

Mr. Yoon had no experience in dealing with political contests, and the Opposition's aggressive approach in the National Assembly after April 2024 left him frustrated. In desperation, he decided to declare emergency martial law on December 3, 2024, at 10:24 p.m., despite reported opposition from most of his Ministers. Mr. Yoon, along with the Defence Minister, sent the military and police to various places including the

National Assembly. He was in constant touch with them and ordered them to arrest several political leaders. He also reportedly ordered that members should not be allowed to enter into the National Assembly.

However, military and police officials moved reluctantly and they were not willing or able to stop a large number of people gathering in front of the National Assembly. National Assembly members voted 190-0 against martial law by midnight. As per the South Korean constitution, a simple majority in the 300-member House may repeal martial law and the President has no choice but to comply. Finally, at the dawn of December 4, Mr. Yoon announced the withdrawal of martial law.

On December 5, an impeachment motion was brought in the National Assembly and put up for vote on December 7 evening.

Meanwhile, the ruling PPP was in fix on how to respond to this crisis. If it supported the impeachment motion, they would lose the support of hardcore conservatives, a substantial set of the electorate, and if they opposed it, they would lose face to the rest of the Koreans. So even though most of the conservative leaders expressed opinions against martial law, they refrained from supporting the impeachment motion. The PPP decided not to take part in the voting and the motion could not get passed. As impeachment requires the support of 200 out of 300 Assembly members, the motion failed with only three PPP members voting in favour.

The Opposition decided to bring another impeachment motion, which was voted on December 14. Mr. Yoon declared to be impeached by 204 votes in favour of the motion in the National Assembly. Mr. Yoon still stubbornly says that he would fight it out in the Constitutional court of South Korea and refused to resign.

The Constitutional court could deliberate on the impeachment for many months. Of the court's nine seats, three are currently vacant, and a minimum of six affirmative votes is required to validate the impeachment. It means all present judges must agree with the motion and Mr. Yoon is aware that four of the six judges reportedly have conservative leanings, and one was appointed by him. Although popular pressure would be high on judges, Mr. Yoon still hopes for his survival.

Meanwhile, delaying tactics would mean that the leader of the main Opposition party, Mr. Lee, may get a jail sentence as the case against him for corruption charges is scheduled to be decided by February-March next year. Mr. Cho, who launched a political party and won 18 seats in the National Assembly, was given a two-year jail sentence by the Supreme Court on December 12 and the Opposition thinks that if Mr. Lee also falls, it would be less advantageous for the Democratic Party in the next Presidential election.

The political crisis in South Korea may get over in a few months. However, it has laid bare the immaturity of its political leaders and parties and the weakness of its democratic institutions. The ray of hope comes from the South Korean people, who, while divided in two opposite camps seem to agree that the present represents an existential crisis for its democracy. If the political crisis does not get resolved and democratic institutions are not strengthened, the implications on South Korea's image could be severe.

Sandip Kumar Mishra is Professor, Centre for East Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlar Nehru University, New Delhi

## THE GIST

Yoon Suk Yeol, a former Prosecutor General, became South Korea's President in 2022 despite limited political experience. His tenure was marked by controversial policies, strained foreign relations, and deepened public dissatisfaction.

Facing mounting opposition and governance challenges, Yoon declared martial law on December 3, 2024, which was swiftly repealed by the National Assembly. This move enraged the public and intensified calls for his impeachment.

Although an initial impeachment motion failed due to the ruling PPP's abstention, a second motion on December 14 succeeded with 204 votes. Yoon has refused to resign and plans to challenge the decision in the Constitutional court, where his fate remains uncertain.



# Should legislatures in India have fixed tenures?



P.D.T. Achary

Former Secretary General of Lok Sabha



M.R. Madhavan

Co-founder and president of the PRS Legislative Research

## PARLEY

**T**he Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Ninth Amendment) Bill, 2024, introduced in the Lok Sabha on December 17, 2024, mandates a fixed five-year term for the Lok Sabha, with State Legislature elections aligned to this cycle. If the Lok Sabha or any State Assembly is dissolved before completing its full term, mid-term elections will be held only for the remainder of the five-year term. Should legislatures in India have fixed tenures? P.D.T. Achary and M.R. Madhavan discuss the question in a conversation moderated by Aaratrika Bhaumik. Edited excerpts:

### Do fixed legislative tenures promote better governance by reducing the disruptions of frequent elections?

**P.D.T. Achary:** It is worth questioning whether this Bill and the proposal for simultaneous polls are necessary at all. The claim that such a system will reduce electoral expenditure lacks credibility. A portion of the expenditure is allocated by the Election Commission and State governments through budgetary provisions from the Centre and the States. However, the majority of election spending is incurred by political parties. Even if some costs are saved, it is improbable that political parties would redirect these funds towards development or infrastructure projects. More importantly, frequent elections enhance political accountability, compelling representatives to regularly engage with the electorate.

**M.R. Madhavan:** This Bill does not propose a fixed term for legislatures, as it allows for mid-term elections. It ensures accountability to the legislature, in line with the core tenet of the parliamentary system. By permitting mid-term elections, the Bill is also in conformity with the basic structure of the Constitution. The key change, however, is that in the event of a mid-term election, the term of the newly elected legislature will be shorter than five years. Whether this improves governance is uncertain. However, it does not provide the same stability as the U.S. presidential system, for instance, where the incumbent President can only be removed through impeachment.

### Does aligning the tenure of State Assemblies with that of the Lok Sabha compromise federalism and pose a threat to political plurality?

**MRM:** I find the Bill symmetrical since it also aligns the tenure of Parliament with that of



The winter session of the Parliament, in New Delhi, ANI

State Assemblies. For instance, if the Central government collapses after three years, fresh elections will be conducted for the Lok Sabha, and the newly elected legislative body will serve only a reduced term of two years. Therefore, I don't think State Assemblies are being aligned with Parliament. Rather, the Bill standardises the timing of all elections to a common date. I do not see any threat to federalism in this approach.

The argument that simultaneous polls would drive voters to select the same party for both the Centre and the State Assembly is flawed, as it underestimates the electorate's intelligence. Historical examples, such as the 2014 elections in Delhi, demonstrate that voters can and do make distinct choices. Despite the BJP's overwhelming victory at the Centre, voters elected the AAP in the State Assembly, despite both polls being held within six months of each other.

**PDTA:** For the first time, this Bill seeks to make the tenure of State Assemblies contingent upon that of Parliament. For instance, if Parliament completes its full term while a State Assembly is only in its second year, the Assembly would be prematurely dissolved, with elections held concurrently with Parliament. This approach undermines the principles of federalism. Under the existing constitutional framework, State Assemblies function as autonomous legislative bodies. This Bill seeks to alter their independent tenure, a crucial attribute of the federal structure.

### Could such a system discourage attempts to destabilise governments and curb practices like horse-trading?

**PDTA:** This is a novel proposal, and it is difficult to predict whether such a system can



Under the existing constitutional framework, State Assemblies function as autonomous legislative bodies. This Bill seeks to alter their independent tenure, a crucial attribute of the federal structure

P.D.T. ACHARY

effectively deter these practices at this stage. However, a greater concern lies in the potential erosion of India's identity as a federal republic, which is rooted in the autonomy of its legislative bodies.

**MRM:** My understanding of the Bill is that it aligns the tenure of State Assemblies with Parliament for the first time. However, after a few electoral cycles, if a mid-term election occurs for Parliament, State Assemblies will continue and will not be dissolved.

Recent large-scale defections in Madhya Pradesh and Karnataka, where MLAs resigned or were disqualified, triggered by-elections. However, I doubt the Bill will curb such practices. A more significant concern is the dissolution of the House. If a government falls after three and a half years, mid-term elections will be necessary, taking an additional 4-6 months. This would result in a Lok Sabha with a tenure of one year or less, which I believe is undesirable.

### Does the Bill adequately account for political exigencies? For instance, if the ruling party splits but the breakaway faction refuses to side with the Opposition.

**MRM:** I believe the Bill effectively addresses such contingencies. For instance, the 2013 Delhi and 2005 Bihar legislative Assembly elections resulted in hung Assemblies. In Delhi, the Congress, AAP, and BJP were unable to arrive at a consensus and form the government. The Bill resolves such deadlocks by allowing fresh elections to take place. The only difference is that the newly elected legislature will serve a reduced tenure rather than the full five years.

**PDTA:** The Constitution prescribes a five-year term for State Assemblies and the Lok Sabha but allows for their dissolution to address political exigencies. This flexibility reflects a pragmatic approach to governance. While fixed legislative tenures provide stability, the option to dissolve legislatures is crucial for addressing political instability. For instance, State governments have often dissolved Assemblies

to seek a fresh and decisive mandate through mid-term elections – a contingency the Bill fails to adequately address.

### Could the German model of a constructive vote of no-confidence help resolve political stalemates?

**PDTA:** Such a proposal was rejected by the high-level committee led by former President Ram Nath Kovind. It has also been deliberated upon previously, but I doubt its adoption is feasible in India.

**MRM:** I don't think it is a viable option given our system. In most instances, when a ruling government loses a no-confidence motion, no alternative government commands a majority in the House. This could lead to a situation where the incumbent government remains in power but lacks the majority needed to pass essential bills or the budget.

### The U.K.'s Fixed-term Parliaments Act of 2011, repealed in 2022, was criticised for triggering constitutional crises and policy paralysis. Are there lessons for India?

**MRM:** The Bill is being misunderstood as proposing fixed legislative tenures when it only introduces a "maximum term". This is different from the system that existed in the U.K., where a newly elected legislature would complete its full five-year term, even if mid-term elections were to be held. In contrast, under the system proposed by the Bill, if the government loses the confidence of the legislative majority, mid-term elections will be called, and the newly elected legislature will then serve a truncated tenure.

**PDTA:** In a country like ours, political instability is a real possibility, especially at the State level. While Parliament will continue to have its five-year tenure, States may encounter situations that necessitate mid-term elections, resulting in shorter tenures for State legislatures. I firmly believe that, despite its flaws, the current system should be preserved. The proposal for simultaneous elections risks creating unnecessary turmoil, and there is no compelling reason to pursue it at this juncture. The government should instead focus on tackling more pressing challenges that affect the people.



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## NOTEBOOK

# The social character of scientific knowledge

In science, not knowing is ubiquitous. The problems arise when we don't know, or choose to overlook, where science ends and faith begins

Vasudevan Mukunth

**M**any of us want to know how the SARS-CoV-2 virus originated. To do that, right now we need to unravel its evolution from its bat coronavirus ancestor by sequencing the genomes of animals and viruses near the outbreak site and we need to effect China's cooperation to check whether SARS-CoV-2 could have 'leaked' from a lab. Where the virus came from was once singularly important because the answer could have pointed the way to avoiding similar outbreaks in future. But today, there is good reason for this question to take the back seat.

We don't know where or how the virus originated. If it did in a lab, we would have to re-examine how we regulate research facilities and their safeguards and the manner of political oversight that won't curtail research freedom. If the virus is *au naturel*, we would have to institute and/or expand pathogen surveillance, eliminate wildlife trafficking, and improve social security measures to ensure populations can withstand outbreaks without becoming distressed. But even as these possibilities aren't equally likely (according to scientists I trust), the origin of SARS-CoV-2 is less important than it once was because the COVID-19 pandemic caused us to implement all these outcomes to varying degrees.

SARS-CoV-2 isn't special of course: it's still difficult to conclusively say what really happened with many things, scientifically. In 1977, a telescope in the U.S. recorded a signal from outer space that seems strange to this day. We don't have a physical explanation for the "spooky" result of an experiment Anton Zeilinger and co. conducted in 1998. We lack a complete understanding of how general anaesthesia works its magic on the brain. Not even their makers fully know how powerful AI models work the way they do. No existing theory of nature can what happens in intervals shorter than  $10^{-43}$  seconds.

In fact, not knowing is ubiquitous. To quote philosopher Nicholas Rescher, "no one can say in advance what questions natural science can and cannot answer." But science communication has taught me not all of us can know everything unless we invest considerable, perhaps even impossible, resources. Years ago, the philosopher Daniel Sarewitz wrote an article that changed my relationship with science. He argued that while we may know about the Higgs boson particle and that it gives other elementary particles their masses, we can't truly know any of this until we learn the complicated mathematics required to make sense of it. Until then, we just have faith in the physicists who know. This relationship goes for most technical information in our lives.

Science journalists like me communicate science by providing for scientists' claims, to quote Rescher, "the backing of a rationale that renders [their] correctness evident", but I still demand a considerable amount of faith from readers. At some point faith also becomes trust but trust still isn't understanding. (This said, the system of sanctions should they err provides a reasonable backdrop for trust in scientists' and journalists' work.) The general idea here is that you pick someone you trust and you believe what they say to be true. Let's call this the social character of scientific knowledge.

When people encounter a weighty concept scientists aren't able to explain fully, the social character becomes more apparent than it normally is. Some people trust impassioned scientists unwilling to consider extra-scientific possibilities. Some lean towards authority figures who don't trust science to provide the answer. Historically, people have turned to faith in the face of the unknown. The problems arise when we don't know, or choose to overlook, where science ends and faith/trust begins. Then we fixate on answers that may never matter at the expense of answers that are already useful.

[mukunth.v@thehindu.co.in](mailto:mukunth.v@thehindu.co.in)

## PICTURE OF THE WEEK

Welcome home, champ!



D. Gukesh, who made history by winning the 18th Chess World Championships, arrives at a felicitation function in Chennai. Gukesh beat Ding Liren of China in the 14th and final classical game of the match to become India's second world champion after Viswanathan Anand. B. JOTH RAMALINGAM

## FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO DECEMBER 20, 1974

### Panel's concern over Railway finances

New Delhi, Dec. 19: The Railway Convention Committee, expressing a sense of anxiety in regard to railway finances, has recommended the continuance in 1975-76 of the existing rate of dividend to the general revenues and a relief of about Rs. 39 crores over the Fifth Plan

## The Hindu

period in regard to capital works.

The committee's sixth report presented to the Rajya Sabha has asked the Railways to expedite the costing studies on "social burdens" so that they might review the freight structure in the light of the findings.

According to the Ministry of Railways, social burdens were of the order to Rs. 225.44 crores in 1973-74 and out of this amount, the loss on low-rated commodities was Rs. 115.4 crores while the losses on coaching and unremunerative branch lines were Rs. 95 crores and Rs. 10.98 crores respectively.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO DECEMBER 20, 1924

### Leprosy relief in India

Mr. Frank Oldrieve, Secretary, British Empire Leprosy Relief Association, in an interview with a representative of the Associated Press, said that the Madras Government was to be warmly commended on the excellent beginning it has made in opening the Lady Willington Leper Settlement in Chinglepet, as this is the first settlement to be opened by a Provincial Government in India.



# EXPLAINED

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## Taxing coconut oil: Why SC said it is for eating, not hair care

**AJOY SINHA KARPURAM**  
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 19

IS COCONUT oil an edible oil or a hair care product for the purposes of taxation? After the judiciary at several levels pondered this question for more than 15 years, the top court has made its decision: coconut oil is an edible oil, and should be taxed at a lower rate. And it does not matter that coconut oil is sometimes sold in small packets like personal care products.

Edible oils currently attract a lower rate of Goods and Services Tax (GST) (5%) than hair care products (18%).

**Tax on coconut oil**

Before 2017, when the GST regime was implemented, provisions of the Central Excise Tariff Act, 1985 (CET Act) were applied to coconut oil.

After 2005, when the CET Act was amended, coconut oil was included under Section III — "Animal or Vegetable Fats and Oils and their Oleaginous Products; Prepared Edible Fats; Animal or Vegetable Waxes" — and carried an excise duty of 8%.

"Preparations for use on the hair" appeared under Section VI ("Products of the Chemical or Allied Industries") of the Act, and carried an excise duty of 16%.

This was in line with the Harmonised System of Nomenclature (HSN), international taxation norms published in 1986 by the World Customs Organization, an inter-governmental body representing 188 countries' administrations around the world.

In June 2009, the Central Board of Excise and Customs under the Department of Revenue of the Union Ministry of Finance issued a circular classifying coconut oil sold in containers of less than 200 ml as hair oil, so it could be taxed at the higher rate of 16%.

The circular was withdrawn in October 2015 after rulings by Tribunals and courts to the effect that "just because the retail packs of coconut oil were in sizes of 200 ml or less, the same could not be presumed to be meant for use as hair oil".

In the GST regime, coconut oil is taxed at 5%, while products under the "Preparations for use on the hair" category carry an 18% tax.

**Case before the SC**

In 2007, central excise authorities issued show-cause notices to Madhyan Agro Industries (India) Pvt Ltd, a company that sold coconut oil in packets of 5 ml to 2 litres, proposing to impose a higher tax, classifying the oil as a hair care product.

On Madhyan Agro's challenge, the Customs Excise and Service Tax Appellate Tribunal (CESTAT) in Chennai held that following the 2005 amendment to the CET Act,

coconut oil was an edible oil and not a hair care product. The Tribunal passed similar orders in challenges involving several Pudukcherry-based companies that sold coconut oil in small containers.

The Commissioner of Central Excise, Salem, challenged these orders before the SC.

### View of the top court

In 2018, a Bench of Justices Ranjan Gogoi and R Banumathi delivered a split verdict — Justice Gogoi held that coconut oil should be classified as edible oil regardless of the package size; Justice Banumathi applied the "Common Parlance Test" and held that coconut oil sold in small packages is "understood in the market by dealers/consumers as 'Hair Oil', and must be taxed as such.

On Wednesday, a Bench comprising Chief Justice of India Sanjay Khanna and Justices Sanjay Kumar and R Mahadevan held that

the headings specifically provided under the law in line with international HSN norms "cannot be ignored while classifying goods".

It also rejected the application of the common parlance test in this case, saying the test could only be applied "when a product is not clearly defined or specifically dealt with under the law."

"The mere fact that coconut oil [can] also [be] used as a cosmetic or toilet preparation, by itself, would not be sufficient to exclude [it] from the ambit of 'coconut oil' and subject it to classification as 'hair oil', the court said.

Also, it said, "Small-sized containers are a feature common to both 'edible oils' [and] 'hair oils'... There must be something more to distinguish between them for classification... other than the size of the packaging."

The court noted that under the Standards of Weights and Measures (Packaged Commodities) Rules, 1977, edible oil can be

packed in sizes of 50 ml, 100 ml, 200 ml, etc.

**Common parlance test**  
The test is employed when a good or product can be reasonably classified under two different taxing entries — the court will see what uses the market and the public generally tend to associate it with.

In May 2023, the SC held that homeopathic hair oil should be classified as a "medicament" and taxed at a lower rate under the CET Act, and should not be included under "Cosmetic or Toilet Preparations".

In 2022, the SC considered whether anaruri (dried pomegranate seeds) should be included under "Edible Fruit or Nuts" or "Oil seeds and Oleaginous Fruits; Miscellaneous Grains, Seeds and Fruit". It held that "seeds" fall under the latter heading because they are known to be used for sowing in common parlance, while pomegranate is consumed as a fresh fruit.

### EXPLAINED SCIENCE

## HOW SCIENTISTS USED SCOTCH TAPE TO CREATE ULTRA-THIN DIAMOND FILM

WHEN RICHARD Drew invented Scotch tape in 1930, he was looking for a simple solution to wrap Christmas presents. And this remains his invention's primary use case, with sales spiking during the holiday season.

But Scotch tape might have another, potentially pathbreaking use case. A team of scientists has managed to create films of diamond, up to five centimetres wide and less than a micrometre (one millionth of a metre) thick, using some sticky tape, an article published on Thursday in the journal *Nature* reported.

**A welcome accident**

The "simple, scalable and reliable method" was discovered courtesy a chance incident where an electrical engineer Jing Jixiang of the University of Hong Kong accidentally peeled away a bit of diamond with a mis-placed piece of Scotch tape.

Intrigued, Jing and his colleagues decided to experiment further. They first implanted some nano-sized diamonds in a small silicon wafer, and then blew methane gas over it at high temperatures to form a continuous, thin diamond sheet.

The challenge was to then extract the thin diamond layer from the silicon without damaging it. For this, they cut the wafer to expose the diamond's edge, and fixed some tape to the diamond. When they peeled the tape back, a thin layer of diamond came with it. Subsequently, they dissolved the tape in a chemical solution to produce a free-standing ultra-thin diamond film.

Scientists have similarly utilised Scotch tape to create thin materials before, including graphene, a sheet of

graphite made of a single layer of carbon atoms.

**Desirable qualities**

The diamond sheets produced using Scotch tape were extremely thin while also being smooth enough to allow for the kind of etching techniques used to produce silicon chips. They were also very flexible.

The films' "flat workable surface, support standard micro-manufacturing techniques, and their ultra-flexible nature allows for direct elastic strain engineering and deformation sensing applications, which is not possible with their bulky counterpart," the article published in *Nature* said. ("Scalable production of ultraflat and ultraflexible diamond membrane")

Diamond is known to possess unique electronic properties.

On one hand, it is a good insulator. At the same time, it also allows electrons of certain energies to move without resistance.

In theory, this can translate to diamond chips being able to be far more efficient than conventional silicon chip designs.

But so far, creating high-quality, free-standing films of diamond, which can then be fashioned into chips, has been a challenge.

This is why the latest development is extremely promising. "This new edge-exposed exfoliation method will be an enabler for a multitude of device designs and experimental approaches," physicist Mete Atatüre of the University of Cambridge told *NewsScientist*. One area it could be particularly useful for is offering greater control in high-end quantum devices that use diamonds as sensors, he said.

**EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE**

**VIKAS PATHAK**  
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 19

THE SHOWDOWN in Parliament over Union Home Minister Amit Shah's remarks allegedly insulting B R Ambedkar has spotlighted the BJP's embrace of India's first Law Minister who angered Hindu nationalists with his attacks on the caste system and his conversion to Buddhism towards the end of his life.

The RSS started to invoke Ambedkar in the 1980s, and the BJP's celebration of Ambedkar in recent decades has been driven mainly by political expediency.

Rising in the vacuum created by an increasingly weakening Congress, the BJP attempted to bring all Hindu castes, including Dalits, in the Hindutva tent.

As it faced challenges from assertive anti-caste and pro-reservation movements, the Sangh Parivar constantly reassessed and re-defined its position on Ambedkar.

**Ambedkar & Hindu nationalists**

At the Depressed Classes Conference in Bombay on October 13, 1935, Ambedkar declared that he was born a Hindu, but he would "not die in the Hindu religion".

In his 2006 paper *The All-India Hindu Mahasabha, untouchable politics, and 'denationalising' conversions: the Ambedkar-Ambedkar Pact*, historian Keith Meadowcroft captured the common thread of Ambedkar's denunciation of Hinduism caused among Hindu nationalists.

N D Savarkar, the younger brother of former Hindu Mahasabha president V D Savarkar, arranged a meeting between Ambedkar and "well-known Hindu religious preacher" Masurkar Maharaj, Meadowcroft wrote. At its meeting in Poona a couple of months after Ambedkar's threat to convert, the Mahasabha discussed ways to tackle its fallout.

In early 1936, the Jat Pat Todak Mandal, a Lahore-based organisation associated with the Arya Samaj and the Hindu Mahasabha, cancelled Ambedkar's lecture on the "Annihilation of Caste" following objections from senior Hindu Mahasabha figures in Punjab, including Bhai Parmanand. Ambedkar had already prepared his speech, and published it as a monograph that is considered his most succinct, blunt critique of caste.

While the Hindu Mahasabha had to ultimately depose its former president B S Moonje for negotiations with Ambedkar in June 1936, one Mahasabha leader had been in touch with him throughout. V D Savarkar



Congress MLAs in Karnataka placed pictures of Ambedkar on their desks on Thursday to protest Home Minister Amit Shah's alleged insult to his memory. PTI

praised Ambedkar's work, and wanted a collaboration of some kind, which however, did not materialise.

"Through his commentaries and articles, published in different newspapers, Savarkar backed Ambedkar's initial agitations in Mahad and Nashik that argued untouchability was against the Hindu ethos and humanity. Ambedkar was aware of Savarkar's work and activism in Ratnagiri district... At times, he even congratulated him — through personal correspondence and his periodicals — for his work. Yet, this never translated into a political alliance and the 1951 manifesto of Ambedkar's Scheduled Caste Federation clearly said the party would not have any alliance with 'reactionary forces' such as the Hindu Mahasabha and RSS," Prabodhan Pol of Manipal Academy of Higher Education, whose doctoral thesis was on Ambedkar, said.

**The Hindu Code Bill**

The Hindu nationalists' suspicion of Ambedkar continued after independence. When, as Law Minister, Ambedkar attempted reforms in Hindu personal law through the Hindu Code Bill, the RSS and leaders on the Hindu right pushed back strongly.

Syama Prasad Mookerjee, co-founder of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh — the precursor to the BJP — described the Bill as a "threat to Hindu culture". In a series of articles and editorials, the RSS-linked periodical *Organiser* launched a tirade against the Bill.

"We oppose the Hindu Code Bill... because it is a derogatory measure based on alien and immoral principles... It is anything

but Hindu. We condemn it because it is a cruel and ignorant libel on Hindu laws, Hindu culture and Hindu Dharma," an editorial in *Organiser* said in 1949.

In 1951, when Parliament stalled his draft of the Bill under pressure from the Hindu nationalists and Congress conservatives, Ambedkar resigned from Jawaharlal Nehru's Cabinet.

**Change in RSS's position**

From its foundation in 1925, the RSS had Hindu unity as its vision, but it took decades for it to fully accept institutional safeguards for disadvantaged groups.

While the mass conversion of nearly a half-million Dalits to Buddhism by Ambedkar in 1956 was a setback for its vision, the RSS started to invoke Ambedkar and reach out to Dalits only after an incident in Tamil Nadu's Tirunelveli district in 1981, in which hundreds of lower-caste Hindus embraced Islam.

That same year, the Akhil Bharatiya Pratinidhi Sabha (ABPS), the highest decision-making body of the RSS, called for a special committee of "non-partisan social thinkers" to evaluate who should be included in reservations, and for how long. The ABPS endorsed reservation for the present, and called for transcending it in the future.

The Sangh also started organising Hindu Samagams, or gatherings, at various places. At an event in Maharashtra on April 14, 1983, the RSS marked both the birthdays of Ambedkar and its founder K B Hedgewar.

In 1990, the Sangh marked the centenary year of Ambedkar and Dalit reformer Jyotiba Phule, and the ABPS passed a resolution say-

ing "these two great leaders dealt deadly blows to the evil practices and conventions prevailing in Hindu society".

**Changing political context**

The change in the RSS-BJP's perception of Ambedkar came about in the context of the weakening of the Congress and the rise of the politics of identity in North India.

In 1989, V P Singh, who had rebelled against Rajiv Gandhi, became Prime Minister with the BJP's support.

His government took a series of steps to recognise and honour the legacy of Babasaheb, conferring the Bharat Ratna posthumously on him, installing his portrait in the Central Hall of Parliament, and bringing the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. Politically, the focus was on winning away the Congress's captive Dalit vote bank.

After coming to power in 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has repeatedly invoked the contributions of Ambedkar to the Constitution and the Republic. The BJP's electoral success over the past decade has been due in significant degree to its ability to retain and expand its core upper-caste base while providing greater representation to Dalits, Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and Adivasis.

On Saturday, Union Minister Kiren Rijiju told Lok Sabha that the Modi government had given "prominence to five teerth shals (places of pilgrimage) relating to Dr Ambedkar", including his birthplace, Mhow in Madhya Pradesh, and the house in London where he lived for some time.

A Babasaheb Ambedkar International Memorial has come up, and the development of Chhatra Bhoomi in Mumbai is underway. A 450-foot statue of Ambedkar is coming up in Mumbai. It will be visible from 25-30 km away, Rijiju said.

Almost a decade ago, during the 2015 Bihar Assembly election, RSS Sansangchalak Mohan Bhagwat had called for a review of reservation by a panel of "non-partisan observers". The statement was seen as being damaging for the BJP — and Bhagwat was quick to course-correct and praise Ambedkar during the Sansangchalak's traditional Vijayadashami address. He ended the speech with the slogan "Hindu-Hindus ek rahen, bhed-bhava ko nahi sahein (All Hindus must unite, we must not tolerate discrimination)".

And on September 6 this year, Bhagwat said in Nagpur that reservation should continue for as long as there existed discrimination in society.

(This explains draws from a previous report by Ravish Tiwari that appeared in *The Indian Express* in June 2018)

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## From Vishy 2013 to Gukesh 2024: Story of India's rise as a chess power

**AMIT KAMATH**  
MUMBAI, DECEMBER 19

GUKESH DOMMARAJU last week became the first Indian to occupy the World Chess Championship throne since Viswanathan Anand, a five-time champion, lost to Magnus Carlsen in 2013. And after Anand lost his rematch against Carlsen in 2014, no Indian grandmaster had come close to being in the race to win the most prestigious title in chess — until Gukesh.

This does not mean, however, that Indian chess stagnated in the interim decade. Far from it.

**Several notable successes**

Koneru Humpy and Harika Dronavalli, the first two Indian women to become grandmasters, were pretty successful over the past decade.

Humpy in 2019 returned from a two-

year sabbatical to claim the Women's World Rapid Championship.

Before Indian youngsters like Gukesh and Arjun Erigaisi began to challenge for the top spots in the FIDE rankings, Humpy was a constant there. Between October 2007 and February 2019, she did not fall out of the top five in women's rankings even once, and peaked at number 2, a position she occupied for 22 months at a stretch.

Dronavalli too had some notable results, winning bronze medals at the Women's World Championships in 2012, 2015, and 2017. Back then, the Women's World Championship was held in a knockout format, with medals on offer for the top three finishers.

But beyond individual successes, what is perhaps more notable is the fact that India has produced 50 grandmasters, the highest title in chess, over the last decade.

For perspective, in the 25 years since Anand became India's first GM in 1988,



India had managed to produce only 35 grandmasters in all.

**Rise of the young guns**

In the 2020 Chess Olympiad, a team event, the Indian team ended up as joint gold medalists with Russia.

Two years later, at the Chennai Olympiad in 2022, the world got its first real glimpse of future world-beaters like

Gukesh, Praggnanandhaa, Arjun Erigaisi, and Nihal Sarin. India finished with two bronze medals — Gukesh stumbled late in the tournament, leading to India missing out on a well-deserved team gold medal.

But he more than made up for it at this year's Budapest Olympiad, which was a coming-of-age event for Indian chess as a whole.

Both the Indian open team and women's team bagged team golds, and the

contingent bagged the overall gold medal. There were also four individual gold medals, including one for Gukesh.

Gukesh had caught the eye of the world back in 2019 when he became the second youngest chess GM at the age of only 12 years, 7 months and 17 days. Notably, he rose to GM status 10 months faster than Carlsen, whose career has become a yardstick for modern-day success on the chessboard.

**Becoming a chess nation**

The success that Indian chess is enjoying at the moment is due to a few factors.

First, as the Internet started to penetrate into all corners of India, grandmasters began emerging from towns and cities that had no real chess tradition to speak of. Arjun Erigaisi, for instance, comes from Wangaripet, Thanks to the Internet, he could access elite trainers like Srirath Narayanan, who were grandmasters themselves, at a very early age.

Moreover, with many tournaments being played online in the pandemic and post-

Covid era, players like Praggnanandhaa and Arjun now face players of Carlsen's and Hikaru Nakamura's calibre more frequently than they would have in a previous era.

Second, it has become the second generation of grandmasters from India — the likes of Vishnu Prasanna, Surya Shekhar Ganguly, RB Ramesh, and Srirath — switched to coaching early on. The current golden generation is reaping the rewards of this move.

While Srirath has trained Arjun and Nihal Sarin in their formative years, Ramesh guided Praggnanandhaa, Vaishali, and Aravindh Chithambaram. Vishnu was the man behind Gukesh becoming India's youngest grandmaster.

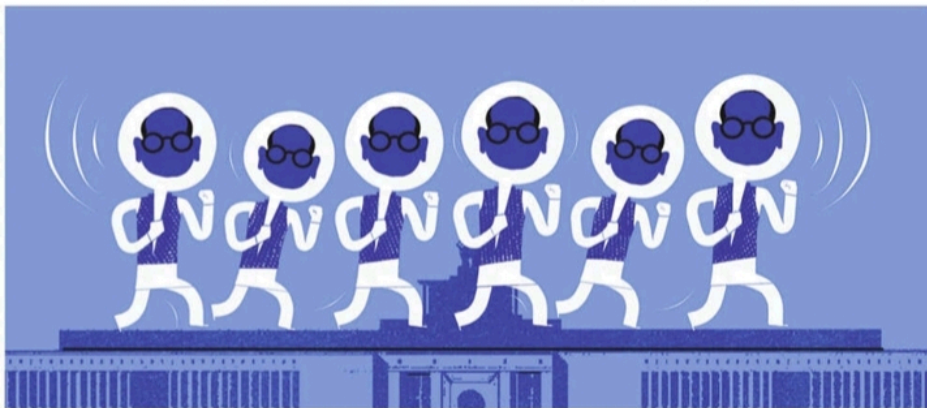
In fact, Gukesh may find himself fighting another Indian in the 2026 world championship. As chess legend Garry Kasparov recently said: "Gukesh's victory caps a phenomenal year for India. Combined with their Olympiad dominance, chess has returned to its cradle and the era of 'Vishy's children' is truly upon us!"



# THE IDEAS PAGE

**DIS/AGREE**  
THE BEST OF BOTH SIDES

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



C.R. Sankar

In Parliament, there is a battle over B R Ambedkar's legacy. Is this just about the current moment in politics or does it represent an unease with his progressive legacy?

## Don't invoke him selectively

If you want to venerate Babasaheb, give credence to his idea of the nation



ADITI NARAYANI PASWAN

JAWAHARLAL NEHRU WROTE: "Reservation... will promote inefficiency and mediocrity." I often wonder if this was a reason for denying B R Ambedkar a dignified space in the corridors of power. Did the Congress think so little of us, the Dalits? Did Ambedkar resign because he felt neglected or because he became the voice of Dalits and women?

Usually, I would abstain from airing my views on political controversies, which will neither further the cause of the marginalised nor lead to a constructive conversation. However, the ongoing mudslinging in Parliament is a case of the pot calling the kettle black. Politicians, mostly from dominant castes, are fighting over the legacy of Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar. They have done little to weed out caste-based discrimination that is so pervasive in the system that it has become a system in itself. We still hear of a man being untrained upon simply because he is a Dalit. In this day and age, this defies all logic.

The present controversy is an insult to our collective intelligence. The intensity with which the INDIA bloc has raised this belies the fact that people in power still do not understand the real issues of Dalits or other marginalised groups. Let it be made clear that we Dalits are not fighting for identity. There is no identity crisis for us. From Babasaheb to Babuji (Jagjivan Ram), from Karpoori Thakur to Karsani Ram, from Mayawati to Ram Vilas Paswan, our cause stands on the shoulders of giants who do not need any introduction. The fight is for our dignity and recognition, opportunity, and equality.

It was wrapped in appeasement politics for the last several decades and sprinkled with dole-outs. The downside of appeasement politics is that it is meant to keep the concerned demographic at marginal deprivation, ensuring that their demands are met but their hopes are crushed. Despite budget allocations, political relevance and vote-bank politics, dismal efforts in basic amenities like education, health and employment have ensured that the biggest minority in India is facing the same issues that they did 50-60 years ago.

The oldest political party in India did everything it could to stay in power, toying with soft Hindutva, nationalism and minor-

ity appeasement. The Dalits and OBCs of this country grew without the explicit support of the dominant party for the greater part after our Independence. From initial roadblocks to reservation in the Constituent Assembly to resistance towards Mandal Commission recommendations — the Congress has done everything possible to dilute the affirmative action put in place by Babasaheb. One can only imagine the plight of Dalits had Ambedkar not been the head of the drafting committee.

In the initial decades after Independence, ruled by the Congress and driven heavily by ideas and ideals of the Left, especially the Communist binary of rich and poor, the Congress did not see beyond class. Historically, the biggest vote bank of the Congress had been the Dalits, but the party saw them from a narrow view of class instead of understanding the realities of caste. For the Congress, it was not Dalits who voted for it, but the *gureh janta* (poor people). *Gureh* (poverty) was the mainstay of Indian politics and Dalits formed the largest chunk of it. The social experiment based on an ideological approach led to the invisibilisation of the community. This went on for the most part of our modern independent political history. The rise of socialist movements and caste-based state parties and leaders gave impetus to Dalit rights, issues and aspirations.

Babasaheb Ambedkar is like god to us and reservation is like oxygen for us. The sheer number of ideas and the vision Ambedkar left behind is not just useful for Dalits but also for the nation, to look beyond the vagaries of discrimination. In the last decade or so, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's efforts in mobilising GYAN (gureh, yunus, annadata, nari) and giving dignity and respect to the Dalit discourse has been unprecedented. From introducing the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, 2023, and Uniform Civil Code in Uttarakhand to the creation of *panch teerth* sites, the current regime has actualised the dreams and aspirations of Dalits. The level of participation of Dalit leaders and politicians in a national party like the BJP has been unparalleled in India. Ambedkar is not just for the Dalits but for anyone who is marginalised. We have moved on from outright for identity and existence. We know that no party can ignore us now whether in power or in opposition. Our fight is for aspiration, equal opportunity and equity in education, administration, and governance.

It does not matter whether you call him Ambedkar or Babasaheb, whether you take his name once or chant it every day — if you want to venerate Babasaheb, give credence to his idea of the nation.

The writer is assistant professor of Sociology, Lakshmi College, Delhi University

## Stop trying to turn the clock back

Dalits' worship of own idols like Ambedkar subverts the old order. For the vanguards of the status quo, this is unthinkable



ANSHUL AVIJIT

THERE ARE ONLY a handful of gods exclusive to the Dalit pantheon. Quite unlike the 33 crore gods traditionally available to caste Hindus to empower their sanctums and protect their faithful. It was a cruel reversal of the religious template, in which worship itself became blasphemous. So, for the Dalits, it's been a hard-fought selection of their icons, coming after centuries of denial and dispossession, of temple doors being closed on their faces. The Dalit gods are also uniquely historicised and earthly figures, with a provenance of struggle and merit that would invite admiration, if not worship, from far beyond the caste trenches. It's the new social compact between Dalits and caste Hindus that is the hallmark of Indian modernity — do not demean, do not mock, do not patronise. Do not make light of a battle for the devotional ideals of religion in the arrangement of unequal religious privilege. This compact should not be breached.

The comments by Home Minister Amit Shah in the Rajya Sabha on B R Ambedkar — which suggested a misplaced search for god by Ambedkar's ardent followers — are, therefore, highly regrettable. This remark, and the reactions that have followed are now being typecast as a political conflict between an outraged Opposition and the defensive treasury benches. The Home Minister's press conference and the Prime Minister's counter-attacking tweets, unprecedented in the political history, clearly indicate the panic after the lapse. But the real story is not that of polarised politics, or the competitive claims to social justice — the roll-call of achievements and reprimands fueling TV debates. History is well witness to the rough

ride of social justice in recent memory, of those who made laws for equity and those who resisted. While the upholders of old social orders are now being exposed, new history books also expunge caste references in order to shield them. The real story is actually about a lingering mindset, more pervasive and more upsetting than we think, which makes remarks such as these slip through.

The god analogy is an appropriate one.

In ancient India, the glories of which many invoke, there was joint sovereignty between the king and the deity over land and its people. This supreme alliance, one complementing the other, allowed the exclusionary social system both a divine and administrative sanction. One can argue that the current regime, through its recent conversions, is implicated in a similar old-world revival. For the conquering rulers, the deity represented the fulcrum of the relationship between the protector and the protected; its absence would crumble the state. If caste hierarchy, if cracks have emerged, since no system can be perfectly rigid, the symbiosis was reinforced.

Historically, the Dalits, the "outcasts", were coerced into this ancient arrangement, and without ever having the benefit of "darshan": Looking at the deity in the eye and seeking blessings. In fact, their mere presence was a defilement. The search for alternate gods continued and the 16th-century cobble-mystic Ravidas, whose devotional yet irreverent verses braved the minefield of caste, struck a chord with the changing times. Many were also included in the Guru Granth Sahib. But it was only in the 20th century, when the self-affirming need for community gods and heroes became acute, that Ravidas got firmly entrenched in Dalit consciousness. Decolonisation and democracy threw more icons, this time political actors involved in both social justice and nation-

building. Among the many notables were Jagjivan Ram, who rose to become Deputy Prime Minister, and B R Ambedkar, under whom India's Constitution, its most sacred document, was penned. The latter is the icon at the centre of debate. Here were icons who had earned their divine pedestals, who had had near-impossible achievements, and for their followers, managed to squeeze water from a stone. If anything, this divination is not merely performative, it becomes a form of ritualistic insurgency — a time to reboot privileges, force equity and compel social change. In the old order of kings and priests, divination could only be affirmed by its negation at its polar end. Dalit worship of its own idols not only subverts this idea but offers dissociated alternatives. For the vanguards of the status quo, this idea is unthinkable. And far too many lurk among us.

Reading tea leaves is not necessary. Comments like these will continue to deprivilege chosen icons and as a result, dehistoricise their loyalists. At the core of this debate is the scourge of modern India, the caste system — the greatest betrayal of humanity ever conceived by man.

The writer is national spokesperson, Indian National Congress

## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"If the public comes to see that only those without access to power centres get punished while those close to top politicians and other power centres are spared, their faith in the country's legal process will fade. So will their trust in the political parties."

—THE KATHMANDU POST

## In the House this winter

Themes that dominated, people who made a mark, a speech that set a record — and a heartening birthday dinner



**ZERO HOUR**  
BY DEREK O'BRIEN

YOU ARE READING this on the concluding day of the Winter Session of Parliament. Thoughts on the 21-day session.

**Five proper nouns dominated:** Common nouns like price rise, inflation, federalism, and unemployment were expected to dominate the debates in this session. But instead, only these proper nouns made headlines for all the right/wrong reasons: George Soros, Gautam Adani, and Jawaharlar Nehru.

In the concluding days of the session, it was B R Ambedkar and Home Minister Amit Shah who were trending. This columnist was sitting only a few feet away, on the same row, from where the Home Minister was delivering his speech. Here is what he said (translation): "It has become fashionable, Ambedkar, Ambedkar, Ambedkar, Ambedkar, Ambedkar... If you had taken God's name so many times, you would have gone to heaven for seven lives". The leader of the Opposition, sitting on this columnist's right, immediately responded (his intervention was not picked up on the microphone, nor was the camera on Mallikarjun Kharge who said) "Mr Home Minister, by what you just said it seems you have a big problem with Ambedkar. Why?"

**Who spoke the most:** As of December 18, Rajya Sabha ran for a total of 43 hours. Of this, Bills were discussed for 10 hours. The debate on the Constitution lasted for 17 and a half hours. Of the remaining 15-and-a-half hours, who spoke for four-and-a-half hours, or nearly 30 per cent of the remaining time? It was the Rajya Sabha Chairman and Vice President, Did Jagdeep Dhanekar set a new record in Parliament?

**Sparkling debut:** Six MPs were sworn in earlier this week. Sana Sabih Bano (TDP), Mashran Rao Yadav Beedha (TDP), Ryaga Krishnaiah (BJP), Rekha Sharma (BJP), Sujet Kumar (BJP), and Ritabrata Banerjee (ATC). Ritabrata even got the opportunity to speak on the Constitution the day after he was sworn in. While his party colleague took each word of the preamble as the theme for their speech, he spoke on Rabindranath Tagore. Come again and read out four stanzas from Tagore's "Morning Song of India". The first stanza of that poem was adopted by the Constituent Assembly as our national anthem. Ritabrata's *Jugubhadi* of Bengali and English gave us goosebumps.

**Marathon speeches:** During the debate titled "Glorious Journey of 75 Years of the Constitution of India", someone

murmured: "Listening to some of the speeches from the Treasury benches, was wondering whether we are discussing 75 years of the Constitution or 49 years of the Emergency!" A few members spoke for over one hour. Messrs Modi, Shah, Rajnath Singh, Kiren Rijju, J P Nadda, and Nirmala Sitharaman. Mallikarjun Kharge was the only Opposition MP to speak for more than an hour.

**My favourite speech by a BJP MP:** In the government's previous term, Bhupendra Yadav would be the Minister of Environment, Forest and Climate Change as well as Labour and Employment. Since June 2024, the Labour and Employment portfolio has been given to someone else. Enjoyed listening to him as he referred to a research paper by the University of Chicago that analysed life spans of constitutions around the world. Quoting from the paper, the Minister shared that 50 per cent of Constitutions are likely to be dead by age 80 and only 19 per cent survive until age 50. Seven per cent do not even make it to their second birthday. Intriguing.

**Best birthday party:** Several parties are hosted by MPs during a session of Parliament. It was Sharad (Uncle) Pawar's 84th birthday on December 12. His daughter, Lok Sabha MP Supriya Sule, organised a cosy birthday dinner. The celebration was not only for her father, but also for Pratibha Pawar, her mother, whose birthday was the next day. Among the guests in attendance were Telangana Chief Minister (CM) Revanth Reddy, former Uttar Pradesh CM Akhilesh Yadav along with spouse MP Dimple Yadav, former Jammu and Kashmir CM Farooq Abdullah, and MPs Jaya Bachchan, Saugata Roy, and Abhishek Manu Singhvi. Wish more octogenarians had such a positive mindset.

**An unexpected speech on the Constitution:** The Constitution is more than a book in a library. It is a living, breathing document on the streets of India. We are a week away from Christmas. There is a Jewish bakery in Kolkata that makes delicious Christmas cake. All the 300 workers in that Jewish bakery belong to one community. They are all Muslims. And about a week before Christmas, you see long queues outside the bakery. If you go and ask the people standing in those queues, they will tell you their names: "Bhaskar, Reema, Arun". It does not matter. They are all Indians. Cake for a Christmas festival, made by Muslim bakers, and enthusiastically purchased by Hindu buyers. Come, celebrate Christmas in Bengali new year at the Kolkata Christmas Festival. Come again at the end of March to line up on Red Road and watch the Dil players. And, mark the date, April 30, 2025. Come to Digha to see the beautiful new Jagannath Temple.

The writer is MP and leader, All India Trinamool Congress Parliamentary Party (Rajya Sabha). Additional research: Ayashmita Dey, Varunika Mishra

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### PRIORITISE FARMERS

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "A strife too long" (IE, December 19). Though three farm bills were repealed by the BJP government, the subsequent trust deficit between farmers and government is clear. Efforts of the government to bridge this gap were inadequate, resulting in farmers' renewed agitations. Agrarian resentment in the country, especially in Punjab, requires complete and inclusive solutions. Government institutions involved in R&D should also emphasise frequent outreach programmes to understand the difficulties that farmers face, working as a bridge between them and the government.

Devendra Awasthi, Lucknow

### GOOD BYE, GOOD LUCK

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "Well played, Ashwin" (IE, December 19). It is odd that Ravichandran Ashwin announced his retirement midway through India's Test series overseas against Australia. Australia's captain Pat Cummins expressed surprise at his decision too. Ashwin has been a fantastic player all around. There aren't too many finger spinners that have the kind of longevity that he has enjoyed. He has also been more than handy with the bat. His maturity and experience make him the perfect mentor for other players, including youngsters in the team. However, now that he has taken this decision, one wishes him the very best, with the hope that he will volunteer to be a bowling coach for budding cricketers in India.

Sankar Paul, Nadia

### FOR GROWTH

THIS REFERS TO the article, "More money, less problems" (IE, December 19). Reintroducing a wealth tax in India could be an effective measure to reduce income inequality and promote economic growth. By targeting the uber-rich, the wealth tax can serve as a progressive tool to redistribute resources. The revenue generated can be invested in education, healthcare, and infrastructure, fostering equitable development. Currently, India's reliance on indirect taxes like GST disproportionately burdens the middle and lower-income groups, widening the wealth gap. A carefully structured wealth tax, with minimal administrative hurdles and clear exemptions for productive assets, could balance the tax system.

Nilesh Dubey, Ahmedabad

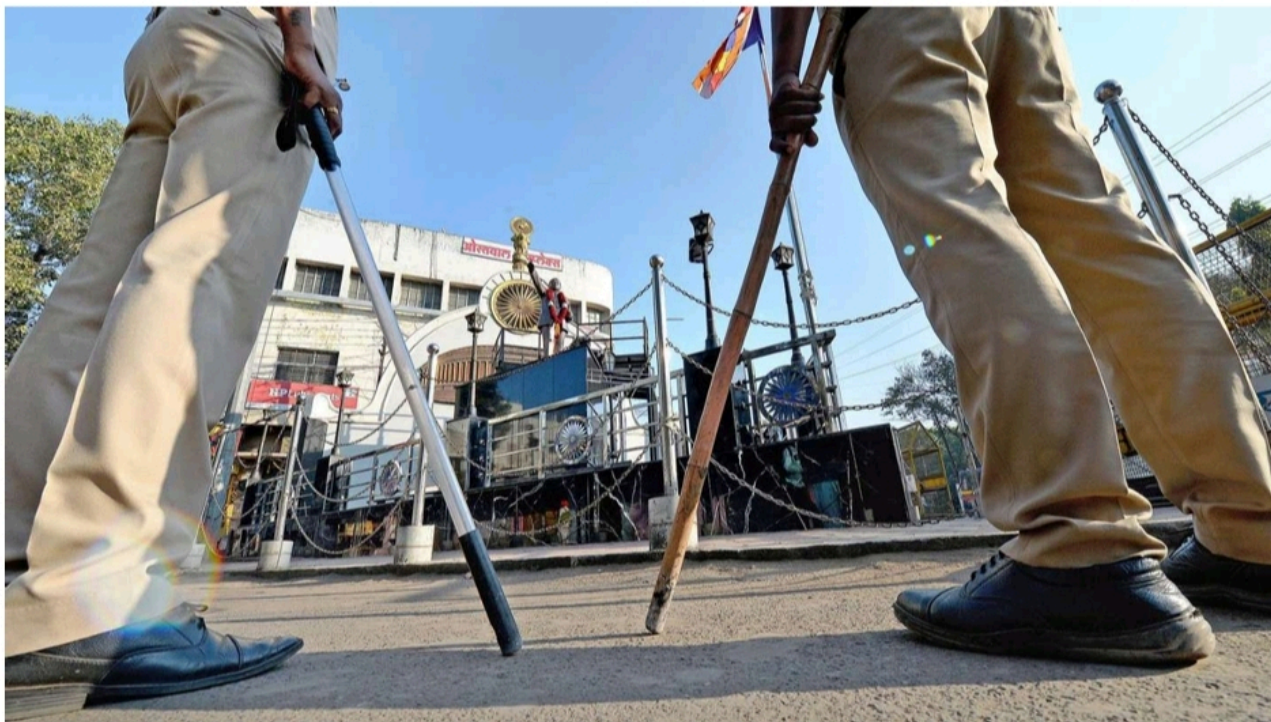
### OFF WITH THE BIAS

THIS REFERS TO the article, "In the name of Constitution" (IE, December 19). With the ongoing Constitution debates in Parliament, it is imperative to reiterate that time and again, there is something that every parliamentarian should take stock of: The original guiding principles of the document. The article also discussed the trend of blaming Jawaharlal Nehru for the imperfections present in the Constitution, at the expense of bringing up current affairs. The article focuses on constitutional morality and the need for leaders to be disciplined and to put partisanship aside, while debating. This also comes at a time when the Constitution has been trampled on and politicised. There is a pressing need to break this trend.

Hansuja Tiwary, Patna



## SPOTLIGHT



Maharashtra police personnel keep vigil near the statue of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar at Station Road in Parbhani after violence broke out in the area when a replica of the Constitution was damaged. VIJAY SONEJA

# The Indian Constitution – violated

On December 11, violence broke out in Maharashtra's Parbhani city after a man damaged a replica of the Constitution, a part of the statue of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. With tension still in the air, the incident has triggered fear among Dalits, following the death of a member of the community in judicial custody, which it claims was due to 'police brutality', reports **Snehal Mutha**

**J**ust outside the two-platform Parbhani railway station in Maharashtra's Marathwada region flutters the Indian national flag mounted on a pole. Beyond the tea shops selling *misal pav* and hotels catering to travellers, in front of an Art Deco building, is a statue of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who headed the drafting committee of the Constitution of India. Behind the statue are more symbols of the Indian republic: a replica of the Ashoka Chakra that forms the central symbol of the national flag, and the Ashoka Pillar, the original erected in Sarnath, Uttar Pradesh, where Buddha gave his first sermon. In front is the Constitution, now covered in a blue cloth, the colour of Ambedkar's Scheduled Castes Federation of India flag. From the statue, the Doctor Line market begins, extending about 3 km up to Gandhi Park.

Dilip Ragade, 55, who runs a newspaper stand next to the statue, recalls a scuffle between a man and an autorickshaw driver between 4 p.m. and 5 p.m. on December 10. "At first, I thought he had pulled something out of the autorickshaw and thrown it on the road. Later, I realised that it was the replica of the Constitution. The autorickshaw driver had confronted the man," he says. Soon, a crowd of about 200 people gathered and the man was thrashed, say witnesses. People ran towards the market spreading the word, and shops began to shut.

The police, the District Collector, and Ambedkarite leaders showed up and took the badly injured man to hospital, says Ragade. The man was arrested and the police told people that he was mentally ill and had not done the damage on purpose. Ambedkarites, however, were not convinced. They blocked the Nandigram Express for at least 30 minutes. Additional Superintendent of Police (ASP) Yashwant Kale says the train left Parbhani station only after the Government Railway Police dispersed the crowd.

The next day, following protests by Ambedkarites, there was stone pelting and arson, followed by a crackdown by the Parbhani police. Somnath Suryavanshi, 35, who had come from Pune for his law entrance examination, was allegedly picked up from where he was staying. He died in judicial custody a few days later.

Ambedkarites claim people not from their community joined the protests so the blame for the violence would fall on them. They say the "police brutality" was a reflection of how Dalits are treated in society.

## Protests of different kinds

Earlier in the day on December 10, Hindu Sakal Samaj, a right-wing outfit, had taken out a *morchha* (march) condemning the atrocities against Hindus in Bangladesh, which has a prominent border with India. It took place a few metres from the Ambedkar statue where the statue of 17th-century Maratha king Chhatrapati Shivaji, a symbol of Maratha pride, is located. There was not much movement in the city during the *morchha*, say the residents of Parbhani. Ambedkarites claim several people delivered provocative speeches. This right-wing event combined with the desecration of the Constitution's replica angered Dalits, many of whom are Ambedkar's followers. Around 8 p.m. that night, the administration organised a *shanti samiti baithak* (peaceful meeting). Here, Ambedkarite leaders said they would carry out a protest at five locations in Parbhani the next day. They would also submit a letter to the Collector putting forth their demands, which included charging the man and his 'accomplices' under the stringent Unlawful Activ-

The crowd was massive; they could have burnt anything that came in its way. The anger was visible, and the police were hiding

**KAPIL CHONDE**  
Trader,  
Parbhani market

ities (Prevention) Act, 1967, and making him undergo a polygraph test to find out the 'mastermind' behind the act of vandalism. That night, the city went to sleep peacefully.

The following day, Ambedkarite organisations called for a bandh. These included the Republican Sena led by a grandson of Ambedkar; the Republican Party of India (A) led by Union Minister Ramdas Athawale; and the Buddhist Society of India, founded by Ambedkar himself, who had converted to Buddhism.

Ambedkarite groups began protests across the city around 8 a.m. People gathered in groups ranging from 200 to 1,000. Seven groups peacefully submitted the charter of demands to the Collector. The police say the eighth group got disruptive, forcing its way into the Collector's office. Soon, they say, violence erupted in the market, about 600 metres from the office. There was stone pelting and arson, followed by the firing of tear gas shells, say witnesses.

## A city unsettled

Ambedkarites say the police reacted violently. A 32-year-old demonstrator says, "The police first stopped us from reaching out to the Collector. That is why we agitated and some of us got on top of the police van to raise slogans. Now, they are looking for me everywhere." She has been in hiding after a video featuring her protesting went viral. Infuriated, she says, "We agitated for something that has given us a dignified life." She says a few men wearing masks and holding lathis had joined the protesters. "The people of Ambedkar Basti did not have these when they left."

Eight FIRs were registered, over 200 people booked, and 50 arrested, including minor girls from Dalit *bastis* (neighbourhoods) in Parbhani such as Gautam Nagar, Priyadarshini Nagar, Rahul Nagar, and Bhim Nagar. The police booked people on charges of rioting, assault on public servants, promoting enmity, and damaging public property. "Two police vans, two four-wheelers, 18 two-wheelers, and hundreds of shops were damaged. Nine police personnel were injured. Five women were released a day after detention," says the ASP. "So far, 27 people have been arrested," he says.

On December 11, orders were issued under Section 163 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Samhita, preventing the assembly of five or more people. Social activists and locals have criticised the administration for taking a whole day to do this. "The State Reserve Police Force (SRPF) unit was stationed a few kilometres from here in Hingoli, yet the police did not act," says a 49-year-old retailer in the area. The SRPF was deployed the next day after 2 p.m.

Vijay Wakode, an Ambedkarite leader, who

died of a heart attack while protesting against the death of Somnath, had said the protest was peaceful until 1 p.m. "Then things went haywire and we cancelled the rally scheduled to be held after the protest," he had said, adding that people not part of the Ambedkar movement got mixed in the crowd, making Ambedkarite organisations the scapegoat "to malign us".

During the Maharashtra Assembly's winter session in Nagpur, the Opposition slammed the Mahayuti government over "poor law and order" in the State. In response, Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis said, "The government will never do anything against the Constitution and the insult of it will not be tolerated."

Meanwhile, newly appointed Minister and MLA from Jintur in Parbhani Meghana Bordikar told mediapersons that "Suryavanshi's death was due to a heart attack". She also defended the police, saying, "They arrested the accused immediately."

## A market on edge

One of the shops that was damaged belonged to Kapil Chonde, 25. As news of the violence spread, he quickly bundled up sweaters, caps, and dark glasses that lay on his makeshift platform under a tarpaulin tied between an electric pole and bamboo struts. On seeing the mob rush in his direction, he sought safety in a *pucca* shop, but a lot of his goods were burnt. "The crowd was massive; they could have burnt anything that came in its way. The anger was visible and the police were hiding," Chonde says, two days after the incident, distraught. He estimates his loss at ₹40,000. He has taken a loan of ₹60,000 and wonders how he will pay it back.

Several traders are grappling with the task of assessing the extent of damage. Boards were damaged, doors bashed in, pushcarts broken, and bits thrown into the gutter. The Parbhani police estimate that property worth at least ₹30 lakh was damaged. Doctor Line has shops owned by a variety of trading communities from different ethnicities and religions. However, Kashinath Shinde, 45, one of the owners, says, "Most shops are of the Maratha community. The violence was targeted at them as the perpetrator is a Maratha."

The area around the Ambedkar statue has been cordoned off with barricades. Riot Control Police vans are stationed at the opposite end of the road. At least 10 police personnel are deployed every 300 metres, and police vans stationed at every kilometre, with patrolling every half an hour. The government also suspended Internet services for two days.

Rumours abound in the city. One talks about the arrest of a 10-year-old girl, another the custodial death of a woman. The moment a rumour is spread, the shutters of shops go down. This happens a couple of times. The police announce on loudspeakers that these claims are untrue.

## Dalits traumatised

In Dalit settlements, people are gripped with fear of getting picked up by the police. Kalawanti Dabade, 50, a daily wage earner, says, "The police are searching every house and taking our children." A demonstrator from Bhim Nagar says, "We started pelting stones when the police resorted to lathi charge and opened tear gas. We missed our exams because they are looking for us and many of us are in hiding." His body is covered with black and green scars that he says are a result of the lathi charge. "The government hospital refused to take me in, saying I was a rioter." Vachala Manavte, 53, was hospitalised after

she was released from jail on December 12. She works at a nearby hospital and was allegedly thrashed for recording a video of the police while they were detaining youth in Priyadarshini Nagar. "After dragging me there, they threw me in the lock-up and slapped and kicked me. They were trying to retrieve my mobile phone's password to delete the video," she says.

Rutuja, 20, and Pooja, 27, along with two minor sisters, aged 14 and 12, from Bhim Nagar were taken into custody. "They treated us like animals and humiliated us for being Dalit. I could actually relate to *Jai Bhim* [a Tamil movie on a tribal woman fighting for justice]. They asked us to kneel and not look up," says Rutuja, adding that the police also took her hall ticket for her first-year BA exams. Pooja tells a similar story. The minor girls' mother has sent them to Nanded to avoid harassment by the police.

Politicians have been visiting the area following the violence. Athawale visited the Ambedkar statue, garlanded it, met officials in-charge of the administration, and residents of Bhim Nagar. Sujat Ambedkar, the great-grandson of Ambedkar, also garlanded the statue and visited Bhim Nagar.

On December 17, Prakash Ambedkar, Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi chief and Sujat's father, posted a video on X and wrote: "A mother of a newborn was brutally assaulted by the police in her house. She had locked herself in the bathroom to save herself from the violence, but the police broke the door down and brutally beat her up."

## Conspiracy theories

The man who desecrated the Constitution is from Mirzapur village in Parbhani district and worked at grocery shops in Parbhani. His father-in-law, who asked not to be named, says his younger son was the first to receive a call from the police informing them about the incident. He adds that he will accept what the law decides. "For the last two months, he had been hospitalised in Akola [about 200 km from Parbhani] and arrived in the city on the day of the incident," he says. "For the past 16 years, he has been under treatment for mental health issues." A doctor confirms this.

Ambedkarite organisations believe the man was used. "This could be a conspiracy to create a rift between Marathas and Dalits. The police must probe this under the Supreme Court's observation," Bhimrao Hattimbire, an Ambedkarite leader from Parbhani, says.

However, District Collector Raghunath Gaware calls this a "mere coincidence" and dismisses such a possibility. "Prima facie there is no correlation between the two incidents. We are investigating this angle. This was a huge but unintentional mistake."

Somnath's brother Premnath Suryavanshi is now fighting for justice. His lawyer, Pawan Jondhale, says Somnath had no role in the events of December 11 and was picked up with other men from Shankar Nagar, where a number of Dalits live. "He came to Parbhani from Pune to fulfil his dream of becoming a lawyer," he says. "He did odd jobs, from driving to labour work, and supported his family."

Vilas Kale, who calls himself a Parbhanikar, sits outside a restaurant whose board was damaged in the violence. In February, during the Urs (death anniversary of a Muslim holy man) of Hazrat Sayyid Shah Turabul Haq Baba, which saw the participation of both Hindus and Muslims, tensions over the molestation of a woman resulted in stone pelting. "The Urs was cut short by four days citing law and order issues," he says. "Parbhani has always been sensitive."



A victim of the violence offers prayers in front of statuettes of Buddha and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar at her home in Parbhani, Maharashtra. VIJAY SONEJA



Those who want to perpetuate their power do so through the courts. If people were to settle their own quarrels, a third party would not be able to exercise authority over them

Mahatma Gandhi

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

— Ramnath Goenka

## PARLIAMENT NEEDS TO SHUN THE SHAMEFUL 'GRAMMAR OF ANARCHY'

THURSDAY'S unprecedented fracas on parliament premises over the home minister's remarks about B R Ambedkar was a new low in Indian democracy. It should have been avoided at any cost. The acrimonious face-off between members from the ruling NDA and the opposition took an ugly turn with claims of assault from either side of the aisle and police complaints registered against lawmakers on both sides. What transpired was shameful for the largest democracy in the world, whose foundation is owed in no small measure to Mahatma Gandhi's principle of non-violence.

The animosity between the two sides that spilled out in the open would never have happened had the lawmakers addressed their differences with maturity and sat across the table to resolve them, as is expected of them. Parliamentarians, of all people, should never take the law into their own hands. As the saying goes, what would happen to the crop if the fence were to eat it? The adversarial engagement between the NDA and INDI Alliance has reduced what needed to be a serious engagement on critical issues, bills and policies into a binary fight between the two sides. Parliament's time is extremely precious; for it to be squandered in such a squabble in the sanctum sanctorum of the nation's democracy is a sheer waste. Whatever happens with the charges and counter-charges on MPs on the streets outside, we hope that Thursday's violence would not roll over into a scuffle in parliament on Friday, the last day of the winter session.

Ironically, Ambedkar's reflection on the relevance of productive discussion while drafting the Constitution resonates on a day a conflict over his relevance has blown up. "The task of the Drafting Committee would have been a very difficult one if this Constituent Assembly had been merely a motley crowd, a tessellated pavement without cement, a black stone here and a white stone there in which each member or each group was a law unto itself. There would have been nothing but chaos." Our lawmakers need to go back to the classroom to learn a lesson or two in parliamentary propriety and constitutional morality. Dissent is healthy for a democracy. Parliament should give up what Babasaheb called "the grammar of anarchy" for the sake of India's democracy.

## SRI LANKAN PRESIDENT'S VISIT TICKS MOST BOXES

SRI Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake's promise of continuity with change and saying what India wanted to hear on security relations ought to have eased concerns in New Delhi about the Marxist-leaning leader's new regime. For, India is dealing with a new player who came from the fringe after the Aragalaya uprising two years ago and won a massive mandate through the democratic process, pushing all established players to the sidelines. Dissanayake's assurance that Sri Lanka would not be used in any manner detrimental to Indian interests made national headlines, though it was just a reiteration of its longstanding policy.

What stood apart this time was that the statement came from a coalition that had spewed anti-India vitriol over the years. Coming as his visit did in the wake of another regime change in the neighbourhood that resulted in frayed bilateral ties, the anxieties were set at rest by Dissanayake taking the pragmatic middle road. He acknowledged New Delhi's proactive first responder role during any emergency, like the \$5-billion aid given so far ever since the Covid pandemic broke the back of his nation's economy and its positive role in talks on multilateral debt restructuring. The joint statement also spoke about an open, safe and secure Indian Ocean region, which was read in the context of China's territorial expansionism and the knotty issue of berthing research ships for spying against India in Sri Lanka's ports. It would be interesting to see how he nuances that position further when he visits China next month.

The implementation of the 13th Amendment to the Sri Lankan Constitution, a fixture in past joint statements on Tamil rights, was missing this time since Dissanayake is against it. Narendra Modi, in the softest of touches on the hot-button Tamil issue, said, "We hope that Sri Lanka will fully implement the Constitution and will fulfil its commitment to hold provincial council elections." On territorial violation and overshifting, both sides agreed on a humanitarian approach by factoring livelihood concerns and using the dispute resolution mechanisms already in place. Most development proposals to enhance and deepen economic and security ties took past engagements forward. On balance, the Sri Lankan president made a win-win visit, while India continues with painkiller medication to deal with the Bangladesh migraine.

### QUICK TAKE

#### MAKE THE RIGHT CALL

OVERLAYING one map on another can reveal a stark pattern. There was such a moment on Thursday when the government shared data in the Rajya Sabha on tele-density across the country. The states with the lowest tele-density are also the poorest in the country: Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh all fared at least a tenth below the national average of 86 percent. The government also assured that Digital Bharat Nidhi's work of improving connectivity in rural, remote and hilly areas through installation of more mobile towers—a scheme running for more than two decades—is going apace. What's needed is its speedier expansion in the poorest districts.

THE night of December 3 was scary for South Koreans, to say the least. The world's 12th largest economy, which has also been a vibrant democracy in recent decades, was plunged into a shocking crisis. In a baffling move, President Yoon Suk-yeol announced emergency martial law in the dead of the night—the first in the country in over four decades—and sent troops to the National Assembly.

Fortunately, enough number of lawmakers were able to reach parliament and vote out the martial law in only six hours. Whereas Yoon justified his act as just a warning to the opposition members who were blocking his policies and appointments—and generally making governance difficult—there is no doubt that he crossed all the limits.

It may be true that after the opposition secured 192 of the 300 seats in the National Assembly in April 2024, Yoon was feeling frustrated because he was not able to get several of his bills passed. But the extreme step he took is largely attributed by his own autocratic way of dealing with democratic contestations.

Yoon was a prosecutor before he got an opportunity to become presidential candidate from the conservative People's Power Party in 2022. His inexperience in democratic politics—which is a domain of give-and-take, compromises and, more importantly, tolerance for dissent—led him to become increasingly unpopular in South Korea. Rather than rectifying his mistakes, he tried to run over dissent. In foreign and domestic policy-making too, it has been alleged that did not take along popular opinion and has been too 'bored' in his alignment with the West.

The declaration of martial law was, basically, a move in desperation and delusion. It not only shocked South Koreans, but also enraged them. Soon, people took over the streets and the National Assembly proposed an impeachment motion. The first impeachment motion, which was voted on December 7, did not succeed as People's Power Party members did not participate in the proceedings. But the second impeachment motion was successfully passed by the National Assembly a week later.

The matter has gone to the Constitutional Court, which will decide the final fate of Yoon in the next few months. Meanwhile, most presidential powers have been delegated to Prime Minister Han Duk-soo. In all likelihood, if the Constitutional Court judges are not divided on ideological lines—their nomination is

South Korea has clawed back most of the economic losses caused by the shocking declaration of martial law. Its next president is likely to be colder to the West, warmer to China

## TREMORS FROM THE LONG NIGHT OF DECEMBER 3

SANDIP KUMAR MISHRA

Professor, Centre for East Asian Studies, IITJ



being debated at present—it would be an open-and-shut case and Yoon is going to be removed from the presidential office.

After his final removal from the post, election to choose a new president is required to be held within two months. It is likely to herald a return of the centre-left Democratic Party. This would mean a president who would be less inclined to be as unabashedly supportive of the US and Japan as Yoon was, and more accommodative of engagement with China.

One may say that another bout of authoritarianism era in South Korea has been avoided largely because of the people's vigil and resolve, apart from the armed forces' cooperation. But it could also be said that a huge damage has been done to

its political and economic credentials.

South Korea has experienced long periods of authoritarian politics in the past and was able to have a democratic set-up only in 1987. It earned strong democratic credentials with the course of time, but the declaration of martial law revived old memories and images. It would have implications for domestic politics, but hopefully not too much for the South Korean economy.

It was never expected that the mayor of Seoul would have to release an advertisement saying 'Seoul is safe' and appeal to foreign tourists not to change their plans of visiting the capital. It shows that the martial law incident has affected how the world is viewing the country.

## FOR GRACE IN LEGAL EVOLUTION

THE recent decision of a nine-judge bench of the Supreme Court, in *Property Owners Association vs State of Maharashtra*, which interprets Article 30(b) of the Constitution, represents a noteworthy development in the complex and often contentious history of property rights in India. In deciding that not all private property forms part of the "material resources of the community" available for distribution by the state, the court has sought to achieve a nuanced balance between the conflicting demands of individual rights and the state's obligation to ensure economic justice for all.

The judgement, apart from exemplifying the SC's ever evolving take on the characteristics and extent of property rights within a socialist democratic republic, is a reflection of the changing attitude of the ruling dispensation towards some conflicts that have underpinned this discourse since the inception of our republic.

In *Property Owners*, the court addressed a long-standing debate over the interpretation of Article 30(b), specifically the phrase "material resources of the community". The judgement carries special significance for its potential impact on future legislation. It refutes the interpretation that all privately owned resources automatically fall under the ambit of "material resources of the community", an interpretation championed by Justice V R Krishna Iyer in the *Rangnath Reddy* case and subsequently followed in the *Sanjay Coker* case. It clarifies that while private resources can be considered "material resources of the community" in specific contexts, this is not an automatic categorisation. By rejecting this broad interpretation, the Court, in a way, reaffirms the importance of individual property rights while acknowledging the state's role in regulating resources for the common good. The judgement, however, also has significant implications for judicial discipline and the treatment of minority opinions.

The majority judgement by Justice D Y Chandrachud, apart from substantially diluting the power of the state to initiate land reforms and redistribution measures in future, has created considerable debate regarding Justice Krishna Iyer's approach to the phrase, which the former chief justice has obdurately labelled as the Justice Krishna Iyer Doctrine. The judgement states that Justice Iyer's approach had been influenced by a particular social philosophy and economic ideology. Justice Chandrachud opines, "The doctrinal error in the Krishna Iyer approach was postulating a

rigid economic theory, which advocates for greater state control over private resources, as the exclusive basis for constitutional governance... a single economic theory, which views the acquisition of private property by the state as the ultimate goal, would undermine the very fabric and principles of our constitutional framework."

flexible spirit of the Constitution," that observation is curiously absent from the liberal version. Truly, the transition towards liberalisation, privatisation, and globalisation that has occurred since the 1990s cannot lead to the characterisation of the judges from the past "as doing a disservice to the Constitution".

Legal interpretation naturally evolves with society. The transition from socialist principles to market liberalisation represents a gradual shift in collective thinking rather than the invalidation of earlier approaches. Harsh criticism of past judicial philosophies risks erasing important chapters of constitutional history that contributed to India's development and would be in ignorance of what Hans-Georg Gadamer termed the "hermeneutic circle"—that our understanding is inevitably shaped by our own historical consciousness.

Early SC decisions favouring land redistribution reflected the immediate post-independence need to address economic disparities. Progressive judgments protecting workers' rights and the expansive reading of fundamental rights by judges in the 1970s and 1980s was influenced by the need to protect vulnerable sections of society.

Whatever may be the case, Justice Chandrachud's decision marks an acceptance of the general societal shift from viewing all private property as community resources. And in many ways, his tenure is a culmination of the neoliberal consensus that dominated India's political economy for the past three decades. His faith in liberty, private enterprise and globalisation is evident in his decisions on economic matters.

He will be remembered as a champion of individual liberties and progressive values. His judgements decriminalising same-sex relationships, on the right to privacy, and the scope of the right to life are rightly hailed as watershed moments. However, for someone who has been deeply conscious of his legacy, what is clear is that Justice Chandrachud stands as a transitional figure. With all his many successes, failures and a few, he is emblematic of a neoliberal and conservative India coming to terms with a changed society and the false promises and pretenses that animated its past.

What is more troubling is what is not found in the majority's final judgement. While the dissenting judgements quote in extenso from a "proposed" judgement of the former chief justice, where he is said to have opined that "[t]he Krishna Iyer doctrine does a disservice to the broad and

flexible spirit of the Constitution," that observation is curiously absent from the liberal version. Truly, the transition towards liberalisation, privatisation, and globalisation that has occurred since the 1990s cannot lead to the characterisation of the judges from the past "as doing a disservice to the Constitution".

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(Views are personal)

(saaisudharsans@gmail.com)

### The economic fallout

The short-term effect of the declaration was seen in the financial market—the KOSPI market index, which was at 2500 on December 3, dipped to 2360 by the 9th, the lowest in a year; the KOSDAQ, similar to the Nasdaq in the US, moved down from 880 to 827, which was its lowest in five years. Fortunately, after almost a week of downturn, both of them bounced back to 2482 and 883 by December 12.

Meanwhile, individual investors sold almost \$700 million worth of stocks on the day after martial law was declared, but the trend has gradually been reversed. South Korea's small businesses reported a 90 percent fall in sales soon after December 3, but things have since been improving.

The country's currency won also fell to its lowest level in the last two years, but stabilised later. The South Korean central bank has been trying to maintain liquidity in the market through special repo operations, and has announced a stock market stabilisation fund.

The finance minister had assured foreign investors and the international community that South Korea's economic fundamentals are strong, and productions as well as exports are not going to be affected by the brief upheaval. He suggested that for the same reason, the country's credit rating must remain the same. In a way he is right—around the time the impeachment motion passed on December 14, many of the short-term economic setbacks were restored to pre-martial law levels. However, if the impeachment issue drags on in the Constitutional Court, it may have a deeper impact on the economy, as decision making in the transition would be largely on an ad hoc basis.

Once Yoon is formally removed and a new president is elected, in all probability the transitory problems of the economy will be fully overcome. However, though the low growth rate and fear of stagnation in the economy visible in the revision of the growth rate for 2025 from 2.2 to 2.0 percent, remains to be addressed. The country also needs to assuage the international community and foreign investors that such a political turmoil would not occur again.

It could be concluded that the impact of the martial law and the impeachment process—though utterly shocking—would not have any long-term negative effect on the country's economy. But that now depends, first, on the efficiency of its judicial process.

(Views are personal)

### MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

#### Define defamation

Ref: Defamation cases will clog courts till clarity is provided (Dec 19). Defamation cases are becoming increasingly misused, burdening our courts and suppressing free speech. Without clear legal guidelines, frivolous cases will continue to waste judicial resources. It's high time the judiciary ensured clarity to safeguard both the freedom of expression and efficient functioning of our courts.

Kheshi Kumar, email

#### Humble AI

Ref: The Petrol dilemma & AI (Dec 19). The 1983 incident serves as a chilling reminder of the potential dangers of unchecked AI. We need "humility" in AI, enabling it to recognise its limitations. Safe and ethical AI development requires a multidisciplinary approach prioritising human values and ensuring a future where AI serves humanity.

Disha Mori Bhargal, Bengaluru

#### Undignified spat

Ref: Modi raps Cong over demand for Shah's are (Dec 19). It is quite embarrassing to see the potential danger of the ongoing debate on 75 years of the Constitution in parliament. The Constitution has seen many amendments by governments that succeeded in passing them. It is disgusting to the common man when accusations over it are politically motivated.

Jiji Panicker K, Chengannur

#### Everyone's Ambedkar

Ref: Opposition turns heat on govt over Shah remarks, seeks apology (Dec 19). A responsible opposition leader like Mallikarjun Kharge or B R Ambedkar, a "Dalit hero" speaks of petty-mindedness. Ambedkar was, is, and will be respected by all Indians cutting across caste and religious lines. Even Gandhi and Nehru, who were at loggerheads with Babasaheb on so many issues, never looked at him as only the representative of a particular community.

Venkat Desikan, Chennai

#### Adieu Ashwin

Ashwin's retirement in the middle of an R Ashwin tour surprised the entire cricket world. Here is a high-quality cricketer who has been constantly tested shabbily, especially on overseas tours. He deserved a better exit, a ceremonial one at that.

Sanath Kumar TS, Thrissur

#### Chess academy

The Tamil Nadu government's decision to open the Home of Chess academy under the Sports and Recreation Authority of Tamil Nadu will surely be a boon to aspirants. It will help nurture more grandmasters from the state.

J Selvaraj, email



SCIENCE

# Never events: unacceptable failures in implementing patient safety protocol

Never events as a term was introduced in 2002 by the National Quality Forum (NQF) in the United States. It has since been adopted in the Western world, particularly in countries like the U.S., U.K., and Canada, and they maintain a list of never events. They highlight the importance of preventing harm by strict adherence to a safety regime

C. Aravinda

**T**he concept of 'never events' (NE) is described broadly as serious and largely preventable incidents that should never occur in healthcare settings if proper safety protocols are followed. Never events as a term was introduced in 2002 by the National Quality Forum (NQF) in the United States. It has since been adopted in the Western world, particularly in countries like the U.S., U.K., and Canada, and they maintain a list of never events. They highlight the importance of preventing harm through systemic checks, improved processes, and strict adherence to safety protocols.

Never events lack a universal definition and overlaps with terms like 'sentinel events' or 'serious reportable events'. These categories generally share the theme of preventable harm resulting in severe patient consequences such as operating on the wrong side of the limb, insulin overdose, or mismatched blood transfusion.

This could lead to disability, death, or great discomfort for the patient. The broad scope of never events overshadows the systemic complexities behind such incidents.

Organisations like the National Health Service (NHS), Cigna, and Leapfrog share the goal of improving patient safety, but they differ in their focus on the description of never events, financial penalties, root cause analysis learning, and breaches of safety protocols.

**Variations in lists across systems**  
The list of never events varies across organisations. For example, the United Kingdom's NHS's updated 2021 list includes 16 events (enlisted in the table), while the United States recognises 29 events. This variation reflects the complexity of healthcare as a socio-technical system. Healthcare involves numerous stakeholders and interactions between social, technical, human, organisational, economic, and regulatory components, all shaping how never events are defined, occur, and addressed in the system.

What does one do after a never event? According to the Leapfrog Group, when a never event occurs, it is essential to take specific steps to address the situation in the aftermath of the incident. First, the healthcare provider should offer a sincere apology to the patient. The incident must then be formally reported to ensure transparency. A detailed root cause analysis should follow to uncover the

## List of never events as per NHS

Never events are difficult to eradicate, but efforts and a method to prevent them are critical.



CATEGORY	NEVER EVENT
Surgical	Wrong site surgery
Surgical	Wrong implant/prosthesis
Surgical	Retained foreign object post-procedure
Medication	Mis-selection of a strong potassium solution
Medication	Administration of medication by the wrong route
Medication	Overdose of insulin due to abbreviations or incorrect device
Medication	Overdose of methotrexate for non-cancer treatment
Medication	Mis-selection of high-strength midazolam during conscious sedation
Mental health	Failure to install functional collapsible shower or curtain rails
General	Falls from poorly restricted windows
General	Chest or neck entrapment in bed rails
General	Transfusion or transplantation of ABO-incompatible blood components or organs
General	Misplaced naso- or oro-gastric tubes
General	Scalding of patients
General	Unintentional connection of a patient requiring oxygen to an air flowmeter
General	Undetected oesophageal intubation

factors that led to the event. Finally, any costs incurred directly because of the incident should be waived as a gesture of accountability and fairness.

### Are never events fully preventable?

The idea of completely preventing never events is a subject of ongoing debate and contention. While achieving absolute prevention is often seen as the ultimate goal, no consensus remains on whether it is practically possible. Studies reveal that never events persist at a rate of 1 to 2 per 100 incidents, with overall patient safety incidents occurring in 2 to 3 out of every 100 consultations.

Despite significant investments in safety mechanisms and interventions, the persistence of these incidents in healthcare systems shows its complexity. Never events cannot be viewed in isolation from the complex interplay of socio-technological systems, organisational dynamics, and cultural factors.

This complexity suggests that while the

**Medical complications are expected risks inherent to medical procedures. Latrogenic causes may overlap with complications but are specifically tied to medical interventions, whether acceptable or negligent**

frequency of never events might be substantially reduced, the notion of their complete prevention is more aspirational than practical. Adopting the As Low As Reasonably Practicable (ALARP) principle – a balanced risk management approach – offers a pragmatic framework for addressing and minimising these incidents. Never events also have a problematic tendency of concentrating accountability disproportionately on frontline healthcare workers. It evokes strong emotional and punitive responses.

This approach fails to account for systemic failures, such as organisational inefficiencies, poor infrastructure, and

communication gaps, contributing to never events incidents. Evidence points to the reality that frontline staff, though closest to these incidents, are not fully responsible for their occurrence.

### The Indian context

Never events as a term has not been explicitly acknowledged or used in the Indian context. Instead, medical negligence is applied in medico-legal cases and allegations of professional misconduct in healthcare. While never events emphasise preventable harm within healthcare systems, in India, similar incidents are categorised and addressed under the broader legal framework of medical negligence.

Medical negligence occurs when a healthcare provider fails to meet the expected standard of care, leading to harm, as per the Bolam test.

This may involve acts of commission, such as administering incorrect medication, or omission, like neglecting to check for retained placenta in the uterus after delivery. The evaluation of negligence is based on whether the actions align with what a competent peer would have done under similar circumstances.

Medical errors can be unintended mistakes arising from misjudgements, such as a missed diagnosis or an incorrect treatment arising without deliberate deviation from the standard of care. Latrogenic events are harms directly caused by medical interventions.

Some latrogenic effects are unavoidable and accepted as part of treatment, such as hair loss during chemotherapy, while others, like leaving a surgical pad in a patient, indicate negligence. Medical maloccurrences are outcomes that cannot be prevented even with appropriate care, such as rib fractures during CPR or rare revascularisation of fallopian tubes after sterilisation. Differentiating these phenomena is critical.

Medical complications are expected risks inherent to medical procedures that occur despite proper care and do not imply negligence. Latrogenic causes may overlap with complications but are specifically tied to medical interventions, whether acceptable or negligent. Medical negligence represents clear failures in duty. Medical maloccurrences are outcomes that, while undesirable, are not preventable even under optimal conditions.

(Dr. C. Aravinda is an academic and public health physician. The views expressed are personal. aravinda@iimj10@hotmail.com)

## THE GIST

Never events are preventable incidents that result in severe patient consequences: operating on the wrong side of the limb, insulin overdose, or mismatched blood transfusion

When a never event does occur the healthcare provider should offer an apology, prepare a formal report, conduct a root cause analysis, and finally cover any costs

While never events might be reduced, complete prevention is more aspirational than practical. Adopting the ALARP principle offers a pragmatic framework for addressing and minimising these incidents

## HUMERUS



# Disability and queer health in medical education — India under the lens

Bindu Shajan Perappadan

**I**ndia's National Medical Commission's (NMC) alleged non-inclusion in its medical curriculum of disability and queer rights is at the forefront of a commentary piece *One step forward, two steps back: urgent priorities to embed disability and queer health in medical education* systems published online in *The Lancet Regional Health – Southeast Asia*.

The commentary also notes that on the global front, out of the 110 Lancet Commissions, aside from mental health and the Holocaust, there is no dedicated commission for disability or the queer community.

In India, the mandatory inclusion of disability rights as disability competencies in India's new medical curriculum in 2019 was highlighted as one of the 17ighthouse initiatives by UN India during the SDG mid-point review.

### Hamper human rights

Explaining why exclusion will continue to hamper human rights one of the authors of the commentary, Satendra Singh from the Department of Physiology, University College of Medical Sciences & GTB Hospital, University of Delhi, said



A protest on 'International Day of Persons with Disabilities', in Kolkata. ANI

Lancet Commissions are science-led, international, and multidisciplinary collaborations aimed at achieving transformational change, with a particular focus on policy and political action. "Their evidence-based recommendations provide critical data to influence policymakers in revising health policies. Currently, there are 1.2 billion young people aged 15 to 24 years, accounting for 16% of the global population. A similar proportion (16%) of people globally experience disability, with more individuals joining this group every year," said Dr. Singh.

India has among the highest number of road accident fatalities worldwide (as of 2022); additionally, it is recognised as the "diabetes capital of the world," where complications such as gangrene, limb loss, and ocular conditions contribute to disability.

Also historically, both the disability and transgender communi-

ties have been marginalised within the medical establishment, said Dr. Singh, adding that these two groups share similar vulnerabilities, which contribute to health inequities and undermine the Agenda 2030 goal of "leaving no one behind." He stated that things will only change when voices from these two communities are part of these Lancet Commissions.

India has the highest number of medical colleges in the world, producing future doctors and medical professionals. "Many of these graduates also represent the largest group of international medical professionals working in the USA and Canada. A compassionate medical graduate, well-versed in the health inequities faced by vulnerable groups, can play a crucial role in dismantling long-standing structural and attitudinal barriers," they explain.

### Educating future medics

Co-author of the commentary Rohin Bhatt, who is also a human rights lawyer, argues that both of these groups have been marginalised in healthcare settings. "They have borne the brunt of discrimination and marginalisation in healthcare settings. So, when the doctors of tomorrow are educated, it is essential that they do not repeat the mistakes of their predecessors and ensure that disabled and queer patients are not deprived of the right to advocate for

themselves, but also so that the doctors see these patients not as a collective of symptoms but as full humans in their own right," he said.

The paper adds that it is important to recognise that amidst a variety of factors that perpetuate inequality, non-inclusive language warrants attention.

"Prioritising inclusive language – clear, consistent, and respectful – recognises diversity. It shouldn't be left to minorities to advocate for this but should be everyone's responsibility, especially policymakers," said the paper.

In India, the National Medical Commission in its preamble emphasises improving access to quality, affordable medical education, promoting equitable healthcare, encouraging community health perspectives, and enforcing high ethical standards in medical services that are flexible.

"The circumstances in India are, however, not just a dereliction of the duty of the NMC but also, arguably, an action that is ultra vires the parent legislation and thus, ex facie illegal," states the paper.

### For feedback and suggestions

for 'Science', please write to science@thehindu.co.in with the subject 'Daily paper'



[ OUR TAKE ]

## Dealing with the Dragon

India-China ties show progress, but Delhi must not lose sight of Beijing's border ambitions

The meeting of the Special Representatives for the India-China border issue produced signs of incremental progress in addressing the fallout of the four-year military standoff on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and restoring bilateral relations to an even keel. The Special Representatives, National Security Adviser Ajit Doval and China's foreign minister Wang Yi discussed cross-border cooperation, including the resumption of the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra and border trade. The focus was on ensuring peace at the disputed border and learning from the events of 2020 when a bloody clash at Galwan Valley took its toll on their lowest ebb in six decades. There was also emphasis on a "fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable framework" for resolving the boundary question. All of this follows the earlier progress on disengagement of forces and border management, and these moves must continue.

However, the difference in language and emphasis in the official statements of the two sides after the meeting suggests that peacebuilding remains a work in progress. Though the Special Representatives met early on Wednesday, the readouts came late in the night, pointing to a possible lack of agreement on a joint statement. The Indian side made no reference whatsoever to a "six-point consensus" that the Chinese side claimed was reached during the talks. The Chinese side, once again, made a pointed mention of its desire to see the border issue being separated from the overall relationship. The two sides now must address the thorny issues of de-escalation and restoration of the status quo, and decide on the need for new confidence-building measures since Chinese actions in 2020 brought into question the viability of existing border management agreements and conventions.

Besides, as this newspaper reported on Thursday, China is building infrastructure and villages in territory traditionally seen as part of Bhutan, and close to the strategic Siliguri Corridor. If proof was needed about China not scaling down its military presence along the LAC, it has come in the form of an annual report from the US department of defense, which speaks of Beijing maintaining troop numbers and ramping up infrastructure and facilities in the area opposite Ladakh. Most experts believe these activities are part of China's plan to create a new reality on the ground by steadily nibbling away at disputed territories. New Delhi must keep all these factors in mind and not lower its guard on border developments, including Bhutan's ties with China while striving to make progress in its relations with Beijing.

## Oscars are no yardstick to judge Indian cinema

The failure of *Laapataa Ladies* to make it to the Best International Feature shortlist at the Oscars means that this prize will continue to elude Indian cinema. The International Feature category claims to feature the finest from outside Hollywood and the absence of winners from India — only four have made the long list — should not be seen as a reflection of the quality of films from India.

It is not surprising that *Laapataa Ladies* missed the bus. It is a sensitive and layered comedy about the status of women in the Hindi heartland and how aspirations are changing gender relations in rural India, but it arguably lacks the grandeur and thematic and emotional universality to rock global screens. An Oscar nomination/win does carry more heft than a prize from Cannes, Berlin, Venice, Locarno or our own Goa International Film Festival of India (IFFI) because the Oscars represent the soft power of America and are backed by the commercial muscle of Hollywood. But India's cinema (Bollywood to regional language film industries) has aesthetic and commercial autonomy and agency that, fortunately, allows its filmmakers to stay rooted and tell stories that reflect the local realities.

Some such cinema does appeal to foreign audiences. It said Raj Kapoor's popularity in the USSR was rivaled only by Jawaharlal Nehru. In recent years, Rajinikanth flicks have been toasted in countries as different as Japan and Germany. To be sure, Indian art house cinema has always had its moments globally (the Honorary Academy Award for Satyajit Ray in 1992, and, more recently, a Grand Prix at Cannes for *All We Imagine as Light*, the entry many thought should have gone to the Oscars. And, of course, Indian artists such as Bhanu Athaiya, AR Rahman, Gulzar, Ravi Shankar, Mani Keeravani, and Chandra Bose have won Oscars for their work in non-Indian productions. Give it time.

# OPINION

## Trump tariffs and the making of a trade war

Before targeting the US's two neighbours and rival China, Donald Trump should bear in mind that there will be no winners in this war

Merely weeks before his inauguration as the United States (US) President for a second term, Donald Trump announced that he would implement his campaign promise of raising tariffs immediately after assuming charge. In two posts on his social media platform Truth Social, Trump stated that he would "sign all necessary documents to charge Mexico and Canada a 25% Tariff on ALL products coming into the United States, and its ridiculous Open Borders". He added, "This Tariff will remain in effect until such time as Drugs, in particular Fentanyl, and all illegal Aliens stop this invasion of our Country!" Trump also accused Beijing of not taking strong enough action to stop the flow of illicit drugs into the US, stating that the US "will be charging China an additional 10% Tariff, above any additional Tariffs, on all of their many products" imported by the US.

Through these announcements, the president-elect targeted two sets of problems affecting the US he has consistently highlighted — the flow of illegal migrants and the opioid crisis.

The former issue was among the central planks of Trump's election campaign, while the latter was also given considerable space. Over the past several years, the opioid crisis emerged as a major problem for the US due to a steep rise in the number of deaths from drug overdose, according to the US Drug Enforcement Administration. Synthetic opioids, including fentanyl illegally produced in China, contributed to the spurt in opioid deaths over the past decade.

Trump's announcement is his unique way of using unilateral measures to force targeted countries to fall in line with his agenda. But it raises two sets of questions. One, would the Trump tariffs sufficiently disrupt the exports of the three countries to the US, forcing their governments to clamp down on illegal immigration and trafficking of illicit drugs? Two, if the US acts unilaterally, as the president-elect has proposed, wouldn't the target countries retaliate, setting off a trade war?

Trade data shows that the Trump tariffs could significantly affect overall exports of Canada and Mexico to the US, as the two North American countries are overwhelmingly dependent on their neighbour for their export business. In 2023, Canada's dependence was 78%, and Mexico's was almost 80%. Interestingly, both countries have become more dependent on the US after Trump renegotiated the North American Free Trade Agreement in 2018, replacing it with the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement.

Several major manufacturing sectors of Canada, including transport equipment and metal fabrication, rely heavily on the US market, accounting for more than 90% of total exports. Mexico's largest manufacturing sectors are almost as dependent on the US market. In 2023, more than 93% of Mexico's garment exports and 90% of electrical and electronics exports ended up across the country's northern border.

83% of Mexico's automobile industry exports, which have emerged as one of the largest globally, were to the US. On the other hand, China's exports would be much less impacted by the Trump tariffs. Although the US has remained its largest export market, China's large presence in almost all regions never made it too dependent on a single country's market. The US accounted for over 23% of China's exports in the early years of the millennium, but since the 2008 economic recession, this figure stood at 17-19%. However, after the Covid pandemic, China's exports to the US declined further to below 15% of the total in 2023. This is the lowest level since 1993, the early phase of China's forays into the global economy.

Unlike the US's two neighbours,

stronger Canadian responses such as imposing retaliatory tariffs and cutting off electricity exports to some US states. China, on the other hand, is a study in contrast. While there has been no official response thus far on the measures it could adopt to counter Trump tariffs, a few voices from the policy community have provided some indications of China's likely response. For instance, a former head of the People's Bank of China argued that Beijing may be forced to retaliate to "give the public an account" of what is being done in response. Trump seems to have made it a habit to threaten the imposition of higher tariffs on countries he feels are acting against his plans of "making America great again". However, reactions from the three countries suggest that the US's unilateral actions will be retaliated against, making trade war a distinct possibility.

Before he signs the executive orders authorising tariff hikes, Trump will do well to recognise that in a trade war, there are no winners.



Biswajit Dhar

is a distinguished professor, Council for Social Development. The views expressed are personal

## Five principles integral to better schooling systems

A study recently published by the World Inequality Lab at the Paris School of Economics says that China's manufacturing and productivity leap is rooted in more than 40% of its youth pursuing vocational education in the 1980s, as compared to India's 10%. B Sekhar's recent analysis for the Public Report on Secondary Education (PROSE) study, based on household data from the National Sample Survey and the National Family Health Survey, also highlights the large gaps in access and quality in secondary/vocational education. The PROSE study is a serious effort to understand how India's education and skill-building can contribute to higher productivity and higher wages of dignity.

The most damning statistic is the neglect of primary education in India in the first four decades of freedom comes from the 42nd round of the National Sample Survey (1986-87), which found 69.23% of aged six-plus females in rural India never enrolled in a primary school. Surely, a few high-quality higher education institutions can't make up for India's neglect of primary education.

Why has India's schooling system not done better? Lucy Crehan, a British school teacher who wrote about five high-scoring countries in the learning-outcome benchmark Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) test, provides some answers. Crehan says that in Finland, Singapore, Japan, Canada, and Shanghai (China), five principles explain high-performing, equitable schooling.

**Principle 1 — Get children ready for formal learning:** Despite India's education policy recognising the need to prepare the country's children for formal learning, investments were not kept pace. The Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) that engages the *anganwadi sevak* and helper for children aged zero-six years for four to six hours a day (*anganwadi sevikas* are paid a monthly honorarium that is less than minimum wage, and therefore longer working hours are virtually ruled out) is seen as the point for readying children for formal learning. Unfortunately, its coverage is not universal, and curricula are often not fully aligned with those of schools. Finland does not teach anything till age seven as children till that age group only play and learn.

The teacher-pupil ratio in Finnish schools is much lower and the teachers are trained to keep academics out as they promote the communication skills of children and learning by doing. ICDS, in India, has ended up as more of a hot-cooked centre. The new National Education Policy (NEP) tries to bring preschool closer to formal school, both physically and pedagogically. We will need to raise a cadre of well-trained nursery teachers

who make learning happen without burden.

**Principle 2 — Design curricula concepts for mastery (and context for motivation):** Crehan, being a teacher herself, identifies the following as a good national/provincial curriculum — minimal (focusing on fewer topics, but in greater depth), high-level (clear on what concepts and skills are required without prescribing content or pedagogy), and ordered (organising concepts in a logical order, based on research into how children learn). An over-defined curriculum framework often takes away the autonomy of the school or the teacher. While there is a case for a common curriculum, it must have opportunities for development of teaching and learning methods that respect local contexts. In India, while there are many assessment boards, there is still a need to have a standardised curriculum that allows large-scale local experimentation.

**Principle 3 — Support children in taking on challenges, rather than making concessions:** All school systems that perform well in PISA never give up on any student. The system is geared to ensuring a basic level of proficiency. No dilution of standards is ever attempted to improve school results. Singapore is an exception, starting "streaming very early". In the other high-performing jurisdictions, the vocational and academic pursuits are organically linked, and the progression is smooth. There is enough evidence to suggest that streaming for vocational very early may lead to compromises on skill and productivity.

Reducing pass marks is clearly not the way to build a successful school system. Children from underprivileged homes need even greater learning and financial support. Lowering standards is only a way of playing with one's students' careers. There must also be a robust system of teacher performance assessment and accountability.

**Principle 4 — Treat teachers as professionals:** This is where each of the five well-performing regions invests a lot. The professional development of the teacher is central to the schooling process.

India has serious challenges in the governance environment of the teacher development process. Despite efforts of the National Council of Teacher Education, the teachers being recruited for the school system are not adequately equipped in most cases. For India to match China, we need to overhaul the teacher development system, improve the service condition of teachers, and make teachers socially respected far more than present.

**Principle 5 — Combine school accountability with school support:** School inspector raj is no way to improve schools; teachers need support to remove deficits that compromise learning in schools. Decentralised community action with adequate unit resources will empower local initiatives of teachers at the school level. India has a long way to go to develop good quality schooling from below. The PROSE study hopes to provide answers to many of the schooling and skilling challenges from the perspective of households, students, teachers and instructors.

Amarjeet Sinha is senior fellow at Centre for Social and Economic Progress, coordinating the work of the PROSE study. The views expressed are personal.



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KEIR STARMER | PRIME MINISTER OF THE UNITED KINGDOM

India is a vital partner for the UK and we have huge ambition to unlock more opportunities together, building on our already strong relationship



## Power shifts in China's defence establishment

There are signs that the Chinese military is facing significant internal strife. Recently, China's defence ministry announced the suspension of Central Military Commission (CMC) member Admiral Miao Hua for serious disciplinary violations. This decision coincided with reports that defence minister Dong Jun may also be under investigation for corruption. Historically, public presence has served as an indicator of an official's safety from corruption-related allegations in China. For instance, before their dismissals, former officials like foreign minister Qin Gang and defence minister Li Shangfu had notable absences from public life. Before there was confirmation of action being taken against them, here it is worth noting that Dong was last seen attending the Second Symposium on Security Situation in the Gulf of Guinea on December 5. Moreover, rumours of a probe against him were dismissed by foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning. Despite this, recent developments indicate a broader crisis within China's defence apparatus.

The past two years have seen significant upheaval in the People's Liberation Army, with numerous high-ranking officials from various branches facing investigations for misconduct. Li Shangfu's corruption scandal was linked to his tenure as head of the Equipment Development Department (EDD). Now, it appears that factional struggles within the CMC are at play, with more dispensable officials continuing to be targeted. In China's clientelist Leninist Party-State system, power politics at the highest levels often takes place through the targeting of a competitor's network of patronage, revealing hidden skeletons in their closets to either achieve acquiescence or elimination.

When Dong was promoted to the post of defence minister in December 2023, he was the first from the navy to assume the post. Dong was expected to step up to accelerate combat preparedness in hostile naval theatres. But from the perspective of the internal decision-making hierarchy, his role was primarily public-facing. This is par for the course in the Chinese system. However, Dong has not enjoyed substantive authority. Despite being in the position for a year, he has been excluded from the CMC. Both his purged predecessors, Li Shangfu and Wei Fenghe, were members of the CMC. Dong's exclusion is likely indicative of resistance among factional opponents to the hierarchy. His appointment, nevertheless, was seen as an extension of Miao's authority. Now

with Miao's suspension, Dong's position does seem suspect.

What further adds credence to this theory of factional infighting at the highest levels is the series of actions taken against officials such as Lin Xiangang, current Commander of the PLA Eastern Theatre Command, as well as Wang Xihou, former Commander of the Southern Theatre Command. Miao, Dong, Lin, and Wang are all interconnected through their historical ties to Fujian province, forming what some analysts refer to as a "Fujian gang" in the military, led by CMC's third-in-command He Weidong. This faction is countered by a "Shaanxi gang", led by CMC second-in-command Zhang Youxia.

Given that Li Shangfu was a protégé of Zhang Youxia, he must have faced quite a setback from his purge. Now, two other critical members of the so-called "Shaanxi gang" remain in the CMC. The first is Zhang Shengming, a key figure who oversees anti-corruption efforts within the CMC.

His background in the Rocket Force aligns him with other PLAIF leaders who have faced scrutiny recently. The other is He Hongjun, who, in July 2024, became an executive deputy director of the CMC Political Work Department. His rapid promotion from major general to general, in just 11 years, reflects Zhang's influence and suggests that if Miao were to be replaced, He could be a likely candidate. He's appointment is also more beneficial to Xi himself, given that Miao may have been appointed to the CMC by Xi, but did not owe his rise through the ranks to the chairman. He Hongjun, on the other hand, was assigned an exclusive billet of executive deputy director by Xi.

The fall of figures like Li, Miao and potentially Dong, does not indicate weakness in Xi's position. He continues to stay above factional struggles for the moment. But it does reveal potential instability within Xi's inner circle. And if close confidantes like Miao, or even He Weidong and Zhang Youxia are purged, it could signify a deeper crisis affecting military cohesion and loyalty.

While Xi's anti-corruption campaign aims to consolidate power and ensure loyalty to his position, it has inadvertently exposed factional dynamics that threaten stability. As these dynamics unfold, Xi faces challenges that extend beyond mere inefficiency or corruption.

Anushka Saxena is staff research analyst, The Takshashila Institution. The views expressed are personal



Trade data shows that the Trump tariffs could significantly affect overall exports of Canada and Mexico to the US.

none of the major manufacturing sectors of the Chinese economy are too dependent on the world's largest economy. In fact, relatively more technologically-intensive sectors, especially electronics and other machinery producers exported only around 15% of their total exports to the US in 2023. Pharmaceutical and organic chemicals producers did similarly. On the other hand, the automobile industry, which is already being targeted by the Joe Biden administration using high tariffs, exported less than 10% to the US in 2023.

Political leaderships of the targeted countries have responded to the threat of Trump tariffs in varied ways. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum contacted the US President-elect immediately to state of the immediate economic turmoil their countries could face if the tariffs were imposed. Sheinbaum sounded a note of warning in her response: "If there are US tariffs, Mexico would also raise tariffs". This was a clear signal that her government could take retaliatory actions against its largest trade partner. Trudeau made initial efforts to negotiate with Donald Trump, but premiers of British Columbia and Ontario have spoken of



Anushka Saxena

is a staff research analyst, The Takshashila Institution. The views expressed are personal



IN THE LIMELIGHT



Film maker (right) Goutam Ghose with Marco Leonardi. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

# In Parikrama, Goutam Ghose probes the human and spiritual cost of development

The Indo-Italian production that had its Asia premiere at the 30th Kolkata International Film Festival calls attention to the adverse consequences that Indigenous people and pilgrims face because of big-ticket dam projects on the mighty Narmada

Anuj Kumar

Destiny and development politics delicately come together in Goutam Ghose's latest work of art, depicting the threat to human settlements and the environment from big-ticket dam projects in the Narmada basin. Long in the works, the film has come when big dams are being discouraged worldwide because of socio-economic and environmental concerns.

At the outset, the Indo-Italian production appears like a venture to sell the serene Narmada valley to the Italians who historically love to travel and explore the cultural diversity of India. However, as the narrative takes shape, Ghose, one of the vanguards of the Parallel Cinema movement in India, displays how the lightness of touch can be a subversive device, reviving memories of the days of the New Wave when projects co-funded by the State didn't shy away from speaking truth to power.

**Layered contradictions**  
Mounted like a picturesque canvas, *Parikrama* carries the contradictions of tradition and technology, growth and development in its layers. The story follows Alessandro or Alex (Marco Leonardi), a conscientious Italian filmmaker who makes films on environmental displacement. He is keen on making a documentary on the pilgrims

that circumbulate the Narmada but discovers that because of multiple dams that have come up on its vast course, the sacred river and the pilgrimage are fast losing their character. With the change in physical dimensions, the landmarks have become unrecognisable and the comfort of hospitality has submergished with the villages forcing pilgrims to circumbulate the stagnant waters of the lakes along the way.

A single father, Alex leaves his son Francesco (Emanuele Esposito) behind with his grandmother in the Mediterranean country to explore the journey of the mighty Narmada into the Arabian Sea.

In India, he is joined by Rupa (Chitrangada Singh), a social worker in the field of child welfare who is battling her own demons. Keen to find a voice for the film, Alex comes across Lala (Aryan Badkul), a street-smart teenager selling curries on the banks of the river. As the two develop an enduring bond, the otherwise ebullient Lala narrates the tragic backstory of how his village got submerged in the river because of a dam project. Only an unhealed man in the village dare speak against the development and a child is left to tell the tale of the devastation of his family life. Through the eyes of a child, the film reflects on how the Sardar Sarovar Project built to dam the Narmada has swallowed fertile lands, archaeological sites, and places of worship leaving devastated

dreams in its wake.

Simultaneously, the film also critiques the Western gaze on India and feels like a poetic follow-up piece to Roberto Rossellini's ethnographic docu-fiction *Matri Bhumi* (1959). In the Italian master's picturesque depiction of Nehruvian India, the narrator Devi finds livelihood and safety from floods at the then-upcoming Hirakud Dam on Mahanadi. Six decades later, Lala loses his land, livelihood, and possibly hope because another monstrous concrete structure has emerged in the middle of Narmada. And if you look closely, a portrait of Nehru, covered with years of dust, hangs in a government office where the officer refuses to provide compensation without papers. That Yesterday's solution could be today's problem, that progress could be cruel, shines through as the narrative makes our emotional reservoir swell.

For Marco, who emerged as a teenage star with *Cinema Paradiso* (1988), *Parikrama* is a cinematic circumambulation of sorts as three decades after playing the teenaged Toto in the Italian classic, he gets an opportunity to be an Alfredo for the doughty Lala. Like Rabindranath Tagore's *Kabuliwala*, Alex, a foreigner travelling for sustenance, sees the reflection of his motherless son in Lala who has lost his motherland.

**'Intertwined lives'**  
The film has an interesting phrase for this bond: *humra naseeb (our fate)*. It not only

explains how the marginalised surrender to their fate, but also, how our lives seem to be intertwined. This twinning of destinies comes through the background score as well when Ghose interpolates Operatic music in the scenes depicting environmental displacement around Narmada. When Alex gets enraged with giant structures protruding out of the river that have killed the sacred confluence of Cauvery and Narmada, he refers to Atlantis, the fictional island in Plato's work that was lost to the world because of human hubris. Ghose's incisive gaze links it to the revelry in the water parks where consumers perhaps don't process the price Indigenous tribes have paid for their giant wheels of entertainment to revolve.

Impeded by the pandemic, the impact of certain scenes is not fully realised and the conversations between Alex and Rupa tend to drag. Aryan has an unmistakable charm and flair for performance but, his enthusiasm, at times, leaves an impression as if he is in a summer workshop.

Ghose doesn't give up on his quest though and even submits his point of view to scrutiny. Rupa questions Alex's morality for milking Lala's heart-rending story for his project and wonders whether his gaze is voyeuristic. The same question could be asked of Ghose. *Parikrama* takes a few extra rounds to avoid easy answers but the question it raises leaves you numb.

## THE DAILY QUIZ

With 2024 coming to an end, dictionaries and round-up articles have reviewed the year in words. A quiz on some of the words, phrases, terms that became popular this year

Abhinaya K

**QUESTION 1**  
If the Barbenheimer phenomenon defined the summer of 2023, this word was the tune of the season this year. Inspired by the namesake album of a popular artist, the word became a trend, an aesthetic, and also was part of the U.S. Presidential campaign. Identify the word.

**QUESTION 2**  
After a year of many key elections, Merriam-Webster announced 'polarisation' as its word of the year. Another word that stood out in the year, according to the dictionary, means 'to say, do, or provide

what someone wants even though it is not proper, good, or reasonable'. Identify the word that was also very popular during the elections.

**QUESTION 3**  
This word is the name of a titular character from a children's book but means something else in the context of the economy. Name the word.

**QUESTION 4**  
Is a new word used to describe spam/unwanted content related to Artificial Intelligence.

**QUESTION 5**  
In our hyper-online era, this phrase was used to encourage people to participate in real-world experiences. It was added to the Merriam-Webster dictionary recently. Identify the phrase.



**Visual question:**  
This word was declared Cambridge Dictionary's word of the year. It was highly searched after the Paris Olympics and Singer Dua Lipa's headline slot. Identify the word. AP

**Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz:** 1. Who was Ashwin's opponent in his Test debut? **Ans: West Indies**  
2. Ashwin was part of two ICC tournament-winning Indian teams. **Ans: 2011 ICC World Cup and 2013 ICC Champions Trophy**  
3. In which year did Ashwin win the ICC Men's Cricketer of the Year and ICC Men's Test Cricketer of the Year awards? **Ans: 2016**  
4. What is common to the following Test matches: against West Indies at Mumbai (2011) and Antigua (2106), versus England at Chapeau (2021), and against Bangladesh at Chennai (2024)? **Ans: To score a century and take five or more wickets in the same Test**  
5. Ashwin belongs to an elite club along with Shane Warne and Stuart Broad. What achievements are these the only three to achieve? **Ans: The rare double of 3000 plus runs and 500 or more wickets in Test cricket**  
6. Against which two nations has Ashwin taken 100 or more wickets? **Ans: Australia (115) and England (114)**  
7. With which legendary spinner does Ashwin share the record for the most Player-of-the-series? **Ans: Muttiah Muralitharan**  
Visual: Ashwin is being congratulated after scalping the first of the 537 Test victims. Who was the batter? **Ans: Darren Bravo**  
Early Birds: Dodo Jayaditya | Tamal Biswas | Tito Shilladitya | Sonali Das | Piyali Tuli

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



FROM THE ARCHIVES

## Know your English

K. Subrahmanian  
S. Upendran

If I hear you complain about Padma one more time, I'll show you the door."  
"Show me the door? What for? I can see it from here. It's the same old door, isn't it? I've been..."

"... When you say you'll 'show someone the door', it means you're asking him/her to leave because you're angry with the person concerned. When Priya questioned the Principal's authority, she was shown the door."

"When I tried to enter the stadium without a proper ticket, I was shown the door."

"Really? When was this?"  
"About two years ago. By the way, didn't you say you would take me to 'Fiddler on the Roof' tomorrow?"

"I'm afraid our movie plans will have to be put on ice for the time being."

"Put on ice? What does it mean?"  
"When you put something on ice, you take no action on it for a period of time. When Suresh lost his job, his plans to get married were put on ice."

"From your examples, it seems to me that 'put on ice' means the same thing as 'put into cold storage'."

"You're right. The two expressions mean more or less the same thing. When you put a plan into cold storage, you postpone it for a while rather than put it into action immediately."

"Now tell me, why do you want to put our movie plans into cold storage?"

"Because I have a lot of things to do."  
"You can do them later. You must take me to the movie tomorrow."

"I'm not obligated to."  
"Obligated? You mean 'obliged', don't you?"

"Both 'oblige' and 'obligate' imply commitment of some kind. The British use 'obligate' for legal obligations. Mohan was obligated to repay the loans he took from the bank. When giving testimony in court, you are obligated to tell the truth. Americans, on the other hand, use 'oblige' and 'obligate' interchangeably. A student is obligated to turn up in time for the class. Or you could say..."

"... a student is obliged to turn up in time for the class."

"By the way, can 'criteria' be used as a singular?"

"No. It is used as a singular by some. But it is wrong. 'Criterion' is the correct singular. His one criterion was the greatest good for the greatest number. What are the criteria for judging great literature? The word 'criterion' is from Greek 'kritos' meaning 'to judge'. The word 'critic' is also from the same root. Do you know what 'criticaster' means?"

"No."  
"A criticaster is a petty or inferior critic."

"But how does..."  
"If you don't stop pestering me, I'll be obliged to show you the door."

Published in The Hindu on June 28, 1994

## Word of the day

**Obdurate:**  
stubbornly persistent in wrongdoing

**Synonyms:** adamant, inflexible, unmanageable

**Usage:** She remained obdurate, refusing to apologise.

**Pronunciation:** newsth.live/obduratepro

**International Phonetic Alphabet:** /ɒbdjʊrət/

For feedback and suggestions for Text & Context, please write to [letters@thehindu.co.in](mailto:letters@thehindu.co.in) with the subject 'Text & Context'



Opinion

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2024

Better late than never

The retail frenzy for SME IPOs and rising cases of frauds forced Sebi's hand

THE SECURITIES AND Exchange Board of India's (Sebi) marathon meeting on Wednesday evening yielded a rich harvest. As a result, tighter checks on insider transactions, tougher criteria for merchant bankers, and easier rules for investment trusts are on the way, most of which should help in improving investor protection and the efficiency of market participants. The biggest measure, of course, was reserved for initial public offerings (IPOs) of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), which were making headlines for all the wrong reasons. The best part is that while tightening the regulations, the regulator has balanced investor protection objectives with the needs of genuine SMEs. Sebi's intentions anyway didn't come as a surprise: A consultation paper in November this year had red-flagged some SMEs diverting issue proceeds, declaring manipulated numbers, and undertaking outsized related party deals.

The retail frenzy for SME IPOs and rising investor complaints about frauds have obviously forced Sebi's hand. The point is that Sebi should have woken up much earlier. Some years ago, it had allowed unfettered freedom to issuers looking to list on SME platforms. They were exempted from filing their offer documents with the regulator and from announcing quarterly results or complying with most of the governance norms contained in the Listing Obligations and Disclosure Requirements Regulations. A course correction was required as a few rogues were spoiling the party. In this sense, Wednesday's regulatory action can be termed as better late than never.

The changes are designed to ensure that only financially sound and operationally viable SMEs can raise capital through IPOs. That explains the criteria of a minimum operating profit of ₹1 crore in at least two out of its three most recent financial years. The change of rules to limit the offer for sale by promoters makes eminent sense as this comes in the wake of instances of diversion of issue proceeds to shell companies controlled by promoters and inflation of revenue by circular transactions through related parties. It's not clear, however, why the Sebi board did not approve the consultation paper's proposal to increase the minimum application size for such IPOs from ₹1 lakh to ₹2-4 lakh. The hesitation in setting a ₹4 lakh application size is understandable as it may have prompted retail SME punters to take even more concentrated bets. But a ₹2 lakh application size should have been allowed.

Overall, the tightening of regulations was warranted as they come in the wake of the recent irrational exuberance witnessed in SME IPOs. Since the establishment of SME platforms, FY23-24 witnessed the highest number of SME issues and the highest SME fundraising. In the current financial year alone, 159 SMEs have gone public so far, raising more than ₹5,700 crore. As many as 29 out of 61 IPOs were oversubscribed over 100 times since September this year. The applicant-to-allotted investor ratio increased from four times in FY22 to 46 times in FY23 and 245 times in FY24, according to Sebi data.

SME listed entities are typically promoter-driven or family business companies with high concentration of shareholding among a few promoters. There is also limited presence of other shareholders who act as a check on the promoter's influence. Regulations must ensure that unscrupulous elements don't take advantage of the platform and that investor interests are adequately protected. In short, there can't be any alternative to setting a higher governance bar.

AI robots are coming, and they'll be made in Asia

OVER THE PAST YEAR, I've noticed an overwhelming theme emerge when Asian tech leaders look at what comes next for artificial intelligence. There has been a marked desire to move beyond chatbots and software, and into the physical realm. We'll start to see much more AI-enabled hardware and robotics — and it will come from Asia.

The experience I've had tuning in to many executive chats and tech conferences couldn't be summed by Nvidia chief executive officer Jensen Huang's proclamation in Taipei in June. The next wave of AI is physical AI," he said. "The era of robotics has arrived."

Historically, a lot of coverage of robot-human interactions in Asia have been filled with futuristic techno-orientalist tropes that often fail to reflect the reality. But there are factors that make the region uniquely primed to propel this next leap forward in integrating AI into the physical world. While the US is the leader in AI advances — and the software and internet revolution emanated from Silicon Valley — Asian tech giants have traditionally been very good at the hardware side of things.

Citigroup projects that there would be 1.3 billion AI robots globally by 2035 and 4 billion by 2050, doing everything from household chores to delivering parcels. A lot of the progress will come from China, which accounts for 78% of all robotics patents over the last two decades, the Citi analysts said. Japan and South Korea make up 7% and 5%, respectively, while the US contributes just 3%. This dominance in Asian robotics remained just as strong when the sheer quantity of patents was weighed through a quality-assessment measure.

Other societal factors suggest that an embrace of AI robotics makes sense. Researchers have found Japan is poised to be a global leader in deploying technologies that adopt automation, as it confronts an ageing population and shrinking workforce. AI-driven software coupled with hardware are being developed and implemented across all types of work, including white and blue collar, agriculture, and services. While many US industries have been gripped by fears of robots taking away livelihoods, in Asia, there has been a tendency to welcome automation due to a people shortage.

This is already playing out, although on a small scale, in several creative ways. A Shenzhen start-up is using an AI robot to help cook meals. A tool unveiled by Japan's Fujitsu in October teaches Noh, a performance art dating back to the 14th century, under pressure as there are fewer people who know the techniques to carry on the tradition. Not to mention the countless industrial robots.

While the region may currently be behind the US when it comes to AI now, Asian tech firms have shown great success in finding practical, market applications for technology developed elsewhere. Japanese tech entrepreneurs, especially, have been very good at this. Sony Group perfected the consumer radio after taking transistor technology invented in the US. (Sony also unveiled the first consumer robot to the mass market in 1999: the beloved Aibo dog.)

There's been a tendency to overhype the role and value of robots in Asian societies, especially in Western reporting, when the reality is much more nuanced. I've yet to meet a real person in Japan who ties Shinto animism beliefs into the embrace of robots. And mounting research suggests that eldercare robotic experiments have not been worth the cost and end up causing more work for. Several high-profile robotic ventures launched in recent years have been curtailed.

But AI could serve as a catalyst, especially as investors and company leaders increasingly search for practical and real-world applications for the technology that go beyond just engaging chatbots. Softbank Group founder Masayoshi Son said in Tokyo last month that he is "passionate about AI robotics," stating that like his favourite cartoon, *Astroboy*, "you can't just have the muscle, you have to have intelligence".

I remain sceptical that we will see the rise of AI robots in the near year, but I have no doubt they're coming, and that they will likely be coming from Asia.



CATHERINE THORBECKE  
Bloomberg

MARITIME PROGRESS

A LEGISLATIVE REWORKING OF THE SHIPPING SECTOR WILL REQUIRE POLICY SUPPORT

Radical overhaul of shipping laws

FOUR BILLS RELATED to the shipping sector were listed during the winter session of Parliament. These bills mark a significant step forward in the development of India's shipping sector — crucial not only for economic growth but also for national security.

Discussions about this sector often focus on the logistics and efficiency of ports, which are undeniably important — but ships are equally vital. India unfortunately lags behind in all the areas of shipping — ownership, shipbuilding, and flagging. India owns just 1,526 ships, with a total gross tonnage capacity of around 13 million. Of these, 487 vessels are engaged in overseas trade. India is at the 18th position with 1.2% of the global shipping capacity. Further, only 0.77% of the world's ships are registered under the Indian flag. Additionally, India has an almost negligible presence in shipbuilding, with only 0.07% of the global market share. China dominates the industry with 46.6% of shipbuilding measured by gross tonnage, followed by South Korea at 29.2%, and Japan at 12.2%.

Not only does the lack of ships annually cost India \$90 billion in shipping related payments, but it is also a big security risk. The proposed legislation is part of a wider attempt to fix the problem. The first bill is the Coastal Shipping Bill, 2024. It seeks to create a comprehensive regulatory framework for coastal trade, an area that has so far lacked cohesive legislation. Currently, mechanised vessels involved in coastal shipping are partly governed by Part XIV of the Merchant Shipping Act, 1958. The non-



SANJEEV SANYAL  
AAKANKSHA ARORA  
Respectively member and joint director, EAC-PM

mechanised vessels fall under the Coastal Vessels Act, 1838. These address only their registration and do not provide a broader regulatory framework.

To promote coastal shipping, the new legislation removes the requirement for Indian-flagged vessels to obtain a general trading licence for engaging in coastal trade. It also empowers the Director-General to issue licences to foreign-flagged vessels, considering factors such as the crew's nationality, the vessel's construction specifications, and other relevant criteria. A key feature of the bill is the proposal to establish a national database for coastal shipping, aimed at ensuring transparency in the licensing process. Additionally, the bill introduces provisions for the compounding of various offences, streamlining regulatory compliance and enhancing the ease of doing business. Finally, it mandates the development of a strategic plan for the long-term growth of coastal shipping.

The second bill, the Merchant Shipping Bill, 2024, has also been introduced in Parliament. It will replace the Merchant Shipping Act of 1958 with the pri-

mary objective of significantly simplifying ownership and registration requirements. One of the key changes is the expansion of eligibility for vessel ownership. Under the new bill, Indian vessels can be owned not only by Indian citizens but also by Non-Resident Indians (NRIs), Overseas Citizens of India (OCIs), Indian-registered companies, and other entities designated by the government. In contrast, the 1958 Act required that the ships flagged in India be 100% owned by Indian citizens or by companies incorporated under Indian law and also required that their principal place of business be located in India.

The new legislation introduces the option for registration under the Bare Boat-Charter (BBOC) method, allowing ships to be acquired with an upfront partial payment and the balance paid over time. This is critical for financing an expensive, long-term asset. Till now, the law required full upfront payment.

The bill also includes measures to reduce the compliance burden and promote ease of doing business such

India owns just 1,526 ships, with a total gross tonnage capacity of around 13 million. Of these, 487 vessels are engaged in overseas trade

A haze of institutional weakness



NIRVIKAR SINGH  
Professor of economics, University of California, Santa Cruz

Policies that are localised and reactive will solve none of India's air pollution problems

A CONSTANT HEADLINE at the end of each year in India is the problem of air pollution. Increased monitoring of pollution levels as well as worsening levels themselves have made these headlines global. The problem is most acute in the Indo-Gangetic plains of northern India, which have topographical and climatic features that trap pollutants near the ground. Recent headlines have tended to focus on the capital region of Delhi, or on other cities, as sites of acute problems, and on the increased burning of crop residues in the agriculturally intensive states of Haryana and Punjab as a proximate cause. However, the problem affects all of northern India, and the causes are many.

A National Clean Air Programme was launched in 2019, and it has increased monitoring of air pollution, but has had little impact in terms of reducing the problem. Government responses have included shifting schools to online modes or just asking students to stay home, banning vehicles in certain cities at certain times, and shutting down various economic activities. Individuals also respond to pollution by curtailing their activities, or by relocating temporarily. The health costs of air pollution at the levels being experienced in India are enormous. The responses to mitigating these costs seem to be extraordinarily inefficient in terms of costs, and the benefits may be limited by their unevenness and limited nature. Why is India doing so badly at controlling air pollution?

Clean air is a public good, in the economist's definition of that term —

theoretically available simultaneously to everyone without exclusion. It is not something that markets can provide efficiently. Therefore, air pollution is a failure of governance. What are the sources of this governance failure in India? At an abstract level, these sources are structural, and more or less common across different public goods in the Indian context, though keeping the air clean has its own special features and complexities.

Air pollution comes from combustion. In the case of factories and power plants, technologies exist for controlling the emissions that contribute to air pollution. A pervasive problem in India is lack of clear regulations for such controls, and lack of enforcement. Polluters have to be given incentives to reduce their pollution. Shifts in technology can also help solve the problem; in particular, reducing the use of coal for electric power generation and industrial activity by shifting to renewable energy is technologically and economically feasible. Internal combustion engines for vehicles are another major source of air pollution. The emissions of these engines can also be reduced with add-on features, or they can be replaced by battery-powered engines. In the case of crop residue burning in agriculture, there is no technology for emissions reduction, but there are several alternatives to burning the residue.

All of these cases may involve potential one-time switching costs, as well as higher ongoing costs. In many cases, there needs to be systemic switching to make the change feasible, as in the case of electric vehicles which need a new infrastructure for charging rather than petrol filling stations. Systemic adjustments are also needed in the case of switching to renewable energy for electric power — the entire power grid, including new electricity storage mechanisms, needs to be redesigned and reconstructed. In the case of crop residue burning, cropping choices need to be modified at a systemic level, and this also requires changes in national food procurement policies.

A common source of failure to change in all these cases is centralisation without coordination to specific needs. Design and implementation of policies both suffer. Resources and authority are not allocated optimally across different levels of government: national, state, and local. Resources for implementation, including enforcement, are typically inadequate, or not well-monitored. This situation persists because democratic accountability mechanisms are weak as well. The relative failure of these political mechanisms is also a political issue — impulses for political control reduce politicians' incentives to improve the system. For example, allowing the judicial system to

remain resource-poor increases politicians' power and control. Democratic accountability is not the only option — China manages without it, but it has institutional mechanisms for horizontal and vertical coordination and implementation. It has done much more than India to reduce air pollution. Of course, this is not an endorsement of authoritarianism, but a pointer toward effective incentives and accountability.

Another, less obvious source of obstruction is that India is a highly unequal society. In "socialist" India, this inequality did not show up fully in income and wealth statistics. It manifested itself in activities that were not measured in economic data — privilege and perks that were far greater for the elites than those below them in the pecking order. As India has liberalised, there has been some democratisation, but more than outweighed by increasingly unequal access to earning power. Clean air, like other public goods, can be privatised to some extent — elites can live, travel, and work in air-conditioned cocoons. Only when they start to be affected does policy attention reach critical levels. But policies that are localised and reactive will solve none of India's air pollution problems. The "canary in the coal mine" was an early warning system for those miners of the past, its health an indicator of potentially dangerous air in the mining tunnels. The metaphor is one that can be applied broadly. In this case, air pollution in India is an indicator of the pervasive institutional weaknesses that hold back material progress.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Need to prioritise agriculture

APROPOS OF "Placing Indian agriculture on the global map" (FE, December 19), before looking into the solutions presented in the article, there is a dire need for prioritising agriculture to make it viable for producers and accessible for all. At present, producers are struggling for viable prices and consumers are suffering due to growing food prices. No

doubt, there is much scope to improve the quality of our agri produce to place it on the global map. A department may be established to coordinate the efforts of agri scientists and farm technocrats to achieve this. The sector's contribution to the GDP has reduced from more than 50% at one point to roughly 24%. Though we retain the eighth position in global agri exports, a decline from \$55 billion to \$51 billion calls for attention. —AG Rajmohan, Anantapur

Regulations are important

APROPOS OF "Acting with restraint" (FE, December 19), designing regulations for specific cases is a recipe for disaster. Regulations are needed in all spheres of economic and social activity, or there would be chaos all around. It is a given that they should be fair, transparent, and unambiguous, leaving absolutely no room for different interpretations. A clear and

valid reason for a particular regulation must be spelt out, or, in certain cases, they must be withdrawn. Rules and regulations need changes from time to time to keep in step with the evolving times. However, regulations must not only be fair but also be accepted as fair by all stakeholders so that they have confidence in the regulatory authorities. —Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra

Write to us at [letters@expressindia.com](mailto:letters@expressindia.com)



# DESECRATION OF THE TEMPLE OF DEMOCRACY

THIS is how public money is drained.

It was the penultimate day of the winter session of Parliament. The entire session failed to discuss even one issue pertaining to the common man. Not a single MP raised any issue regarding his constituency. Entire time was killed in ruckus and protests alleging link between Adani, who according to Rahul, was looting the country under Modi's protection. BJP levelled a counter-attack, alleging Sonia Gandhi's links with George Soros.

As the session was coming to a close, Thursday saw unprecedented and most unfortunate incidents which I would call as a black day in the history of Parliament. Protest, counterprotests and brawls were

witnessed on the penultimate day of the Winter Session during an unprecedented scuffle between the members of NDA and INDIA bloc MPs over insult to the legacy of the country's greatest Dalit icon, Dr Ambedkar.

The MPs justified with one another, which resulted in one suffering bleeding injuries and the other having to undergo an MRI. It was a shameful incident because the Leader of Opposition (LoP), Rahul Gandhi, did not even show the courtesy of extending sympathy towards the injured fellow MPs, but displayed a body language which was unbecoming of an LoP. "Kya hua", he asked walking aggressively towards the injured BJP MP. When one of them asked, "why did you

shove him?" his one liner was, "No, I did not push him, he pushed me" and walked away.

It is something unimaginable that the leader of India's opposition treated the place as a battle ground and fellow MPs as enemies across the border. He should have at least had the courtesy to say it was an unfortunate incident and should not have happened. Later in the evening, Congress and Rahul again displayed their obsession of 'Adani' and 'attack on Constitution', and threatened to take up a country-wide agitation. I had covered Parliament for over a decade and half and over three decades of state legislature proceedings, but never did I see so much arrogance being displayed by any member after any un-

fortunate incident took place. Who is right, and who is wrong would be known after a probe but it is expected that some kind of sympathy was shown towards the injured.

Since the issue has taken a very serious turn, the Lok Sabha secretary should release the CCTV footage so that the country can know what exactly happened. The opposition had no heart to say that it was an unfortunate incident. This does not behoove a party which claims to be the followers of principles of Mahatma Gandhi, if they really do so.

While Rahul said he was pushed by the 60-year-old man, Priyanka Vadra talks of attempts to remove Amit Shahs Rajya Sabha video on Ambedkar form 'X' handle and

questions why BJP MPs were allowed to protest at the gate. But there was no word of sympathy towards the injured. Is this the example of Congress party's 'Mohabbat ki Dukan'?

Well, dissent and protests are Constitutional rights. The Congress has been doing it since day one of the winter session. He as the LoP should have raised the issue in Lok Sabha and should have said that one wishes such an unfortunate incident did not happen, and wished speedy recovery of the injured MPs. Thereafter, he could have blamed the BJP for the incident. This certainly amounts to the desecration of the temple of democracy. This is not expected from the lawmakers. Parliament is not Akha-da!

## LETTERS

Amit Shah exhibits Manuvaadi mindset

AMIT SHAH commented that, "it has become a fashion to chant 'Ambedkar'. If they had taken God's name, so many times, then they would have got a place in a heaven." It is an insult to those who revere Dr Bhabha Saheb Ambedkar no less than as a God. Dr Ambedkar has freed crores of people from hellish life and gave them salvation in this very life. Ambedkar is the ideal for crores of people of the country. By insulting Ambedkar, Amit Shah has hurt sentiments of crores of the people of this country. Ambedkar is our pride and passion. Amit Shah's comments are evidence of the "Manuvaadi" mindset that has always been opposed to the Constitution.

Zakir Hussain, Kazipet

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As a Union Home Minister, Amit Shah could ill-afford to take an indirect swipe on Dr Ambedkar with his unsavoury comment. What is worse, his extra-terrestrial reference to heavens above reflects a bit of his unscientific temper.

Shahgiri Row Karry, Hyderabad

Pollution now a pan-India problem

SUB: Editorial - Indian cities are yearning to breathe better (Dec. 19). Many Indian cities are turning into virtual gas chambers, of late, due to increasing pollution levels. The winter season is an addition to woes as the growing fog tends to suspend pollutants making it not only difficult to breathe, but drastically reducing visibility on roads and rail services. Flight services must be cancelled on this account. Pollution has become a pan-India problem, leading to a variety of health problems.

K R Parvathy, Mysuru

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THE problem is not just of lifestyle but also policy and enforcement which is lacking on account of in-terplay of silly politics. Further, it is disheartening to note that governments turn a blind eye to the suffering lot and act only when court intervenes. It is time Centre establishes a monitoring cell on the lines of IMD in each state capital to monitor pollution and suggest remedial measures, giving no room for parties to indulge in blame game in order to escape responsibility and accountability.

K R Srinivasan, Secunderabad

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OBSESSING about the likes of Nehru, Ambedkar and Patel is going to do nothing about the present toxicity that is going to affect our lungs and more so the health of the younger people, condemning them to a lifetime of sickness and many health-related problems. Leaving everything to the courts is not a good idea. The courts have intervened in the matter but the people themselves will have to decide on their future. It is time for the people to realise their future is at stake if they continue to ignore the effects of breathing toxic air and how it could affect their future.

Anthony Henriques, Mumbai

Real issues relegated in Parl

THE winter session of parliament appears to be jinxed for many reasons. Adani, Soros, ONOP, Ambedkar and what not, both the ruling and opposition parties are "finding" some lame excuses to stall the proceedings. Holding sessions under such circumstances means a colossal waste as criminal waste of public money. What exactly these parties achieved all these days by stalling the proceedings is anybody's guess. Amit Shah could have toned down his rhetoric against the Congress party on issues pertaining to the Constitution of India and B R Ambedkar. The habit of Congress party is to distort the remarks and try to gain some political mileage.

Govardhana Myneedu, Vijayawada

ONOP contradicts merits of democracy

SEPARATE elections and, that too held frequently, ensure greater political accountability by keeping oppositional parties on their toes and compelling them to be sensitive to voter concerns. An undesirable fall-out of ONOP is that an election in the event of a fall of a government, of which there is likelihood, for the remainder of a 5-year term means truncation of a tenure. Election expenses are a small price for a robust democracy to pay. Remember elections are hailed as 'festivals of democracy'. Hence it cannot be justifiably cited as a reason for ONOP if we are to be a vibrant democracy. Elections must be held to meet the need (for governance according to the will of the people) and not to suit our convenience, or parties' self-interest, or fulfill a leader's vanity, or cash in on a leader's mass appeal.

G David Milton, Maruthancode, TN

thehansreader@gmail.com

## BENGALURU ONLINE

India's job market projected to grow by 9 pc in 2025: Report

BENGALURU: India is expected to see a 9 per cent growth in hiring in 2025, according to a report on Thursday. The report by foundit (formerly Monster APAC Ramp; ME), showed that IT, retail, telecommunications, and Banking, Financial Services, and Insurance (BFSI) sectors are the primary drivers of this growth in the country.

With a 10 per cent growth in 2024 and a 3 per cent month-on-month growth in November, the forecast indicates that hiring is set to retain its momentum, with a predictable hiring environment.

Emerging technologies and evolving business priorities will further shape India's job market in 2025. Innovations such as edge computing, quantum applications, and cybersecurity advancements are set to transform industries like Manufacturing, Healthcare, and IT, the report said.

Meanwhile, the rise of retail media networks and AI-driven workforce analytics will reshape talent needs in e-commerce, human resource (HR), and digital services. Organisations will look for professionals skilled in digital marketing, ad management, and HR analytics.

In 2025, sectors that are projected to rise include finance and accounts (+8 per cent), HR and admin (+7 per cent), IT (+6 per cent), Hospitality (+5 per cent), and marketing and communications (+3 per cent).

Bengaluru (10 per cent) will lead city-wise growth, followed by Coimbatore (9 per cent), Hyderabad (8 per cent) and Chennai (6 per cent), the report said.

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

# Treated wastewater can help ease our urban water crisis

India treats only 28 per cent of the wastewater it generates; 72 per cent remains untreated - once treated, all this wastewater can be reused

Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) and National Mission for Clean Ganga (NMCG) release the report jointly

NEW DELHI: Of the total urban waste water and sewage generated in India, a mere 28 per cent (20,236 million litre per day or MLD) undergoes treatment, leaving a substantial 72 per cent untreated and allowed to flow into rivers, lakes and land. All this treated water - and the remaining untreated amount if treated - holds an opportunity within itself: the opportunity to ease India's urban water crisis, says a new report from Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) that was released here today.

The report, titled 'Waste to Worth: Managing India's urban water crisis through wastewater reuse', was released at a national workshop organised jointly by CSE and the National Mission for Clean Ganga (NMCG), under the Union Ministry of Jal Shakti, Government of India. Sunita Narain, director general, CSE and Rajiv Kumar Mi-

tal, director general, NMCG addressed the inaugural session.

Narain said: "India faces significant water scarcity challenges due to rapid urbanisation, industrial growth, population expansion - and most importantly - climate change. Wastewater reuse can be a key part of the strategy to address these concerns and promote water circularity and sustainability." "In fact, there is an opportunity for turning wastewater into water again, and this is what our report's title - 'Waste to Worth' - is referring to," Narain added.

Based on a comprehensive analysis of 35 case studies across 16 cities in seven Indian states, the report assesses the current state of treated wastewater reuse in India. It examines existing policies, pro-programmes and on-ground practices, providing valuable insights for policymakers and practitioners. It also highlights the critical importance of prioritising treated wastewater reuse as a public good, particularly for irrigation and groundwater recharge, while ensuring equity and justice for underserved communities. It urges a critical re-evaluation of treated wastewater reuse from both a policy and practice standpoint.

The urgency of water scarcity demands a fresh perspective on how we prioritise and utilise treated wastewater as a new and vital water resource. By promoting equity, fostering climate resilience, and advocating for sustainable water management practices, this report serves as a blueprint for building a robust framework for treated wastewater reuse across India



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Releasing the report, Rajiv Mital said: "Using and disposing treated water, without harnessing its potential, means we are losing out on utilising an important resource. The challenge is to scale up and ensure that the work we do in this sector is impactful."

The Jal Shakti Ministry has mandated that cities must recycle and reuse at least 20 per cent of the water

they consume. Says Subrata Chakraborty, senior programme manager, water programme, CSE: "This is in line with the belief that promoting a circular economy is essential for achieving a sustainable and climate-resilient future, and for managing the ever-growing demand for freshwater."

The CSE report points out that the gap in total sewage water generated and its treatment is the highest in Uttar Pradesh, followed by the states of Maharashtra, Karnataka, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Delhi and Haryana.

(in that order). Says Chakraborty: "Having said that, the report also highlights good examples - cases of states that have introduced policies to encourage treated wastewater reuse."

Maharashtra, for instance, mandates industries in urban areas to use treated wastewater. Gujarat targets 100 per cent reuse with applications in agriculture and industry, and Tamil Nadu promotes reuse for industrial and urban greening projects. At the national level, the National Urban Sanitation Policy (NUSP) and the Namami Gange Programme emphasise wastewater management and reuse as key components of water security initiatives.

Cities like Nagpur, Bengaluru and Chennai have taken the lead in implementing wastewater reuse practices. Nagpur supplies treated wastewater to power plants, significantly reducing freshwater usage, while Bengaluru utilises it for agriculture, lake revival and groundwater recharge. Chennai has adopted treated wastewater for industrial applications, urban landscaping and groundwater recharge.

Sumita Singhal, programme manager, water, CSE, says: "Upscaling wastewater reuse faces challenges, including infrastructure gaps in sewage treatment and distribution, quality assurance to meet reuse standards, public resistance due to cultural beliefs, and the high operational costs of treatment facilities."

She adds: "The data implies that 28 per cent (20,236 MLD) treated water is immediately available for reuse. Aligning policies with urban planning and industrial needs can enhance adoption, while advancements in decentralised and cost-effective treatment technologies can address infrastructure deficits."

The CSE report points out that public-private partnerships can help mobilise investments for scaling up reuse projects, and capacity-building initiatives can improve awareness and acceptance among urban managers and communities.

Explaining the joint efforts by CSE and NMCG, Chakraborty says: "CSE, in collaboration with NMCG, has been working on a capacity-building initiative aimed at 'Making Ganga Basin Cities Water-Sensitive for Improved River Health and Flow'. The primary objectives of this initiative are to raise awareness and build the capacities of municipal and state-level officials, elected representatives and key stakeholders, including the NMCG team, to promote water-sensitive urban development."

He adds: "Additionally, the initiative seeks to enhance the integration of national programmes such as the Jal Jeevan Mission, Atal Bhujal Yojana, Jal Shakti Abhiyan, AMRUT (Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation), and the Swachh Bharat Mission for more effective implementation and synergy."

# Change & empowerment at last mile

NEW DELHI: December 11, 2024, is etched in Rekha's memory. She woke up with a palpable excitement as she awaited recognition of her efforts. She was awarded Miss Haemoglobin by the Department of Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) in Guna, Madhya Pradesh, for her commitment to improving her health. Rekha has consistently focused on a balanced diet, taking iron and folic acid pills, and overcoming the initial discomfort they caused. Her hard work paid off, and she was applauded for promoting healthy nutritional practices. This acknowledgment is part of the POSHAN Abhiyan, aimed at making India anaemia-free by encouraging healthier habits, particularly among adolescent girls.

The Aspirational Districts Programme (ADP), launched in 2018, aims to transform 112 of India's most underdeveloped districts, such as Guna, into centers of sustainable growth. Focused on convergence of government schemes, collaboration among officials, and competition through monthly district rankings, the ADP addresses key areas like health, education, infrastructure, and financial inclusion

Aspirational Districts Programme Heralds Transformation

and competition through monthly district rankings, the ADP addresses key areas like health, education, infrastructure, and financial inclusion. Rooted in the principles of Good Governance, it emphasizes transparency, accountability, and citizen participation.

For districts like Guna, the ADP encourages local, innovative solutions to improve community well-being. Rekha's recognition is part of the broader goal of empowering women and children to combat anemia and promoting healthier habits in communities.

In Pauri Garhwal, another district under the ADP, a similar transformation is happening. Kavita, an adolescent girl from the region, had struggled with anemia due to low adherence to iron and folic acid pills. Many women faced similar challenges, as inconsistent messaging, fear of side effects, and lack of proper counselling made it difficult to form healthy habits. To



overcome this, counselling cards were introduced for frontline workers (FLWs), offering guidance on the benefits of IFA pills, managing side effects, and reinforcing healthy habits. This initiative led to a marked increase in adherence to IFA supplementation across the district.

At the same time, a local solution emerged in Pauri Garhwal in the form of iron-rich Jhangora laddoos, made from barnyard millet, a nutritious and locally

available resource. These laddoos provided a tasty, convenient alternative to traditional Take Home Rations (THR), which many women found unappealing. The initiative not only tackled anemia but also empowered women by forming self-help groups that produced laddoos at scale, creating new business opportunities and boosting local entrepreneurship.

These stories highlight the positive impact of community-driven solutions in

The ADP, launched in 2018, aims to transform 112 of India's most underdeveloped districts, such as Guna, into centers of sustainable growth. Focused on convergence of government schemes, collaboration among officials, and competition through monthly district rankings, the ADP addresses key areas like health, education, infrastructure, and financial inclusion

tackling health issues. They are closely aligned with the Aspirational Districts Program's goals, which focus on innovative solutions, empowering individuals, and inclusive growth.

The Government of India further underscores its commitment to effective governance during Good Governance Week 2024 (December 19-24). This year, the Preparatory Phase is from December 11-18, with the launch of a dedicated portal, <https://dappgaps.nic.in>.

in/GGW24, on December 11, 2024. The portal enables District Collectors to upload progress reports, share Good Governance Practices, and feature video clips during the campaign's preparatory and implementation phases, fostering greater transparency and accountability.

Thus, Aspirational Districts Programme is a prime example of Good Governance in action. It embodies the 8 Principles of Good Governance outlined by the United Nations, including participation and inclusiveness, ensuring that all communities are involved in the decision-making process and benefit from the outcomes. The focus on transparency, accountability, and responsiveness ensures that district-level initiatives are executed with clear communication and efficient use of resources. Furthermore, emphasising equity and effectiveness ensures that no one is left behind, particularly the marginalized and vulnerable. The Aspirational Districts Programme demonstrates how good governance can lead to inclusive growth and nationwide development, empowering individuals and communities to thrive.





# The EDITORIAL PAGE

WORDLY WISE  
SOME PEOPLE BECOME VANDALS BECAUSE  
THEY WANT TO MAKE THE WORLD A BETTER  
LOOKING PLACE. —BANKSY

## The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY  
RAMNATH GOENKA  
BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

### OVER BABASAHEB

Debating Ambedkar's legacy surely does him proud — not the push and shove, sound-bite tokenism

IN THE WAKE of Parliament's spirited debate over what the Constitution means, the government and the Opposition have now grappled — even literally — in the name of B.R. Ambedkar. Two BJP MPs, Pratap Chandra Sarangi and Mukesh Rajput, are in hospital. The party alleges they were shoved by senior Congress leader Rahul Gandhi. The main Opposition party in Parliament, in turn, has accused BJP members of obstructing Opposition leaders from entering Parliament and injuring party chief Mallikarjun Kharge and other Congress members. At the centre of the row is Union Home Minister Amit Shah's remarks in which he referred to B.R. Ambedkar and mocked what he suggested was the Congress's lip service to Ambedkar. This criticism is par for the Parliamentary course but Shah, not exactly known for the lyrical flourish, crudely framed his critique unbecomingly of his stature in a party that regularly invokes Babasaheb in its post-2014 zeal. "There is a fashion to keep repeating 'Ambedkar, Ambedkar'... if the Opposition had taken God's name so often, they would have reached heaven," he said calling out the Congress for not giving "Babasaheb his due". For the Opposition block, recently fractured over how to take on the ruling party after the Maharashtra debacle, Shah's remarks serve as an instant glue, at least for now; for the Congress, its outrage reinforces its new-found social justice plank.

Ambedkar wouldn't have minded. In the more than 30 years of his public life, he contested the ideas and actions of almost every major political stream of his times, including the Congress and the Jana Sangh and the Hindu Mahasabha. The Congress's ideological clashes with him are well known. As is the fact that the opposition of the BJP's forebears to the Hindu Code Bill pushed Ambedkar to resign from the Nehru cabinet. It's, however, a testament to his presence that six decades after his death, nearly every political party in the country professes to embrace Ambedkar. The growing tide of social justice since the 1990s and the imperative of every party to reach out to the marginalised and oppressed, mean that Ambedkar's ideas today are part of the discourse on the Left, Right and the Centre. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has often said that without Ambedkar he would not have been in office and the BJP regularly invokes Babasaheb in its outreach to the Dalit and marginalised communities. Likewise, Congress today claims to speak for his legacy. In recent years — especially during the Lok Sabha elections — Rahul Gandhi has often referred to "Ambedkar's Constitution" to restore the party's fraying links with the Dalit constituency. The Opposition's campaigns for a caste census carry Ambedkar's name.

Clearly, his appeal and significance transcend his original constituency. That's why competitive populism, even posturing, co-exist with campaigns for constitutionalism, human rights and social justice in Ambedkar's name. The contesting claims to his legacy attest to the vibrance of democracy that he helped secure. Impassioned debates — even occasionally raucous ones — would have certainly made him proud but the unseemly push and shove and the deafening sound-bite tokenism don't do him justice.

### A HAWKISH APPROACH

US Fed lowers interest rate, but signals fewer cuts next year. As pressure on rupee intensifies, policy choices before RBI narrow

ON WEDNESDAY, in its last meeting of the calendar year, the US Federal Reserve cut interest rates by 25 basis points. This was expected. The target range for the federal funds rate is now at 4.25-4.5 per cent. The Fed's forward guidance was, however, distinctly hawkish — it has now projected only two rate cuts next year, down from its earlier projection of four cuts. In fact, Fed Chairman Jerome Powell acknowledged that the decision to cut rates was "a closer call" this occasion. He added that "from here it's a new phase and we're going to be cautious about further cuts".

Inflation has been stubbornly high. As per the projections accompanying the December inflation, as measured by the personal consumption expenditures, is now expected by Fed officials to be at 2.5 per cent in 2025, as opposed to earlier expectations of 2.1 per cent. In 2024, inflation is at 2.4 per cent. Assessment of future policy rates and the inflation trajectory will also have to factor in changes in policy under a new White House administration. There are expectations that Donald Trump will announce tariffs on major US trading partners — a move which will be inflationary — and will also cut taxes — which will raise the government deficit. If this fructify, it would force the Fed to keep rates high for long. In his comments, Powell did say that "some people did take a very preliminary step and start to incorporate highly conditional estimates of economic effects of policy into their forecasts at this meeting". Fed officials now expect interest rates at 3.9 per cent in 2025, as against earlier expectations of rates being at 3.4 per cent.

Reverberations from the Fed's actions were felt across markets — US bond yields rose, global stocks fell and the dollar strengthened. The S&P 500 ended the day down 3 per cent. Asian markets mirrored the decline with the Nikkei falling by 0.7 per cent, Hang Seng by 0.5 and Kospi by almost 2 per cent. The BSE Sensex was also down 1.2 per cent. The Dollar index rose to 108.26 — its highest level since November 2022. The Indian rupee breached the \$85/dollar mark in early trade. There is now an expectation that the Fed will take a pause on rate cuts in its next meeting in January as it awaits greater clarity on the policies of the Trump administration. For RBI, the policy choices are narrowing as the pressure on the currency intensifies.

### IT'S NOT THAT SERIOUS

Googly eyes on art murals in Oregon are a reminder — public art is made better by the public

WHAT DO INTERESTED BODIES, comic strips, famous cartoon characters and the public art murals in Bend, Oregon have in common? The mischievously moving "googly eyes". Stuck on by unidentified vandals on several murals in the town, these cartoon eyes are the latest addition to the long list of ways the public has interacted with art in their localities.

In 1988, American artist David Hammons painted *How Ya Like Me Now?* Slotted to be installed in a parking lot opposite the National Portrait Gallery in Washington DC, it depicted Black rights activist Jesse Jackson with a Caucasian complexion, blue eyes and blonde hair. The idea was "if he were White, he would be inside the museum". However, when locals took sledgehammers to it before the work could be mounted, Hammons had it reinstalled — this time, alongside a row of sledgehammers and Lucky Strike cigarettes. The interaction with the public added new dimensions to the final work. This is also why Paul McCarthy refused to repair his work *Tree*. Put up in Paris, it was supposed to resemble a Christmas tree but carried within it a double entendre — one the artist was in on.

The Bend police and city officials are not looking for the vandals, and have taken the public bonding well — with the caveat that there is no costly property damage. The message, from McCarthy and the cops, is clear: "It was never that serious". Public art is meant to take beauty from the far removed, behind-the-glass case of museums to the street. Art must be interacted with, played with, made their own by the people whose streets and parks it adorns. And for those who find themselves upset at these "vandalisms", they need only look at the Bend mural "Big Ears", depicting a family of deer (now with googly eyes) that are sure to pull a chuckle out of anyone looking.



SAMIR SARAN

FOREIGN POLICY TRENDS in 2025 will be shaped by shifts in great power relationships. A new administration in the US could upend its relations with old allies in Europe and intensify rivalry with China. In an uncertain world, India plays a leading role in maintaining balance. The global community is watching New Delhi's efforts to restore stability to its troubled relationship with China, and wonders whether the Indo-US dynamic will recapture the energy that characterised it in Donald Trump's first term. In spite of all this, the most consequential bilateral relationship in 2025 will be between India and Russia.

The strength of ties between New Delhi and Moscow matters to both countries. It touches core mutual areas: Trade in energy, technological co-development, and strategic interests. Russia remains India's most accommodating partner when it comes to high-tech supplies. While the West — France and the US in particular — are relaxing rules for trade with India in dual-use tech, there is still a long way to go before New Delhi's undersea and long-range requirements are satisfied by the West. This is where Moscow steps in.

What some overheated commentary on the India-Russia relationship misses is that it is of deep importance for the West as well. The BrahMos missile, co-developed by India and Russia, has been given to the Philippines to fend off the Chinese. In other words, it is only through India that Russian technology can be used to preserve the rules-based order. And it is only because it is India that no Chinese veto is permitted by Moscow on such sales.

This is but one example of the unique nature of the relationship between India and Russia. Their closeness will have deeper implications in 2025, a year in which it will be recognised as a global public good. Here are five ways in which this relationship is vital for the preservation of global order.

### India-Russia relationship is essential to prevent fracturing of a stressed global order

The India-Russia relationship prevents the Russian bear from totally entering the dragon's den. A Russia locked into servitude to Beijing's interests would be profoundly inimical for the world order, the West in particular. India's outstretched hand grants Russia the ability to manoeuvre and allows it to avoid capitulating completely to China's demands. Russia expects a partnership of equals. India provides one, China does not.

First, it serves as a bridge between the rest of the world and a Russian polity that has been alienated by, and has set out to further alienate, the Western ecosystem. India's commitment to multilateralism and the global order anchors Russia, its close partner, to a system that it otherwise seeks to disrupt. India can do this because it is not seen as agitating for any one political or geopolitical position. It is a boundary nation that transcends systems, and provides an ability to connect — even integrate — separate universes.

Second, the India-Russia relationship prevents the Russian bear from totally entering the dragon's den. A Russia locked into servitude to Beijing's interests would be profoundly inimical for the world order, the West in particular. India's outstretched hand grants Russia the ability to manoeuvre and allows it to avoid capitulating completely to China's demands. It has become increasingly clear — at BRICS and elsewhere — that avoiding becoming a junior partner to its giant neighbour is a priority for Moscow. Russia expects a partnership of equals. India provides one, China does not. Europe must realise that when peace eventually returns to the continent, it will be with Russia as an equal of the European Union, and not subordinate to it.

Third, trade between India and Russia in fossil fuels is designed to be compliant with sanctions meant to limit Russian profits. This too provides broader benefits to the world. It brings valuable price stability and predictability to energy markets, which is vital for the West and for Europe in particular. It is no exaggeration to say that the energy trade component of the Indo-Russian relationship prevents Europe from slipping further into political disorder.

Fourth, the relationship allows for new possibilities in the crucial Arctic region. Without India's increasing strategic presence

in the Arctic, in partnership not just with Russia but also with European and Nordic friends, a new Russia-China axis would have shaped the region's future. This would have spelled disaster for the ecology and security of global supply chains. India's growing role in global opens better options. A Chennai-Vladivostok corridor, co-owned by Russia and India, might be a first step towards a more effective and inclusive connectivity and governance architecture for the region.

Finally, India's presence in groupings with growing power and influence like BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation ensures that these are not weaponised against the West. As External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has put it, India is non-Western, it is not anti-Western. This moderate and reasonable attitude shapes the actions and positions of such groupings. The entry of New Delhi's candidates — and Western friends — such as the UAE, Egypt and Vietnam into BRICS as either members or partners has further moderated that grouping. The presence of these countries, and India's leadership, ensures BRICS serves more as a complement to legacy, Western-led multilateral groupings than as a challenge.

The ability to partner with nations that are deeply divided by geopolitics has been a feature of Indian diplomacy since Independence. It is only now, however, that this ability will be revealed as essential to prevent the fracturing of a stressed global order. The India-Russia relationship serves not just the two countries in question, but the world. The policy community in both India and the West is keenly aware of this relationship's pivotal importance. Scepticism in the West's Russophobic media and think tank ecosystem does not change that reality.

The writer is president, Observer Research Foundation



VENKATA KRISHNA B

### AT THE CLOSE OF PLAY

In the game and outside of it, R Ashwin remained true to his roots

IS RAVICHANDRAN ASHWIN the most misunderstood contemporary cricketer? From my own experience, the answer would be in the affirmative. Though our paths crossed towards the end of 2010 when I moved to Chennai as a club reporter, there was always a hesitation on my part to approach him. It wasn't the case with any other Tamil Nadu cricketer, including former players, who were all courteous and always available for a chat over the phone. It was only much later that I realised Ashwin is cut from the same cloth, if not one even better.

With Ashwin, it took me a long time to break the ice and it was down to my naivete. I'd heard fellow scribes call him arrogant and I let those assumptions consume me without bothering to know the cricketer or the person. That I saw him once sitting stooped in the dining area of the old MA Chidambaram Stadium while the rest of us were in a laugh riot watching a classic Goundamani scene didn't help. Apart from a nod and an occasional "hi", we hardly spoke. But once I came to know him, I quickly realised how wrong I was.

There has never been any smokescreen around Ashwin. He has never donned a mask to display different faces. The player Ashwin is a cricketer great. But Ashwin the individual has remained the same, accessible at all times, never forgetting to call back. He has been a superstar in every sense, but never came across as one. The faces around him at Ramakrishnapuram 1st street have remained constants right through his journey. Even his better half Prithi happens to be his

Following COVID, one got to see a different side to Ashwin. In the months spent in lockdown, like many others, he too, had been gripped by fear. But it was the time when his magnanimity shone through. When the 2020 IPL was on in the UAE, as several journalists, including cricket writers, lost their jobs in pandemic-induced layoffs, Ashwin heard about it and reached out to know if he could be of any assistance.

classmate from school. Like countless boys in Chennai, he has endured long bus rides to study engineering in a college on the outskirts. Nothing has come easy to him. And he values those who put in hard work. When he learnt about a pacer who was struggling to make ends meet, he opened doors for him by finding the youngster a club to play in, thereby helping the pacer earn his Tamil Nadu cap in two years. In a competitive PR-driven world, he never put his fellow cricketers down. If anything, he went the extra mile to defend teammates.

Ashwin remains a quintessential Chennaiite. In conversations, he will seamlessly slip in popular movie dialogues to crack a joke or two on himself or others. But it is never personal. A movie buff, on tours, one could find him trying to catch first-day-first shows of his favourite Rajinikanth or Vijay movies or ask for movie or series suggestions. He would even inquire about the hot spots in Chennai to visit. But as his wife revealed in this newspaper earlier this year, all of it only remains on his to-do list. Perhaps, now that he will have the time, one can expect him to catch up on these.

Following Covid, one got to see a different side to Ashwin. In the months spent in lockdown, like many others, he too, had been gripped by fear. But it was the time when his magnanimity shone through. When the 2020 IPL was on in the UAE, as several journalists, including cricket writers, lost their jobs in pandemic-induced layoffs, Ashwin heard about it and reached out to know if he could be of any assistance. "Do not hesitate to tell

me if somebody needs help," he would say, even offering to hire people for his YouTube channel. He kept his word, too, giving a 30-year-old desperate for opportunities, a job.

Among his many old-school traits was also the belief that cricket wouldn't be the game it is without sports journalists. Despite his busy, unforgiving schedule, he would make time to meet the local press often. He understood our needs. In return, he expected only accountability. After he had taken India home in a tight run-chase against Bangladesh in the Mirpur Test, I'd written a story on why Ashwin wasn't considered for leadership roles despite being the team's biggest match-winner in the past decade. Among the reasons listed out was that he was seen as an over-thinker by decision makers. That evening he called to say he differed from my opinion but he never brought it up again. He was among those who agreed to disagree.

The other fascinating aspect that I've admired about him is his interest in keeping abreast of things around the sport in general. There have been instances where Ashwin has called up in the middle of an India tour to enquire about scores or how the pitch was behaving in a Ranji match I was covering. It is a habit that continues to date, where he follows not just the Tamil Nadu team scores, but also keeps a close eye on his Chennai club matches. It is not surprising that he will go back to his roots and play club cricket after quitting international cricket. With Ashwin, one expected no different.

venkata.krishna.b@expressindia.com

### DECEMBER 20, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

#### VAJPAYEE ON PM

THE BJP PRESIDENT Atal Bihari Vajpayee, has questioned Rajiv Gandhi's competence to lead the country. "In any crisis, major or minor, Rajiv Gandhi either loses his temper or he loses his nerve," Vajpayee told a press conference on December 19. Ever since Gandhi was inducted into politics in 1980, "he has said and done many things which have left thoughtful Indians wondering about his ability and suitability for any high office," Vajpayee said.

#### KAPIL DEV: BACK CONG

CRICKET STAR KAPIL DEV has appealed to sportsmen all over the country to come out in support of Congress-1. Addressing a press conference on December 19, Kapil Dev said that Congress-1 being the ruling party and having fielded more than 500 candidates for the congressional elections, stood the best chance of forming a government at the Centre. "Therefore, in the interest of national unity and integrity, all people, including sportsmen and, should support Congress-1," said Kapil.

#### FREE JAILED AKALIS

SURJAN SINGH THEKEDAR, convener of the Akali Dal ad hoc committee, ruled out any talks with the Centre unless the Akali leaders were released "unconditionally." Talking to pressmen, he referred to the election speeches of the Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, and the Union Home Minister P.V. Narasimha

Rao, that the Punjab issue would be resolved after the Lok Sabha elections and said that there was no question of any talks with the Centre when its leaders and workers were kept in jails.

#### LAST GAS TRACES

SCIENTISTS AND TECHNICIANS on December 19 began work to get rid of the last traces of the lethal liquid MIC which left a trail of over 2,000 dead and forced 300,000 residents to flee Bhopal city. A spokesman of "Operation Faith" at the Union Carbide plant told newsmen that by the middle of the day, two more tonnes of methyl-isocyanate would have been put into the charge pot, thus using up 14 tonnes of the gas.





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PAPER WITH PASSION

## Clamour for caste census

While the exercise is fraught with challenges, its potential to uplift marginalised communities cannot be ignored

The demand for a caste census in India has been a recurring topic of debate, reflecting the country's complex socio-political fabric. While proponents emphasise its importance for targeted development and policy-making, critics raise concerns about its potential to exacerbate social divisions. The nuanced arguments surrounding this issue highlight both its necessity and its challenges. The caste census refers to the systematic collection of data on the caste composition of the population. India has not conducted such a comprehensive exercise since 1931, even though caste remains a significant determinant of socio-economic status in the country. Proponents of the caste census argue that it is essential for ensuring equitable development, especially for historically marginalised communities. As Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas) leader Chirag Paswan points out, specific data on caste populations is critical for designing and allocating funds for community-based development schemes. Paswan's endorsement of the caste census is pragmatic. However, he also issues a cautionary note: while the government should collect such data, making it public might deepen societal divisions by reinforcing caste identities.

A caste census would provide granular data on the socio-economic conditions of various communities. This information is crucial for crafting effective affirmative action policies and welfare programmes. Historical injustices and systemic exclusion of certain communities require targeted interventions. A caste census would help identify the actual beneficiaries of reservation policies and assess whether they are achieving the intended outcomes. The Opposition, including Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, has emphasised that a caste census is a step toward realising the promise of social justice. By understanding the precise demographic composition, governments can ensure proportional representation and resource allocation. But having said that, making caste census data public could lead to heightened caste consciousness and further fragment society. India's socio-political landscape is already fraught with identity-based divisions, and the misuse of such data could deepen these fault lines. There is a legitimate fear that caste census findings might be weaponised for political gain. Instead of addressing inequities, the data could fuel caste-based mobilisations, electoral strategies and even conflicts. This aspect must be looked into and safeguarded before taking up this mammoth exercise. Besides, conducting a caste census is a massive logistical challenge. The accuracy of data collection and classification would be critical, as any errors could lead to disputes and undermine the credibility of the exercise. The caste census is essential and must be conducted, but it requires careful attention to ensure its accuracy and to address potential repercussions.

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## PICTALK



A person dressed as Santa Claus rows a boat as seagulls fly past, near Causeway of Tapi River in Surat.

## Victory Day: Bangladesh's legacy of liberation

Victory Day serves as both a celebration of freedom and a reminder of the challenges ahead in safeguarding its democratic and inclusive aspirations

Victory Day holds profound significance for Bangladesh, marking its liberation and the triumph over the Pakistan Armed Forces in the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. Celebrated annually on December 16, the day symbolises the birth of a sovereign state and the culmination of a long struggle for self-determination, where India played the pivotal role of midwife in the creation of the newest state in South Asia. The Bangladesh Liberation War was not merely a conflict confined to its borders but a defining moment in the geopolitics of the region. The roots of this war were entrenched in the systemic neglect and exploitation of East Pakistan by the ruling elite of West Pakistan.

Decades of economic disparity, cultural suppression, and political disenfranchisement laid the foundation for a movement demanding autonomy, which was catalysed by the brutal military crackdown on March 25, 1971. Operation Searchlight unleashed a reign of terror that sought to silence the aspirations of millions but instead ignited a people's resistance. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the towering leader of the Awami League, became the symbol of this resistance. His leadership united the Bengali population, and his call for independence resonated with millions who yearned for freedom. As the conflict escalated, millions of refugees poured into India, creating a humanitarian crisis of unparalleled magnitude.

India's intervention under the leadership of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was both a strategic and moral decision. The Indian Armed Forces, working in coordination with the Mukti Bahini, mounted a joint operation that decisively defeated the Pakistani forces within a mere 13 days. The surrender of the Pakistani military on December 16, 1971, in Dhaka is one of the most iconic moments in modern history. The image of General AAK Niazi signing the Instrument of Surrender in the presence of Lieutenant General Jagjit Singh Aurora remains etched in the collective memory of both nations. This marked not



only the liberation of Bangladesh but also a significant blow to the two-nation theory that had led to the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. The emergence of Bangladesh was hailed globally, but it also underscored the complexities of international politics. The then-US President Richard Nixon and his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, who had been staunch supporters of Pakistan due to Cold War dynamics, were caught off guard. Nixon's infamous remark about South Asia becoming an "international basket case" was a harsh reflection of the scepticism with which the new nation was viewed.

Yet, Bangladesh defied the odds and began its journey toward self-reliance and growth. Over the past five decades, Bangladesh has transformed remarkably, earning the moniker "the garment factory of the world." Despite initial challenges, including political instability, natural disasters, and infrastructure deficits, Bangladesh has managed to sustain an impressive growth trajectory. Today, Bangladesh stands as a significant player in South Asia, with a GDP growth rate that often outpaces its neighbours. The country's success in achieving many of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly in areas such as gender

equality, education and healthcare, is commendable. It has become a model for other developing nations, showcasing how strategic planning and a focus on human development can lead to sustained progress. Victory Day is not just a celebration of past triumphs but also a moment to reflect on the challenges and opportunities ahead. The geopolitical landscape of South Asia has evolved significantly since 1971. While the ties with India remain strong, underpinned by historical bonds and mutual interests, Bangladesh has also embraced China's Belt and Road Initiative, balancing its foreign policy to maximise economic benefits. Victory Day also underscores the importance of remembering the sacrifices that led to Bangladesh's independence. The war claimed lives of countless freedom fighters and civilians, whose bravery and resilience paved the way for a new nation. The liberation struggle also left deep scars, including the atrocities committed by the Pakistani military, which continue to evoke strong emotions. Efforts to bring justice through war crimes tribunals and to preserve the memory of the Liberation War are vital in honouring this legacy. As Bangladesh celebrates another Victory Day, it does so as a nation that has defied expectations and charted its path to

progress. The dreams of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the Mukti Bahini have been realised in many ways, with a vibrant democracy, a thriving economy, and a resilient population. However, recent political instability has cast a shadow over Bangladesh's progress. The fall of Sheikh Hasina's Awami League, after years of dominance, has left a power vacuum, fueling uncertainty and unrest. Political polarisation has deepened, and concerns over democratic backsliding have surfaced. The status of minorities, particularly Hindus and indigenous groups, remains precarious, with reports of rising communal tensions and targeted violence. Ensuring minority rights and fostering inclusivity will be critical for Bangladesh to maintain its social fabric and democratic principles. The anniversary of Victory Day is a reminder of the enduring spirit of a people who fought for their right to self-determination and emerged victorious against overwhelming odds. It is a celebration of freedom, a tribute to those who made the ultimate sacrifice, and a pledge to build a future worthy of their dreams. Bangladesh's story, from a war-torn newborn state to a thriving economy, stands as a beacon of hope and inspiration, not just for South Asia but for the world.

(The writer is an associate professor; views are personal)

only the liberation of Bangladesh but also a significant blow to the two-nation theory that had led to the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. The emergence of Bangladesh was hailed globally, but it also underscored the complexities of international politics. The then-US President Richard Nixon and his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, who had been staunch supporters of Pakistan due to Cold War dynamics, were caught off guard. Nixon's infamous remark about South Asia becoming an "international basket case" was a harsh reflection of the scepticism with which the new nation was viewed.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## G7 FACES CRISIS

Madam — The 'Group of Seven' or G7 countries are considered to be the group of the richest countries in the world. But after the Covid pandemic, their economic condition also seems to be almost in shambles. Especially three of those countries can be named here, in which political turmoil has been seen within the last 10 days. Those countries are Germany, the biggest economic power in Europe, France, the third biggest economy there, and the North American country Canada. In France, four prime ministers have been sworn in during the last one year. Emmanuel Macron's government can fall at any time. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz had announced the dismissal of Finance Minister Christian Lindner, citing breach of trust and economic policy differences. Now he himself has lost the vote of confidence. Due to elections to be held again there in the coming February. On the other hand, Canada's Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland, has resigned from her post, citing disagreement with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. She has expressed disagreement on how to respond to the tariff threat of incoming President Donald Trump. Meaning, here too the main reason for instability is economic and financial problems. France has been affected by Europe's energy crisis and high interest rates, which have weakened the country. In 2024, Europe's largest economy will be stuck in recession for the second consecutive year. More and more businesses are under pressure and are suffering from falling sales, high energy costs and taxes, and Germany's overly cumbersome bureaucracy. Starting from 2022, per capita production in Canada has declined in six of the last seven quarters. Unemployment has also increased by a full percentage point compared to last year.

Jang Bahadur Singh | Jamshedpur

## TRUMP DEMANDS EQUAL TARIFFS

Madam — Donald Trump, the newly elected President of the United States,

## R Ashwin retires from international cricket



Ravichandran Ashwin, India's second-highest Test wicket-taker (only behind Anil Kumble's 619 wickets), announced his retirement from international cricket at the age of 38. He expressed gratitude to his teammates and the BCCI, highlighting his fulfilling career. While he feels he still has more to offer, he'll focus on club-level cricket. Ashwin concluded his international career with 537 Test wickets, 156 ODI wickets and 72 T20I wickets. His cricket

et journey, from a fringe player in the 2011 World Cup to one of India's greatest match-winners, has been marked by trials, triumphs, and unwavering dedication. Despite overseas challenges and controversies, his innovative approach and analytical mind have solidified his place in cricketing history. The 38-year-old Ashwin, with 537 Test wickets and six centuries, will continue playing franchise cricket, notably for Chennai Super Kings in the next edition of the IPL in 2025. We should not forget that Ashwin is the man who played his cricket all through with cleverness and dignity and decided to retire cleverly and in a dignified manner too. We should not be ungrateful and miss recognising and saluting him for his immense contribution to Indian cricket after Anil Kumble hanging up his boots. Love you, champions! Cricket lovers will miss you for sure! Bidyut Kumar Chatterjee | Faridabad

conflict will not be limited to economic impacts; it will also have far-reaching diplomatic and social consequences.

R K Jain | Barwani

## TABLA MAESTRO'S LEGACY

Madam — Zakir Hussain's music was intertwined with his all-encompassing love for everyone without an iota of bias or prejudice. In fact, it reminds one of a popular Kashmiri Kumer number, "Pyaar Baante Chalo" (Keep spreading love), from the 1965 Hindi movie "Hum saah ustad hai". Apart from his divine renditions on the tabla, what endeared him most to his audiences was the halo of love and humility that surrounded him. In an interview with the BBC, he once said that all his shows were sold out well in advance, not because of him, but because of the power and attraction of music.

Avinash Godbole | Dewas

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

## Vipul Nautiyal: Chandan Mitra's calamity reporter

Whether it was crafting flawless editorial pages or recounting tales of his newsroom days, Vipul Nautiyal's legacy is one of dedication, warmth and passion for his craft

He flaunted the title "calamity reporter" with pride as he vividly narrated the story behind how Dr Chandan Mitra, editor-in-chief of The Pioneer, gave him the name. Known to friends as Nauty (that's how he spelled it) and to juniors as Vipul Sir, or Nauty Sir, I was introduced to him in August 2021, while writing a test for an editorial role at The Pioneer. I hadn't met him before, but had heard things about him — his co-workers respected him, but they feared him even more. It was my first stint in the media and I was nervous.

I was supposed to join his team and work on the Edit and Oped pages. By the time I was almost done with the test, I was looking around wondering who Mr Nautiyal could be. That was when an old-looking fellow, who was humbly dressed and had uncombed hair and a grey beard, looked at me and said: "Cheating karo du?" I laughed it off. This couldn't have been the Vipul Nautiyal I had been told about. But then an HR executive arrived and my paper was handed over to him. I was interviewed and



ended up addressing this "old-looking, humbly dressed" fellow as "Vipul Sir" ever since. I learned an important lesson that day. Nevertheless, I was hired. A few weeks of working with him. I realised that he was extremely honest towards his job, so much so that he made me question myself. He would reach the office sharp at 2 pm, retouch his already super-organised desk and begin the thinking work — often with a glass in his hand. He was proud of the work he did, he knew he was good. He had an impeccable eye for detail — if it was Vipul Nautiyal's page then it had to be error-free, even if nobody was going to read it, even if he hadn't been paid in months. Headlines were paid even

more attention, they had to be perfectly symmetric — a habit that I picked involuntarily. This was the Vipul effect. He once recounted an incident from his days at The Times of India, when Dr Mitra had asked him to return to The Pioneer. Later, during the exit interview at TOI, when Mr Nautiyal was asked "TOI chhod kar Pioneer kahan jata hai?" (Who leaves TOI to join Pioneer) he replied with lit-up eyes: "Jisko Chandan Mitra bulata hai". He knew how to efficiently run a desk and bring the team up to speed with some flair.

A senior editor at TOI says, "Vipul Sir could beat you in a game of table tennis single-handedly, with his favourite drink in his other hand." Mr Nautiyal often mentioned that he received job offers from almost all leading media houses, except for The Indian Express, for which, he said, he waited for quite some time. In my five months of working with him, I never saw him snap at anybody — unless somebody caught him on the phone during work hours. He was known to be unpredictable at times. But he was there for his colleagues —

those who worked with him would agree. His way of getting his point across was his own. When I had to negotiate my salary while joining TOI — where he had referred me — he told me to ask for a massive raise, saying, "Purse bhailey hi HR ke paas hai, but tu journalist hai, bol tu lagayega" (Even though the purse is with HR, you are a journalist, so you will call the shots). He had more confidence in me than I had in myself. Those who teamed up with him absorbed a great deal of wisdom in all walks of life.

That's how Vipul Nautiyal was. Besides being an exceptional storyteller, he had a song, a shayr or an anecdote for almost every occasion. He was a fanboy when it came to Dev Anand. He often wrote an editorial piece on Dev Sahab's birth anniversary. He was proud of the fact that he had seen Guide several times. He would often play Mohammed Rafi songs or Mehdi Hassan ghazals, lower the volume, and write the edit columns.

(The writer is a former staffer of The Pioneer; views are personal)



NEERAJ KUMAR



## FIRST COLUMN

SRI LANKA-INDIA:  
ON THE SAME PAGEBoth nations reiterate commitment to defence  
collaboration and regional stability

KUMARDEEP BANARJEE

India strengthened its ties with its closest maritime neighbor, Sri Lanka, this week, countering the growing influence of China in the island nation. Sri Lanka's President, H.E. Mr. Anura Kumara Dissanayake, made his first bilateral visit to New Delhi following the recent presidential and parliamentary elections. Earlier this year, President Dissanayake had also visited Delhi at a time when Sri Lanka's political future, including the timing of its elections, was still uncertain. The new President came to power riding on the left-leaning party, which is known to have harboured some Anti-Indian sentiments in the past. However, New Delhi chose to bet on the relatively young Marxist leader, hoping for a sense of prudence in future. Dissanayake in the past, has managed to maintain a fine balance in Sri Lanka's bilateral relations with India and China, not trying to get caught in any crossfire.

Meanwhile, while India's military tensions with China have de-escalated in the recent past, it still chooses to be cautious. Special Representatives from India and China also met this week in Beijing, to discuss their mutual bilateral relations. It seems that with the Trump administration back in the Oval Office in January, China wants to de-escalate military tensions with countries it considers as rivals. China is aware that Trump is likely to impose tariffs on many of its exports to the US, and perhaps further tighten the transfer of high-end technology from America. It is acutely aware that, India would not join an economic dialogue unless the overarching military issues are sorted. It is against this background, that Sri Lankan President's visit to India assumes significance. It may be recalled that China had in the past, sent spy ships



(which it calls maritime research vehicles) to Sri Lankan waters, which have raised many red flags for the Indian security agencies. China also controls critical ports in Sri Lanka, which during any military conflict could be used for strategic purposes. Sri Lanka's President is aware of his country's dependence on China to keep its economy afloat, while, also not trying to disturb the deep bilateral partnership with India. It was heartening for policy watchers in India to note that the Sri Lankan President chose Delhi to be his port of call after getting elected and came out with some emphatic statements, regarding not allowing, their national territory to be used for any anti-India activities. The joint statement released after the President and Indian PM's meeting read "Recognising shared security interests of India and Sri Lanka, both leaders acknowledged the importance of regular dialogue based on mutual trust and transparency and giving primacy to each other's security concerns. India is Sri Lanka's closest maritime neighbour, President Dissanayake reiterated Sri Lanka's stated position of not permitting its territory to be used in any manner inimical to the security of India and towards regional stability."

Taking cognisance of India's security concerns the two nations further reiterated to "Explore the possibility of concluding a framework Agreement on Defence Cooperation; Foster cooperation in hydrography; Provision of defence platforms and assets to augment Sri Lanka's defence capabilities; Intensify collaboration through joint exercises, maritime surveillance, and defence dialogue and exchanges; Extend assistance to strengthen capabilities of Sri Lanka on disaster mitigation, relief and rehabilitation, including through training, joint exercises and sharing of best practices; and Enhance capacity building and training for Sri Lankan defence forces and conduct tailor-made training programmes, wherever required." The bedrock of this relationship is India's generous economic support to Sri Lanka without putting it through non-transparent, self-serving infrastructure loans, which has led to the loss of strategic ports for the island nation.

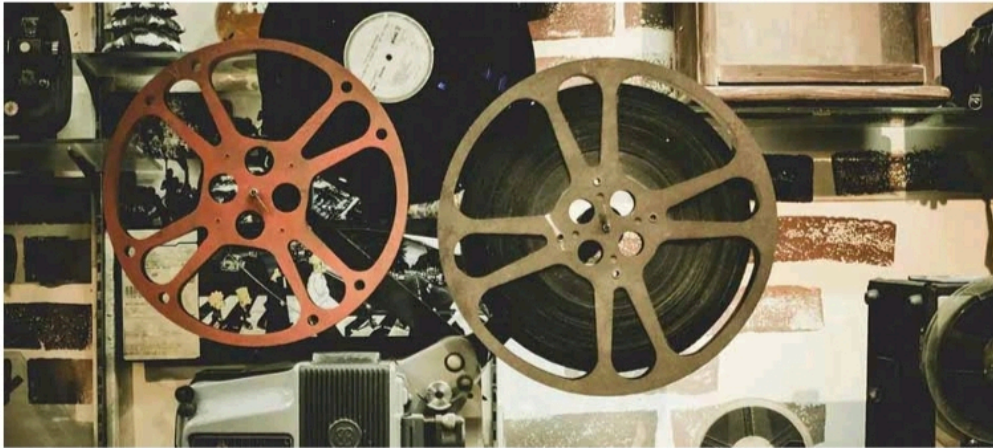
(The writer is a policy analyst; views are personal)

The evolution of cinema  
through technology

Whether through sound, colour, digital effects, or immersive technology, filmmakers have always sought to expand the boundaries of what is possible



CHAITANYA K PRASAD



Beneath the flickering lights of an old projector, cinema was born—a dance of shadows and light, whispering stories into the dark. From silent dreams projected on silver screens to the roaring worlds of colour and sound, cinema has always been a magician, conjuring entire universes with the stroke of a reel. As technology sprinkled its magic dust over time, the cinematic world transformed, evolving from simple moving pictures into immersive journeys that now wrap us in their digital embrace, where imagination knows no bounds. In the late 19th century, cinema was a purely visual experience. Films like *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), India's first feature film, relied entirely on visuals, as sound was not yet a part of cinematic storytelling. Globally, the Lumière brothers' early works, such as *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat* (1895), left audiences mesmerised.

The technology was simple—manual cameras, mechanical projectors, and natural light. But this early era laid the foundation for the visual storytelling techniques that filmmakers would continue to refine for decades to come. The advent of sound in cinema was a game-changer. Alan Arr (1931) became India's first talkie, marking the beginning of an era where dialogue and music played a crucial role in storytelling. Globally, *The Jazz Singer* (1927) made similar waves, showcasing the transformative power of synchronized sound. Colour, too, began to seep into cinema's world. While *Kisan Kanya* (1937) was India's first colour film, it wasn't until *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960) and *Hum Dono* (1961) that colour became a truly artistic element, bringing emotional depth and grandeur to the screen.

The partially colourised *Mughal-e-Azam* in particular stunned audiences, giving the larger-than-life historical drama a visual vibrancy that was previously unimaginable. Ramesh Sippy's *Sholay* (1975) was a groundbreaking film, being the first Indian movie shot on a 70mm screen. Indian theatres were initially equipped to accommodate this scale, but the format gave *Sholay*'s action sequences a larger-than-life feel, adding to its epic narrative. The film also introduced enhanced stereophonic sound, a novelty in Indian cin-



THE TECHNOLOGY WAS SIMPLE—MANUAL CAMERAS, MECHANICAL PROJECTORS, AND NATURAL LIGHT. BUT THIS EARLY ERA LAID THE FOUNDATION FOR THE VISUAL STORYTELLING TECHNIQUES THAT FILMMAKERS WOULD CONTINUE TO REFINED FOR DECADES TO COME

ema. *Shan* (1980) followed, introducing impressive special effects such as explosions, action choreography, and stunt sequences, drawing comparisons to Western films like *James Bond*, with a blend of spectacle and style that had rarely been seen in India. The onset of digital technology and CGI changed the landscape of Indian cinema in the 2000s. Films like *Krish* (2006) and *Ra. One* (2011) ushered in a new era of superhero films and futuristic themes, using advanced CGI and motion capture. *Robot* (2010), featuring a humanoid robot protagonist, combined impressive VFX with engaging storytelling, marking a turning point in Indian cinema's relationship with technology. As CGI became increasingly prevalent, Hollywood and Indian cinema both embraced digital effects as a core component of storytelling.

Hollywood's *Jurassic Park* (1993) and *The Matrix* (1999) showcased the immense potential of CGI. Indian films like *Baahubali* (2015-2017) set new standards with their breathtaking visual effects, making Indian cinema a global player in the visual effects arena. *R* (2022) followed suit, pushing the envelope with dynamic CGI-enhanced action scenes. Cinema is now becoming more immersive than ever. James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) brought 3D to the forefront of mainstream cinema, while Indian cinema explored immersive experiences with films like *Kaala* (2018), which offered a 360-degree VR experience. Technologies like VR and AI are now beginning to merge with traditional filmmaking, pushing the boundaries of storytelling even further. Technological advancements have transformed both the creative and commercial aspects of cinema, allowing films to evolve into multifaceted brands. Innovations like high-definition cameras, VFX, and animation have significantly elevated

the quality of filmmaking, enabling large-scale productions such as *RRR* and *Baahubali* to create immersive experiences that attract global audiences. These technological tools have expanded the branding potential of films, positioning them as not just stories, but as global entertainment products. Furthermore, the media and entertainment sector's growth, particularly in India, reflects this shift, with theatrical revenues reaching an all-time high of INR 120 billion in 2023. The business model of cinema has expanded beyond traditional box-office revenue, thanks to digital platforms like OTT services, which offer new avenues for distribution and monetisation. These platforms provide filmmakers with the opportunity to market their films globally, turning local content into international brands. Films now capitalise on multiple revenue streams, including merchandising, digital rights, and exclusive streaming deals. Additionally, high-end multiplexes have begun focusing on premium cinematic experiences, creating "experience zones" that cater to affluent audiences and further enhance the brand identity of films.

Cinema has also become a significant platform for advertising and brand collaborations. FMCG, e-commerce, and tech companies increasingly use films for product placements and promotions, contributing to the industry's revenue. Meanwhile, Indian films are reaching wider audiences across 160 countries, thanks to advancements in content production and global distribution. This expanded global reach is turning Indian cinema into a formidable international brand, with films frequently topping global streaming charts, further proving that technological advancements are integral to both the branding and business of cinema. Recently released films like

*Kalki 2898 AD* and *Street 2* have pushed the envelope for Indian cinema by leveraging advanced CGI and innovative storytelling techniques. *Kalki 2898 AD* embraced futuristic narratives, with its visually rich depiction of a dystopian future made possible through cutting-edge visual effects, similar to global sci-fi films. *Street 2* blended horror, comedy, and CGI to craft a unique, immersive experience, further proving that Indian filmmakers are increasingly adept at balancing narrative depth with technological prowess, placing them on the global stage. From the early days of silent films to today's CGI-driven spectacles, cinema has continuously evolved with technological advancements.

Whether through sound, colour, digital effects, or immersive technology, filmmakers have always sought to expand the boundaries of what's possible. The future of cinema technology promises exciting advancements. Virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) are set to provide even more immersive storytelling experiences, allowing audiences to interact with cinematic worlds in unprecedented ways. Artificial intelligence (AI) is also emerging in post-production, helping streamline visual effects and editing processes. Additionally, innovations in 3D and holographic projections could redefine how we experience films in theatres and at home. Advances in sound technology, like spatial audio, will make the viewing experience more immersive, ensuring cinema continues to evolve. The cinematic journey, it seems, is far from over—technology is pushing the boundaries further, transforming both the art of storytelling and the audience.

(The writer is a former additional DG, DFF and Festival Director, IFFI; views are personal. Inputs by Zoya Ahmad and Vaishnavi Srinivasan)

Rajasthan's Golden Horizon: From cultural marvel to investment powerhouse  
With the success of 'Rising Rajasthan Investment Summit 2024,' the state is poised for an economic transformation

*Sone ri dharti jathe-ar chandi ro aasman* translates to "Where the earth is made of gold and the sky is built with silver." This cherished folk song beautifully captures the essence of Rajasthan's Thar Desert. Today, these words remain as relevant as ever, reflecting the state's unique charm and its emergence as a hub of global investment opportunities. Rajasthan, India's largest state, is rich in minerals, endowed with vast solar and wind energy resources, and brimming with potential for investors worldwide. The Rajasthan Government has successfully hosted the 'Rising Rajasthan Investment Summit 2024' in Jaipur this week. Throughout the event,



MOHIT TANTI

memorandums of understanding (MOUs) totalling over Rs 35 lakh crore were signed, highlighting the immense investment potential of the state. Actually, very few places can match Rajasthan's allure. It boasts nine UNESCO World Heritage Sites, iconic palaces and forts, 320 sunny days a year, powerful winds, and expansive land. Combined with excellent law

and order and robust rail connectivity, these factors place Rajasthan in a league of its own as a destination for investment. Currently, the state is undergoing an economic transformation. The government aims to propel Rajasthan's economy from \$180 billion to \$350 billion by enhancing the Ease of Doing Business and creating employment opportunities for the youth. Over the next five years, the administration seeks to generate one million jobs across private and public sectors, with a focus on attracting significant investments.

Chief Minister Bhajan Lal Sharma emphasises Rajasthan as a pivotal player in India's economic growth. His administration is fostering a

pro-business environment across industries, recognising that Rajasthan's development is integral to achieving the vision of a "Developed India" by 2047. Rajasthan's rich natural resources, skilled workforce, and outstanding connectivity make it a magnet for investments. Over 58 per cent of the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor (DMIC) and 39 per cent of the Dedicated Freight Corridor (DFC) pass through the state. This infrastructure connects Rajasthan to domestic and export markets, while its proximity to northern states and western ports ensures seamless trade access. With the third-largest national highway network and second-largest rail network in India, along with



nine inland container depots, several airports, and an air cargo complex, Rajasthan is a logistical powerhouse. Rajasthan's investment prospects span diverse sectors: petroleum infrastructure, food processing, education, chemicals, electronic systems, automotive, electric vehicles, and renewable

energy. Traditional industries like tourism, and emerging fields like startups, also offer immense potential. For instance, in agriculture and agro-processing, Rajasthan is a top producer of mustard, millet, guar gum, fenugreek, isabgol, and medicinal crops. The sector contributed 29 per cent to the state's Gross State Value Added (GSVA) in 2022-23. The state also ranks second in livestock population and milk production and is a leader in spices, organic farming, and coarse wool. With these advantages, the agriculture sector presents vast opportunities in agri-food parks, warehousing, and cold chain facilities. Rajasthan's journey from a

cultural and historical treasure to a thriving investment hub reflects its unparalleled potential and forward-looking vision. The state's abundant natural resources, excellent infrastructure, and strategic location make it an ideal destination for investors across various sectors, from renewable energy and agriculture to manufacturing and technology. With an ambitious economic transformation underway, Rajasthan's government is committed to creating a pro-business environment that will not only attract global investments but also create employment opportunities for its youth. As the state continues to capitalise on its diverse strengths, the "Rising

Rajasthan" initiative stands as a testament to its growing prominence on the global stage. The government's efforts, backed by strategic partnerships and forward-thinking policies, position Rajasthan as a key player in India's economic future, driving growth, prosperity, and development. The initiative seeks to bolster Rajasthan's industries, create jobs, and amplify its economic potential, ensuring the timeless folk song "Sone ri dharti jathe-ar chandi ro aasman" resonates on a global stage. (The writer is Executive Member, National Institute for Locomotor Disabilities, Kolkata. Views expressed are personal)



THE ASIAN AGE

20 DECEMBER 2024

2024: Watershed year for Indian diplomacy

The mandarins of the external affairs ministry can pat themselves on the back for a successful year of dialogue and diplomacy with various countries and at international forums. If India is in a better space towards the end of 2024 than it was at the beginning of the year, much of it is owed to the sustained work done in continuous engagements.

The crowning achievement of direct diplomacy through bilateral meetings at different levels in the year was with China. The recommencement of the meeting of special representatives after five years saw both countries positively affirming the outcome of the disengagement process on the LAC while agreeing to move the relationship forward in many more areas.

A Himalayan thaw would not have come about without China, easily the most dominant player in regional forums at which India is also featured prominently, sowing the initiative to resolve the border standoff. As if to indicate where the diplomatic push came from, President Xi Jinping had shepherded Prime Minister Narendra Modi to a photo opportunity after their meeting in Kazan, Russia on October 23 at which they had agreed to revive mechanisms to address the border issue as a first step towards normalising bilateral ties.

A meeting between the foreign ministers at the G-20 in Rio de Janeiro was followed by the SRIs met led by NSA Ajit Doval and China's Wang Yi in Beijing this week. Together, they gave the peace initiatives a positive momentum with there being talk of convergence over six points for taking forward cross-border cooperation, including revival of the Mansarovar yatra for Indians and date sharing on trans-border rivers and border trade.

**The crowning achievement of direct diplomacy through bilateral meetings at different levels in the year was with China with both countries affirming the outcome of the disengagement process on the LAC**

This is a total turnaround from the Galwan clashes of the summer of 2020 that had revived the worst of old suspicions and widened a trust deficit. The Chinese troop buildup on the LAC may not have lessened much, but the phased disengagement and resumption of patrolling can be taken as proof of how India had stood up to China on the border, not cowering down to the Chinese strategy of "salami-slicing" that it may be facing in its border disputes with at least five other countries.

Standing as we do at a promising moment resembling the start of a new era in China ties, India can take heart from the fact that the year saw it solidify its relationship with Sri Lanka, which pivoted off a distinct Chinese orbit and sought a change that might even see it tilt a bit towards India. Having been a friend in need at the time of the financial meltdown, India is in a far better place via a visit Sri Lanka too than at the start of the year.

With solid, even stellar, diplomacy, India was able to get through to an aggressively pro-China Maldives and bring it around to see the benefit of balance. India has opened its purse strings to be more helpful to neighbours and done so with good intentions and that made a difference in Sri Lanka and Maldives.

A change in regime in Bangladesh might test India's patience at diplomacy, but there, too, India made its point in the foreign secretary's visit to Dhaka to convey its of how beneficial connectivity in energy, digital avenues and trade could be for a developing nation.

Pakistan will be Pakistan, and it continues to swear by cross-border threat. It will be a thorn until some day that China convinces it of the attractions of regional peace initiatives. Even so, India can look back at 2024 and call it a diplomatic watershed year that may help usher in prosperity along with peace.

Subhani



Let people celebrate, or India's rise will be hurt

Patralekha Chatterjee  
Dev 360

In this season of celebrations, can anyone be denied their right to celebrate? That is exactly what happened to Ashwini Choudhury and Avani Bhargava, an inter-faith couple. Both are professionals based in the United States. Earlier this year, they registered their marriage under India's Special Marriage Act 1954 with the Consulate General of India in San Francisco. The couple had plans for a joyous wedding reception this month with family and friends in Aligarh, their hometown. Invitation cards were distributed.

But then things took an astonishing turn. What was meant to be a happy occasion ended in a heart-breaking story. The couple, who were widely reported in the media, a motley bunch of people belonging to assorted Hindu nationalist groups in Aligarh got to know about the reception and decided to take things into their own hands. They protested, submitted a memorandum to the local administration and threatened dire consequences if the reception took place. The couple, they asserted, had no right to celebrate their marriage because one was a Muslim and the other a Hindu, and a reception would "disrupt communal harmony".

"We are not against their marriage as they are adults, but we opposed the get-together scheduled for December 21. Such functions could lead to more inter-religious tensions between young men and women of the two different communities," the coordinator of one of the Hindu nationalist outfits told journalists.

Both families have now announced that the reception is cancelled due to "force majeure circumstances". Clearly, there was concern about the safety of the couple. One media report I read noted that the memorandum also brought up other issues such as the mistreatment of Hindus in Bangladesh.

I am still rubbing my eyes, trying to find a link between the situation of Hindus in Bangladesh and a proposed wedding reception in Aligarh where the couple happen to be from different faiths.

Arguably, in hyper-polarised India, a frenzy about Hindu-Muslim marriages grabs the most attention but it is by no means the sole marker of undue community interference. Another recent report from Bulandshahr, Uttar Pradesh, pivots around a Dalit constable's wedding procession which was allegedly attacked by upper caste men who objected to loud music played by DJs. Reports say the goons vandalised the vehicle, threw stones, and forced the groom to get off his horse. In the melee, several guests were injured. "The accused not only prevented the playing of music and the procession but also resorted to threats, brandishing firearms and unleashing casteist slurs on barakats. They threatened to kill us for filing a complaint..." the bride's brother told journalists.

We are at the far end of 2024. Tumultuous changes are sweeping across the country. A lot has changed in the country too. But some things obstinately persist. India continues to create individual Muslims who are visibly successful, lauded internationally and, who add to the sheen of Brand India. But in many parts of the country, harmful behaviour towards ordinary people belonging to the minority communities is becoming the norm.

Inter-faith marriages remain a political and socio-cultural hot potato, triggering threats, intimidation and violence. If India is now socially acceptable to interfere in other people's personal lives, the celebration of an inter-faith marriage as "instigation to communal harmony".

Several Indian states have enacted laws requiring cou-

community interference in wedding processions in India remains a significant concern, particularly for inter-faith and inter-caste couples. There has been progress toward greater acceptance of diverse relationships but the cancelled wedding reception in Aligarh shows that disruptors feel emboldened.

How much longer are we going to allow this frenzy over inter-faith marriages to distract us from the pressing everyday problems facing ordinary Indians? In a free country, adults should be free to love and marry who they wish to, and to celebrate the way they wish. Worryingly, the line between community spirit and community interference is blurring. If this continues, we will legitimise and empower people who believe in community interference in private lives.

Where do we go from here? These are tough times. Huge political shifts are taking place across the world. Uncertainties loom ahead. India has a choice: it can either put all its energy into addressing the monumental challenges that remain and work towards fulfilling national aspirations, or it can allow itself to be repeatedly distracted, let self-appointed custodians of the national interest decide what others should do, who they should meet, with whom they should mate and what and how they should celebrate? The question that pops up as the year winds down — can a hugely diverse country which talks about leading the world, joining the club of modern nations, continue to deny itself into a frenzy over who marries whom? As we ponder the changes transforming the world, we must realise that erecting barriers between communities will eventually take the shine off the India story. No one should be allowed to deny others their right to celebrate joyous moments. Development is not about disrupting wedding processions and ceremonies on flimsy grounds.

The writer focuses on development issues in India and emerging economies. She can be reached at patralekha.chatterjee@gmail.com.

This should make us think. Scenarios for inter-faith couples would be unnecessary if police and government agencies were serious about cracking down on those trying to make the lives of these couples miserable. India needs to introspect. As the year winds down,

LETTERS  
STRANGE REMEDIES

On the advice of an occult practitioner, a man is reported to have swallowed a live black chick which led to his death. This was supposedly done as a cure to his being unable to have a child. As there is a death involved it would be unsympathetic to make it out to be black comedy. There will be thousands of such cases across the nation which never come to the attention of the media because there have been no serious consequences. Sadly one observes even well educated individuals falling prey to such kind of ridiculous beliefs.

Anthony Henriques  
Mumbai

SHAH SHOCKER

THE RECENT REMARK by the home minister stating that "Congress leaders would have got a place in heaven had they chanted the name of God rather than following the fashion of repeating Ambedkar's name" has sparked outrage across the country, reflecting a concerning disregard for the legacy of Dr B.R. Ambedkar and the principles of democracy. Such a comment from such a high position can contaminate the new generation's mind and lead to undermining the legacy of our real heroes. It is imperative for the BJP to take cognizance of this matter, ensure respect for our great leaders, and refrain from making such remarks in the future.

Jakir Hussain  
Kanpur, UP

NOBLE ASHWIN

IT IS INCOMPREHENSIBLE that an accomplished and committed cricketer of the calibre of Ravichandran Ashwin would bid goodbye to Indian cricket midway on an overseas tour. One may recall during his recent India-New Zealand home series he had to rush to Chennai to see his ailing mother but he came back to Rajkot and resumed his duties on the field the very next day. So is it the attitude of the selectors that irked him? Or did his relatively poor performance in the New Zealand series lead to a self-assessment? Was it that he wanted to give the young brigade a chance?

Gopalaswamy J.  
Chennai

Probe ferry mishap thoroughly

The horrific accident of a passenger ferry and a naval speed boat near Mumbai has shocked the nation. Neel Kamal, the passenger ferry carrying more than 100 passengers from Gateway of India to Gharapuri island, where the historical Elephanta Caves are situated, capsized in the Arabian Sea after the naval speedboat collided into it. So far 13 people have been confirmed dead and a search is on for two missing — a man and a child. The incident has raised several questions that must be answered by the authorities.

The first question is whether the passenger ferry had deviated from its approved course or not. It can be easily answered as all vessels in the waters around Mumbai are tracked by the Mumbai Port Trust through Vehicle Tracking System (VTS). All vessels, including fishing boats and passenger ferries, have to be tracked by the Identification System installed. This was made mandatory after 10 Pakistani terrorists entered Mumbai via sea route on November 26, 2008.

As per the Maharashtra Maritime Board (MMB) safety norms, a passenger ferry must carry life jackets for more than 100 per cent passengers. Annual MMB inspection of all registered vessels is mandatory. Fire and safety equipment must be checked in the annual inspection. Were more life jackets available on Neel Kamal than the number of onboard passengers and does the annual MMB inspection confirm it?

The Navy also needs to come clean. As per their official statement, a new engine was installed on the speedboat and a trial was being conducted when the accident occurred. If that is true, the Navy ought to have issued an alert about its exercise taking place on the route of a civilian ferry. As per the general practice, other vessels are not allowed to enter the area of naval exercise. However, as per the preliminary information, no alert was given by the Navy about Wednesday's exercise. If there was an alert issued, its proof should be made public.

The state government and Navy have announced a joint investigation into the tragic accident. The investigation must answer the above questions.

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KAMINI MEHTA  
Editor

R. SURESH  
Printer & Publisher

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Kamal Davar

Strict watch on the challenge of 'Khalistan' is vital in Punjab

SOME weeks ago, former Punjab deputy chief minister Sukhbir Singh Badal, undergoing religious penance at the holy Harmandir Sahib in Amritsar's Golden Temple, survived an assassination attempt on his life when a former ageing "Khalistan" terrorist, Narain Singh Chaura, fired at him. Thanks to an alert police sub-inspector, Mr Badal was saved as the round went astray. While the Punjab police successfully thwarted the attempt on Sukhbir's life, a can of controversies has opened up on the motive behind this unexpected event.

Many conflicting theories have emerged at this unfortunate occurrence inside the shrine in full view of the Punjab police, who were fully conversant with the infamous history and whereabouts of the alleged would-be assassin.

All plausible angles on this event need serious introspection, including those pointing to personal enmity or the "Khalistan" angle to it, or as some in the Punjab Police claim, the possible "stage-managed" of this event to garner sympathy for the fading fortunes of the Shiromani Akali Dal. As the police and other security agencies delve deeply into the nuances of this crime, it will be in the larger security interests of the nation to analyse any "Khalistan" conspiracy angle.

The fact remains that though India's most strategic border state of Punjab is relatively peaceful, with no inter-social or internal security problems,

yet the mischief played in the 1980s by the rogue state of Pakistan in Punjab can't be taken lightly and the careful, regular monitoring of the Khalistan in Punjab of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence must be ensured. It must also be accepted by our political and security establishment that there has been, in recent years, a discernible rise in sympathy for the "Khalistan" secessionist movement among India's Sikh diaspora with some support from the governments of Canada, and to a lesser extent from that of the United States and Britain. These governments' claims about freedom of speech and allowing protests in their societies fails to stand scrutiny as some in the Indian diaspora have misused these freedoms to vandalise temples and target Indian diplomatic missions.

What is a sly cheer is that Pakistan's ISI appears to have revived its "K2" (Kashmiri) strategy, which was pioneered by military dictator Gen. Zia-ul-Haq in the early 1980s when he realised it was impossible to otherwise wrest Jammu and Kashmir from India and foment a credible separatist movement in India's Punjab. That in both places the patriotic people of Punjab and even the Kashmiris had not succumbed to Pakistani machinations is a historical fact. India also cannot forget the "Khalistan" secessionist movement among Punjab in the 1980s, while terror attacks do take place in J&K at times triggered by Pakistani agents. In both Punjab and J&K, however, the overall secu-

rity situation is normal.

Since independence, barring short interludes during the time of Prime Minister Liaqat Ali Khan (later assassinated) and for around three years when Gen. Pervez Musharraf was both Chief of Army Staff and President, Pakistan with its myopic and self-destructive policies has maintained an anti-India policy in all its politico-strategic formulations. The "K2" dream still persists in their mindset and that of the Sikh diaspora, and even Sikhs in Punjab continue to be targeted by the ISI's propaganda machinery. India, therefore, has to ensure a "whole nation" approach to counter these designs by Pakistan and Canada. The Sikhs are among the most patriotic, gallant and industrious communities of India, who whenever given a chance, will rise to the ground any anti-India elements.

The Indian government, however, has to implement a well-thought-out strategy to counter the anti-India propaganda both at home and abroad. Sooner rather than later, India must send out delegations comprising eminent Sikhs from different walks of life in India to the Western nations where the Sikh diaspora resides. These delegations should re-educate those affected Sikh elements. The sacrifices of our Sikh brethren in preserving the integrity of the land must be given its rightful share in our history. The genuine problems of the farmers, a large number of whom are Sikhs, should be sympathetically addressed by the government with

alacrity. The Sikh diaspora often gets unnecessarily agitated over farmers' issues in India.

Regarding the assassination bid on Sukhbir Badal, the Punjab police investigating the case, the Badal family and the SGPC are locked in a verbal war on the reasons behind the assassination bid. CCTV footage shows that Narain Singh Chaura and two "accomplices" had carried out a reconnaissance of the Golden Temple premises a day earlier and Mr Badal's brother-in-law, Birkam Majithia, has alleged that the SGPC president had hugged Narain Singh before the shooting incident and thus asked the SGPC to release the entire CCTV footage. The Punjab police feels that it may be a "lone wolf" incident, whereas the Badal family claims that there is a deeper conspiracy.

It will ultimately be prudent for the Central government to go deep into this incident and have a reputed outfit like the National Investigation Agency probe the case. A simmering "Khalistan" emergency abroad exists — for the time being — and this it will be prudent for India's security and intelligence establishment to keep a close watch inside Punjab for India cannot afford to have a re-emancipation of the conditions in India's crown jewel state of Punjab as had taken place in the mid-1980s.

The writer, a retired lieutenant-general, was the first head of India's Defence Intelligence Agency, and is a strategic analyst