

Mitigating, aggravating circumstances in death penalty cases

AJOY SINHA KARPURAM
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A SESSIONS court in Kolkata sentenced Sanjay Roy, convicted of the rape and murder of a doctor at RC Kar Medical College and Hospital, to life imprisonment on Monday.

The CBI had argued strongly for the death penalty in the case that shook West Bengal and triggered several weeks of protests and strikes by doctors. West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee had demanded death for the murderer.

The Supreme Court has held that a sentence of death should be passed only in the "rarest of rare" cases, after the court has considered possible "aggravating" and "mitigating" circumstances (Bachan Singh v. State of Punjab, 1980).

'Rarest of rare' test

In Bachan Singh, the SC considered a challenge to the constitutionality of the death penalty. It upheld the death penalty, but said it should be imposed only in the "rarest of rare" cases where there is no possibility of

reformation.

The five-judge Constitution Bench did not specify the standards to determine whether the death penalty should be imposed, but laid down non-exhaustive lists of "aggravating" and "mitigating" circumstances for courts to consider while making the decision.

AGGRAVATING CIRCUMSTANCES, which could tilt the court's decision towards the death penalty:

- If the murder is pre-planned, calculated, and involves extreme brutality;
- If the murder involves "exceptional depravity";
- If the accused has been found guilty of murdering a public servant, police officer or a member of the armed forces while on duty, or because of anything they may have lawfully done while discharging their duty.

MITIGATING CIRCUMSTANCES, which could tilt a case away from the death penalty:

- Whether the accused was "under the influence of extreme mental or emotional disturbance" at the time of the offence;
- Age of the accused; they would not be given death if they are very young or very old;
- Probability of the accused posing a con-

tinued threat to society;

- Probability of reforming the accused;
- If the accused was acting on the directions of another person;
- If the accused believed their actions were morally justified;
- If the accused suffers mentally and is unable to appreciate the criminality of their actions.

After Bachan Singh

The understanding of mitigating and aggravating circumstances has evolved over the years, and new factors have been added to the list through several decisions. These include:

AGE OF ACCUSED: In several cases including *Ramnarayn and Ors v. State of Chhattisgarh* (2012) and *Ramesh v. State of Rajasthan* (2011), the Supreme Court considered the young age of the accused persons (below 30 in these cases) as an indication that they could be reformed.

However, as the Law Commission of India noted in its 262nd Report (2015), the Death Penalty, age as a mitigating factor "has been

used very inconsistently". In *Shankar Kisanrao Khade v. State of Maharashtra* (2013), the SC split several cases with similar facts into two groups: where age was considered as a mitigating factor, and where age was ignored or considered irrelevant. The court also noted that sentencing in death penalty cases had become "judge-centric".

In the RC Kar case, the convict Sanjay Roy is 35 years old.

NATURE OF OFFENCE: In *Shankar Khade*, the SC said courts should compare the case before them with a pool of cases concerning similar offences before determining the punishment. Otherwise, the court said, applying the "rarest of rare" doctrine would become "subjective". The Law Commission Report used the example of cases concerning the rape and murder of a young child, and presented examples to show that it "shocks the judicial conscience in some cases, not in others".

In *Madhu Singh v. State of Punjab* (1983), the SC held that death could be given in cases where the "collective conscience" of society is so shocked that the judiciary is expected

to impose the death penalty.

The Law Commission noted that this decision, and the decisions it influenced in the future, focused only on the circumstances of the crime, and not the circumstances of the criminal and the possibility of reform.

POSSIBILITY OF REFORM: In *Bachan Singh*, the SC held that the government must prove there is no possibility of reform, and that the presumption would be against such a penalty. In *Santosh Bariyar v. State of Maharashtra* (2009), the SC said "the court will have to provide clear evidence as to why the convict is not fit for any kind of reformatory and rehabilitation scheme".

The Law Commission Report said the requirement for evidence was held as "essential" in *Bariyar* "for introducing an element of objectivity into the sentencing process".

Stage of the trial

When should the court consider these circumstances?

In *Bachan Singh*, the SC said courts must conduct a separate trial after convicting, so that judges can be persuaded why the death sentence should not be imposed.

When should this separate trial take place? In several rulings, the SC has held it can be on the same day; in other cases, it has stressed the importance of a "real, effective and meaningful hearing" during the sentencing hearing in death penalty cases.

In *Dattaraj v. State of Maharashtra* (2020), the court held that such a hearing did not take place, and that this was a valid reason to commute a death sentence to life imprisonment. In suo motu proceedings initiated in 2022 (*JNRE: Framing Guidelines Regarding Potential Mitigating Circumstances To Be Considered While Imposing Death Sentences*), the SC asked whether sentences delivered on the same day as the conviction satisfy the requirement of a meaningful and effective hearing.

It also noted that aggravating circumstances form a part of the record of a case and are always available to a judge, whereas mitigating circumstances are only placed on record after a conviction and before sentencing.

"This", the Bench said, "places the convict at a hopeless disadvantage, tilting the scales heavily against him", and referred the case to a larger Bench to create a uniform approach to sentencing hearings in death penalty cases.

EXPLAINED GLOBAL

ANNUAL MEET BEGINS IN DAVOS: WHAT IS THE WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM?

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
 NEW DELHI, JANUARY 20

THE WORLD Economic Forum (WEF) is holding its Annual Meeting from January 20 to 24 in Davos, Switzerland. Attendees will include European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, China's Vice Premier Ding Xuexiang, and other leaders in business and politics.

Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw is heading the Indian delegation. Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis, Telangana Chief Minister Revanth Reddy, and Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu will also attend. "There will be a detailed discussion in the WEF Annual Meeting World Economic Forum about inclusive growth, investment in social, physical and digital infrastructure and democratising technology," Vaishnaw said.

The WEF, its founder

German professor Klaus Schwab founded the WEF. He was a mechanical engineering graduate who then earned a Master of Public Administration degree from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

After working as a professor for several years, he founded the WEF in 1971, originally known as the European Management Forum. It introduced the concept of "stakeholder capitalism". According to the WEF website, "A company should serve all its stakeholders, not just its shareholders: employees, suppliers, and the community it is part of."

In service of this idea, business, government and civil society leaders annually make their way to the Alps "to consider the major global issues of the day and to brainstorm on solutions to address these challenges".

What happens at WEF

Initially, Schwab focused the meetings on how European firms could catch up with US management practices. Events in 1973, namely the collapse of the Bretton Woods fixed exchange rate



Major Indian companies such as TCS and Infosys will also be present in Davos, Reuters

mechanism and the Arab-Israeli War, saw the Annual Meeting expand its focus to socio-economic issues.

Two years later, the organisation introduced a system of membership for the "1,000 leading companies of the world". The European Management Forum was the first non-governmental institution to initiate a partnership with China's economic development commissions in 1979, the same year China and the US established diplomatic ties.

Davos brings together some 3,000 participants (including paying members and select invitees), among whom are investors, business leaders, political leaders, economists, celebrities and journalists. Last year, the major themes at the event were Artificial Intelligence, geopolitical uncertainties and climate change.

Funding of WEF

The WEF is largely funded by its participating corporations. These are generally global enterprises with annual turnover greater than \$5 billion.

In 1998, participants emphasised the need to include major developing countries in the process. One idea was to set up a body to include 20 countries — half developed economies and the other developing ones. Such a meeting of what would become the G20 was held in Bonn, Germany, later that year.

ANONNA DUTT
 NEW DELHI, JANUARY 20

THE LANCET medical journal's Diabetes & Endocrinology Commission last week proposed a new definition and method for diagnosing obesity, beyond simply looking at a person's Body Mass Index (BMI), the ratio of one's weight and height.

This comes after years of research, and the piling up of a significant body of evidence suggesting that BMI alone is an inadequate measure for diagnosing, and treating people for obesity.

An associated publication also proposed a new definition of obesity specifically for Indians, on the lines of the broader recommendations made by *The Lancet*.

This major development comes at a time when doctors have in their arsenal new, highly effective medicines, specifically GLP-1 receptor agonists such as Ozempic, to deal with clinical obesity.

How has obesity been measured thus far?

The standard method of determining obesity across the world has thus far employed BMI cut-offs as the sole determinant. A person with a BMI of less than 18.5 is considered to be underweight, a BMI between 18.5 and 24.9 is considered to be normal, those with BMI between 25 and 29.9 are considered to be overweight, while those with BMI over 30 are considered to be obese. BMI is calculated by dividing a person's body mass (weight) in kilograms by the square of their height measured in metres. For instance, a person weighing 70 kg and having a height of 1.75 m (roughly 5 feet 9 inches) has a BMI of 22.86, which falls in the healthy range, according to the definition followed thus far.

Why has this method been criticised?

Relying solely on BMI cut-offs leads to both over- and under-diagnosis of obesity. People with excess body fat may not always have a BMI of more than 30. They may nonetheless suffer the health consequences of obesity. On the other hand, people with high muscle mass may have a BMI of more than 30 while being extremely healthy, and in no need of any intervention.

Then there are many people who do have excess body fat, but still maintain normal organ function. They too require minimal, if any, medical intervention.

In India, for instance, many seemingly lean people with a BMI of less than 30 have abdominal fat that can affect the function-

EXPLAINED HEALTH

OBESITY: A GLOBAL PROBLEM

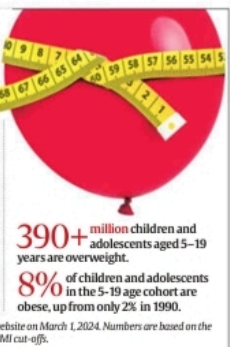
According to the World Health Organization's (WHO's) fact sheet on obesity*

2.5 billion adults globally are overweight (including those living with obesity), corresponding to 43% of all adults. Only 25% of adults were overweight in 1990.

890 million adults are living with obesity globally, corresponding to 16% of all adults. The prevalence of obesity among adults has doubled compared to 1990.

37 million children under the age of 5 years are estimated to be overweight.

*Data from 2022; it was published on WHO's website on March 1, 2024. Numbers are based on the prevalent method of determining obesity, using BMI cut-offs.



not the sole determinant of body size, which in turn is the sole determinant of obesity. The Commission suggests looking at two of the following four parameters for evaluating body size:

- BMI
- Waist circumference
- Waist-to-hip ratio
- Waist-to-height ratio

Doctors may also use methods such as DEXA scan to directly measure body fat.

What is different about the new definition for Indians?

Although on the same lines as the *Lancet* Commission recommendations — Dr Misra is a common author — the Indian guidelines use the classifications of stage 1 and stage 2 obesity instead of preclinical and clinical obesity.

Moreover, "BMI has been retained as the entry-point for the diagnosis in India. This is because people are familiar with it, and it would be easier to implement," said Dr Misra.

According to the Indian definition, a person would be deemed to have stage 1 obesity if they have a BMI of more than 23 — waist circumference and waist-to-height ratio is optional for this group — but do not have symptoms that show limitations in day to day activities, and other obesity-related chronic conditions. For diagnosis of stage 2 obesity, a person would have to have a BMI of more than 23, meet one more physical parameter of obesity (such as waist circumference and waist-to-height ratio), and suffer from obesity-associated limitations, comorbid diseases.

How is obesity to be treated?

For pre-clinical obesity, the *Lancet* Commission says that the focus has to be on risk reduction and prevention of progression to clinical obesity. This requires counselling for weight loss, and prevention of weight gain along with regular monitoring. "Lifestyle interventions such as good diet and regular exercise can suffice in this group," Dr Misra said. For those with clinical obesity, there will be more evidence-based, and personalised interventions. Success in dealing with obesity should be assessed by improvement in signs and symptoms associated with obesity rather than loss in weight.

"Doctors now have newer weight loss medicines that can be used for treating obesity. Weight loss surgery is available. These new guidelines help physicians select better the patients who need these interventions. Using medicines to treat a person with a high BMI but no other condition or symptoms is injudicious use of the medicine," Dr Misra said.

ing of various organs.

"We saw that Indians would get diabetes, hypertension, heart diseases and other consequences of obesity even at lower BMI. This is because they typically have higher body fat percentages and central obesity as compared to Western counterparts," Dr Anoop Misra, chairman of the Fortis CDOC Hospital for Diabetes, and the only Indian on the *Lancet* Commission, said.

Indeed, the BMI cut-offs for obesity were adjusted for Indians in 2009. Those falling in the 23 to 24.9 range were deemed overweight, while a BMI of more than 25 was deemed to indicate obesity. This too did not, however, do away with the problems arising out of using BMI as the sole yardstick to determine obesity.

What is the *Lancet* Commission's new proposed definition of obesity?

The *Lancet* Commission defines clinical obesity as a chronic illness that results in alteration in organ functions regardless of other conditions a person might have. "It can lead to life-altering or life-threatening complications," the Commission states.

The new definition broadens the meaning of obesity to take into account a number of physical parameters such as height, weight, and waist circumference, as well as things such as muscle mass, and the functioning of various organs.

For a clinical obesity diagnosis, the physician will have to check for all kinds of signs and symptoms, such as breathlessness,

wheezing, sleep apnoea, high triglyceride levels, metabolic dysfunctions, non-alcoholic fatty liver disease, changes in reproductive system, heart failure, chronic fatigue, and knee and joint pain, among others. They may also consider how active a person is in their day-to-day life, before arriving at a diagnosis.

Under the new definition, obesity cannot simply be self-diagnosed — it is a determination for a qualified physician to make, like other diseases and conditions.

What does 'pre-clinical obesity' mean under the new definition?

The new definition does away with the overweight category, adding instead a category called "pre-clinical obesity" where a person has excess body fat, but no associated ongoing illness. Like the diagnosis for clinical obesity, this requires meeting multiple physical parameters, and a physician to make assessments regarding organ function.

The Commission defines preclinical obesity as a physical attribute but not an illness. It says: "In some people it might represent an earlier stage of clinical obesity, whereas in other people it can be a phenotype with lower tendency to directly affect organ function."

How is body size calculated for this evaluation?

Even with all the additions to the definition of obesity, body size remains a crucial factor. What has changed is that BMI is now

Bail under PMLA: interpretation by SC, HCs of law on exception for women

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THE SUPREME COURT criticised the Enforcement Directorate (ED) last week for arguing that the rigorous bail conditions in money laundering cases will apply to women even though the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002 (PMLA) provides an exception to this standard.

"We will not tolerate conduct on the part of Union of India to make submissions contrary to statute," a Bench of Justices A.O. Kulkarni and Augustine George Masih said while hearing the bail plea of a woman accused of aiding alleged money laundering activities by the promoter of a Lucknow-based real estate company.

The court gave bail to the woman, a government school teacher named Shashi Bala.

PMLA and exception

Section 45 of the PMLA, which provides for bail, puts the onus on the accused seeking bail to prove that there is no prima facie case against them. This is similar to the stringent bail standard under the anti-terror law Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 (UAPA).

Section 45(1) reads: "No person... shall be released on bail or on his own bond unless (i) the Public Prosecutor has been given an opportunity to oppose the application...; and (ii) where the Public Prosecutor opposes the application, the Court is satisfied that there are reasonable grounds for believing that he is not guilty of such offence and that he is not likely to commit any offence while on bail."

However, there is an exception to this bail standard, which applies to minors, women, and sick people:

"Provided that a person, who is under

the age of sixteen years or is a woman or is sick or infirm, may be released on bail, if the Special Court so directs."

This exception is similar to exemptions under the Indian Penal Code, 1860 (IPC) for women and minors.

Legal precedent

In 2023, Delhi High Court granted bail to Preeti Chandra, wife of Sanjay Chandra, who was the Director of M/s United Group, underlining the exception for women. The HC rejected the ED's argument that the accused was not entitled to the benefit of the exception because she was not a "household lady".

"To argue what kind of woman is entitled to fall within the proviso to section 45(1) PMLA by creating an ad-hoc illusio-

nary sub-classification of educated women, business women, women belonging to high social strata, within the broader classification of "woman", is misconceived," the court said.

However, to be eligible for bail, the accused must not be a "fugitive" or "tampers witnesses", the court said. (Preeti Chandra vs Directorate of Enforcement, June 14, 2023).

In April 2024, however, a Bharat Rashtriya Samithi (BRS) leader K Kavitha in the Delhi excise scam case, observing that it was not "obligatory" or "mandatory" for the court to follow the exception.

Judge Kaveri Baweja observed that Kavitha was "well-educated" and a "well-placed woman in the society", and could not

be considered a "vulnerable" woman for the purposes of the exception under the PMLA. (Kavitha was subsequently given bail by the Supreme Court.)

Case of Shashi Bala

The ED is investigating alleged fraud by Shine City Group and its promoter Rashed Naseem, who, according to a May 2024 release by the agency, "collected huge amount of money (approximately Rs 800-1000 Crore) from the public... and promised huge returns on such investment".

"However, no such returns were given to the investors and they were cheated by the accused by way of committing fraud," the ED said.

Shashi Bala is one of several individuals accused of assisting Naseem in money laundering and concealing the proceeds of crime. The ED has alleged that she was

Naseem's main confidant, and received more than Rs 36 lakh as a part of the money laundering exercise.

Shashi Bala was arrested in November 2023, and her plea for bail was denied by Allahabad High Court in September 2024.

The HC held that she was in contact with Naseem, who is absconding, and "coupled with the proportion of fraud committed", she does not fall under the category of a "vulnerable woman" and would not be entitled to bail under the exception for women under Section 45 of the PMLA.

Shashi Bala appealed to the SC, and in December 2024, the ED argued before the court that the exception should not be available to her. On January 15, Justice Oka said: "If people who appear for the Union of India do not know basic provisions of law why should they appear in the matter?"

EXPLAINED LAW

Dattaprasad Shirodkar | Mumbai

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THE IDEAS PAGE

Rekindling republicanism

Let this R-Day be about more than going through the motions of a sarkari ritual



DESHKAAL
BY YOGENDRA YADAV

WHAT EXACTLY DO we celebrate on Republic Day? It took me nearly 50 years to figure it out. And I must thank our prime minister for this. Sure, Modi hai to mumin hai.

As a child, I knew what we celebrated on the 15th of August. Azadi from British raj was not hard to comprehend. For us, 26th of January was more of a gala celebration as we filled the colours of our imagination in the jhankis of the Republic Day radio commentary. In the sarkari function in our town, a pohawani would move a truck with his teeth. But we didn't quite know what was this ganatantra that we celebrated. It had something to do with the Constitution, we were told.

My civics teacher in Class IX, Master Fateh Chand Goyal, was a Wikipedia on the Indian Constitution, one of the reasons for my abiding interest in political science. He clarified the difference between November 26 (not yet Constitution Day then) and January 26, the day we became a republic. Any country that is not ruled by a hereditary ruler is a republic, he told us. Unlike Britain, still stuck to the bygone institution of the monarchy, we had adopted a republican form of government. The idea of India being one up on England appealed to me at a time when we lost most of our test matches to their cricket team, but then every other country was also a republic. What was so special about being a republic in this age and time, I asked him. "Bade hokar samjho", he said.

I didn't even after I grew up. Once you read Harishankar Parsai's biting satire, you can never take "Thithurata Hua Ganatantra" (A Shivering Republic) out of your mind on January 26. Recalling his visits to the Republic Day parade, he wondered where the "thunderous applause" in the Akshvani commentary came from, as none of the persons in the enclosures took their hands out of their warm coats in the bitter cold of Delhi. He surmises that the applause must come from those hands whose owners did not have warm clothes to wrap themselves in. His immortal line — "lagta hai, ganatantra thithurata hue hathon ki talipan par tika hai" (apparently, the republic rests on the applause of shivering hands) — left me scarred for years. It still leaves me with goose bumps. Celebration of the republic was a cold thought.

Narendra Modi's rise to power and the journey of the last decade made me rediscover the concept of a republic. As we began losing our institutions, our freedoms, our voices and our sanity, I kept looking for the word that could give this loss a name. We were losing democracy and our Constitution, I was told. That was, of course, true, but there was something more this time than the mutilation of constitutional democracy during the dreadful Emergency. We were losing our shared sense of purpose, our collective being, our Indianness. How do we name this momentous loss?

This is when the *jhumka* suddenly dropped: We are losing our republic. A republic is not just a negation of that quaint institution called monarchy; it is a rejection of arbitrary power in all its forms — political, social and economic. A republic is not someone

with a MAGA-Iomania. Republicanism connects to a deep political and intellectual tradition in the Euro-Atlantic world, an alternative to liberal-democracy, a radical tradition centred around the ideals of political liberty, popular sovereignty, equal citizenship and civic virtues. Republicanism recalls the key value of our freedom struggle — *swaraj* in all dimensions of our life — and the political quest of Babasaheb Ambedkar as well as the spirit of *gana* that informed ancient Indian republics. Indeed, radical republicanism is the underlying philosophy of our Constitution. Now I understand why my civics teacher was so proud of us being a republic.

This realisation took me back to academic — that is, western — political theory after a long gap. I discovered that "republicanism" had staged a comeback. Following the path-breaking research by Quentin Skinner and JGA Pocock, it was understood that thinkers like Machiavelli were not monarchists but belonged to a robust tradition of civic republicanism, that their understanding of liberty was very different from that of the dominant liberal tradition. Building on this understanding in his book *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*, Philip Pettit redefined liberty as non-domination. In this version, "neo-republicanism" is not just an academic fad, it opens the door for modern democrats to reconnect with the egalitarian, anti-power, impulse of various struggles all over the world. *Radical Republicanism* (edited by Bruno Leipold, Karma Nabulsi and Stuart White) makes this connection across various domains of social, economic and political life in our times.

How does this connect to our political tradition? I turned to Babasaheb Ambedkar, arguably the only democratic theorist of 20th century India, for an answer. His writings on democracy (so ably curated by Christophe Jaffrelot and Narendra Kumar in *Dr Ambedkar and Democracy: An Anthology*) show a shift from republicanism to a radical republicanism, culminating in this astounding



C.R. Sasikumar

A republic is not just a negation of that quaint institution called monarchy; it is a rejection of arbitrary power in all its forms — political, social and economic. A republic is not someone with a MAGA-Iomania. Republicanism connects to a deep political and intellectual tradition in the Euro-Atlantic world, an alternative to liberal-democracy, a radical tradition centred around the ideals of political liberty, popular sovereignty, equal citizenship and civic virtues. Republicanism recalls the key value of our freedom struggle — *swaraj* in all dimensions of our life — and the political quest of Babasaheb Ambedkar as well as the spirit of *gana* that informed ancient Indian republics.

ing statement (italics in original): "My definition of democracy is 'a form of government whereby revolutionary changes in the economic and social life of the people are brought without a bloodshed'". For him democracy was not merely a political order. A genuine democracy must also be a social order sans hierarchy that is based on a shared sense of community of all citizens. Such a moral order requires a cultivation of civic virtues, an attitude of mind based on equality and liberty, but above all anchored in fraternity or *maiteer*. To avoid any misunderstanding, he declares "Let no one, however, say that I have borrowed my philosophy from the French Revolution... I have derived them from the teachings of my Master, the Buddha." Radical republicanism comes closest to defining Babasaheb's democratic theory. No wonder, he founded the Republican Party of India.

This Republic Day must not be about going through the motions of a tired sarkari ritual but about rekindling this spirit of republicanism. Satish Parsai had proposed that each Republic Day *jhanki* could display the reality of the state that year. Drought relief cash, corruption scandals, riots, atrocities. In a similar vein, this year UP could be represented by a bulldozer, Maharashtra by a giant washing machine, Haryana with a scene of lynching and Delhi with the images of Umm Khalid and the UAP detainees without trial. Towards the end, there could be a blank mega TV screen and the statue of justice without a blindfold or eyes. This Republic Day could be a *jhumka*, a glimpse, of the fracturing of the *gana* in our ganatantra, the dismantling of our republic.

If republicanism was what we have lost over the last 10 years, reclaiming the republic must be the clarion call, our *shankhnaad*, this 26th of January.

Yadav is member, *Swaraj India*, and national convener of *Bharat Jodo Abhiyan*. Views are personal

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Ultimately, Gaza should become part of an independent Palestinian state. In the best of worlds, this ceasefire will be the beginning of this essential change."

— THE WASHINGTON POST

A virus in perspective

Anxieties about HMPV are understandable after Covid. But it has been in circulation since 2001, our health system is equipped to deal with it



Soumya Swaminathan and Harkabir Singh Jandu

FIRST DETECTED IN 2001, HMPV (Human metapneumovirus) is a virus from the family called Pneumoviridae and has been in circulation even earlier in human populations. Hence HMPV is well known to the medical community in terms of its characteristics, illness caused, prevention, detection and management. Further, many people in India would have been exposed to HMPV because it is a common virus. The virus just happens to now be picked up by the media. The few cases of the HMPV detected in India during the current flu season are within the expected range and not a cause for alarm.

HMPV usually spreads from infected people through droplets, infected surfaces, and contact such as handshakes. The typical period between infection and appearance of symptoms is three to six days. Symptoms can include nasal congestion, sneezing, cough, breathlessness, fever, sore throat, similar to the ones caused by common cold or flu. In almost all cases, HMPV causes only mild symptoms that resolve in a few days. Like most respiratory viruses that affect humans, HMPV can cause more severe respiratory illnesses especially in infants, young children, the very elderly, and those who have weakened immune systems.

HMPV can be prevented by following the usual precautions of the flu season. These include wearing masks, avoiding touching the face, frequently washing hands, avoiding crowded places, especially by the very young and the elderly. In fact, routinely wearing masks could help reduce many high-burden diseases in India including seasonal flu, pneumonia, and tuberculosis.

The health system in India is fully equipped to deal with HMPV. The virus can be detected through a routine RT-PCR test of the kind used for detecting the Covid19 virus, though this is not needed for most cases. Management of HMPV is similar to that of other respiratory viruses and principally revolves around symptomatic management including hydrating, taking warm fluids, resting, and taking paracetamol for managing high fever. It is important to keep an eye out for warning signs, particularly in infants and the elderly. These include breathing fast, difficulty in breathing, persistent high fever, incessant coughing, vomiting, and infants being unable to feed. One should seek medical attention from a doctor if these symptoms appear.

We can say with a high degree of confidence that the handful of cases of HMPV that have been detected so far in India originate not from outside the country but from within, as is expected during the winter months.

Using its country-wide lab-based surveillance network, the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has found that

HMPV has caused approximately 3 per cent of the cases of Influenza Like Illness (ILI) and Severe Acute Respiratory Illness (SARI) in the current season. The vast majority of cases have been caused by SARS-CoV-2 (that caused the Covid19 pandemic) and is still circulating in the country. Influenza A, Influenza B, RSV, and other pathogens. This distribution typically changes month-on-month. Of course, the more we test the more we will detect. For an infection like HMPV, the absolute numbers of cases are not important and need not be counted — only overall trends in virus circulation in the country are useful to know.

Further, there is no data to suggest that the circulating HMPV has mutated in any way that is of public health concern. ICMR and its institutes continue to track this as per usual.

Anxieties about respiratory disease outbreaks are understandable in the wake of the Covid19 pandemic. Hence, science-based communication and response become even more critical for all sections of society.

When SARS-CoV-2 was first detected in 2019, it was a truly novel virus for the world. At the time, no one in the world had been exposed to SARS-CoV-2 or had specific immunity against it. In contrast, people across the world have been exposed to HMPV for decades and the virus is well studied. HMPV and SARS-CoV-2 belong to two very different virus families with fundamentally different characteristics and epidemiology, with strong seasonality seen for HMPV unlike SARS-CoV-2. Both viruses cause different severity of symptoms particularly over the long-term and the affected population segments do not fully overlap. HMPV in general causes milder illness with deaths being very rare and no long-term post-viral immune system effects.

India's Ministry of Health & Family Welfare has taken prompt action during this flu season, keeping in mind the sensitivities around HMPV. Learning from the Covid19 pandemic, ICMR and the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) are closely monitoring surveillance data across the country. The national and state health systems are also communicating proactively. We should use this period to test our surveillance and risk communication systems, to learn and refine processes in anticipation of an actually virulent outbreak in the future.

The Niti Aayog published its framework report on future pandemic preparedness and emergency response in August 2024. The recommendations of this report should be implemented on priority along with increased investments in R&D for vaccines and counter measures against pathogens of concern, which have been identified by the World Health Organisation. This will help India to be fully prepared for future outbreaks, epidemics from known and emerging infections.

Finally, air pollution significantly exacerbates respiratory illnesses, including ILI and SARI, and is one of the leading drivers of mortality globally. It's time we swiftly and effectively act on air pollution across the country through a multi-sectoral and all-of-government approach.

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Seizing the peace

An approaching Trump presidency may have pushed Hamas towards a deal



SUMIT GANGULY

AS PRESIDENT JOE Biden was about to leave a press conference about the announcement of a possible ceasefire accord between Israel and Hamas, a reporter asked him, "Who gets credit for this, Mr. President, you or Trump?" Apparently, Biden had stopped, turned around, smiled and said, "Is this a joke?"

His sardonic response aside, according to reliable news reports, his administration had made a relentless effort in its last days to try and conclude a ceasefire between the two warring parties. This endeavour, that his Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken had spearheaded, was no doubt an effort to cement his legacy as his presidency ended.

To no surprise, President-elect Trump wasted little time in claiming that his election was responsible for the accord even before it had been formally announced in the Middle East. His self-aggrandising announcement notwithstanding, the Biden administration had initiated this process and Trump's new emissary for the Middle East, Steve Witkoff, helped to conclude it. Even Witkoff conceded that it was Brett McGurk, President Biden's trusted Middle East hand, who had played a crucial role in bringing this deal to a successful close.

The agreement is now being imple-

mented. Ninety Palestinians, who had been held in Israeli prisons, have now been released in exchange for three Israeli hostages. Another 30, who still remain in Hamas' custody, will be released in the next several weeks. In the meanwhile, many displaced Palestinians are now returning to their demolished homes.

This six-week ceasefire may well lead to a broader diplomatic initiative that culminates in a more permanent peace. Whether or not that happens remains uncertain. The relentless Israeli bombardment of Gaza designed to eviscerate Hamas, and its military prowess has actually had an unintended and perverse consequence: As per some reports Hamas is alleged to have actually exploited the abject conditions prevailing in Gaza to recruit almost as many of fighters that it has lost. Consequently, it is still not a completely spent force, a key objective of the Netanyahu government's war.

It should also be noted that at least one key member of his war cabinet, National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir, who was staunchly opposed to the ceasefire, has now resigned along with two other ministers. Another hardliner, Minister of Finance Bezalel Smotrich, who chose not to quit the government, has stated that Israel should ex-

plicitly reserve the right to go back into Gaza should it deem necessary.

As both Israelis and Gazans see the implementation of the agreement, a key question remains unanswered. Why was the agreement reached at this very late hour, in the twilight of the Biden administration? It is impossible to provide a definitive answer to this question. However, both informed analysts in the US as well as key members of the Israeli opposition have reportedly argued that Netanyahu deliberately slow-walked the negotiations once Trump was elected to the presidency for a second time. They contend that, as a very astute observer of the American political scene, he must have concluded that an accord reached just before Trump assumed office would give him greater leverage over the future of the Palestinian question. Such an assumption is far from fanciful. Among other matters, during the first Trump administration, a long-standing Israeli demand had been granted. In December 2017, the United States had accepted Jerusalem and not Tel Aviv as the nation's capital and the US Embassy was also shifted to the city. Furthermore, in 2019, the Trump administration had recognised Israeli sovereignty over the occupied Golan Heights.

Finally, Trump, with his usual bombast, had repeatedly stated in the last few weeks that there would be "hell to pay" if the Israeli hostages were not released before he took charge on January 20. This message, for a certainty, was not lost on Hamas. Additionally, his weakened leadership may have also concluded that given Trump's inclination to grant extraordinary leeway to any Israeli government, it was perhaps best to conclude a ceasefire while the Biden administration was still in office.

The accord, if it goes into effect as planned, will bring this sanguinary war to a close, at least for the next several weeks. What will transpire thereafter will depend in considerable measure on two key factors. First, the degree of latitude the Trump administration is willing to grant Netanyahu's government in dealing with Hamas and the Palestinians in general. Second, on Netanyahu's ability to hold his fractious government together and his willingness to appease the most extreme members of his coalition as he seeks to ensure his own political survival given his legal woes.

Ganguly is senior fellow and directs the Huntington Program on US-India relations at Hoover Institution, Stanford University

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

BIDEN'S SEND OFF

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Triumph & tragedy' (IE, January 20). Joe Biden's term in office was a mixed bag. Despite all the naysayers, he won the presidency in 2020. Then, he secured major legislative victories like the Inflation Reduction Act, and managed to double the number of Americans who have access to affordable healthcare. The economy created 2.3 million jobs. But his administration failed to solve the inflation crisis, and continued unwavering support for Ukraine and Israel which was met with fierce opposition. His administration has failed in controlling illegal immigration. Regardless of the political leadership change in the White House, all indications are that the Indo-US relationship will only grow stronger.

SSPAU, Nadi

HEALTH IS WEALTH

THIS REFERS TO the article 'For better health' (IE, January 20). Health is an essential factor in all spheres of nation-building and healthy citizens are precious assets. We must invest in the health of the citizenry and the nation. Following the policy of 'One health', we need digital records of citizens' health. Investment in research of zoonotic and other illnesses is a must. We must also

centralise treatment plans of patients and update them regularly so healthcare professionals, researchers and the state have the information required to preempt a health disaster. A healthy nation will progress in leaps and bounds; that should be the goal.

Subhash Vaid, New Delhi

AN ESSENTIAL TEST

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'Carriage to Good Morning: How to get ready for Trump's shock & awe' (IE, January 20). There are immense challenges and opportunities that await Donald Trump in his second term. The focus on foreign policy and immigration overshadowed a crucial internal issue: The future of America's democratic institutions. Trump 2.0 could be a defining moment for the state of democracy itself. His past rhetoric and actions have often raised questions about the erosion of democratic norms, parties in relation to the rule of law, political polarisation, and respect for constitutional checks and balances. As Trump seeks to reaffirm America's global leadership, he must also address the pressing need for unity, stability, and institutional integrity within the country. This may be his most difficult task.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali



DECCAN HERALD

ESTABLISHED 1948

When misogyny derails poll discourse

The standards of political discourse have steadily deteriorated in the country over the years, often touching new lows during election campaigns, though that is the time when a model code of conduct is supposed to moderate and keep tabs on the words and actions of politicians. It is not just propriety that often becomes a casualty during elections. Even common decencies of everyday life are violated. Exchanges from public platforms become offensive and even vulgar. Successive elections have seen an increasingly disturbing trend in this respect. The campaign for the Delhi Assembly elections is hotting up and political parties with high stakes in the polls, especially the AAP and the BJP, have come out with all guns blazing. There is noise and a lot of it involves abuse, insults, personal attacks, and innuendoes. Unfortunately, much of it is directed against women.

Congress MP Priyanka Gandhi and Delhi Chief Minister Atishi were special targets. BJP leader Ramesh Bidhuri, who is contesting against Atishi in Kalkaji constituency, promised to make Delhi's streets look like Priyanka Gandhi's cheeks. He also said Atishi "changed her fathers. Earlier she was Marlena. Now she has become Singh. This is their character." The BJP accused AAP leader Arvind Kejriwal of insulting Poorvanchalis (people from Eastern UP and Bihar) by calling them "fake voters." The Lt. Governor of Delhi V K Saxena, who is not part of the campaign, thought Kejriwal insulted Atishi by calling her a "temporary Chief Minister." The BJP's national spokesperson Shehzad Poonawala apologised for a disparaging remark he made about the Maithili Brahmin community after it became a matter of discussion and was widely condemned by the community. There have been other offensive comments, charges and countercharges from all sides.

Personal attacks and misogynist and sexist comments directed at women — many of them crude and repugnant — have increased. Ramesh Bidhuri is a serial offender but his party has not considered it necessary to take action against him or to warn him. Last week, the Election Commission said it would take sexist and derogatory remarks about women seriously and such remarks would attract stringent action. But such comments continue to be made without inhibition. The number of women in public life and legislatures is small; there are not many candidates contesting elections either and the few who are continue to be subjected to insults and calumny. Ensuring political representation for women is important but for a start, they need to be extended something more fundamental — the respect they deserve.

Big BBMP fix: Approved for violation?

Bengaluru, once a haven for pensioners and a city known for its gardens, is now struggling to cope with the consequences of unregulated and unauthorised construction. A recent survey conducted by the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) has revealed a startling fact: two out of three buildings under construction in the city lack statutory municipal plan approvals. This means that only 835 of the 2,419 buildings surveyed had obtained the required permission, while a staggering 1,584 properties proceeded with the construction without even applying for approval. The root cause for this chaotic urban planning can be attributed to systemic failures and inefficiency, compounded by a severe policy paralysis within the government.

One of the primary reasons behind this illegal construction epidemic is the BBMP's refusal to issue building plans for 'B' Khata properties, which are essentially revenue sites or single plots situated in unauthorised layouts. Ironically, the government turned a blind eye when these layouts were being created, and did nothing to prevent the sale of sites, which were then registered in the sub-registrar's office. The government should have checked the mushrooming of these layouts in the first place. It is now essential to find a solution and take steps to ensure that a similar problem does not arise in the future. It is also puzzling why 'B' Khata sites were issued, giving buyers a glimmer of hope. Lakhs of people have invested their hard-earned money and retirement savings in these sites, only to be made to suffer for no fault of theirs. The government cannot simply absolve itself of the responsibility by taking the stand that these constructions are unauthorised as this would be a gross injustice to innocent property owners who have been led to believe that their investments are legitimate.

While the 'B' Khata site owners are grappling with their own set of problems, an equally critical concern is the widespread unauthorised constructions on 'A' Khata sites, where high-rises are erected on small plots, additional floors are built without sanction, and setbacks are completely disregarded. It is inconceivable that such blatant violations occur without the complicity of local BBMP officers who are constantly present in the area. The BBMP's failure to take action against these major violations exposes the deeper issue of corruption. While BBMP should definitely resolve the issues faced by the 'B' Khata owners, it is equally important to act against builders who are flouting rules with impunity. It should also take stern action against its own officers who are colluding with such erring builders. The BBMP should act before lawlessness in urban planning becomes the new norm.

Two out of Bengaluru's three under-construction buildings lack statutory municipal plan approvals

Why India's defence sector needs a policy push

Improved private participation, optimised public sector capabilities can transform defence manufacturing

NANDINI BHATNAGAR

As India prepares for the 2025-26 Union Budget, the question of how the defence allocation will address current challenges is front and centre. Despite consistent increase in allocation — now exceeding Rs 62 lakh crore — the defence industry remains heavily dominated by public sector enterprises. The private sector, despite showing promise, continues to play a limited role in manufacturing and innovation. This persistent gap raises an important question: why hasn't India fully tapped into the capabilities of its private sector to bolster defence manufacturing?

In this context, the Ministry of Defence has declared 2025 as the 'Year of Reforms', signalling a renewed commitment to restructuring and modernising defence production. These reforms are aimed at streamlining procurement processes and encouraging private sector participation, along with a strong focus on achieving self-reliance in defence manufacturing. This move is in line with India's 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' mission, which aims to reduce dependence on imports and develop indigenous capabilities across sectors.

India's defence budget has consistently shown a commitment to reducing reliance on imports. About 75% of the modernisation funds are reserved for domestic manufacturers, which is a reflection of the government's mission to strengthen indigenous production. Over the years, policies like the 2020 Defence Acquisition Procedure (DAP) were created to prioritise domestic manufacturers. Yet, in practice, state-owned giants like Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) and Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL) have been central to this endeavour. It is important to highlight that these organisations have developed capabilities over decades and remain vital for handling sensitive technologies and national security projects.

However, public sector enterprises alone cannot meet the growing demands of modern defence requirements. The overreliance on public sector enterprises has created inefficiencies that drain the defence budget. Challenges such as production delays and technology gaps often arise due to the sheer scale and complexity of their

responsibilities. For instance, the Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) Tejas project has taken years longer than expected. This forced India to import equipment to fill the gap, which undermined the very goal of self-reliance. These kinds of setbacks aren't a failure of the PSUs but rather an indication of the need for complementary contributions from the private sector to enhance capacity and efficiency.

The hesitancy to involve private companies in defence manufacturing stems from both historical and strategic concerns. After independence, India adopted a centralised approach to defence production, focusing heavily on public sector control to safeguard



sensitive technologies and ensure secrecy. While this approach served its purpose during the early years of nation-building, it created a culture of mistrust towards private enterprises. Decision-makers have long worried that private companies could prioritise profits over national security or fall victim to monopolistic tendencies. These concerns, while valid, have inadvertently limited the potential for private sector innovation to play a transformative role in defence.

The private sector, with its capacity for innovation, efficiency, and competition, could address many challenges. Programmes such as Innovations for Defence Excellence (iDEX) have already begun encouraging startups and small businesses to develop cutting-edge technologies for defence. Yet, systemic issues like bureaucratic red tape, inconsistent procurement processes, and limited access to government contracts have hampered private companies from scaling their involvement.

PPP in play

In countries like the United States, private companies like Lockheed Martin and Boeing play a pivotal role in defence manufacturing and developing ad-

vanced technologies under strict government oversight. These partnerships have not only driven innovation but also created robust industrial ecosystems that benefit the broader economy. For India, the challenge is to replicate such models while trying to ensure that sensitive technologies and national security concerns remain protected. While private entities like Larsen and Toubro (L&T) have made commendable contributions in the development of the nuclear-powered Arihant-class submarines, such examples are more of an exception rather than the rule. There is also a room to institutionalise such collaborations with a strong Public Private Partnership (PPP) framework.

PPP represents an important area of opportunity. Projects like the Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA) could benefit from private sector involvement. These collaborations, however, must be underpinned by clear guidelines to ensure that national security is not compromised. Transparency in bidding processes and fairness in awarding contracts will also be essential to build trust between the government and private players.

While the defence budget should encourage private sector involvement, it is equally important to recognise the areas where public control must remain paramount. Sectors that involve highly classified technologies, such as missile systems or nuclear capabilities, are best managed by state-owned enterprises due to their direct impact on national security. Similarly, strategic assets like cyber security systems and critical infrastructure should remain under strict government oversight to prevent vulnerabilities. Balancing these priorities will require a nuanced approach that distinguishes between the areas where private innovation can flourish and those where government control is essential.

Apart from financial numbers, the substance of the Union Budget and the Prime Minister's vision are critical for shaping our developmental trajectory. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision that underscores the importance of indigenisation in defence manufacturing demands more than budgetary allocations; it requires a policy thrust that translates words into action. The 2025-26 budget offers an opportunity to outline clear initiatives to boost private participation in the sector. A balanced approach of combining the strengths of the public and private sectors could transform India's defence manufacturing ecosystem into one that is efficient, innovative, and self-reliant.

(The writer is a research assistant at the Chintan Research Foundation)

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

As elfie with the lord

A temple visit left me pondering: Is tech more thoughtful than the devout?

RASHMI RAJ

I need no alarm from mid-December to mid-January. No, I am not on vacation mode, but it is *Dhanurmasa*, a month-long period when temples and the devout start their day very early as if in defiance to the biting cold. The temples around my house begin the day with *bhajans* and *shlokas* even before the lark awakes.

At the fag end of the month is Vaikuntha Ekadashi, and the poojas start an hour earlier than usual. I got ready as soon as I could, wanting to be the first in a long queue of devotees. I was first indeed, but from last, I had clearly underestimated the enthusiasm of others like me. The temple was up on a hill, and I stood at the bottom on the last step. The cold

wind forced me to bite my teeth hard and hug myself, although I wore a jacket. The doors of the temple opened for the darshan as people moved, chanting *Govinda-Govinda*, and singing *bhajans*. As I reached the main entrance, I noticed an elderly couple in tears of joy; they had seen the 'Lord' first. The lady wore the traditional nine-yard saree with stunning diamond earrings that immediately reminded me of M S Subbulakshmi. While the gentleman was in *silk panche* and *shawl* with no sweater or shawl on, just like my grandfather, who left us when he was 99 years young and never wore a sweater till his last day.

The eyes of the elderly couple were filled with contentment. They walked down the steps holding each other's hand, singing *Baja Govindam* together.

A little girl's excitement held my attention. She had the best seat in the world to see the lord — her father's shoulders — as she shouted, 'Appa, see, God knows I am very hungry. He has done some magic and grown fruits on the ceiling. Can I

pluck them and eat?' The father replied calmly, 'Hold on a little while! Just a few minutes more.' The mother and I smiled at each other. I entered the temple and saw many taking selfies with the almighty — in devotion to self rather than bowing down. I am sure the photos went up on different social media platforms within seconds. The outer *pradakshina* of the temple was decked up with lights, and the *prasad* counter, with a mandatory *ladoo*, and it appears, selfies too are a must — there was a selfiebooth in the temple *prakara* milling with people.

I returned home to a warm cup of tea and the newspaper. A report about an app for selfies at Kumbh Mela caught my attention. The report mentioned CCTV in many corners, underwater drones to prevent devotees from drowning, and drones up in the sky. As I wondered whether the *sarvanyami* (omnipresent) technology had become more attuned to the value of human life than we are, the loud cooker whistle jolted me back to reality.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Congress must decisively resolve infighting

The article, 'Congress power struggle threatens governance in Karnataka' (Jan 20), was clear and incisive. Despite the fact that Congress rode to power on an anti-corruption campaign, the party's government is perceived as no better than its BJP predecessor due to several high-profile scandals. These include the alleged scam in Karnataka's tribal corporation, Siddaramaiah's involvement in the MUDA land scam, and the excise minister's unethical practices and extortion. The Waqf Board's al-

leged land grab has also fuelled farmer mistrust. Although Siddaramaiah and D K Shivakumar have maintained a cordial public facade, their factional feud is eroding the goodwill generated during the assembly polls, leaving the government directionless. To restore public faith, the high command must act decisively to resolve this damaging feud, which is undermining the state's administration and tarnishing the governing party's image.

K V Chandramouli, Mysuru

Sedition is serious

Apropos 'Stop making sedition accusation casually' (Jan 20), the casual invocation of sedition charges against opposition leaders in India is alarming. Such allegations have the potential to erode democratic debate and dissent, stifling free speech and instilling fear. Sedition is a grave charge that must only be invoked in extreme cases, supported by clear evidence of incitement to violence or harm to the nation. Leaders

must exercise restraint, prioritising constructive dialogue and reserving sedition accusations for genuine threats to national security, rather than political disagreements or critical commentary.

Malika Gangopadhyay, Bengaluru

Save soil

Apropos 'The rising threat of land degradation' (Jan 20), without taking direct reference to the conclusions and resolutions adopted at various

COP summits, it is imperative that we implement essential land conservation methods at local levels by adopting scientific agrarian practices, as outlined in the GAP. Agri universities must incorporate this subject into their curricula, ensuring that the information reaches farmers.

Rajiv Magal, Sakaleshpur

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

SPEAK OUT

One bullet fired by Godse hit Gandhi, but his body had three bullets. Where did the other two bullets come from? Who arranged that? Did Nehru arrange that? I suspect that Nehru arranged the assassination because he wanted to be a dictator. Gandhi did not breathe his last due to the bullet fired by Godse.



Basangouda Patil Yatala,
BJP MLA

I feel like I'm too busy writing history to read it.
Kanye West

TO BE PRECISE

GREAT IF YOU CAN CONVINCE A FRIEND TRUMP THAT ONE CAN RULE BY RHETORIC THAN ACTIONS!



IN PERSPECTIVE

Poised for take-off

With record aircraft orders and busier international schedules, Indian airlines are coming into their own

ASHWINI PHADNIS

Indian airlines are slowly but surely expanding their wings to take a larger share of non-stop international flights. Earlier this month, IndiGo, which has a domestic market share of over 60%, announced that it had become the largest foreign operator out of Sri Lanka operating 54 weekly frequencies from Jaffna and Colombo to four points in India. Indian airlines' share on the India-Sri Lanka route will go up further as Air India operates 21 weekly services and Alliance Air operates three weekly services to Sri Lanka.

The latest development on the India-Sri Lanka air route is a reversal of history. In October 2003, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe had signed an open sky agreement which allowed Sri Lankan airlines to fly daily into India's metro cities and unlimited frequencies into 18 tourist destinations. Sri Lankan airline, which was under Emirates airline's management control, was able to quickly secure more aircraft and become the largest foreign carrier out of India with over 100 weekly services. But with Sri Lankan reverting to government control, the number of weekly flights has come down and IndiGo has now taken this spot.

The United Kingdom is another country where Indian airlines dominate the skies. Data by OAG for this month shows that Air India is operating 284 flights while British Airways is operating 240 flights and Virgin Atlantic 154 flights between India and the UK. OAG provides data for the global travel industry and has the world's largest network of flight information. On the India-UK route, the balance is going to tilt further in India's favour as news reports have appeared that IndiGo is set to launch daily services between India and UK sometime later this year.

Both are significant developments — the UK is one of the biggest markets for domestic and international airlines given the large number of Indians who live and work in that country. Closer home, India and Sri Lanka enjoy close people-to-people relations and India was the largest tourist market for Sri Lanka with close to 600,000 Indians visiting the island nation.

Late last year, the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) allowed Indian airlines to wet lease aircraft. There are two kinds of leases — a dry lease in which the airlines from India take the aircraft and use their own crew to operate the flights. In comparison, in a wet lease, the crew, aircraft insurance and maintenance is provided by the company from which the aircraft is leased. DGCA's decision was taken keeping in mind the supply chain disruptions Airbus and Boeing are facing. Air India has ordered 570 aircraft, IndiGo has ordered 530 aircraft and has rights to order another 70 wide-body A 350-1000 aircraft while Akasa has ordered 150. Till these aircraft come in, with a wet lease, Indian airlines will be able to quickly deploy aircraft on domestic and international routes while waiting for the delivery of their own aircraft.

Besides, the current government has been very selective in exchange of air services bilaterally or treaties that are exchanged between two countries which allow airlines from the two countries to designate carriers to operate between them. Like in the case of India and the UK, it was decided to increase the weekly flight services airlines from both sides can operate to 70.

The shift is here. Among them, Indian carriers have ordered over 1,300 aircraft including wide-body aircraft capable of flying non-stop between India and the United States and Canada, which are key source markets for Indian airlines. What will further help Indian carriers is that India has an open skies policy with both US and Canada under which airlines from both sides can launch as many flights as they like.

For decades, foreign airlines have been carrying a larger share of traffic from India than that carried by Indian airlines because of two reasons. Air India was under government control and ordering new aircraft was a slow and tedious process. In addition, private airlines did not have the fleet strength and wide-body aircraft to take on the likes of Etihad, Qatar Airways, Emirates as well as the European and South East Asian carriers. About two years back, it was estimated that foreign airlines carried 70% or more of passengers travelling abroad from India. This situation does not exist anywhere in the world.

Now, with Indian airlines coming into their own, setting a global record for ordering aircraft in a calendar year and the developments that have been seen in the India-UK and India-Sri Lanka markets, it is a matter of time before Indian airlines carry more passengers abroad than correct a wrong that has gone uncorrected for decades.

(The writer is a Delhi-based senior aviation journalist)

Focus on Davos

States must improve ease of doing business

With domestic private investment being weak and foreign direct investment growing slowly, the Centre and state governments have pulled out all the stops for the annual World Economic Forum (WEF), which takes place at the Swiss ski resort of Davos. The country will have two pavilions, one for the Centre and the other for representatives of six states, including three chief ministers. Representing the Centre is Ashwini Vaishnaw, holding important portfolios like railways, information and broadcasting, and information technology, who said he planned to propagate India's "inclusive growth agenda". The states that have sent delegates are Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Kerala, and Uttar Pradesh. Chief Ministers Devendra Fadnis (Maharashtra), Chandrababu Naidu (Andhra Pradesh), and Revanth Reddy (Telangana) are attending to hard-sell investment opportunities to foreign investors. There is no doubt that India means business at Davos.

Andhra Pradesh, for instance, is reportedly spending ₹15 crore, with Mr Naidu lining up 19 meetings, plus 50 meetings scheduled by the state's information-technology minister. Almost all the states have branded their initiatives — such as "Bullish on IT" or "Telangana Rising 2050" — as part of the effort. All of this reflects a proactive urgency of mission and a recognition that there are limits to the amount of heavy lifting the Centre and states can do to keep economic growth ticking over and expand employment opportunities. But questions arise over the utility of these efforts, which involve a significant expenditure of money and time by key state functionaries.

Behind the rhetoric of big themes, Davos is undoubtedly known for the opportunities it offers for behind-the-scenes deal-making, so it is possible that these efforts by Indian officials may yield value. But other chief ministerial visits of earlier years have had a suboptimal impact chiefly because of the low priority that India attracts. This year, with the Chinese economy slowing, this could change — Mr Naidu, for instance, is reported to be meeting two heads of states, though who they are has not been specified. At the same time, foreign investors who are being approached may legitimately ask why domestic corporations are shying away from investing in their own country. Instead, domestic outward investment appears to be growing. That apart, each of these states holds annual investment jamborees that traditionally attract eye-catching proposals which rarely translate into shovel-ready projects on the ground.

These are facts of which overseas investors are well aware, just as they are of the many impediments to doing business in India — from chronic policy uncertainty to infrastructure constraints. The K-shaped nature of post-pandemic consumer demand may also prove a deterrent, a factor that will certainly count for such emerging businesses as electric vehicles and renewable energy. All the same, the state administrations that have chosen to make investment pitches in Davos must be applauded for making the effort. Yet, with the notable exception of Uttar Pradesh, the other five states are those that are relative raccoons in the investment states, Indian or foreign. Their purposefulness begs the question of why other northern states, which urgently need more manufacturing activity to address the problem of poor-quality jobs, are not making a similar effort to attract foreign investment. In a sense, their absence says much about the skewed dynamics of India's economic progress.

The automotive frontier

India needs investment in the EV segment

The Bharat Mobility Global Expo, being held in several locations in the National Capital Region, provides an opportune moment to consider the state of the automobile-manufacturing ecosystem in India. It is worth remembering that this was, till recently, one of the few sub-sectors of manufacturing where India had demonstrated competence. In particular, the automotive-component business had managed to reach a level of proficiency that was reflected in healthy export earnings and sustained relationships with global original equipment manufacturers (OEMs). India also had large private-sector companies in the OEM space that were able to incubate research and development and open up new markets. Yet it has to be acknowledged that the sector is going through a period of transition, to which India is yet to have a clear response. This transition is defined in particular by three trends: The technological shift from internal combustion engines (ICEs) to hybrid or electric vehicles (EVs); the vast overcapacity being built up in China; and the subsidies and support being provided for reshoring in the large consumer markets of the West.

The context of these three trends provides a ceiling on the size and growth of Indian ICE-focused companies in the automotive sector. Some of these have healthy balance sheets, driven by growth domestically in the medium and large utility vehicle space. But a dependence on domestic growth has its limits, as is becoming increasingly obvious. The question is where the next motive force for the sector will come from, and even whether it is sufficiently future-proofed against these three disruptive trends. The reports from the auto expo underline the fact that much of the energy has shifted away from Western OEMs to Chinese carmakers.

BYD, for example, has promised to expand the range of its cars available in India. There are quantitative restrictions and tariffs on imports, but it is possible that Indian consumers will buy whatever is available. Yet, for geopolitical reasons, India has put restrictions on Chinese investment in India. Given that the geopolitical climate is changing alongside the technological landscape, it may be time to revisit this decision. A \$1 billion investment offer to India by BYD in partnership with a local firm for focusing on re-export to peer markets deserves re-evaluation, for example. Other such opportunities might also be sought. It is to be noted that the same company said yesterday that a \$1-billion plant in Indonesia would be completed by the end of this calendar year. If India waits much longer, it might lose out on the technological frontier.

The auto-component sector must also be given time to evolve, through the creation of alternative ecosystems. It has been noted that such investment has created commercial complexes and ecosystems in locations in Southeast Asia and Mexico. India's security concerns about Chinese investment in core infrastructure are eminently defensible. But investment in other manufacturing sectors, particularly EVs, may not have the same security implications. The fear is that India will be shut out of the legacy export markets in the West while also being cut off from technological innovation like in EVs. This could end up creating only a high-cost domestic industry that leaves both consumers and producers worse off.

Anatomy of a regulator

Regulatory bodies are important institutions in a market economy, requiring careful handling

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



Microeconomics 101 explains the causes and effects of market failures in a free-market economy, as well as the need and justification for regulators. Over time, even developing economies have realised that having credible and well-regulated regulatory institutions is a pre-requisite for sustainable growth.

The enactment setting up a regulator should have a clear purpose, explicitly stating the objective, role, powers and functions. As for the appointment procedure, powers and functions, guiding principles for regulation, appellate mechanism, and how the regulator will be held accountable. The regulator must have operational and financial independence, and the law should unambiguously prescribe that.

A number of regulatory bodies have been established in India since the country embarked on its journey of economic liberalisation in 1991. This column is not focused on analysing the performance of these regulators, but rather on examining certain broad core issues that need to be addressed.

Let's begin with the question of whether we need so many regulators. This question often arises from concerns about the financial burden on the public exchequer when setting up new institutions. However, a far more serious and important issue is the need to analyse the impact of multiple regulatory institutions with poorly defined or even conflicting roles on the regulated entities and other stakeholders. Among other consequences, the objective of improving the ease of doing business certainly gets thrown out of the window.

It's not that this aspect hasn't been examined in the past. For instance, the Financial Sector Legislative Reforms Commission (FSLRC) report of 2013 on the financial sector clearly explains the need for rationalising the regulatory architecture and recommends having only two regulators in the sector. However, vested interests and turf issues have ensured that this idea remains on the back burner.

The government's mindset in setting up these institutions and dealing with them needs to change. First

and foremost, it should accept that statutory regulatory bodies aren't government departments. In many sectors, some of the regulated entities are government-owned. These entities often, citing sovereign ownership, seek and expect different regulatory treatment, including forbearance, compared to private-sector players. How about a cost-benefit analysis of such a proposition? The costs are obvious. Among other perspectives, it distorts the level playing field. As for the benefits, if one digs deeply, there are hardly any in the medium to long term. Most of the time, it only implies throwing the can down the road, and bringing in complacency in the working of these entities.

Regulators' arm's-length functioning, both in letter and spirit, is an essential prerequisite. If the government finds this impractical or unfeasible in a particular case, it is better not to set up that regulator.

Coming to administrative matters, including the appointment of regulators and ensuring their accountability.

The arm's-length working principle dictates that the appointment procedure, including tenure, should be embedded in the law and not left to rule-making. Extending this principle to the appointment of the private sector, should not be handled by the ministry dealing with that sector. Let the department of personnel in the government handle the appointment of all statutory regulators.

Getting the right people to fill the regulatory jobs can prove to be a challenging task. Recent events have sparked a media debate on whether such appointees should come from the government or the private sector. This subject requires a separate discussion, and this column is not on that. That said, a word of advice regarding the selection of candidates from the government may be in order. The common public perception that these jobs are sinecures for the retired officials has to be strongly negated. The government should identify and offer appointments to suitable candidates well ahead of their superannuation, say, three or more years before retirement. Autonomous regulatory bodies with substantial and well-defined roles would definitely

attract the right people ready to leave their government jobs to take up these roles.

A lot has been written in the media about the accountability of regulators. It is a serious issue. Regulators cannot be given a free pass in the name of regulatory independence.

Let us first examine the legal provisions in some existing statutes that may be relevant for ensuring oversight of regulators' working. These include — the powers of the central government to make rules, issue directions to regulator and even supersede them in certain situations; the requirement for regulators to submit an annual report to the government, which is subsequently laid before Parliament; the provision for laying regulations before Parliament; and the establishment of an appellate body to hear appeals against the quasi-judicial orders passed by regulators. Some enactments also prescribe government nominees on the board of the regulator.

These provisions only serve a limited purpose. The government's rule-making is restricted to administrative issues; issuing directions could be perceived as a violation of the arm's length working principle. Instances of a regulatory board being superseded are virtually unheard of. Annual reports attract more attention from the media — there are no instances of regulations laid before Parliament being modified. The functioning of appellate bodies is often marred by vacant positions and a lack of expertise.

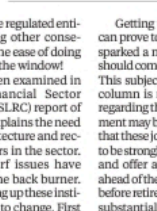
While some improvements could be brought in to make such provisions efficacious, the desirable approach would be to have a direct parliamentary oversight through parliamentary committees over regulators' functioning. Though we have parliamentary standing committees reviewing different ministries' working, few would disagree that this mechanism has a long way to go before reaching the level of maturity observed in developed democracies of the West. These committees should be strengthened by providing well-qualified supporting staff, and streamlining the processes. A regulatory committee could call a regulator's annual report to its functioning and also hear from stakeholders and experts. Regulators should be obligated to file an action taken report on the committee's observations, within a defined timeframe. The committee may then finalise its report, which should be placed before the parliament, and later in the public domain.

In fact, as the system matures, the concerned parliamentary committee may also be entrusted with the authority to convene the appointment of regulators.

Regulatory bodies are important institutions in a market economy, and need to be nurtured and developed with care to support economic growth, ensuring that all stakeholders continue to repose faith in the ecosystem.

The author is distinguished fellow at the Observer Research Foundation, and former chairman of SeH. He also previously served as secretary of the National Gas Regulatory Board, and as chairman of the Central Pollution Control Board.

AIJAY TYAGI



The need of the hour is a 'Dream Budget'

In less than two weeks, the finance minister will present the Union Budget for 2025-26. This Budget comes against the backdrop of a slowing economy characterised by high levels of fiscal deficit and debt. That means the FM will have to find a way to announce policy initiatives to revive growth while also achieving fiscal discipline. While calls for tax cuts and increased infrastructure spending are loud, this Budget must do a lot more to drive sustained growth.

The two key questions are: What is the diagnosis of the economic slowdown? And what can the Budget do to address it? Let's tackle the question of slowdown first. The consensus is that the slowdown is temporary, but data suggests otherwise. Barring one quarter, the economy has been slowing steadily since mid-2023, with real gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate falling from over 8 per cent to under 6 per cent in just a year. High-frequency indicators also show that the post-Covid growth momentum is fading, possibly signalling a deeper, structural slowdown.

Before Covid, the economy was already struggling, growing at less than 4 per cent in Q4 2019. Post-Covid, many high-frequency indicators pointed to the emergence of two different economies within one: An "Old economy" in middle and rural India, and a "New economy" driven by a boom in service exports. The latter was fuelled by the rise of global capability centres (GCCs), mainly US-based, employing high-skilled Indian workers in sectors like R&D. This New economy boosted luxury consumption, such as SUVs, and sparked a mini-boom in construction. In comparison, the Old economy has been weaker, from even before the pandemic, due to low private sector investment and weak goods exports, among other things. Workers in the Old

economy have also been getting battered by high food inflation and falling real wages. And now, the New economy is slowing down too, normalising to a more moderate growth pace. Together, these dynamics are creating a serious demand problem.

How should the Budget address this, while also reducing fiscal deficit? Two things are worth considering. The Budget should focus on rationalising expenditure to achieve fiscal consolidation. In February 2023, the FM had set a target to reduce the fiscal deficit to less than 4.5 per cent by 2025-26, but this will be challenging in a slowing economy, with nominal GDP growth under 10 per cent. However, lowering the fiscal deficit is essential for macroeconomic stability, which is key for growth.

To achieve fiscal consolidation, the government should focus on reducing revenue expenditure, which includes schemes and transfers and constitutes nearly 77 per cent of total spending. For example, why is it necessary to provide free food grains to 800 million people annually when the pandemic emergency has long passed?

On the issue of growth, there is a lot of clamour for more government spending on infrastructure. While some infrastructure is needed, it is unclear if this alone will boost GDP growth. For sustained economic growth, a revival in private sector investment is crucial, but public infrastructure spending does not seem to encourage this. Moreover, with much infrastructure already built, the marginal benefits of new roads or highways are diminishing. In short, government infrastructure spending might be a blunt tool for stimulating growth when private sector confidence remains low.

Likewise, tax cuts can boost consumption, but giv-

ing the limited fiscal space, there is little room for widespread cuts. Moreover, large segments of the Old economy, where falling wages and poor job prospects are hurting demand, aren't even in the tax base. As a result, some tweaks here and there with the tax structure are unlikely to make a significant impact.

To facilitate high, sustained growth, the Budget must revive a key element missing from India's economic agenda since the rollout of goods and services tax (GST) in 2017, no major reforms have been introduced. Many say that no new reforms are needed since all the key policy initiatives have already been adopted. But this is not true. There is, in fact, much that needs to be done.

Given the current economic climate, the Budget could propose liberalising import tariffs, removing non-tariff barriers where import dumping is not a concern, scrapping Quality Control Orders that restrict the imports of vital supplies to the manufacturing sector, overhauling the tax system (including residence-based taxation to attract foreign investment), further simplifying the GST, eliminating cesses and surcharges, curbing excessive industrial policy so as to create a level playing field for all firms, and incentivising states to do land and labour reforms. Long-overdue regulatory reforms should also be prioritised. The conversation around reforms has faded, but now is the time to bring it back.

This Budget must serve as a blueprint for the government's long-term economic vision, laying out a comprehensive medium-term strategy to restore private sector confidence. Incremental changes to taxes or spending will not be enough to turn the tide, and the economy will continue to struggle. The time is ideal for a "dream budget" akin to the 1991 reforms that sparked high growth and unlocked significant gains in productivity.

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MACRO PULSE

RAJESWARI SENGUPTA



Joining the dots on infrastructure



BOOK REVIEW

SANJEEV S AHLUWALIA

Pratap Padode is a financial journalist and publisher of *Construction India*, a magazine launched in 1996, followed by *Infrastructure Today*, *Power Today* and *Project Reporter*. This book comes favourably pre-reviewed by industry veterans Nandan Nilekani, founder chairman, Unique Identification Authority of India, S N Subrahmanyam, Chairman, Larsen & Toubro, and policy maestro Amitabh Kant, the Prime Minister's G20 Sherpa.

It stands out in the literature on infrastructure for two reasons. First, it is an industry veteran's perspective on the domestic political economy, global drivers, and the industry response that shaped infrastructure from 1996 to 2024.

Second, it is data-heavy, which readers unacquainted with this sector might welcome. It also touches on macro-policy issues that impact infrastructure. Chapter two explains more than one half of the book. It is a monthly narration of key events and decisions from 2012 onwards, based on the author's editorials in trade magazines — a primer on how infrastructure evolved and the government's supportive initiatives, including the India Infrastructure Consortium (IICV), constituted in 2006, to provide long-term debt, and the India Infrastructure Project Development Fund in 2007 to partially finance the considerable documentation cost of projects under the public-private partnership (PPP) model.

Read together, chapters one and two provide, in the author's words, "a ringside view" of the "halcyon days of growth to the logjam and policy paralysis reached in 2012", and thereafter "rejection of fuel by Prime Minister Narendra Modi." India's infrastructure story became globally visible in 1998 when then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee

announced the Golden Quadrilateral — more a vision than a project — to link the country's urban extremities in all four directions with highways. The length of four-lane highways increased from just \$56 km in 1998 to 14,000 km by 2007, funded partially by a new cess on the sale of petrol and diesel — an appropriate new revenue source borne by owners and users of motor vehicles who benefitted directly from lower fuel consumption and maintenance costs due to road improvement and widening, as did industry and trade from better connectivity.

Chapter three examines why "the pace (of development) is elusive" and annual cost overruns on projects are ₹4 trillion, making private investment shy of new commitments. The exception is India's demonstrated prowess in digital public infrastructure and applications for identity recognition, payments, information-sharing and digital storage stacks, which are expected to find markets in developing economies. These are the stepping stones to feed data-hungry artificial intelligence sub-systems.

Indian Railways has yet to live up to being the fourth largest global network by enhancing the quality of its services. Energy- and emissions-inefficient road transport still accounts for a disproportionate share of passenger traffic and freight, though new investments in ports and dedicated freight corridors are nearing completion. The glacial pace in the privatisation of public enterprises shrinks the space for private business, exaggerating the drain on public finances. The Smart Cities mission has yet to transform city planning mechanisms in states where shortage of urban planners, skilled, certified and registered construction workers and contractors, constrain small projects.

L&T, one of the few Indian professionally managed companies, remains the dominant engineering and construction company with a turnover 4 times of the next company, illustrating that the scale of investment must expand significantly to provide more room for other

corporations to grow and to attract foreign competition.

The last chapter, titled "Fast Forward to Viksit Bharat," is expansive, delving into 15 suggested transformative changes. Some are a little distracting from the narrower issue of why India does not excel at infrastructure development and how to improve it. Examples are the suggestion to jettison gross domestic product (GDP)

for measuring development and adopt multiple dimensional indices instead, or the need to enhance women's participation in the workforce — both needed but unlikely to boost infrastructure. Others are wishful, such as actualising cooperative and competitive federalism. The political economy barriers can only be overcome by devising new institutional mechanisms for power sharing in key decision-making bodies that face political economy barriers. Decentralisation is generally desirable for revenue diversification but could negatively impact projects via inter-governmental friction.

Some of the suggestions are spot-on, such as evolving a new strategy at scale for vocational training, improving access to technology for medium and small enterprises, boosting tourism to enhance demand for construction and services, reducing the upfront public finance project commitment by adopting the Andhra model of "land pooling" and the need to reduce construction risks via contracts compliant with international standards, such as those of FIDIC, a Switzerland-based international federation.

This book is recommended for its data-based insights into the problems and prospects of infrastructure development. One inescapable conclusion is a discussion on the unimplemented recommendations of the Kelkar Committee Report of November 2015 on the PPP model of infrastructure development. The public investment demands of the green energy transition and defence preparedness are likely to overshoot the sustainable level of public investment. The need to reduce domestic and foreign investment via PPPs could fill that gap and induce the next phase of cost-effective high infrastructure growth.

The reviewer is consultant, economic governance & energy regulation

We need distinguished jurists as judges

A critical aspect of a judicial system is the effective and timely delivery of justice. This can be achieved in the Indian judicial system only if the significant crisis of backlogs and vacancies is addressed urgently by both the judiciary and the government.

Data as of January 1, 2025, show that 371 posts of the 1,122 posts sanctioned across the High Courts of the country remain vacant. The Allahabad High Court functions at only 50% of its total sanctioned strength. Naturally, this has a direct impact on the already alarming levels of backlog. As millions of people have to wait for a long time for justice, their faith in the judicial system is eroding. Although this has been a perennial issue, there are now about 60 lakh cases pending across all the High Courts, an astonishing number. To solve this, we need both immediate remedial steps and reformative measures.

While it is true that the pace of Collegium recommendations and the resulting appointments has picked up in the last couple of years, it has unfortunately not been able to match the number of retirements and ever-increasing number of filings. In turn, this has put enormous strain on the system, compelling judges to take on a higher caseload than feasible. This is likely to adversely impact both the time given to as well as the depth of engagement with a particular case. Therefore, a well-staffed judiciary functioning at near-total sanctioned strength is the need of the hour.

A game changer
In that context, Article 124(3)(c) and Article 217(2)(c), once repealed, of the Constitution become increasingly significant. These provisions allow for the appointment of individuals who, in the opinion of the President (read Collegium), are 'distinguished jurists', as judges of the Supreme Court and the High Courts. Unfortunately, Article



Kumar Ritswik
Delhi-based Advocate, currently serving as a Law Clerk in the Supreme Court of India

124(3)(c) remains unutilised and Article 217(2)(c) has been repealed without any stated reason. In other words, no jurist has been found to be distinguished enough to be appointed to these posts till date. Although it is a routine practice in jurisdictions across the globe to appoint jurists as judges, appointments to the High Courts and the Supreme Court in India have always been either from the Bar (practising advocates) or the judicial services.

At a time when the issue of vacancies and backlogs is stifling the system, introducing and invoking the provision to appoint 'distinguished jurists' to High Courts of the country can turn out to be a game changer. In fact, a similar idea was floated by Shri Shishan Lal Saxena but negated by the Constituent Assembly on June 7, 1949, without any meaningful deliberation.

Involving the world of academia directly into the mainstream Indian judicial system can bring both immense benefits and challenges. A vast pool of specialised knowledge, research-based critical thinking, and expertise can provide unique insights and add a hitherto missing dimension to the judiciary's understanding of complex socioeconomic and socio-legal cases. At the same time, the lack of courtroom experience, procedural knowledge, understanding of limits to exercising judicial power, and a certain degree of resistance among the status quoists within the institution are challenges that will need to be overcome as well.

By drawing upon the expertise of its sharpest academic minds, India will be able to enhance the quality of the judiciary's output

An important message
A number of countries (such as the United States, Poland, Myanmar, Kenya, Thailand, Spain and Italy) that allow jurists or professors of law to be appointed to posts equivalent to that of a judge in the High Courts and/or the Supreme Court of India have vastly benefited from this practice. In India, where academia has expressed its legitimate concerns

and grievances of not having been adequately nurtured or supported, re-introducing Article 217(2)(c) and appointing jurists or academics as judges of the High Courts would send across an important message. At the same time, with adequate training of procedural know-how and courtroom experience, the presence of our sharpest academic minds on the Bench would ensure that the judicial discourse is enriched and that judicial decision-making is further strengthened.

Granting an opportunity to distinguished academics to effectively engage with the complex problems of the contemporary legal world would lend a fresh perspective to the cause of justice. Such appointees would naturally serve as a bridge between academia and practice. This would lead to a synergistic interaction of legal research with the more nuanced and practical aspects of delivering justice.

Therefore, the need of the hour is to tide over the current crisis of increasing backlogs, and bridge the widening gap between the actual strength and the sanctioned strength of courts. First, the government must comply with the Collegium's recommendations within a strict time frame. Second, deploying innovating solutions, such as re-introducing and invoking Article 217(2)(c) to appoint distinguished jurists to High Courts, would help fill existing vacancies. Tapping into the academic world as a valuable resource sector would help ensure that the Indian judicial system remains dynamic, robust, and diverse, grounded in practical realities as well as in-depth understanding of its underlying constitutional principles. By drawing upon the expertise of our sharpest academic minds, India will be able to address the existing concerns and enhance the quality of the judiciary's output. Such a step could prove to be transformative for the Indian judiciary in the years to come.

A pushback against online abuse

An actor's decision to legally take on harassers on social media is laudable

STATE OF PLAY

S.R. Praveen
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In Kerala, trolls and abusers may fall silent, at least for the time being, thanks to a recent incident involving a courageous actor in the Malayalam film industry.

On January 6, the actor lodged a police complaint against 30 people for allegedly posting derogatory remarks beneath one of her posts on social media. The next day, she filed a complaint against businessman Bobby Chemmanur, calling him the "leader" of "social media hoodlums". The actor alleged that he had harassed her with sexual remarks on social media but also off it, during the inaugural function of one of his jewellery stores. After she objected to the remarks and refused to attend the inauguration of other outlets of the Chemmanur Group, she received obscene comments from several accounts. It seemed to her like a targeted attack.

The police pressed non-bailable charges against Mr. Chemmanur and arrested him from his tea estate in Wayanad within two days of the actor filing the complaint. The arrest was dramatic. A group of young men claiming to be Mr. Chemmanur's fans attempted to stop the police vehicle, alleging that the businessman was being unfairly targeted, after a local court denied his bail application and sent him to judicial custody for 14 days. The police also arrested a 60-year-old man, who was one of the 30 people who allegedly abused the actor online.

As the probe gathered pace, many of the offensive comments under the complainant's older posts, and in

some cases the profiles used to post such comments on her profile, began to disappear.

While the Kerala High Court granted bail to Mr. Chemmanur, it made him apologise for his theatrics which involved a reported refusal to sign the bail bond.

The actor's decision to legally take on harassers on social media is laudable. Over the last few years, there has been a growing number of instances of targeted online harassment against women in various fields, especially politicians, journalists, and celebrities. While the worst attacks are invariably launched against opinionated women, sometimes all it takes is the posting of a photograph to attract abuse.

The complainant wrote that cruel comments, sexual innuendos, and a planned campaign by certain social media profiles are enough to take lives these days. Many people, including celebrities facing serious allegations, religious and business groups, and political parties seeking to silence those raising uncomfortable questions, have weaponised online armies to push their detractors into submission. They are known to deploy hundreds and thousands of fake accounts to intimidate their targets and even drive them off social media.

Activist Rahul Easwar, who habitually defends on news

channels men facing serious allegations of sexual harassment and assault, waded into the issue by questioning the actor's sartorial choices. Accusing him of orchestrating a cybercrime against her to manipulate public opinion and trivialise her complaint, the Malayalam actor then filed a complaint against Mr. Easwar. She argued that his comments would prevent more women in similar situations from lodging complaints.

The high-profile arrest sent out the important message that online bullying will not be tolerated. The swift action taken by the police and the fear that it has possibly created could act as a strong deterrent against anyone harassing in the future. Women face a particularly violent and sexualised form of abuse online, sometimes even in the form of rape and death threats, which is why the actor's firm stand has been lauded widely.

However, some people argue that the arrest of the businessman was an attack on the freedom of expression. This is a willful and wrongful conflation. The freedom of speech does not translate into a freedom from the consequences of such speech. Freedoms come with reasonable restrictions. It is possible to cause great harm to people without taking lives anywhere close to them physically, and therefore, freedom of speech comes with great responsibility. Only stringent and sustained action against both well-known and faceless online harassers can ensure that the social media sphere is reclaimed as a space for creativity, respectful engagement, and sane debates and reasoning, as it is used to be, rather than as one where vituperative modes of interaction hold sway, which is unfortunately the case now.

One in three Indians wants to buy an electric vehicle next: report

Women influence 52% of the decisions related to the purchase of EVs in Indian households

DATA POINT

The Hindu Data Team

One in three consumers in India is eyeing electric vehicles (EVs) for their next purchase, says the 'Think Mobility' report by Google and BCG. Women are emerging as key decision-makers in the EV market. While EV-related challenges persist, innovations and localised manufacturing could pave the way for greater adoption, says the report.

The report highlights significant growth potential in India's automotive market. Chart 1 shows that the vehicular market has the highest potential for growth in developing countries such as India. On the other hand, countries such as the U.S., Switzerland, and Denmark, which already have a high vehicle penetration rate, have limited room for further growth.

Chart 2 shows that 36% of consumers are considering an EV for their next four-wheeler, while 30% are inclined towards an electric two-wheeler.

When read together, Charts 1 and 2 show that there are three significant growth potential in India's automotive market as only a small share of the population (3.3%) owns cars, but a substantial portion of this growth is likely to be driven by consumers who are increasingly inclined towards EVs.

The study also estimates a 2.7-fold increase in elite households by 2035. This suggests that the affordability of higher-priced EVs is unlikely to deter a substantial share of households.

However, barriers remain. Over half express concerns about the availability of charging infrastructure, while 45% are dissatisfied with the high acquisition costs of EVs. One in three worry about battery life, and one in five feel the current variety of models is insufficient (Chart 3).

To address these challenges, the report suggests several solutions:

improving the availability and discoverability of charging infrastructure, offering innovative financing options, scaling up localised manufacturing, extending warranties, ensuring transparency in battery health, and introducing new models – 60% of which are being developed by major Indian-origin equipment manufacturers and are new to the market.

Women influence 52% of EV purchase decisions, while they influence only 38% of non-EV purchase decisions in India. The report says that over 41% of Indian customers with two-wheelers prefer vehicles with in-built navigation systems on the dashboard. It also says that 85% of Indian users are open to considering the car model they rented as their next purchase. Notably, Gen Z is 2.7 times more likely to use self-drive rentals compared to the older generations.

One in four consumers who are buying a car for the first time are planning to purchase a pre-owned vehicle. To convert these intentions into actual sales, factors such as digitisation, transparency, and trust are essential. Additionally, one in three consumers seek pre-owned cars to upgrade their lifestyle. High-income, status-driven commuters are drawn towards luxury second-hand cars for their uniqueness, while those who take frequent road trips prefer pre-owned vehicles for their durability (Chart 4).

Sellers are 1.5 times more likely to prefer organised channels when selling their cars. These platforms act as one-stop shops, offering streamlined processes, improved valuations, and hassle-free ownership transfers. However, while purchasing pre-owned vehicles, buyers are less inclined towards organised platforms and prefer local networks of brokers and friends. This hesitation stems from a perceived lack of transparency in organised systems, rigid payment structures, and a lower level of trust compared to familiar in-network sources.

Steering towards a greener future

The data were sourced from 'Think Mobility', a research report published by BCG & Google



Chart 1: The chart plots the penetration of personal cars in 2023 versus the GDP per capita

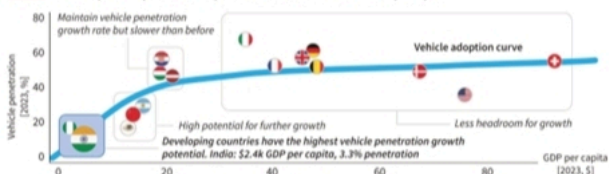


Chart 2: Those who consider an EV for their next car purchase



Chart 3: The share (%) of customers who found the following issues to be of concern while adopting electric vehicles are depicted in blue, and those who did not are depicted in red

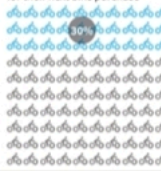


Chart 4: Share (%) of consumers in various segments planning to purchase a pre-owned vehicle

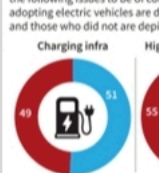
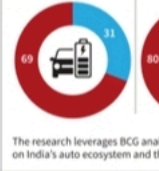


Chart 5: Share (%) of consumers in various segments planning to purchase a pre-owned vehicle



The research leverages BCG analysis, primary research and industry sources to shed light on India's auto ecosystem and the future of mobility in India

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The **Hindu**

FIFTY YEARS AGO JANUARY 21, 1975

Tibet badly hit by quake: 36 die in H.P.

Simla, Jan. 20: A heavy toll of lives and extensive damage to property in Tibet have been caused by yesterday's earthquake which killed 36 persons in Himachal Pradesh.

Reports coming in from across the Indo-Tibetan border said there was "tremendous" damage to life and property in Tibet. Eye-witnesses on the Indian side of the border said they saw Tibetan hilltops crumble with a deafening roar in a heap of debris.

Officials in Delhi put the toll in Himachal Pradesh at 36 and said roads had been blocked in the Kinnaur area and several buildings laid waste. A massive relief operation was launched to-day and helicopters have been inducted for the task.

An official spokesman in Simla reported extensive damage to property and said district authorities were scanning the affected areas to assess the damage.

According to unofficial sources, several personnel of the Indo-Tibetan Border Police and Army have also been killed in the quake. Several bunkers collapsed.

The affected areas have a widely dispersed population.

According to information received in Delhi by the Himachal Pradesh authorities, 10 persons died in Saikha village, 10 in village Leo and three in a village near a heap of debris. Eight labourers of the office of the Director-General of the Border Roads Organisation and a bus driver were also among the dead.

Among the dead in Leo village were nine boys Lamas and a girl. They were killed when a monastery in Leo village collapsed.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JANUARY 21, 1925

AN-HCE

'Pilots are trained in complex situations for over a year before they can fly a display'

Established in 1996, the Suryakiran Aerobatic Team (SKAT) of the Indian Air Force boasts over 700 displays to its credit. As Asia's only nine-aircraft aerobatic team and one of only four globally, SKAT is set to dazzle audiences with breathtaking aerobatic manoeuvres at Aero India in Bengaluru from Feb 10 to 14. What every Suryakiran pilot will demonstrate is the complete skill set required as a modern-day war fighter: extreme formation flying, precision in execution of complex manoeuvres, situational awareness, and decision-making capability. Group Captain Ajay Dasarathi, team leader and Commanding Officer of SKAT, spoke exclusively to *DH's* Nina C George about the team's preparations.

The Suryakiran team comprises nine Hawk Mk 132 aircraft, flying in extremely close proximity, less than 5 metres apart. What level of precision is necessary to achieve this?
Precision and perfection are a by-product of the team's hard work, dedication, and attention to detail. Pilots are selected

not only based on their high level of flying skills but also for their sharp situational awareness, ability to withstand high-pressure situations, and sheer grit and determination. Each pilot is trained progressively in more and more complex situations over a year before being cleared to fly a display. During training season, the team practices two to three times a day.

While the DNA manoeuvre, where five aircraft form a helix shape resembling the DNA structure, is a crowd favourite, what other aerobatic displays can audiences expect at Aero India?
In addition to the DNA structure, the team will perform several other manoeuvres, including crosses such as the 'barbed wire cross', where two aircraft cross each other at high speed up to 1,200 kmph; the 'alpha cross', where one aircraft pierces through a formation of five aircraft making the shape of the letter 'A'; the 'hidden split', where three aircraft conceal themselves before splitting to reveal three separate aircraft flying in precision; and the 'inverted vic',

The Tuesday Interview
With
Group Captain Ajay Dasarathi
Team leader and Commanding Officer, SKAT



where one aircraft flies inverted accompanied by two wingmen, a low-level buzz, synchronous rolls of five aircraft, and rollbacks.

The team is bringing back the Tricolour at Aero India after a gap of 14 years...
The team commenced operations in 1996 on the Kiran MK II aircraft. It was subsequently wound down in 2011 for training requirements. Then, re-start-

ed in 2015 on the current aircraft, the Hawk Mk 132. Since 2020, the team has operated smoke pods on the wing that could generate only white smoke. In 2023, the decision was taken to develop an indigenous smoke pod capable of colour smoke dispensation, which was developed in record time by the base repair depot, Aircraft and Systems Testing Establishment, in Bengaluru and the squadron. The pod is perhaps

the only pod designed, developed, and executed entirely by an air force with no external help.

Could you elaborate on the indigenous upgrade of Suryakiran's Hawk Mk 132 aircraft?

From the design table to the first flight was accomplished in just one year, using only IAF resources and expertise. The addition of colour smoke increases the vibrancy of SKAT displays. Furthermore, manoeuvres such as the DNA have undergone a dramatic increase in visual impact just by the addition of the colour smoke. The colour smoke increases the flexibility in planning and execution of manoeuvres.

Why is the Suryakiran show divided into composite and synchro-manoeuvres?

The first phase, known as the composite, aims to showcase all nine aircraft flying in formation and performing various aerobatic manoeuvres in formation. This in itself is a rare sight for the audience, considering that Suryakiran is the only

nine-aircraft team in Asia and one of only four in the world. The 'composite' phase aims to showcase the skills of the pilots by flying extended formations with nine aircraft in close proximity, just 5 metres apart, under high gravitational force at low levels, is incredibly demanding. The second phase is called 'synchro', where the aim is to bring the thrill lower and faster for the spectators. For this, all nine aircraft split into smaller elements and up the tempo. This phase, while showcasing the manoeuvrability of the Hawk, also showcases the extreme precision of pilots in executing perfect crosses and other extremely demanding manoeuvres just 100 feet off the ground. Synchro is a high-adrenaline, high-gravitational phase executed in a high-thrust environment and requires extreme precision and judgement by each pilot. Thus, over the course of the entire display, each Suryakiran pilot demonstrates the complete skill set required as a modern-day war fighter, be it extreme formation flying, precision in execution of complex manoeuvres, high situational awareness, or decision-making capability.

China's internet companies and their hardworking, resourceful professionals make world-class products, in spite of censorship and malign neglect by Beijing

LI YUAN

The Chinese social media app RedNote is full of cute, heart-warming moments after about 500,000 American users fled to it last week to protest the looming US government ban on TikTok.

Calling themselves "TikTok refugees," these users paid the "cat tax" to join RedNote by posting cat photos and videos. They answered so many questions from their new Chinese friends: Is it true that in rural America every family has a large farm, a huge house, at least three children and several big dogs? That Americans have to work two jobs to support themselves? That Americans are terrible at geography and many believe that Africa is a country? That most Americans have two days off every week?

Americans also posed questions to their new friends. "I heard that every Chinese has a giant panda," an American RedNote user wrote. "Can you tell me how can I get it?" An answer came from someone in the eastern province of Jiangsu: "Believe me, it's true," the person deadpanned, posting a photo of a panda doing the laundry.

I spent hours scrolling those so-called cat tax photos and chuckled at the cute and earnest responses. This is what the Internet is supposed to do: connect people. More important, RedNote demonstrated how competitive a random Chinese social media app can be from a purely product point of view.

With access to an online population of one billion and an army of hardworking, resourceful engineers, China's internet platforms are world-class in their design, functionality and user experience—as is demonstrated by TikTok and now by RedNote, or Xiaohongshu in Chinese.

But why aren't more people outside China using Chinese apps? For a while, the Chinese internet giants seemed to be poised to take over the world. Remember the excitement when Alibaba listed its initial public offering in New York in 2014, when Didit took over Uber in China in 2016, when Facebook was imitating WeChat, and when a partner from the Silicon Valley firm Andreessen Horowitz preached the power of WeChat? At one point, five of the world's 10 largest internet companies measured by market capitalisation were Chinese. Now Tencent, the WeChat creator and game company, is the only one left in those ranks.

The biggest Chinese internet companies still make products that can compete with any in the world. Their employees work harder than their Silicon Valley counterparts. (Many work a "996" schedule — 9 am to 9 pm six days a week.) In the face of US semiconductor bans, they have managed to make impressive developments in artificial intelligence. But the world seems to have forgotten China's internet leaders, except for seeing them as part of a technological and geopolitical threat.

The industry didn't live up to its promises. Why? What happened?

In 2017, I wrote a column at another publication with the headline, *Behind the Great Firewall, the Chinese internet*



TikTok, RedNote and crushed promise of Chinese internet

is booming. I told readers to think beyond China's urge to censor and copy Western businesses because China was being digitised on a scale and at a speed that was mind-boggling.

That year, Tencent's revenue grew 56%, while revenue at Alibaba, the e-commerce giant, surged 60%. Didit raised nearly \$10 billion in funding, mostly from international investors.

All of these feel like a lifetime ago. It's a lot more difficult for Chinese internet companies to thrive now.

The country is mired in the worst economic downturn since the Mao era. Few people believe the 5% growth rate the government announced for 2024. Consumer confidence is low — both Uniqlo and Starbucks, two brands that had thrived in China for years, are losing customers to cheaper brands.

When the country's economy suffers, it's hard for one of its pillar industries to do well. The tech companies' earnings have reflected that.

As China's population continues a steady decline — it fell a third consecutive year — the big tech platforms are running out of new users. WeChat has about 1.4 billion accounts, bigger than the Chinese population. Even a second-tier social media app like RedNote, which is popular among young, urban and affluent female users, amassed more than 300 million users. For such companies, international expansion is the natural next step.

ByteDance, the parent company of TikTok, is the envy of the industry because

of the success of its overseas businesses, which have been growing at a much faster rate than its domestic operations.

But the US effort to ban TikTok highlights how hard it is for Chinese internet companies to expand overseas. As the Chinese Communist Party tightens its grip on the country's private sector, it's increasingly difficult for the world to entrust their citizens' personal data to Chinese companies, which ultimately answer to Beijing.

There are good reasons that the outside world, including the US government, doesn't trust these companies. In a country where the government owns much of everything and wields power randomly and often ruthlessly, the private sector has been on its toes. The internet companies are heavily censored and must self-censor to survive. All the big ones, with no exception, have had their apps removed from app stores or been fined or disciplined by regulators in recent years.

It's well known that China's leader, Xi Jinping, is no fan of the digital sector, unless it is being used to advance his agenda of national rejuvenation.

"The real economy is the foundation of a nation's economy and the source of its wealth," he said in 2018. "Economic development must never deviate from the real economy toward excessive reliance on the virtual economy."

In that speech and on other occasions, Xi made it clear that he put a higher priority on advanced manufacturing than on the internet and liked the State-owned enterprises more than the private sector.

Chinese internet companies and investors are increasingly caught between their authoritarian government at home and suspicion, even hostility, abroad.

Most Western investors now deem China's tech industry not worth investing in because of the geopolitical tension and the country's unpredictable policies. US university endowments and pension funds stopped giving venture capital firms money to invest in Chinese startups. A generation of Chinese investors who helped create some of the most successful tech companies have taken up golfing, marathoning and hiking.

Investors in global markets are equally uninterested in Chinese internet firms.

An investor who was not authorised to speak publicly told me recently that in 2017, when she joined a hedge fund that managed more than \$100 billion, about 40% of the fund's emerging market holdings were Chinese tech stocks. Now they are less than 3%.

The ecosystem that cultivated a vibrant tech sector is broken. Fewer investments mean fewer startups, far fewer overseas initial public offerings and much lower stock valuations than their American counterparts.

RedNote, the social media app that American TikTok users have taken up, was founded in 2013 and has yet to go public.

These companies remain competitive, the investor said. But in the eyes of the world, she added, they're no longer relevant.

The New York Times

Denied by the binary

VIKRAM B K

Padmasri Awarded Mata Manjamma Jogathi, a globally recognised artist, faces a dilemma that highlights deep-seated discrimination: not just based on gender, but on the very recognition of identity. Renowned for her contributions to Indian folklore and as a prominent transgender woman, Manjamma's achievements have been celebrated worldwide. She made history as the first transgender woman to hold the position of president of the Karnataka Janapada Academy and is celebrated for preserving and promoting the traditional art of Jogathi, a traditional folk form. However, today she confronts a predicament that raises urgent questions about cultural acceptance, legal recognition, and human rights.

Manjamma was invited as the guest of honour by a prominent Kannada Sangha in Sharjah, UAE, for their Kannada Rajotsava celebration in November. The event's theme, "Celebrating Mother," resonates deeply as she is seen as a maternal figure in the community—both as an artist and a role model for the transgender community. When organisers attempted to process her visa, an unexpected obstacle emerged. Her passport, listing her gender as "X," was rejected by UAE authorities. Like many countries with conservative stances on gender, the UAE does not recognise non-binary or third-gender categories. Consequently, Manjamma was denied entry solely because her gender identity does not align with the binary male-female classification.

This incident reflects a broader global issue of systemic discrimination faced by transgender individuals. Despite holding a valid Indian passport, Manjamma is barred from travel because her identity challenges rigid legal frameworks.

This raises several questions: Is it justifiable for an Indian citizen to be denied entry into another country because of their legal recognition beyond the male-female binary? In a world striving for inclusivity, shouldn't there be recognition that gender is not always confined to traditional norms? Should the Indian government consider temporary passports with limited validity for citizens with non-binary gender markers?

While this could offer a practical solution, it also risks undermining the rights of individuals to fully express their gender identity authentically. If gender markers can be amended to conform with binary norms for

convenience, does this force individuals like Manjamma to conform to a gender identity that is not their own? Would such measures infringe on their basic human right to self-identity? These questions are not merely bureaucratic; they delve into the core of human rights—the rights of transgender individuals to live without fear of discrimination or erasure.

The irony of Manjamma's case is striking. Invited to celebrate motherhood and revered for her nurturing qualities, she's denied entry because her identity as a transgender woman, marked as 'x' on her passport, clashes with UAE's binary gender norms. Her gender identity is under scrutiny—not by the people who invited her, but by the State that controls access to the UAE.

This contradiction highlights the cultural and legal divides that transgender individuals face worldwide. Manjamma's struggle is not just personal; it reflects systemic marginalisation and the broader challenge of achieving recognition, equality, and dignity for all.

In India, the Jogathi community is a part of the larger cultural fabric. Historically, Jogathis are born male but later take on female identities and roles. They are revered and treated as women within their communities, and their gender identity is not defined by a rigid binary. The acceptance of Jogathis as women, without the label of "transgender," is an example of India's complex and rich understanding of gender, where cultural practices and respect for individual identity often transcend the constraints of Western gender norms.

For many in the transgender community, the demand for recognition as women, rather than "trans women," is an ongoing struggle.

However, for Jogathis, the issue is nuanced: they do not seek to be labelled as transgender but rather as women who were born male but identified as female later. Manjamma's situation, therefore, speaks to the erasure and marginalisation of Jogathis within both the broader transgender community and society at large.

The situation facing Manjamma is a stark reminder that the challenges faced by transgender individuals are not just about personal acceptance—they are about systemic issues of recognition, equality, and the right to live with dignity.

The denial of entry into the UAE, based on her gender identity, is more than a bureaucratic issue; it is a human rights concern. (The writer is a poet and publisher based in Bengaluru)

OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

50 YEARS AGO: JANUARY 1975

Quake claims 36 lives in Himachal

New Delhi, January 20

Thirty-six persons have so far known to have died in a series of earthquakes which rocked Kinnaur District and other areas of Himachal Pradesh on the Indo-Tibetan border. The quake is reported to have taken a heavy toll in Tibet. The toll is likely to be much higher when details come in from the interior. According to reports trickling in from villages near the main road, 11 persons died in Salsit village, 10 in Leo village and three each in Chango and Sundhoo villages in Himachal Pradesh.

25 YEARS AGO: JANUARY 2000

Govt to privatise power, water supply, sanitation

Bangalore, Jan 20

In a significant move, the State Cabinet decided in principle to allow private sector participation in power distribution, urban water supply and sanitation. Briefing reporters after a Cabinet meeting here today, Minister of State for Industries and Publicity B K Chandrashekar said the decision to open up power distribution was in tune with the reforms planned to restore the power sector. The decision would allow the government to initiate discussions with lending institutions, he said.

OASIS | DOROTHY VICTOR

Trusting God's ways in the New Year

small—for ourselves and our loved ones.

We plan for our finances, careers, holidays, and relationships. We invest time and thought, pouring purpose into these plans. Yet, despite our best efforts, many of our plans tend to fail.

At such times, we feel disappointed, often blaming God and others for our failures. But if we pause and examine why our plans fail, the truth that we have overlooked God's plans for us becomes evident. We have tried to fit our own plans into His, disregarding the fact that God has a greater purpose in mind.

This fact is well exemplified all through the Bible. Isaiah 55:9 reads: "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways—saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts."

Similarly, Jeremiah 29:11 reads: "For I know the plans I have for you—declares the Lord: plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." And again, Romans 8:28

reads, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose."

These verses highlight the perfect New Year message—one that would bring true fulfilment and joy in the year ahead.

Resolved to surrender my plans to God, trusting that His plans are far superior, more lasting, and far beyond anything I could imagine for myself.

So, as we step into this new year, let us entrust each day to the Lord, seeking His guidance, rather than insisting on our own way.



Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Potential temporary, gig jobs created by the Maha Kumbh Mela

12 lakh. The Uttar Pradesh government expects to host 400 million devotees. The economic effect of the Maha Kumbh extends across multiple sectors, including infrastructure development, event management, security services, local trade, tourism, entertainment, and horticulture. AP

The dip in Israel's unemployment rate in December

2.6 in per cent. Israel's unemployment rate slipped in December from 2.7% a month earlier, indicating that military conflict continued to impact the country's labour market. More than 22% of the labour force were absent from work due to being called into military duty. REUTERS

The amount of crystal meth seized in a warehouse in Thailand

1.6 in tonnes. The haul — which authorities said had been sent from Africa via India and was bound for Europe, the U.S. or Australia — was found at a warehouse in Bangkok following a tip-off. Four men were arrested at the scene. Officials declined to say how much the haul was worth. AP

Chinese investment in Pakistan's Gwadar airport in Balochistan

230 in \$ million. Pakistan's largest airport, funded and built in the country's restive southwest by Beijing, has become operational. Gwadar airport is in the province of Balochistan, which has for decades been the scene of an insurgency by separatists demanding autonomy. AP

Number of Ford vehicles under probe over hands-free tech

1.3 in lakh. The U.S. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration said on Monday it has opened a probe into Ford Motor vehicles over reports of collisions involving the company's hands-free driving technology, BlueCruise. REUTERS

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UGC regulations or State university laws?

The crux of the dispute is whether UGC regulations framed by the UGC's Chairman, Vice-Chairman and 10 other members can supersede provisions of State University Acts which are plenary laws passed by State legislatures and assented to by the Governor or President

LETTER & SPIRIT

K. Ashok Vardhan Shetty

Six of Tamil Nadu's State universities are at present without a Vice Chancellor (VC). Some of these posts have been vacant from a few months to over a year. This impasse is due to a disagreement between the Governor and the State government regarding the composition of the search committee for selecting VCs.

The Governor (as ex-officio Chancellor of State universities under the University Acts) insists on including a nominee of the University Grants Commission (UGC) in the search committee as per Regulation 7.3 of the UGC Regulations, 2018. Conversely, the State government insists on adhering to the respective State University Acts, which generally require the search committee to consist of one nominee each from the Chancellor, the syndicate, and the senate. It opposes UGC involvement due to concerns over erosion of State autonomy in university governance.

Conflicting Supreme Court rulings have complicated the situation. One set of judgments support the Governor's stance that UGC regulations are mandatory and can override the State University Acts in cases of conflict. Another set of judgments back the State government, holding that UGC regulations are merely recommendatory for State universities. The controversy has been exacerbated by the UGC's Draft Regulations, 2025 which are seen to erode State autonomy further.

There is a somewhat similar stand-off in Kerala and Punjab where numerous universities also face leadership vacuums. This has led to serious deterioration in university administration, including delays in staff appointments and award of degrees.

A constitutional question
UGC regulations are a subordinate legislation framed under Section 26 of the UGC Act, 1956. The crux of the dispute is whether UGC regulations framed by the UGC's Chairman, Vice-Chairman and 10 other members can supersede provisions of State University Acts which are plenary laws passed by State legislatures and assented to by the Governor or President. This is part of a larger question of law dealing with Centre-State relations — "can delegated legislation (rules, regulations, notifications, etc.) framed by the Union Government and its agencies under a Central law override the provisions of a plenary State law?"

It underlines a critical constitutional issue regarding the scope of delegated legislation with potential for eroding the separation of powers, and federalism — both considered 'basic features' of the Constitution.

Judicial precedents

Article 254(1) of the Constitution addresses conflicts between central and State laws. It states that if a State law is repugnant to a central law on matters in the Concurrent List, the central law will prevail, and the conflicting part of the State law will be void. The plain wording of Article 254(1) indicates that it applies only to plenary laws enacted by Parliament and State legislatures, and not to delegated legislation. The Supreme Court has consistently upheld this interpretation in several landmark judgments.

The leading case on the subject is *Ch. Tika Ramji versus State of Uttar Pradesh* (1956). The Supreme Court ruled that the Centre's Sugarcane Control Order, 1955



GETTY IMAGES

issued under the Essential Commodities Act, 1955, could not repeal the provisions of the U.P. Sugarcane Act, 1953. It held: "The power of repeal, if any, was vested in Parliament, and Parliament alone could exercise it by enacting an appropriate provision in regard thereto. Parliament could not delegate this power of repeal to any executive authority. Such delegation, if made, would be void..."

In *Indian Express newspapers (Bombay) versus Union of India* (1984), the Supreme Court ruled: "Subordinate legislation may be questioned on any of the grounds on which plenary legislation is questioned. In addition, it may also be questioned on the ground that it does not conform to the statute under which it is made. It may further be questioned on the ground that it is contrary to some other statute. That is because subordinate legislation must yield to plenary legislation." In *J.K. Industries versus Union of India* (2007), the Supreme Court again ruled: "(Subordinate legislation) may further be questioned on the ground that it is inconsistent with the provisions of the Act or that it is contrary to some other statute applicable to the same subject matter. Therefore, it has to yield to plenary legislation." These rulings make it clear that the Central Government and its agencies cannot use subordinate legislation to override plenary State laws; any changes require a plenary central law passed by Parliament.

An overreach by the UGC

There is no repugnancy between the provisions of the UGC Act, 1956 and Tamil Nadu's University Acts because no provision of the UGC Act addresses the appointment of VCs. According to the UGC, its power to form Regulation 7.3 relating to VCs is derived from Section 260(e), which allows the UGC to define qualifications for university teaching staff, and Section 260(g), which permits regulation of standards and coordination of work or facilities in universities, of the UGC Act, 1956. But the VC is not a 'teaching staff' within the meaning of S.260(e). In all University Acts — Central and State — the VC is an 'officer of the university' along with the Chancellor, Registrar, Controller of Examinations, Finance Officer and Directors. So, the above two provisions do not apply to VCs. Moreover, the UGC's powers under

Section 12(d) of the Act are only recommendatory. While the UGC can advise on standards in higher education, it cannot enforce compliance, except by withholding grants under Section 14. The Supreme Court has affirmed this interpretation in *University of Delhi versus Raj Singh* (1994), ruling that UGC regulations are advisory, not mandatory. Universities can choose whether or not to follow them, albeit at the risk of losing funding. Thus, UGC's regulation 7.3 on VCs is a classic case of executive overreach in delegated legislation and is *ultra vires* the UGC Act, 1956.

Additionally, the UGC's shifting stance — no regulation on VCs till 2010; introducing a UGC nominee on the search committee in 2010; withdrawing this requirement in 2013; reinstating it in 2018; and expanded control in the 2025 draft regulations — reflects an agenda driven more by administrative control than a genuine effort to improve academic standards.

Inconsistencies in judgments

Recently, some conflicting Supreme Court judgments have created confusion.

In *Annamalai University versus Secretary, Information & Tourism* (2009), *State of West Bengal versus Anindya Sundar Das* (2022), *Gambhiran K. Gadhi versus State of Gujarat* (2022) and *Professor Sreejith P.S. versus Dr. Rajasree M.S.* (2022), the Supreme Court held, without articulating reasons, that once UGC regulations are laid before both Houses of Parliament, they become part of the UGC Act, invoking Article 254(1) and rendering any VC appointments contrary to these regulations void.

However, in *Kalyani Mathivanan versus K.V. Jayaraj* (2015), the Supreme Court used the same rationale but confusingly ruled that UGC Regulations are not mandatory for State Universities unless adopted by the State. In *P.J. Dharmaraj versus Church of South India* (December 2024), the Supreme Court held: "If the State Government itself has not adopted the amended regulations, the same cannot be applicable to the (institute);" In other words, UGC regulations apply only if adopted by the State.

The interpretation that UGC regulations lose their subordinate character and automatically become part of the parent Act merely by being laid

before Parliament is not supported by the Constitution or the General Clauses Act, 1897. It contravenes a significant precedent ruled in *Chief Inspector of Mines versus Karam Chand Thapar* (1961) where the Supreme Court held: "(Rules) continue to be rules subordinate to the Act, and though for certain purposes, including the purpose of construction, they are to be treated as if contained in the Act, their true nature as subordinate rule is not lost." In other words, they retain their character as subordinate legislation and do not become integral to the parent Act.

There are three recognised procedures for laying subordinate legislation before a legislature — (i) without further procedure; here the subordinate legislation takes effect immediately and is for information only; (ii) negative resolution procedure; here legislation takes effect immediately but can be annulled or modified by the legislature within a limited period (as in the case of UGC regulations under Section 280); (iii) affirmative resolution procedure; here resolution takes effect only after receiving prior approval from the legislature.

Courts should recognise only rules and regulations laid under the affirmative resolution procedure as part of the parent Act, because the other two procedures have nil or limited legislative oversight and allow executive overreach.

What next?

Given the constitutional significance of the dispute and doctrinal ambiguities, a definitive ruling by a Constitutional Bench of the Supreme Court is imperative. Such a ruling would hopefully reaffirm that Article 254(1) of the Constitution applies only to conflicts between plenary Central and State laws; clarify that delegated legislation does not automatically become part of the parent Act unless laid under the affirmative resolution procedure; and emphasise the advisory nature of UGC regulations for State universities unless adopted by the State.

Such clarity is essential not only to restore the normal functioning of State universities across the country, but also to preserve the delicate balance of legislative powers between the Centre and States.

K. Ashok Vardhan Shetty is a retired IAS officer and former Vice Chancellor of Indian Maritime University.

THE GIST

Conflicting Supreme Court rulings have complicated the situation. One set of judgments support the Governor's stance that UGC regulations are mandatory and can override the State University Acts in cases of conflict. Another set of judgments back the State government.

There is a somewhat similar stand-off in Kerala and Punjab where numerous universities also face leadership vacuums.

Given the constitutional significance of the dispute and doctrinal ambiguities, a definitive ruling by a Constitutional Bench of the Supreme Court is imperative.

ABSTRACT

How does welfare politics translate into votes?

When welfare is the new normal, credit monopolisation through branding and centralisation may not necessarily fetch electoral rewards if people struggle to access welfare services

G. Sampath

Kailash, KK (2024), "The Politics of Welfare: The BJP and the Discerning Voter," Studies in Indian Politics, 12 (2) 228-250, 2024, Lokniti, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies.

Right from the time of its independence, India has had to contend with extreme inequality and a large population of poor people. While there have been improvements since 1947, the twin challenges of high inequality and widespread indigence remain. This has made social welfare an integral element of electoral politics.

But what is the exact dynamic that determines how welfare initiatives translate into votes, if and when they do? This paper by political scientist K.K. Kailash attempts to answer these questions using voting studies data from the National Election Studies post-poll survey in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections.

Kailash's key contention is that voters do not "cast their votes only on whether they received private (welfare) benefits but also consider factors such as their experience and well being while accessing those goods and services." One cannot assume that those who received the benefits will necessarily vote for their benefactor party. What the paper describes as "individual-level processes" – such as how easy or tough it was to access these benefits, and the overall economic well being of the voter – are also factors that influence voter choices.

Background of welfare politics

The paper starts off with an overview of the scholarship on welfare politics in India, grouping them into two broad streams. One set of studies have focussed on the programmatic elements: the design, implementation, delivery, outcomes, etc. The other set has looked at the influence of welfare policies on two related elements: credit attribution and voting behaviour. While the two sets of studies have bridged the gap between politics and public policy, "they do not necessarily talk to each other." This paper brings together the two strands to examine if the experience of accessing welfare matters for vote choices, and in the process, nuances long-standing debates on social service delivery and its relation to vote choice.

Before coming to the electoral impact of what has come to be described, sometimes derisively, as 'revdi politics', it might be useful consider how welfare politics has evolved in India.

Initially, the imperative to address socio-economic inequality drove the conception of welfare programmes as part of planned economic growth. The state perforce had to play a significant role because "social forces were status quiet and would not let change happen." This paradigm changed when India switched to a market-led growth strategy. Welfareism, from being a good in itself, began to be seen as "an antidote to the limitations of the market". Welfare provisioning became an "appendage to the process of economic reforms" – a tool to ensure that reforms remained sustainable in the face of the rising



Daily grind: MGNREGA workers register their work attendance in Kancheepuram in 2024. FILE PHOTO

inequalities and insecurities it created.

But with the advent of a dogmatic adherence to fiscal discipline and concomitant budgetary constraints, States struggled to increase investments in welfare understood in its traditional sense of public goods. For instance, investments in public healthcare and education began to stagnate. Apart from resource constraints, there was another reason why welfare policies conceived as capacity-building investments took a backseat – the outcomes "do not conveniently materialise with the rhythm of the electoral calendar; and made credit-claiming difficult."

Around this time, welfare witnessed another paradigm shift – to a more "responsive" strategy, where "provisioning had to meet internationally accepted, supposedly more efficient and equitable norms and delivery mechanisms". In other words, "all government spending had to cope with the demands for market-compatible forms of state intervention". This paved the way for an extreme reliance on technology, cash subsidies, and direct income transfers – all aimed at making the outputs more tangible. Welfare delivery was reduced to "putting money in people's hands", ostensibly to bestow on them the freedom to choose what they want to do with it. Kailash argues that this reorganisation of public welfare as per market principles did two things – one, it recast citizens as 'consumers', and two, it turned welfare provisioning into an opportunity for political parties seeking to mobilise voter support.

Not only did this end up degrading welfare as a policy intervention, it also had a negative impact on long-term economic thinking and strategic provisioning of resources for capacity-building. Schemes that offered cash transfers, housing, and gas connections were 'tangible' and could be easily connected to a singular benefactor, enabling the "brand identification of parties". Thus, welfare, having started out

as a policy instrument to reduce inequality, provide a safety net and build national capacity for equitable growth, has dwindled into a handy tool to offset the limitations of the market, and today serves as a "key component of the electoral arithmetic of political parties."

Centralisation, monopolising credit

Though most sectors in which schemes are implemented are in State or Concurrent lists, the paper notes that incumbent BJP "has gone big" on centrally sponsored schemes. This "centralising thrust", accompanied by "monopolising credit through branding", as evident from the nomenclature of various centrally funded schemes, are the other key features of the current welfare regime.

To ascertain whether welfare provisioning helps bring credit and votes to the incumbent, Kailash divides voters into beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries, and further divides the former into those who benefited from one or two schemes, and those who benefited from three or more schemes. Were voters who benefited from more schemes more likely to vote for the incumbent (in the context of this study, the BJP)? Data from 2024 and preceding elections suggest, in general, they do, while non-beneficiaries and those who benefited from fewer schemes preferred the Opposition. A closer examination of the data, however, shows a more complex picture.

Votes don't always follow credit

In 2024, there was a 30-point increase in the number of people crediting the Centre compared to 2019 for the five major schemes they were asked about: the public distribution system (PDS), Ujjwala (free gas connection with cylinder), MGNREGA, Ayushman Bharat, and the housing scheme. "Given the branding and the constant reminder through advertisements in multiple spaces that these programmes were personal 'guarantees' of the prime

minister, this attribution is not surprising," notes the paper. But did the credit get translated into votes? Not necessarily.

First of all, when welfare becomes the new normal, with every party competing to promise similar schemes, voters' expectations – especially about the nature of service delivery and quality of services – go up. As a result, voters tend to be more discerning about their expectations from the government. So the incumbent must "not only have a reasonable basket of programmes but also ensure their quality" and easy access for citizens. Without quality and access, claim-making could prove counter-productive. As Kailash argues, "Credit monopolisation and centralisation may not bring imagined electoral rewards if people struggle to access welfare services."

Kailash also tests the hypothesis that a 'double engine' government – the same party in power in the State and Centre – with greater welfare offerings would enable the incumbent to monopolise credit and create more partisan voters. He creates two categories of States: those ruled by the incumbent (the BJP or its allies) and those under the Opposition. The survey reveals that while the central government did get credit for welfare programmes across the country, irrespective of the party government at the State level, the incumbent at the Centre "did not get the votes even in the states ruled by the incumbent".

However, in States ruled by the Opposition, "when the voter gave credit to the state government for welfare schemes, the vote also followed." And in States with 'double engine' governments, "the votes were split between the Opposition and the incumbent when the voter credited the state government." Where voters credited the local government, chances of voting for the opposition were higher. "The voter acknowledges but is not necessarily beholden to the scheme provider."

So why does the incumbent at the Centre, which designs and partly funds the welfare schemes, and even gets credit for them, not get the vote also? Well, "it is not the Centre that implements these programmes; the state and local governments do." When there are last-mile delivery issues, unfair exclusions and access problems, citizens "are more likely to hold those claiming credit responsible for their woes." As the paper notes, "the discerning voter is more concerned about the nature of the service rather than who provides it."

The voter's personal financial condition was another critical factor. When individuals were satisfied with their financial condition, easy access to welfare translated into votes for the incumbent (15-point advantage over the Opposition). But when the individual was unhappy with their financial condition, it did not matter if the access was easy or difficult – the Opposition benefited. Those who were unhappy with their financial condition, and found it tough to access welfare, were most likely to vote for the Opposition.

In conclusion, it would be fair to say there are limits to credit-claiming and welfare branding. As the paper concludes, "welfare beneficiaries are no longer passive recipients but have become discerning consumers." If welfare provisioning is now an integral element of voter mobilisation, then governments will have to focus more on improving access as well as other dimensions of the economy that impact personal economic well being.

A more discerning voter thus creates space for the Opposition by seeking accountability from the credit-claiming incumbent.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subramanian
S. Upendran

"So you feel my writing should be clear?"

"Yes."

"Even when I want to write on a profound subject?"

"Yes. Whatever be the nature of the subject, if you have clear ideas, what you write will be clear. Lack of clarity in speech and writing is the result of lack of clear thinking."

"Some mistake obscurity for profundity. Some teachers use big words in order that the students may be impressed by their vocabulary. The obvious is sought to be conveyed in a pompous, difficult language. A good teacher, a good writer, is one who conveys in simple language even the most difficult concepts. A critic said that it is an act of courtesy to the reader to put him to the trouble of puzzling out your meaning. So be courteous to the reader. And courtesy demands that the writer make himself clear to the reader."

"That's right. J. B. Priestley was a novelist and a playwright. About the style of his writing, he said in an essay: "Deliberately I aim at simplicity and not complexity in my writing. No matter what the subject in hand might be. I want to write something that at a pinch I could read aloud in a bar-parlour. (And the time came when I was heard and understood in a thousand bar-parlours). I do not pretend to be subtle and profound, but when I am at work I try to appear simpler than I really am. Perhaps I make it too easy for the reader, do too much of the toiling and sweating myself. No doubt I am altogether too obvious for the cleverest fellows, who want to beat their brains against something hard and knotty. But then I am not impressed by this view of literature as a cerebral activity. They are no customers of mine, and I do not display my goods to catch their eye. But any man who thinks the kind of simplicity I attempt is easy should try it for himself, if only in his next letter to *The Times*. I find it much easier now than I used to do, but that is because I have kept this aim in view throughout years of hard work. I do not claim to have achieved even now a prose that is like an easy persuasive voice, preferably my own at its best; but this is what I have been trying to do for years, quite deliberately, and it is this that puzzled my friend, the youngish critic, who cannot help wanting something quite different. And this habit of simplification has its own little triumphs. Thus, I was asked to pay a birthday tribute, on the air, to C. G. Jung, for whose work and personality I have a massive admiration. To explain Jung in thirteen-and-a-half minutes so that the ordinary listener could understand what the fuss was about! My friends said it could not be done. The psychologists said it could not be done. But I can reasonably claim, backed by first-class evidence, that I did it. It was a tough little task but when I had come to the end of it, I found, like honey in the rock, a taste of delight."

"It is all right to say that one's writing should be simple. How do you do it?"

"This column will deal with some practical hints on how to write in a simple, clear style."

Published in *The Hindu* on October 11, 1994.

THE DAILY QUIZ

Grammy award winning band, Coldplay, is currently touring India with shows lined up in Mumbai and Ahmedabad. A quiz on the iconic musical act

Vignesh P. Venkitesh

QUESTION 1

What was the band originally called?

QUESTION 2

Name the band's first full-length album.

QUESTION 3

Which tech mogul's memorial service in 2011 had a performance by Coldplay?

QUESTION 4

What day do fans observe annually, to mark the day one of the band's first songs leaked online?

QUESTION 5

Name the band's song which was inspired from the aftermath of the 9/11 terror attack in the U.S.

QUESTION 6

Name the band member who made a cameo appearance in the TV series *Game of Thrones*.



Visual question:

Name this Coldplay song which was shot in India.

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. This was David Lynch's first experimental short film. **Ans: Six Men Getting Sick**

2. The creator of this very popular space opera wanted Lynch to direct this movie of his franchise. **Ans: Star Wars and Return of the Jedi**

3. Lynch appeared in this film directed by Steven Spielberg as this character. **Ans: The Fabelmans and John Ford**

4. Number of times Lynch has been nominated for an Oscar and the film which earned him his first Oscar nomination. **Ans: Four times and The Elephant Man**

5. Name the writer who co-created a mystery-horror drama television series along with Lynch. **Ans: Mark Frost**

Visual: Identify this actor who is a long time collaborator of Lynch. **Ans: Jack Nance**
Early Birds: Viswanadha Rao Batchu| Rajmohan Velayudhan| Kumar Sonali| Umesh Kumar Yadav| Tito Shiladiya

Word of the day

Derisive:

abusing vocally; expressing contempt or ridicule

Synonyms: jeering, mocking, taunting

Usage: His speech drew derisive comments from the crowd.

Pronunciation: newsth.live/derisivepro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /dɪˈrɪsɪv/, /dɪˈrɪsɪv/

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thehindubusinessline.
TUESDAY • JANUARY 21 • 2025

Inflation bugbear

Imported inflation complicates policy response

Diehard optimists would say that retail inflation is trending gently downwards — but the fact is that it has been ruling at above 5 per cent since September 2024. But what is particularly worrisome are the global headwinds emanating out of recent developments in the US. A slew of fresh US sanctions on Russia has rolled the oil market, as a result of which Brent crude oil futures till March and May this year are ruling at \$80 a barrel and \$75 a barrel, respectively, even as current prices are ruling at around the \$80 level.

This sharp spike of 6.1 per cent till January 14 creates serious concerns with respect to imported inflation at a time when food inflation has already assumed endemic proportions. Alongside oil, the Bloomberg Commodity Index too shows a sharp spike between December 5 last year and January 14 (RBI January Bulletin). While this will raise the cost of imports anyway, it will in the process also put downward pressure on the rupee which is already hit by capital outflows, owing to a host of financial uncertainties arising out of the second Trump presidency. For the Reserve Bank of India, these factors could complicate its endeavour to push growth, while keeping a watch on the inflation needle, as it were. What is reasonably certain is that a rate cut is virtually off the table next month.

The RBI is already having to deal with rising inflation expectations arising out of persistent food price driven inflation. Persistent inflation raises inflationary expectations and forces households to scrimp on spending amidst pressure on incomes. This hurts growth. Meanwhile, inflationary expectations can also be a self-fulfilling prophecy. At present, these expectations are being led by food prices, which in turn are rising on account of supply bottlenecks. The onus of fixing these bottlenecks rests more with the government, and less with the RBI.

Inflation should be viewed as a structural problem, demanding medium term policy fixes that address constraints in productivity as well as supply chain issues in food products. Harsh fiscal consolidation or a short-term suppression of inflation expectations through high interest rates could complicate the growth-inflation mix. RBI and the government will have to stay the course at a time of global uncertainty in the wake of the second Trump presidency — while being mindful of food concerns. The correlation between food and non-food, non-fuel inflation has been a subject of considerable debate recently. A range of extraneous factors such as exchange rate, tariffs and commodity prices too lead to elevated core inflation. Yet, it would be a stretch to argue, as some policymakers have sought to do in the past, that the two are not particularly related to each other. More conceptual clarity is needed, going forward. For now, circumspection is the watchword.

POCKET



The rupee hasn't overly depreciated

UNDER CONTROL. Thanks to RBI continuing with its tried, tested and successful post-liberalisation policy of intervening to reduce excess volatility



ASHIMA GOYAL

Recent rupee depreciation has sparked a lot of interest and commentary. There are rumours of a change in regime facilitated by the change in management. This is unlikely, however, because the RBI's description of the Indian exchange rate regime has been unchanged since the liberalisation of the 1990s. It is said to be market-determined, with intervention only to prevent excess volatility.

DEGREES OF INTERVENTION
The basic exchange rate regime may have stayed the same but its implementation has varied over the years, due to policy choices as well as external conditions and objectives to deepen domestic foreign exchange (FX) markets. Volatility tends to be more in times of large net capital outflows, such as the current period. In the initial decade nominal depreciation compensated for higher Indian inflation and maintained a competitive real effective exchange rate (REER). FX markets were thin, with many restrictions. As the role of markets increased, volatility rose in the 2000s. The first time there was appreciation, it generated extensive market commentary and concern much like today.

Two-way nominal movement was established, however. Important lessons in the process must be hard-wired in the RBI. For example, in the volatility after the global financial crisis the management came to believe markets were too large for intervention and a deputy governor said so publicly. The rupee plunged. The RBI had to step in with multiple instruments and their success in stabilising the rupee led to too much intervention in the years that followed. As a result there was real appreciation and exports suffered.

CAPITAL FLOW VOLATILITY
India's opening out has unfortunately coincided with many global crises. But

foreign portfolio investment (FPI) outflows during global risk-off are invariably followed by inflows. Since India's inflation is higher than its trading partners, outflows are used as an opportunity to depreciate, moderated through sale of reserves. Inflows are an opportunity to rebuild reserves, there is less appreciation and the rupee tends to be more stable in such periods.

This is exactly what happened under the last governor. After sharp initial crisis-time depreciation and outflows, reserves were rebuilt during periods of large net inflows. In the last two years high frequency two-way movements were lower as the RBI bought and sold dollars within a narrow band, perhaps because markets were fragile due to repeated global shocks and there were fears of over-shooting.

Although volatility was lower there was crawling depreciation still so that the export weighted REER stayed near equilibrium unlike the appreciation in the late 2000s. In FY24 it was at 101.2 and in September it was 102.7. The nominal value of rupee/dollar depreciated from 71.5 in February 2020 to 82.3 in October 2022. It did not change much after that and was 84.06 in October 2024, but the rupee was certainly not stable. Volatility was low in 2009 and 2016, also periods of capital flow surges.

After Trump's November re-election some real appreciation occurred due to dollar strength and yuan depreciation so faster nominal depreciation was required. But still, nominal depreciation was about 3 per cent compared to 12 per cent in 2022, the year the Ukraine war started.

So there is no over-depreciation and the RBI continues with its tried, tested and successful post-liberalisation policy of intervening to reduce excess volatility and as a consequence real misalignment.

The rupee is still less volatile than many peer countries. The dollar has over-strengthened now and may reverse after Trump comes to power

More daily volatility is, however, induces hedging and helps reduce nervousness after a sudden change. But it is better to moderate the market over-reaction that occurs in global over- or under-periods. The rupee is still less volatile than many peer countries. The dollar has over-strengthened now and may reverse after Trump actually comes to power.

VOLATILITY AND RISK
Volatility raises risk premia that typically exceed actual depreciation in emerging markets (EMs) — average estimated values are 3 per cent. In 2023, without intervention, inflows would have led to over-appreciation, raised expected depreciation and interest rate differentials. Risk premiums and interest rate spreads fell. One year forward premium was 5.19 per cent over 2014-19 but fell to 1.95 per cent in 2023.

Research as well as EM experience shows the importance of reserves and the intervention strategies they enable to sustain market confidence in EMs. Many of our neighbours suffered after their reserves fell to zero. Sri Lanka had 70 per cent inflation as the currency sank. EMs do not have access to Fed swaps or adequate international safety nets.

FPIs want less intervention and more freedoms. They contribute both foreign savings for growth and help deepen domestic markets, but are volatile. Administrative freedoms will grow on India's well-sequenced path to capital account convertibility even as foreign capital appreciates a natural share of about 10 per cent in deep domestic markets that will be able to absorb volatility, so that the tail does not wag the dog. We already see how large domestic participation in the stock market has reduced volatility due to FPI entry and exit. The absolute amount of flows will rise anyway with domestic market size. Innovations in the domestic payments space can be extended to cross-border transactions.

BALANCING INTERESTS
Volatility hurts the real sector and even markets do not like excessive volatility, although banks gain as they can charge

more for hedging products. Depreciation raises the cost of commodity imports immediately but exporters do not benefit much since they have to share gains in India's competitive product markets. But in the longer term they do need the REER to be competitive. Export competitiveness cannot be neglected when the trade deficit is large and exports are a potential source of employment. But depreciation tends to eventually cause the real exchange rate to appreciate through inflation, while nominal appreciation can sometimes help offset domestic pass through of oil price shocks.

Intervention to maintain an export weighted REER of about 100 in the long term balances the different interests well. As inflation falls and productivity rises this can be sustained with less nominal depreciation.

A managed but flexible nominal exchange rate can reduce volatility as well as misalignment from competitive real exchange rates without painful domestic deflation or inflation. It is consistent with adequate volatility to aid price discovery in FX markets and to prevent speculative one-way positions. Occasional nominal volatility within a 5-10 per cent band would suffice.

Most EM central banks attempt something like this in practice. But due to continuing global fragilities and volatile capital flows, implementing this requires multiple instruments such as large reserves, the absence of full capital account convertibility, prudential measures, signals and strategic intervention.

These tools are more successful if they work with markets. And are better alternatives to options of either living with overshooting exchange rates or raising interest rates and reducing domestic demand, which is a costly and inefficient way to respond to the threat of outflows. Volatilities fall also as markets deepen. FX market turnover has doubled from pre-pandemic levels and may partly explain lower volatility.

Therefore, while intervention may change to suit current conditions, the basic regime remains the best option and is unlikely to change.

The writer is Emeritus Professor, IGIDR

Will Trump welcome Indian skilled workers?

The US risks over a million tech jobs going unfilled by end-2030. India is the only country that can offer talent on a large scale

bl.explainer

K Bharat Kumar

US President Trump took oath for the office a second time on January 20, 2025. India has been keenly following the statements coming from him and his supporters regarding the H-1B visa programme to understand the way forward on job opportunities for our workforce.

Why are Trump supporters against H-1B holders, legal immigrants?
The H-1B visa allows skilled workers entry into the US. Visa validity is generally for three years, extendable by another three. Trump has historically spoken against illegal immigrants. Following his election, supporters of Trump's MAGA (Make America Great Again) campaign felt that any backing for even legal, H-1B holders or aspirants went against the spirit of Trump's own 'America First' slogan.

What is Trump supporter Musk's views on the topic?

Elon Musk had said that he would 'go to war' to defend the H-1B programme as his own companies — SpaceX and Tesla — and hundreds of others had benefited from bringing in talent to the private

sector was 'broken' and 'needed fixing'.

Why is H-1B programme important to India?

Since being introduced in 1990, the non-immigrant visa programme has seen annual visa issuances range from 65,000 to 195,000 and back again. Over the past two decades, applicants working in technology firms headquartered in India have been the primary beneficiaries. Indians currently account for about 75 per cent of H-1Bs. In the April-September 2024 period, one-fifth of the total H-1B visas issued were to Indian-origin companies. Of these, Infosys took the lead with 8,140 beneficiaries, followed by TCS (5,274), and HCL America (2,953).

Infosys came second to only Amazon Com Services LLC, which topped with 9,265 visas. Cognizant, which has a significant employee presence in India but is headquartered in New Jersey, ranked third in the India list with 6,321 visas.

Did denial of H-1B applications go up in Trump's first term?

In Trump's first term that started in 2016, his administration lengthened the approval time. Consequently, denial of



H-1B VISAS. Curbing issuances will not benefit the US (STOCK/COM/ASSOCIATED)

new H-1B petitions for initial employment saw some highs in that period.

It rose from 6 per cent in FY15, to 24 per cent in FY18, before dropping to 21 per cent in FY19, 13 per cent in FY2020. It dipped to 4 per cent in FY2021, and fell further to 2 per cent in FY22, with the latter two years witnessing the lowest denial rates ever recorded.

What if the cost of H-1B processing shoots up under Trump?

If costs do rise, we can expect one of two consequences: Companies will either look for talent locally to avoid visa processing costs or employ foreign talent from other countries work remotely for them.

An estimate by the US Semiconductor Industry Association there tells us, for the US economy as a whole, by the end of 2030, an estimated 3.85 million additional jobs requiring proficiency in technical fields will be created in the US. Of those, 1.4 million jobs risk going unfilled unless the country expands the pipeline for workers in fields such as skilled technicians, engineering, and computer science.

If US companies employ foreign talent to work remotely, India is the only country that can offer skilled software talent on a large scale. Over the past few decades, Indian companies have become more than somewhat familiar with the processes needed to deliver software deliverables from offshore locations.

So, clamping down on H-1B will not help US employment?

No, curbing H-1B issuances will make work move out of the US via two channels: it could go to vendors to whom work could be contracted out, such as Infosys and TCS. Or large US companies could set up — and are already setting up — their own IT and/or BPO operations in India. These are called Global Capability Centres or GCCs. A significant portion of IT jobs created in India over the past year has been by these GCCs.

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Nehruvian economics

This refers to Nehru's trust with economics (January 20). The newer generation must not be expected to know our first Prime Minister other than through trolls bred in consumerism. Through the decades of the 1940s and 1950s, India, given the global politics of the Nehruvian era, chose a path of a nuanced neutrality. For two decades plus, we pursued a doctrine of welfare and the primacy of a public sector-led economy. We ought to have then tapered it down to move over to the private sector-led economy. We might well

have done so but for the 1962 war with China that put us on the defensive, politically and economically. We picked up the strands of growth in the 1990s through a liberalised economy to tame an unwieldy public sector and an unimaginative bureaucracy.

R Narayanan
Hosur, Madurai

Farmers' protest

Apropos 'Centre agrees for talks with protesting farmers, next round likely on February 14' (January 21). There is no point in dragging the issue, especially when the government is

continuing negotiations and discussions with all those involved. Assuring a legally supported MSP permanently is crucial. But the debt waiver that the agitating farmers are demanding runs into several lakh crore rupees, which the country cannot afford in the current circumstances.

Katuru Durga Prasad Rao
Hyderabad

90-hour work-week

Apropos 'Corporate leaders, and their hard work' spief (January 20), L&T Chairman SN Subrahmanyam would not have anticipated this

much of flak from various quarters for his prescription of a 90-hour work-week. Any work demands concentration of human mind, which tends to relax every now and then. A 90-hour work-week is humanly impossible. Besides monetary compensation, every worker needs rest or relaxation for reasonable time, which is incalculable in money terms. Corporate leaders should not miss the wood for the trees.

S Ramakrishnasayee
Chennai

Rethink farm credit

Apropos 'Taking banking to farm

gate' (January 20), although the proposal deserves to be studied from the angle of fiscal benefits to farmers, another auxiliary issue that needs attention is agricultural credit to ensure that farmers do not live in an atmosphere of eternal fear of default in view of uncertainties they face both during pre- and post-harvest time. NITI Aayog must devise a lending pattern (term farm loan may not suit the community) to farmers with a focus on comfortability and with a makes on repayment — not waiver.

Rajiv Magal
Halebidu Village, Karnataka

FIRST COLUMN

THE TRANSFORMATIVE
ROLE OF EDUCATORS

Educators serve as mentors and guide, empowering students to become responsible citizens



SAKSHI SETHI

Education is not merely the transfer of knowledge. It is the shaping of minds, the fostering of growth and even more the cultivation of potential. As educators, the role extends far beyond delivering lectures or grading assignments. It encompasses mentoring, inspiring and empowering individuals to become critical thinkers and responsible citizens. Reflecting on our roles allows us to embrace our responsibilities more consciously and adapt to the evolving needs of learners and society. In contemporary education, the role of the educator has shifted from being the sole source of knowledge to a facilitator of learning.

This transition underscores the importance of guiding students to explore, question, and construct their understanding. It is about creating an environment where students feel safe to express their thoughts, make mistakes and grow from them. The role of an educator becomes especially significant when working with board students. When talking about them, the educator's primary responsibility is to ensure a strong understanding of the curriculum, including breaking down complex concepts, identifying and addressing knowledge gaps and providing effective study strategies.

Beyond teaching content, educators must help students develop time management and exam techniques to perform confidently under pressure. The role demands subject expertise and a keen awareness of the examination format and trends. Today, the modern educational landscape for board students includes challenges such as increasing competition, societal expectations, and the rapid integration of technology in learning. Educators need to stay adaptable, leveraging digital tools



to make learning engaging and accessible by recognising diverse learning styles employing strategies to meet those needs, and ensuring that every student feels included and valued. Additionally, acknowledging the diverse learning needs of students and personalising instruction whenever possible is also crucial for ensuring their success. There is no denying that students are at a critical juncture in their academic journey, preparing for examinations that often determine their future educational and career paths. Reflecting on our roles as educators in this context reveals the need for a balanced approach that combines academic rigour, emotional support, and life-skill development.

One of the most vital roles of an educator is to be a lifelong learner. Education is a dynamic field, and staying updated with pedagogical advancements, cultural shifts, and technological innovations is essential. This commitment to personal growth will not only enhance teaching effectiveness but will also model the value of continuous learning for students. Teaching values such as critical thinking, collaboration, and adaptability prepare students for challenges beyond the examination hall. It is essential to emphasise that education is about equipping them with skills for life, not just marks on a report card. Reflecting on our roles as educators highlights the immense responsibility and opportunity we have in shaping young lives. It requires academic expertise, emotional intelligence, and unwavering dedication. By nurturing not just the intellect but also the spirit of our students, we as educators can guide them toward success in their exams and, more importantly, in life. By embracing our multifaceted roles with passion and purpose, we can create transformative experiences for our students and leave an enduring legacy of knowledge and wisdom.

(The writer is an educator; views are personal)

How skill-based degrees are
redefining India's future

DINESH SOOD

By aligning with industry needs and empowering individuals with practical expertise, the nation is paving the way for a more inclusive and dynamic workforce



India's education system is undergoing a quiet revolution. As the global job market evolves, the emphasis on traditional degrees gives way to skill-focused education tailored to the demands of a dynamic economy. A prime example is the introduction of degree courses in salons, spas, beauty parlours, and other vocational domains. These courses signify a paradigm shift in how we perceive education, employment, and entrepreneurship in 'Viksit Bharat'. This development addresses critical challenges. It aligns with the growing aspirations of India's youth, caters to burgeoning private sector industries, and equips individuals with skills for self-employment, entrepreneurship and opportunities abroad.

Growing Demand for Vocational Expertise

The global wellness industry, valued at over \$4 trillion, continues to expand, with India emerging as a key player.

The beauty and wellness sector alone is projected to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 18 per cent over the next five years. The personal grooming industry demands nearly 1.3 million professionals annually, significantly surpassing the 3-4 lakh jobs the software industry adds yearly. This boom has created immense demand for skilled professionals, from hairstylists and estheticians to salon managers and beauty wellness consultants. Recognising this, regulatory bodies like the UGC and AICTE have integrated skills courses into the education system. Indian universities now collaborate with training institutes to offer structured programmes like the Bachelor of Science (BSc) in Beauty and Wellness. These programmes cover skincare, makeup artistry and salon management.

Other universities offer diplomas and degree programmes in wellness and hospitality sectors, designed with industry leaders. Globally, institutions such as the London College of Beauty Therapy (UK) and the Australian Academy of Beauty Dermal and Laser offer world-class programmes. These courses adhere to international standards, providing globally recognised certifications that enhance employability abroad.

Parity Between B Voc and BSc Degrees

An essential aspect of this transformation is recognising the equivalence of Bachelor of Vocation (B Voc) and Bachelor of Science (BSc) degrees. While BSc focuses on academic learning, B Voc emphasises hands-on, industry-relevant training. Recent policy reforms place these degrees on par, ensuring vocational education is no longer seen as secondary but as an equally credible academic pathway. This parity allows B Voc graduates to access the same opportunities as BSc graduates in employment, higher education, or competitive exams. It underscores the value of skills and practical expertise in driving economic growth.

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and National Credit Framework

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) further strengthens this integration. RPL allows individuals to earn formal recognition for previous informal training or work experiences. When aligned with the National Credit Framework, credits earned in schools, vocational training institutions, or universities become seamlessly transferable across sectors. This fosters flexibility in education, empowering individuals to personalise their learning journeys and reduce redundancy.

By integrating RPL with skill-based programmes, India's education system becomes more inclusive and adaptable. Employment and Entrepreneurship Opportunities Skill-based degree programmes unlock diverse career pathways.

1. Private Sector Jobs: Luxury wellness brands, fitness chains, and beauty franchises seek trained professionals. Graduates can secure jobs in high-end spas, salons, and wellness centres with lucrative salaries and career growth.

2. Self-Employment and Freelancing: These courses

empower entrepreneurial individuals to establish businesses. Graduates can run boutique salons or offer personalised wellness services, catering to niche markets.

3. Government Jobs: Recognising vocational degrees has expanded opportunities in government roles. Graduates are eligible for positions in wellness centres and initiatives under schemes like Skill India and PMKVY (Pradhan Mantri Kausal Vikas Yojana).

4. Global Opportunities: Programmes often include internationally recognised certifications, enhancing employability abroad. For instance, graduates from LCBT in the UK find opportunities in European markets, while Australian academy-trained professionals thrive in Asia-Pacific regions.

Breaking Stigmas Around Vocational Careers

Vocational careers have long been viewed as secondary options. Introducing structured degree programmes challenges these stereotypes. Formal education in salons, spas, and beauty parlours combines technical skills, business acumen, and industry exposure, positioning these professions as aspirational.

This shift is especially empowering for women, who form a significant portion of the workforce in these fields and now gain access to recognised qualifications that enhance professional credibility.

Challenges in Implementation India's higher education system, often criticised for being theory-heavy, struggles to improve practical skill sets. Initiatives like the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and platforms like SWAYAM aim to modernise education, but challenges remain:

1. Quality Assurance: Maintaining high standards and industry relevance requires collaboration with established industry players.

2. Awareness: Many students and parents remain unaware of these

opportunities, favouring traditional careers. Awareness campaigns are crucial.

3. Infrastructure and Faculty: Vocational education requires specialised infrastructure and trained faculty. Institutions must invest in state-of-the-art facilities and continuous professional development for educators.

4. Recognition and Accreditation: Further integration into academia and government recruitment processes will enhance vocational degrees' credibility.

Vision for the Future Skill-based degree programmes signify societal reform, recognising youth aspirations and aligning education with market realities. By formalising careers through structured courses, India creates a skilled and confident workforce.

These reforms reflect a commitment to inclusivity, providing pathways for diverse socio-economic backgrounds to pursue rewarding careers.

India is on the brink of an educational revolution. Skill-based degrees in fields like salons, spas, and beauty parlours redefine education. These programmes bridge the gap between aspiration and opportunity, equipping students with skills to thrive globally. As these initiatives gain momentum, scaling them, ensuring quality, and destigmatising vocational careers are imperative.

With parity between B Voc and BSc degrees and the integration of RPL into the National Credit Framework, India's education system is transforming into a flexible and robust framework. These changes will meet today's demands and shape a prosperous future for the nation.

(The writer is co-founder and MD of Orane International, a training partner of the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) and a network member of India International Skills Centres, an initiative of GoI. The views expressed are personal)

THE BEAUTY AND WELLNESS SECTOR ALONE IS PROJECTED TO GROW AT A COMPOUND ANNUAL GROWTH RATE (CAGR) OF 18 PER CENT OVER THE NEXT FIVE YEARS

Balancing rights and order: Innovations in protest management

Protests are the lifeblood of democracy. For law enforcement, it must carefully balance between public safety and democratic freedoms

Thousands of people gather, holding banners and chanting slogans, their voices echoing through the streets. For law enforcement, these aren't merely demonstrations but skill, strategy, and restraint tests. Managing protests today demands more than enforcing law and order; it requires innovation, preparation, and trust.



O P SINGH

and in India.

Dialogue Policing:

Dialogue policing, extensively practised in Sweden and Norway, prioritises proactive communication between police and protest organisers. Liaison officers meet organisers before demonstrations to discuss routes, safety measures, and mutual expectations. This approach fosters trust and de-escalates tensions

before they arise. Indian police have applied similar strategies during political rallies and cultural events, engaging community leaders to ensure peaceful outcomes.

Leveraging Technology:

Technology is transforming protest management globally. In countries like Singapore and South Korea, drones with high-resolution cameras monitor crowd density and movement while artificial intelligence (AI) tools analyse data to predict potential flashpoints. This enables law enforcement to allocate resources proactively and prevent crises. Indian police are increasingly adopting these tools. Drones were deployed during the farmers' protests and other large-scale events, offering real-time monitoring of crowd dynamics.

Social media monitoring cells track misinformation and narratives, enabling swift corrective measures. Law enforcement enhances its situational awareness and credibility by integrating technology with traditional methods.

Non-Lethal Methods:

Germany sets a global benchmark for using non-lethal tools like water cannons, sound devices, and barricades to manage large gatherings. Officers trained in crowd psychology focus on isolating disruptive elements while respecting the rights of peaceful protesters. In India, non-lethal methods have been employed during sensitive protests, such as barricading roads to control crowds or using water cannons to disperse tense gatherings. The



focus remains on proportionality—ensuring responses are measured, harm is minimised, and democratic freedoms are respected.

Transparency and Accountability

Transparency is crucial for public trust. In New Zealand, body-worn cameras document police actions during protests, ensuring accountability and protecting officers from false accusations. Oversight bodies review

footage to ensure compliance with established protocols. In India, body-worn cameras have been introduced in several states, particularly during sensitive operations.

Multi-agency coordination for Large Protests

Managing large-scale demonstrations often requires multi-agency collaboration. In the United States, unified command centres integrate local police, state law enforcement, and federal agencies for cohesive responses. These centres streamline resource sharing and operational alignment, which is critical for complex events. India's law enforcement regularly employs similar coordination during significant events, such as farmers' protests, political rallies, and national festivals. Central para-

military forces often supplement state police, ensuring adequate workforce and resources. Clear protocols and seamless coordination are the backbone of these efforts.

Comprehensive Training:

Training is a cornerstone of effective protest management. Canadian police emphasise de-escalation, cultural sensitivity, and conflict resolution, with officers undergoing practical simulations to prepare for high-pressure scenarios. In India, the Bureau of Police Research and Development (BPR&D) has introduced advanced modules covering non-lethal tools, technology integration, and crowd psychology.

Ethical Policing:

Ethical considerations are central to managing protests.

Globally, technologies like drones and AI are governed by protocols that protect privacy and civil liberties. Similarly, the principle of proportionality—using the minimum force necessary—guides actions to ensure demonstrators' rights are respected. In India, police increasingly emphasise ethical practices. Engaging community leaders, addressing grievances, and prioritising dialogue reflect a commitment to balancing public safety with democratic freedoms. The shift towards a restrained, people-centric approach underscores the evolving role of law enforcement in a modern democracy.

(The writer is Director General of Police and Head of the Haryana State Narcotics Bureau; views are personal)

Newfound nerve-muscle crosstalk shows exercise helps neurons grow

The conventional concept of nerve-muscle interaction emphasises the nerve's control over muscles. However, Ritu Raman and her colleagues at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology started to wonder if the reciprocal could be true: if stimulating muscles could encourage nerves to form

Sayan Tribedi

Regular exercise is proven to be beneficial for our overall well-being. It strengthens our muscles, improves cardiovascular health, helps to maintain a healthy body weight, and can be considered an effective stress buster.

But what if there is more? What if the benefits of exercise go beyond general health?

A recent study by engineers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), published in *Advanced Healthcare Materials*, has revealed that exercise may also stimulate the growth of neurons through its physical and biochemical effects.

This finding can pave new pathways for reparative therapies and perhaps even cures for neurodegenerative disorders.

Nerve-muscle crosstalk

While the effects of exercise on our physical health, like strengthening muscles and supporting the immune system, are widely recognised, researchers haven't explored the specific impact of exercise on neurons (nerve cells).

Given the nerves control the movements of muscles and carry vital information all over the body, understanding the effects of neurons can lead to the development of plausible therapies for nerve injuries.

In a November 2023 paper in the journal *Biomaterials*, researchers established a hint of a biochemical connection between muscle activity and nerve health. Ritu Raman, the Eugene Bell Career Development assistant professor of mechanical engineering at MIT, and her colleagues discovered that they could restore the mobility of mice by implanting muscle tissue at the site of a severe muscle injury and stimulating the new tissue using light.

While examining the graft, the researchers found the grafted muscle had produced certain biochemical signals that induced the growth and development of nerves and blood vessels.

The conventional concept of nerve-muscle interaction emphasises the nerve's control over the muscles. However, Raman and her colleagues started to wonder if the reciprocal could be true: i.e. if stimulating muscles could encourage the formation of nerves.

This hypothesis was initially met with skepticism from the scientific community. Critics argued that the biological environment was complex and that it would be hard to attribute nerve growth to stimulation by muscles because of the variety of other cell types and contributing factors within the organism, including the immune system.

Biochemical benefits of exercise

The new study by Raman & co. concentrated solely on muscle and nerve tissue and aimed to find whether training muscles directly could influence the way nerves grew.

The researchers grew mouse muscle cells into long fibers, which they weaved together to create a small sheet of mature muscular tissue slightly larger than a one-rupee coin.

Using well-known genetic modification techniques, the team was able to use a



The movement of muscles was found to exert mechanical forces on neurons' structure because of the physical contact between neurons and muscles. JULIEN TROMEUR/UNSPASH

flashing light to cause the muscles to contract.

In the past, Raman had come up with a brand-new gel mat for building and exercising the muscle. While the researchers stimulated the muscle to exercise, they allowed the muscle tissue to hold its shape and structure instead of peeling off.

The scientists then collected samples of the fluids surrounding the muscle, believing it should contain myokines like growth factors, RNA, and other proteins. Myokines, Raman said, are a biochemical soup of proteins secreted by muscles, some of which may be useful to neurons.

"Myokines are secreted by muscles nearly all the time, but they produce more when you exercise them," she added.

The researchers transferred the myokine solution to a separate dish containing motor neurons – nerves found in the spinal cord that control muscles involved in voluntary movement. They grew the neurons from stem cells derived from mice. As with the muscle tissue, the neurons were grown on a similar gel mat.

After the neurons were exposed to the myokine mixture, the team observed that they began to grow quickly: about four times faster than neurons that didn't receive the biochemical solution.

The research group also performed a genetic analysis to find out more about the neuronal changes mediated by exercise.

Initially, they isolated RNA from a small cluster of neurons. Cells transcribe instructions on how to make a protein from a gene to RNA first. By measuring the level of gene transcription, they were able to estimate the extent of genetic action in the formulation of those instructions. This enabled them to figure out whether myokines exercised any influence over the activity of certain

neuronal genes.

They found many of the more actively expressed genes were involved in some fundamental processes of neural growth, maturation, neuronal connectivity (including the ones with muscle cells), and axon growth.

The result suggested exercise didn't only stimulate neuronal growth; it also enhanced the maturity of neurons and their functional abilities.

The team, therefore, wanted to investigate whether the physiological response to exercise could also augur well for neuronal function.

Effect of physical stress on nerves

Because of the physical contact between neurons and muscles, the movement of muscles exerts mechanical forces on the neurons' structure.

To check whether these forces could also affect the growth of neurons, the researchers set up mechanical stimulation experiments that tracked neurons' growth in the absence of myokines.

This time, the team cultured another set of motor neurons on a gel matrix containing small magnetic particles. When an external magnetic field was applied, the particles' movement mechanically stretched the neurons, reproducing the conditions in which they might experience mechanical forces during a workout.

They performed this test for 30 minutes every day.

The results were quite surprising. The researchers found that this mechanical stimulation greatly enhanced neuronal growth: the growth level of the mechanically exercised neurons was, on average, equivalent to those exposed to myokine stimulation.

Both groups of exercised neurons also grew significantly more than a set of control neurons that experienced no

The researchers found that mechanical stimulation greatly enhanced neuronal growth: the growth level of the mechanically exercised neurons was, on average, equivalent to those exposed to myokine stimulation

exercise at all.

Exercise as medicine

The findings have tremendous implications for developing exercise-based therapies to repair nerves, especially as they relate to nerve injuries and neurodegenerative diseases such as amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). By exploiting the crosstalk between muscles and neurons, researchers could develop innovative treatment strategies to promote the recovery of nerve cells and promote their healing by activating the muscles surrounding them.

The investigators stated in their paper that, in their understanding of the bi-directional signalling between muscles and nerves, their finding has practical implications in developing novel approaches for treating nerve injuries in which the nerve and muscle tissue are no longer communicating properly.

The team plans to explore the possibility of using targeted muscle stimulation to regenerate and grow neurons in a clinical setting, which could help redefine the role of exercise in medicine and general health promotion to precise therapeutic intervention for nerve repair. According to Raman, this is their first step towards understanding and controlling exercise as medicine.

(Sayan Tribedi has an MSc in bioinformatics from Pondicherry University. sayantribedi97@gmail.com)



Water is dropped on the Palisades Fire in Mandeville Canyon on January 11 in Los Angeles. AP

Satellite projects aim to head off future wildfires

Agence France Presse

As Los Angeles firefighters battle the remaining hotspots more than a week into deadly blazes, scientists and engineers hope the growing availability of satellite data will help in the future.

Tech-focused groups are launching new orbiters as space launches get cheaper, while machine learning techniques will sift the torrent of information, fitting it into a wider picture of fire risk in a changing environment.

Satellites "can detect from space areas that are dry and prone to wildfire outbreaks, ... actively flaming and smouldering fires, as well as burnt areas and smoke and trace gas emissions," said Clement Albergel, head of actionable climate information at the European Space Agency.

Different satellites have different roles depending on their orbit and sensor payload.

Low-earth orbit is generally less than 1,000 km above the surface. Satellites here offer high-resolution ground images, but see any given point only briefly as they sweep around the planet.

Geostationary satellites orbit at around 36,000 km, remaining over the same area on the earth's surface, allowing for continuous observation but usually at much lower resolution.

As climate change brings more wildfires encroaching on human-inhabited areas, the resolution can be crucial.

Based on satellite observations of Los Angeles, "it's very hard to determine" if a particular house is on fire, WKID Solutions' Natasha Stavros, a wildfire expert who has also worked at NASA, said.

Brian Collins, director of Colorado-based nonprofit Earth Fire Alliance, plans a new low-orbit satellite "constellation" to complement existing

Geostationary satellites orbit at around 36,000 km, remaining over the same area on the earth's surface, allowing for continuous observation but usually at much lower resolution

resources.

It will sport a sensor with a resolution of 5 m, much finer than ESA's current Sentinel-2 satellites that can see objects only 10 m wide.

This means "we're going to learn very quickly that there is more fire on the earth than we know about today, we're going to find very small fires," Collins predicted.

EFA aims to launch four satellites by the end of 2026 at a total cost of \$53 million.

It would take the whole planned swarm of 55, costing a total \$400 million, to reach Collins's aim of imaging every point on the earth at least once every 20 minutes.

Dozens of satellites in orbit could "both detect and track fires ... at a cadence that allows decisions to be made on the ground," Collins said.

Less grandiose efforts include Germany-based OroraTech, which on January 14 launched the first of at least 14 FOREST-3 nanosatellites.

The system will "deliver ultra-fast wildfire alerts and high-quality thermal data," chief executive Martin Langer said in a statement.

Additional data from all these new satellites would be "fantastic," ESA's Albergel said, but the large volume of information could prove problematic.

ESA's Sentinel-2 alone sends down one terabyte of data – the storage capacity of a modern high-end laptop – every day. Collins said finding fire signs in such reams of data "is an excellent machine learning" problem. The data could ultimately help both predict new fire outbreaks and their progression, he added.

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

THE SCIENCE QUIZ

The twisted possibilities surrounding time travel

Yasudevan Mukunth

doing the latter?

QUESTION 3

Name the physicist who shared the physics Nobel Prize in 2022 for an experiment he conducted in 1988. The experiment helped prove that if quantum physics is complete and non-deterministic, reality is also nonlocal, i.e., admitting action at a distance.

QUESTION 4

The grandfather paradox of time travel holds that if you travel to the past and kill your grandfather, your own existence shouldn't have been possible. Name the paradox that uses this argument to ask whether free will could be real in a world with time travel.

QUESTION 5

Name the interpretation of quantum

mechanics advanced by Hugh Everett that resolves the grandfather paradox by claiming that once you've killed your grandfather, you move into a new future different from the one before.

Answers to January 16 quiz:

- Surface of the most distant point from which light can reach us – **Ans: Cosmic horizon**
 - Region outside the event horizon of a spinning black hole – **Ans: Ergosphere**
 - Name of surface limiting free travel of light – **Ans: Surface of last scattering**
 - Horizon relating spacetime's structure to black hole physics – **Ans: Killing horizon**
 - Times of day when sunlight is visible before/after the sun has risen/set – **Ans: Twilight**
- Visual: **Jacobus Kapteyn**
First contact: Siddhartha Viswanathan | Dularchandra Kushwaha | Dalbeer Pharswan



Visual: Name this sports car first manufactured in 1981. It became famous when the *Back to the Future* films (1985-1990) used it as a time machine. CREDIT: KEVIN ABATO (CC BY-SA 2.5)

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

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

[OUR TAKE]

Engaging with President Trump

India-US ties may be immune to a change of guard in Washington, but New Delhi should be prepared to respond to the challenges ahead

As Donald Trump begins his second term as the president of the United States (US), there is little to suggest a shift away from the fundamentals that have driven strategic alignment between the US and India over the past two decades, especially in key areas such as security and defence, strategic concerns such as the challenge posed by China and recent initiatives to jointly develop and set standards for critical technologies. For much of this period, bipartisan consensus in the US on the importance of the partnership with India has deepened, benefiting New Delhi in numerous domains. This is reflected in the outgoing Joe Biden administration's decision to end restrictions on key Indian nuclear entities and the Trump transition team's move to set up a meeting of the Quad foreign ministers to coincide with the inauguration. In a sense, therefore, work on crucial pillars of the India-US relationship is expected to continue uninterrupted and this is something that Indian leaders such as external affairs minister S Jaishankar have been quick to point out in recent weeks, ahead of Trump's inauguration.

The tricky part is the chaos, uncertainty and whimsical decision-making that accompanies a Trump presidency, especially in foreign policy. The world, including the closest allies of the US, is tense not knowing what the new president is going to unleash. The MAGA agenda of Trump's core support base, trade and investment, and policies on immigration are just three areas where the path chosen by Trump can have a major impact on the contours of global relations. Given the numerous pledges and threats he has held out over the past year, the question is if Trump will walk the talk. For example, will he go ahead with retaliatory tariffs on India, and will he be willing to go along with the imperatives of Make in India, when his stated goal is bringing manufacturing back to the US? Even a step back from the Biden administration's strong posture on China could have ramifications for India, while a move to shrink the US's role on the global stage could impact the rules-based order.

The India-US relationship has grown to such an extent that it is unlikely to be affected by a change in the White House. Trump is perceived as a friend of India, and more significantly, as a personal friend of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. These should not be reasons for complacency and New Delhi should be prepared for nimble responses and deft footwork to respond to the challenges that lie ahead.

The bovine beliefs of a man of science

Veezhinathan Kamakoti loves cows. More so if they are indigenous breeds. He also believes that cow urine has medicinal value. As a private individual, he has every right to stick to his beliefs, which are derived from faith-based claims than evidence provided by modern science. The trouble is Kamakoti, who has a doctorate in computer science, and has taught the subject to many batches of undergraduate science students, is now the director of IIT-Madras, a reputed institute set up to teach and train young minds in science and technology. Kamakoti was invited to share his wisdom on cow urine by Go Samrakshana Sala because he heads IIT-Madras; endorsement from an IIT scientist-professor would be seen as the perfect validation of a claim that has now assumed the contours of a faith-centric political project. Simply put, regardless of his qualifications, Kamakoti has exposed himself as lacking in scientific temper, which is founded on evidence that can be independently verified, and he is guilty of promoting faith-based pseudo-science. A science teacher and the head of an institution with global standing should have been more careful with his words.

What is disturbing is that Kamakoti is not alone. There is no shortage of people willing to tailor their views to suit those of the State. Some years ago, the government invited research proposals on the uniqueness of indigenous cows and the curative properties of cow urine, dung, and milk, including potential cancer treatments. Using public policy and public funds to make science subservient to faith, or politics is a fraught project with consequences for public health. Kamakoti should tend his thoughts in the bucolic pastures of faith but without the badge of a scientist and the brand of IIT.

Truce to peace, the challenge in Gaza

Sustained international engagement and goodwill from all parties will be essential to build on the Hamas-Israel ceasefire deal

After 15 months of devastating conflict, Israel and Hamas have reached a ceasefire deal that aims to stop violence in Gaza and facilitate the release of hostages. The agreement, brokered by Qatar, Egypt, and the United States (US), marks a significant turning point in the long-standing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and raises hopes for lasting peace in West Asia. The Israeli cabinet approved the deal on January 18, with 24 out of 33 ministers voting in favour. The implementation of the agreement started on Sunday, January 19, a day ahead of Donald Trump's inauguration as the 47th US President.

The deal is structured in three phases, each lasting approximately six weeks. The first phase involves the release of 33 Israeli hostages by Hamas, including women, children, and the elderly, in exchange for about 1,650 Palestinian prisoners. Israeli forces will withdraw from populated areas in Gaza, pulling back to a 10-kilometre-long buffer zone along the border. The Rafah crossing with Egypt will open seven days after the start of the first phase, allowing for a significant increase in humanitarian aid, with up to 600 trucks entering daily. Subsequent phases aim to address the

release of remaining hostages, further Israeli troop withdrawals from Gaza, and the initiation of reconstruction efforts in Gaza.

The ceasefire aims to halt the ongoing violence that has resulted in nearly 47,000 Palestinian casualties and near-total destruction of Gaza. The truce with Hamas is expected to extend Israeli's existing ceasefire with Hezbollah in Lebanon, thereby reducing immediate tensions in its neighbourhood and avoiding the risk of a broader regional conflict. This de-escalation could create a more stable environment for diplomatic initiatives and regional economic cooperation.

Trump described the deal as an "epic ceasefire agreement" and vowed to continue working closely with Israel and other allies to ensure "a secure, safe haven". He pledged to promote "Peace Through Strength" throughout the region, invoking a foreign policy doctrine that emphasises the belief that a strong military presence can prevent conflicts from escalating. The ceasefire presents an opportunity for the US to reassert its diplomatic role in the region; however, achieving this requires a careful balance between supporting Israel and addressing the legitimate grievances of the Palestinians.

The agreement highlights the evolving dynamics among key regional players. Qatar's role as a primary mediator has further deepened its diplomatic standing. Egypt's regional status

has also been enhanced following its successful involvement in brokering the deal, reinforcing its historic role as a key mediator between Israel and Palestinian factions.

The ceasefire may help revive discussions to expand the Abraham Accords further by pursuing a potential Saudi-Israeli rapprochement. While Riyadh has expressed interest in forging diplomatic relations with Israel, the Palestinian issue remains a significant obstacle. The Knesset now insists on a clear roadmap for establishing a Palestinian State before entering into talks to normalise ties with Israel.

For Israel, the ceasefire offers a respite from international criticism and an opportunity to address domestic concerns, particularly the return of hostages. Prime Minister (PM) Netanyahu's political survival is at stake as he faces significant challenges, as far-right coalition members oppose the deal. The agreement's implementation has long-term implications for Israel's security and will be crucial in shaping its political landscape and regional standing.

For Hamas, the ceasefire provides a breather, allowing it an opportunity to regroup and consolidate its support among the Palestinians and even claim a symbolic victory as it was able to survive Israel's onslaught and secure the release of Palestinian prisoners.

Iran, a major supporter of Hamas, has portrayed the ceasefire as a "victory" for the Palestinians and Tehran's recent setbacks in Lebanon,



Ausaf Sayeed



The ceasefire aims to halt the ongoing violence that has resulted in nearly 47,000 Palestinian casualties and near-total destruction of Gaza.

Syria, and Gaza have left it isolated with diminished regional influence. The country is also concerned about its future relations with the US under the Trump administration.

While the proposed ceasefire deal represents a significant milestone in West Asia's tumultuous history, its implementation remains challenging, particularly in its later phases, which make it vulnerable to collapse.

For example, it does not address the future governance of Gaza. Will Hamas be allowed to assume a political role again? During last week's meeting of the Global Alliance for the Implementation of the Two-State Solution held in Oslo, Palestine's PM Mohammad Mustafa rejected a proposal discussed by the US, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel for an international post-war administration in Gaza, led by a senior UN official. He emphasised that the Palestinian Authority (PA) must be the sole governing body in Gaza following the ceasefire. Ironically, Netanyahu has consistently opposed the PA's return to Gaza since the 2007 conflict between Hamas and Fatah, which effectively removed the PA from the Gaza Strip.

The reconstruction of Gaza will be a monumental task. According to UN data, 70% of concrete structures in Gaza have been severely damaged or destroyed, including over 245,000 homes, which has transformed the area into a wasteland. Restoring health care facilities in Gaza and providing nutritious food for more than 1.8 million Palestinians facing "extremely critical" levels of hunger is a top priority. Rebuilding Gaza will require substantial funding, estimated at \$100 billion, and several years of dedicated effort. Israel should be discouraged from pursuing its threat to ban the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), as this would significantly impact the distribution of aid to the Palestinians at this critical juncture.

To translate the temporary truce offered by the ceasefire deal into lasting peace and stability in the region, sustained international engagement and goodwill from all parties, especially the US and other guarantors, will be essential. The fundamental issue at the heart of the conflict — the establishment of an independent state of Palestine coexisting with Israel — must be addressed with sincerity and pragmatism.

Ausaf Sayeed is former secretary to the Government of India, minister of external affairs and former ambassador of India to Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Seychelles. The views expressed are personal.

Donald Trump 2.0 and the limits of CEO as president

Donald J Trump has officially become the 47th President of the United States (US). An interesting feature of the Trump team is that many of his appointees are wealthy elites, billionaires, and multimillionaires from the business and financial world — all bound, among other things, to win Trump's trade war with tariff revisions. Given his successful experience on *The Apprentice* television show, Trump believes that governing a country is like running a corporation.

Should a President govern a country like a CEO running a big corporation? Paul Krugman, a winner of the Economics Nobel, argued in a *Harvard Business Review* article (1996) that a country is not a company, and business leaders need to understand the differences between economic policy on the national and international scale and business strategies on the organisational scale. Though related, economics and business are distinct disciplines requiring different mindsets, styles, and thinking skills. An executive thoroughly comfortable with corporate finances does not necessarily know how to read national income accounts, understand a country's trade balance and its balance of payments, or monetary or fiscal policy, and how they are related.

The economy, in contrast to a corporation, is the ultimate giant conglomerate, with hundreds of thousands of product lines and services united only by the fact of being within the country's borders. This complexity means that a national economy must be run along on general principles and theory. Best economic management almost always consists of creating a market-friendly environment based on a sound analytical framework. The idea rarely sits well with businesspeople, especially with know-it-all billionaires.

Most corporations are built around a core competence, for instance, a particular technology or an approach to a specific type of market. Corporate CEOs succeed not by general concepts or theory, but by finding specific product strategies or organisational innovations that work for their businesses. Successful business leaders have trouble accepting the comparatively hand-off role of a wise economic policymaker.

As some political pundits have pointed out, another difference: Economists view the national economy as a closed system with strong feedback implications and much uncertainty. In the business world, businesspeople are accustomed to thinking of an open system, and feedback tends to be more certain and positive. This is particularly relevant when it comes to Trump's tariff policy to address America's trade deficit. The trade imbalance, to economists, is a macroeconomic condition determined by the difference between investment (both domestic and foreign) and savings (private and public or government's budget surplus or deficit). As an accounting tumbler, the deficit or surplus must be matched by corresponding capital (financial) inflows or outflows. Trump's approach from an open system (business perspective) is unlikely to rebalance Amer-

ica's trade deficit and can even be counterproductive.

This leads us to the broader question: Is experience in running large corporations a reliable qualification for running a country and its economy?

During the high stagflation of the 1970s and early 1980s in the US, Arthur Okun, the late professor at Yale University and chairman of President Lyndon Johnson's Council of Economic Advisors, developed the Index of Discomfort designed to measure the economic well-being of the people living in the country. The index is simply the sum of inflation and unemployment rates. When the index is higher — high inflation and more unemployment — people feel less well off. It was intended as an intuitive measure of economic conditions that affect everyday life. In the 1980 campaign against the incumbent Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan popularised the index and renamed it the Misery Index.

We analysed the change in the Okun Misery Index over the period from 1948 to the present, spanning 14 presidencies, from Harry S Truman to Joe Biden (up till the latest available data). Five of the 14 presidential terms had a Misery Index below 100 and one failed businessman (President Truman). Carter, George H Bush, George W Bush, and Trump were successful businessmen before they became presidents. George W Bush and Trump even had MBA training in their resumes, at Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania, respectively. Yet, both ended up leaving a "more miserable" legacy than when they entered the presidency.

On the other hand, Reagan and Biden — the former an actor-turned-politician and a state governor and the latter a career politician who is a former senator and vice-president — seem to defy the myth of prior business success and wealth as prerequisites for a successful presidency. Both had inherited high misery from their predecessors and managed to turn it around. Reagan left office with the largest turnaround in misery (5 points). Biden turned around the economic misery from the Covid-19 pandemic; he inherited and changed it for the better by more than six points.

The Okun Misery Index, of course, has its limitations. It is not intended to be predictive and, as some political pundits have pointed out, it is a lagging indicator measuring a president's aggregate performance over a period of time.

In most societies, business success is respected and valued for legitimate and good reasons. Political leaders will benefit from inevitably seek advice from business leaders. Do Trump and his team have the wisdom to know the difference between a country and a large corporation and a proper sense of what business success does or does not teach about economic policy? Time will tell.

Kieritisk Toh is former senior fellow at Duke Center for International Development, Duke University (North Carolina, USA), and Prahlad Kasturi, is emeritus professor of economics at Radford University, Virginia. The views expressed are personal.

[TEDROS ADHANOM GHEBREYESUS] DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

Restoring the health system in Gaza will be a complex and challenging task, given the scale of destruction, operational complexity and constraints involved



The lingering pain of the Kashmiri Pandit exodus

I have been more than three decades now since the unfortunate exodus of the Kashmiri Pandits began in January 1990. The exodus was a result of the rise of the Jammu and Kashmir People's Movement led by the masses in the Valley, who were challenging Indian sovereignty. It has been a sad story as Indian sovereignty crumbled, and there were targeted killings of some well-known and prominent Pandits, which resulted in four deaths among members of the community. The State apparatus also failed to control militancy and provide security to the minorities in the erstwhile state, and approximately 100,000 to 140,000 of the total Pandit population left the Valley for Jammu, the national capital region (NCR) and other parts of the country. After all these years, the question of the Kashmiri Pandits' forced migration is very much alive in the discussions on the history of the Valley. The number of Kashmiri Pandits living in the Valley at present is not more than 4,000 to 5,000. Most Pandits have sold their properties and land, and have no roots left there. A large number of them have settled in different parts of the country. However, the people who have migrated from the villages are still languishing in townships made for them by the authorities on the outskirts of Jammu city. They keep on lamenting about the past.

Despite attempts by successive governments to create jobs and accommodation for them and persuade them to return, the response has been dismal, especially with the sporadic killings of Pandits in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). Their return to J&K is a tall order. Unfortunately, this small community, with an estimated total population of around eight lakh scattered all over the country, doesn't have the numbers to ensure elected representation in either the J&K legislative assembly or Parliament. The community only receives hollow promises from the administrators and political parties capitalise on their plight to seek votes in other parts of the country.

Kashmiri Pandits are the remainder of the original Hindu population of J&K. They are a part of the tumultuous history of Kashmir which was an important seat of Hinduism in the first millennium. However, over the years, as the rest of India came under the influence of Buddhism under the Mauryas and the Kushanas, Buddhism influenced Kashmir too. It eclipsed Hinduism in Kashmir till Islam took over.

At Kashmiri-speaking Hindus are Brahmins. This is because the Hindu system of varnas that

divides society into Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras was influenced by Buddhism in the third century. That was the time when most of the non-Brahmin Hindus embraced Buddhism because of its appeal of being a casteless religion. However, while the rest of India was plundered by the Turks and Arabs, Kashmir was not invaded. During this period, a native tradition of Shaivism became popular and acceptable in Kashmir. This was during the rule of the Utpala and the Lohara dynasties. till the arrival of Islam in the 14th century through the Sufism of Bulbul Shah that led to Sultans coming in and Shah Mir became the first Muslim ruler. This dynasty ruled Kashmir for the next five centuries.

These were difficult times for the Pandits. They resisted conversion to Islam and split into their three sub-castes: *gurus* (priests), *iyas* (astrologers) and *karkuns* (employees of the rulers). Most *karkuns* chose professions like medicine, law, teaching, and engineering, and those who could not enter these professions opted to become clerks and accountants. This was the time when many of them started seeking jobs in other parts of India because of their good educational background. The

Dogra rule, which followed the Sikh rule in Kashmir, was a comfortable time for Pandits as they were a favoured section of the population, during the period 1846-1947. However, after 1950, with the Independence of India, and during Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah's regime of the National Conference, around 20% of the Pandits left the Valley. This was because Pandits were major landowners, and the policy of land-to-the-tiller resulted in financial losses to them. Over a period of time, their population share steadily declined, from 6-7% during 1899-1941 to around 5% in 1950-1960. However, the harmony between the two major communities, Muslims and Pandits, continued. The historical professions like medicine, law, teaching, and engineering, which erode their earlier cultural traditions. These traditions continue with Pandits even today in spite of their unfortunate exodus in 1990. Pandits are known for their resilience despite all the struggles they encountered. It is a sad story for this small but bright and highly educated community, which has seen such difficult periods for no fault of its own.

Upendra Kaul is a cardiologist and former president of the Cardiological Society of India and SAARC Cardiac Society. The views expressed are personal.

Editorial



Capex quandary

Private investments remain tentative amid growth concerns

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the Centre has been using public capital expenditure on infrastructure to pump prime the economic recovery. The mantra has been that infrastructure building will stoke demand for products such as cement and steel, generate jobs in construction, and together trigger a strong multiplier effect on the economy, eventually creating conducive conditions for private investors to plan greenfield and brownfield projects. In Budget 2024-25, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said the government will endeavour to maintain strong fiscal support for infrastructure over the next five years, in conjunction with imperatives of other priorities and fiscal consolidation. She announced ₹11.1 lakh crore of capex spends this year, amounting to 3.4% of GDP. That goal is unlikely to be attained partly due to spending curbs in the poll-affected first quarter. While industry has urged the Centre to continue the capex push in 2025-26 as well, it has failed to respond to the government's constant nudges and persuasions to ramp up their own operations.

Data show that two of this year's first three quarters have recorded a notable sequential decline in private investment plans, particularly by domestic industry. In Q1, private capex plans dropped to multi-year lows, and though the July-September quarter recorded a recovery in investment intentions, that uptick has dissipated in Q3. Projects Today data suggest domestic investments' value dropped 1.4% from Q2, while new projects' value dropped over 22% from a year ago as per the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy. There are many factors playing on corporate risk-taking capacity — weak Q2 results, global uncertainties, spiking costs and waning demand in more lucrative urban markets. Going by current indications, including the early bird Q3 results, demand has not really improved, nor is there an ostensible pressure on factory capacities to warrant expansions. For a sustainable breakout from this slowdown, private capital should take the driving seat because there are limits to enhancing public capex while maintaining fiscal rectitude and providing for myriad welfare schemes. The government must accept that exhortations to industry are unlikely to spur fresh outlays, and incentives focused on themes such as import-substitution are insufficient. Not one new rupee will be deployed if a project is unviable and demand flaky. Policy focus should remain firm on ensuring the ground is ripe to instigate investments and easing the realisation of such plans into billowing chimneys and new jobs. For that, boosting incomes and consumption is critical as is expediting macro- and micro-level reforms. That an economic policy framework outlining next generation reforms, promised in the Budget, has not been heard of since then, is not very comforting.

Go, kho kho, go

India needs to pump in more time and resources into rural sports

Kho kho is not, by any stretch of imagination, among the world's most popular sports. Even in India, where the game is said to have originated several centuries ago, it has not yet caught the imagination. Not many would have noticed India winning the men's and women's titles at the inaugural Kho Kho World Cup in New Delhi on Sunday. Pratik Waikar's men and Priyanka Ingole's women flourished but their collective achievements should not be cause to gloss over the fact that kho kho is not a global sport yet. Indeed, the conduct of the World Cup and India winning both the titles could offer a boost to this particular game with a rural heart. Since India is not really a major power in international sport at large, any world title is a welcome addition to the not-so-overflowing cupboard. There are, of course, a few sports in which India is a superpower, such as cricket and chess. Indian cricket may be going through its lowest phase in recent times — notwithstanding the triumph in the T20 World Cup last year — but in the mind game on 64 squares, India's Grandmasters have been authoring one success story after another, the latest being D. Gukesh winning the World chess championship and Koneru Humpy regaining the women's World rapid championship.

India's brilliant minds, however, have not received the acclaim or support they deserve, especially after their historic double gold at the Chess Olympiad held in September, from the government or corporate houses. The government could do a lot to raise the profile of games such as kho kho, chess and Olympic disciplines. The disappointment at the Paris Olympics last year, where India failed to win even a single gold and finished 71st, below Pakistan and Kyrgyzstan, was another stark reminder of the state of Indian sport. India won six medals but its performance was below expectations. India's various sports federations need to review their own functioning. And they could, in fact, learn lessons from how the Board of Control for Cricket in India, for all the criticism directed against it, is running its sport, improving infrastructure and sharing the growth in revenue with players. India may largely be a single-sport country, unlike the United States or Australia, but a game such as kabaddi, with its Pro Kabaddi League, has shown that there is scope for Indian sport on television beyond cricket. The governments, at the Centre and the States, could also do better by developing infrastructure and nurturing varied sport such as kho kho. It is also time to think out of the box as justifying the huge budgetary spend.

UGC's draft regulation has serious constitutional issues

The draft regulation by the University Grants Commission (UGC) on the selection and appointment of vice chancellors of universities has evoked protests by non-Bharatiya Janata Party-headed State governments. Their main objection against this regulation is that it constitutes a violation of the federal principles enshrined in the Constitution of India. The State governments concerned have demanded its withdrawal.

The UGC has sought to amend Regulation 2010 that relates to the selection and appointment of vice chancellors by widening the area of selection. Under the existing regulations, a vice chancellor can be selected only from among academicians who have a minimum experience of 10 years as professor. Through this amendment, the UGC declares that professionals with 10-plus years of experience in industry, public administration or public policy, shall also be considered.

The draft regulation raises serious constitutional issues which need to be examined by separating the political context of protest and a possible political reaction from the UGC or the party in power.

The objective of the UGC Act

The University Grants Commission Act, 1956 was enacted by Parliament to make provision for "the co-ordination and determination of standards in Universities and for that purpose, to establish the University Grants Commission". The Act, therefore, mandates the UGC to take all steps as it thinks fit for the promotion and the coordination of university education, and for the determination and maintenance of standards of teaching, examination and research in universities. For performing these functions the UGC can allocate funds to the universities essentially for the maintenance and development of the universities, recommend measures necessary for the improvement of university education, advise the Union or State governments on the allocation of grants to universities for any general or specific purpose, collect information on all matters relating to university education in India and other countries and make them available to any university, regulation of fees....

Section 26 of the UGC Act empowers the UGC to make regulations for implementing the mandate of the Act. But it is made clear in this section that these regulations need to be consistent with the Act and the rules made there under. The most important among these regulations relate to defining the qualifications required of a person to be appointed to the teaching staff in a university, the minimum standards of instructions for the grant of any

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The problem arises when the UGC begins to regulate an area which is not a part of the parent Act — namely the selection and the appointment of university vice chancellors

degree by a university, and regulating the maintenance of standards and the coordination of work or facilities in universities.

It is not the job of the UGC

The crucial point that needs to be considered here is whether the regulation made by the UGC in respect of the selection, qualification and appointment of vice chancellor is consistent with the provisions of the UGC Act. As a matter of fact, the Act does not contain any provisions relating to the selection and the appointment of vice chancellors. The fundamental objective of the Act is to determine standards in universities and the promotion and the coordination of university education. To lay down the standards of teaching and to prescribe the qualifications of teaching staff whose job is to give instructions, is the main function of the UGC — which it does by making periodic regulations. But the problem arises when this statutory body begins to regulate an area which is not a part of the parent Act. Rules, and regulations are technically called subordinate legislation. The subordinate legislation can be made only in consonance with the provisions in the Act. If the regulation goes outside the scope of the Act, it will be *ultra vires* the Act, and hence invalid.

A close reading of the Act would show that it was not meant to prescribe the qualifications or mode of selection of vice chancellors. All universities, whether under the Union or the States, are established under a statute made by the respective legislature. Therefore, it is the legislature which prescribes the qualifications, mode of selection, and conditions of service of vice chancellors. It is not the job of the UGC. The selection and the appointment of vice chancellors cannot be considered to be an exercise connected with maintaining the standards of education or promotion and coordination of university education. The Bombay High Court in *Suresh Patilkhede vs The Chancellor Universities of Maharashtra and Others* (2011) corroborates this view in the following words "we are of the view that qualifications and method of appointment of Pro-Chancellor and Vice Chancellor of the University cannot be treated as satisfying the 'direct impact' test [on the standards of education]". Therefore, it is safe to assume that under Section 26 of the UGC Act, the UGC has no mandate to make any regulation in respect of the selection and the appointment of vice chancellors.

An interesting constitutional question which arises in the context of the UGC's regulations is whether a regulation can override an Act passed by a State legislature. This question came up in the context of the termination of the appointment

of some vice chancellors in the past. The Bombay High Court in the *Suresh Patilkhede* case (*supra*) took the view that "Regulation 7.3.0 of UGC Regulations, 2010 being a subordinate legislation under an Act of Parliament cannot override plenary legislation enacted by the State Legislature...." However, the Supreme Court of India, in *Kalyani Mathivanan vs K.V. Jayaraj and Ors* (AIR 2015 SC1875 para 22) overruled it by holding "we hold that the UGC's Regulations through a subordinate legislation has binding effect on the Universities to which it applies...." The reason given by the Court for reaching this conclusion is that "it is only when both the Houses of the Parliament approve the regulation, the same can be given effect". It may be clarified here that Parliament does not formally approve any rule or regulation laid in the House. It can only amend a rule which has already come into effect before it is so laid; if Parliament amends the rule, it will, thereafter, be effective in the amended form. With due respect to their lordships, the observation of the Court does not correctly reflect the parliamentary procedure relating to the laying down of rules and regulations in the Houses of Parliament.

The question whether the UGC regulations override a State law can be answered only in terms of Article 254 of the Constitution which deals with repugnancy. Under this Article, if a State law is repugnant to the central law, the State law, to the extent of repugnancy, be void. But is a regulation made by the UGC, a central law within the meaning of Article 254? Clause (2) of this Article says that if the law made by the legislature of a state has been reserved for the consideration of the President and has received his assent, it shall prevail in the State. In this clause the word 'law' simply means the Bill passed by the legislature and sent to the President. It does not include the rules and regulations which are framed only after assent is received. So, what overrides a State law is a Bill passed by both Houses of Parliament and assented to by the President, and certainly not the subordinate legislation.

A key ruling

In any case, the Court made a significant ruling on the question of mandatory application of Regulation 7.3.0 of the UGC relating to the selection and appointment of vice chancellors in the *Kalyani Mathivanan* case (*supra*) it says: "However, the finding of the Bombay High Court that Regulation 7.3.0 has to be treated as recommendatory in nature is upheld in so far as it relates to Universities and Colleges under the State Legislation." This ruling may perhaps help resolve the present controversy.

Prioritising IMEC is in America's best interest

The United States-India relationship has evolved into an increasingly vital strategic partnership ever since the Clinton administration laid the foundation for a new direction in the 1990s. Today, broad bipartisan consensus supports building upon these ties even further, driven by converging interests in economic growth, regional security, and democratic values. As global dynamics shift, the importance of this relationship for the Trump administration becomes even more pronounced.

The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) agreement presents a tremendous opportunity for President Donald Trump to solidify this multilateral partnership while advancing both the strategic interests of the U.S. and India. By leading the effort to secure cooperation among the participating nations, the U.S. can help create a robust economic corridor to ensure free and open trade routes, with enhanced energy security and technological innovation, which, in turn, will also benefit American companies.

More conceptual now

Announced in 2023, IMEC represents an ambitious vision to forge an integrated network spanning three vital regions through advanced physical and digital infrastructure. The corridor must develop efficient transportation routes, including railways, shipping networks, and maritime connections, while also establishing cross-border electricity and hydrogen pipelines and digital communication cables. The end goals should be to enhance trade connectivity and reduce transportation costs, while diversifying global supply chains and promoting deeper economic integration among participating countries (India, the U.S., the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Italy, France, Germany, and the European Commission).

At the moment, it is reasonable to suggest that IMEC is more conceptual than concrete. Meeting its lofty goals requires extensive planning and cooperation. The Trump administration's leadership on this matter could enhance his legacy on the international stage. By supporting IMEC, the U.S. and India can establish a

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The U.S. and India must ensure the completion of this project, which represents a fundamental reimagining of regional economic cooperation

compelling alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), creating a more balanced global economic architecture that aligns with western democratic values and market principles.

IMEC was never destined to be a straightforward endeavour. Each participating nation faces a complex calculus of investment, political will and economic strategy. The corridor demands substantial infrastructure investments that directly compete with other national priorities. Moreover, private sector engagement introduces another layer of complexity. Corporate investors require clear pathways to return on investment; and without active engagement from the private sector, it is unlikely that the project could succeed.

Several countries, such as Greece and Italy, have shown substantial initiative on IMEC. France has distinguished itself by appointing a special envoy in Gérard Mestrallet, who is not a traditional diplomat. France's President Emmanuel Macron has chosen a proven business leader from France to head this geopolitical and economic initiative, as he recognises its economic potential for France. The UAE and Saudi Arabia appreciate the role IMEC can play in advancing relationships with the West, and have spearheaded efforts for its implementation. Without regular, strategic engagement, there is a significant risk of creating an uneven economic landscape that could breed tension and political friction among participating nations. The corridor offers transformative economic opportunities not just for coastal regions and primary ports but also for inland areas that could become crucial nodes in this expansive trade network. Even within the region, we have already seen countries such as Iraq and Türkiye initiate trade agreements to complement IMEC.

As an alternative to China's BRI

IMEC promises substantial economic advantages for India by dramatically reducing trade costs and transforming maritime logistics. This strategic network reduces vulnerability to potential disruptions such as those that might occur in the Suez Canal, but also creates compelling opportunities for increased foreign direct

investment. By positioning itself as an alternative to the BRI, the corridor allows India to strengthen diplomatic ties with West Asian and European countries.

Better for the environment

There are implications to this deal that could impact the earth's climate health. India has emerged as a significant player in green hydrogen development, positioning itself as a potential global leader in this emerging clean energy technology. The country has launched ambitious initiatives to develop green hydrogen as a strategic component of its energy transition and decarbonisation efforts.

India is collaborating with international partners such as Germany and Japan, and developing infrastructure for green hydrogen production, storage, and transportation. This will help reduce carbon emissions, decrease dependence on fossil fuel imports and create new job opportunities in emerging green technology sectors.

The Trump administration's role in facilitating the Abraham Accords proved instrumental in creating the diplomatic conditions that made IMEC possible. Former U.S. President Joe Biden has been a strong proponent of IMEC. Looking ahead, questions remain about IMEC's future under potential new U.S. leadership. One intriguing factor is Mr. Trump's warm personal relationship with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. This rapport could prove significant for ongoing relations. Now that there is a peace agreement between Israel and Hamas, both leaders could facilitate the much needed (and required) meeting of IMEC participants to discuss the next steps.

This endeavour transcends traditional infrastructure development; it represents a fundamental reimagining of regional economic cooperation that requires unprecedented levels of coordination among diverse stakeholders. The U.S. and India, as key architects of the corridor, must work closely to shepherd this project to completion, recognising both its economic significance and environmental implications for all participating countries.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Poor demand

The economist, John Maynard Keynes, wrote that it is the increase in consumption and investment demand that enhances employment, income and output in the economy. That investment by the private sector fell 1.4% in Q3 in India is a case

in point. The sole way out is to increase capital expenditure by the Centre and State governments. Keynes' work, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, one feels, is germane at all times. S. Ramakrishnaswamy, Chennai

'Lit for Life'

Some experts seem to have missed the fact that, notwithstanding the accusation that the general election was not on a level playing field, the BJP's hat-trick performance needs to be recognised. There is no ground to confirm that every BJP voter is a believer

of Hindutva (January 20). There are many who accept the politics of Narendra Modi. This is the beauty of our vibrant democracy. S. Seshadri, Chennai

That "Young India is hankering for a new kind of politics" sounds surprising.

While the well-educated young India leaves for other continents, one also has the less educated migrating in search of a livelihood. But do the young really vote? In a hugely populated nation as ours, no political party can ever claim to solve every issue. However, great minds can help ease

problems for the people. Political parties should focus on the young to ensure that they serve India and not other nations. Balasubramanian Pavan, Secunderabad

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

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The IndianEXPRESS

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RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

Who's afraid of Trump?

Apprehensions of disruptions to the global order may be greatly exaggerated



SANJAYA BARUA

TRUST AFTER RG KAR

Verdict offers some closure. But case has raised questions that demand more answers, interventions by city, state, country

NEARLY SIX MONTHS after he was arrested for the rape and murder of a 31-year-old trainee doctor in Kolkata's RG Kar Medical College and Hospital in August last year, the Saldah Court awarded a life sentence to Sanjaya Roy on Monday. The verdict offers a semblance of closure for the irreparable loss of a young life in a metropolis that prides itself for its progressive traditions and safe spaces, especially for women. The road ahead now must concern itself with the task of rebuilding citizen trust in the city.

The public outrage triggered by the incident at RG Kar rippled across the country last year. In Kolkata, agitating doctors had flagged issues that continue to haunt institutions and public spaces — CCTV cameras that don't work, absence of on-call rooms, gender-segregated wash rooms, lack of a centralised patient referral system and inadequate security measures that have rendered doctors increasingly vulnerable to violence. They were speaking for West Bengal but their demands and complaints could hold true for any city in India. When it comes to women's safety, there continues to be a yawning chasm between intentions and outcomes. For instance, the 100 per cent increase in the budgetary allocation of the Nirbhaya Fund for 2024-25 notwithstanding, data shows that between 2013, when the fund was set up, and 2022, less than half of the allocation had been spent. In the aftermath of the RG Kar case incident, the Aparajita Woman and Child (West Bengal Criminal Laws and Amendment) Bill 2024, was passed by the state assembly, seeking speedy trials and death penalty for heinous crimes against women. Expediting cases and ensuring that there is a restraint of the law — rather than a sense of impunity — are crucial for deterring future incidents. But it must also come with safeguards against knee-jerk reactions and quick-fix solutions.

For long, Bengal has been a place where women have been at the centre of a development narrative. Women also form the core of the electoral base of the current ruling party, TMC, bolstered by Mamata Banerjee's women-oriented schemes such as Lakshmi Bhandar and Kanyashree. The party has the highest proportion of women in the Lok Sabha. In the initial days after the incident, Banerjee had chosen to be blinkered, refusing to hear the rumours both within her party and in the city-wide agencies. She accepted eventually to the requests of agitating doctors to look into their grievances. At the Saldah court, as the victim's family refused compensation, the judge said, "I don't think money can compensate (for) any death. It was the liability of state to protect your daughter as she was on duty..." No amount of retroactive action can make up for the senseless loss of a loved one to violence. But this is the moment for the state and society to affirm the commitment to make good on promises of empowerment and equality. Gender-sensitive design and policy should be integrated into city planning, women's mobility must not come at the cost of their safety. Most of all, larger conversations on gender are needed, across spectrums.

MIS, NOT MSP

For farmers, minimum income support, not minimum support price, is the way forward

IN NOVEMBER 2021, the Narendra Modi government repealed its three agricultural reform laws following protests by farm unions agitating at Delhi's borders. At that time, it tried hard to reach out to the unions and convince them about how the laws — which allowed trade in produce to take place outside state government-controlled markets and agri-businesses to source directly from growers — were in farmer interest, but in vain. Today, the shoe's on the other foot. Since February 1 year, farmers from Punjab and Haryana have been unsuccessfully attempting to enter the national capital, while demanding enactment of a law guaranteeing payment of the government-declared minimum support price (MSP) for all crops. One farm union leader has been on a hunger strike since November 26 — he has accepted medical aid on Day 55 of his fast. This time round, however, the Modi government's approach has been one bordering on indifference. It has finally offered to hold talks, but only on February 14.

But sides are at fault here. The farm reform laws were, no doubt, well-intentioned. The failure, then, lay not in the bills' provisions, but in the way they were steamrolled through Parliament sans any real debate. The dialogue with the farm unions happened much after the laws got passed. The Modi government shouldn't make the same mistake of not engaging the right time. The ruling party's recent electoral victories in Haryana and Maharashtra leave it with sufficient bargaining position to convince the unions about the unreasonableness of the demand for a "legal MSP". Prices of crops, like all commodities, are or should be determined by the forces of supply and demand. Farmers must ultimately produce what the market wants. The government would do better to ensure well-functioning markets rather than fixing, leave alone guaranteeing, MSPs.

The debate should move from guaranteeing minimum "prices" for crops to assuring some kind of a minimum "income" for farmers. There is already a Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi scheme that provides Rs 6,000 annually to all landholding farmers. The quantum of income support under this scheme can, perhaps, be enhanced and even modified from a per-farmer to per-hectare or per-animal basis. All the taxpayer money now being spent on farm input subsidies — whether on fertiliser, electricity, water or credit — can be redirected and converted into direct income support. With pricing of crops and inputs left to the market, it will enable the government to focus on what farmers actually deserve — a minimum income so long as they continue to farm. MIS, not MSP, is the way forward.

DJOKOVIC'S LAST STAND

At the Australian Open, in a riveting game between a titan and a star, both bragging rights and history are at stake

THE TENNIS CALENDAR is only into its first month but already what could turn out to be the defining contest of the year is here. The last titan of the greatest generation in the men's game, Novak Djokovic, against one of the current stars on the circuit, Carlos Alcaraz. At 37 and coming off a season without adding to his Grand Slam tally, it would be tempting to conclude that Djokovic is no longer a force at the very top of the sport, especially when Alcaraz and Jannik Sinner evenly split all the Majors of 2024 between them. But as the Serb showed in winning his first Olympic singles gold in Paris, beating Alcaraz in the final, nothing is beyond him. With the Spaniard needing the Australian Open to complete a career Grand Slam, both bragging rights and history are at stake.

Djokovic is the most successful male player in Grand Slam history, lifting the Australian Open trophy no less than 10 times. But he wears his sleeve a grievance that he hasn't got his due, or not as much as his illustrious contemporaries Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal have. This year, too, he has brought up the ignominy of deportation from Australia during the pandemic and even alleged that he may have been "poisoned" during that episode.

Djokovic plays his best when he believes the world is against him. It fuels his angst to prove a point and makes him a dangerous proposition for his opponent. The Serb has improved as the tournament has progressed, and has a narrow 4-3 lead in their head-to-head history. But in a bid to prevent himself from being consigned to the status of a legend from the past, that too at his favourite hunting ground, this could be Djokovic's last stand.

GRANT IT TO Donald Trump. He knows how to sell an idea and get the market all excited and worried. He will reclaim the Panama Canal, occupy Greenland and subjugate Canada. He might even orchestrate a political coup in London. An entire industry of global commentators has emerged predicting turbulence in world affairs caused by a disruption of the so-called post-war "rules-based international order" by President Donald Trump. It is not merely adversaries like China, Iran and Russia that he will go after, it is predicted, but also allies and friends across Europe and Asia.

The Indian leadership seems to have gone into a funk, more after President Xi Jinping received an invitation to Trump's inaugural. All the speculation about who was spotted at which do in Washington DC this weekend is no different from the excitement surrounding the guest list to a billionaire's wedding.

How much of this Trumpian turbulence and disruption talk is bluff and bluster? Indeed, how capable is the United States today to disrupt and damage the existing global order without hurting itself? Can Trump Make America Great Again hurting allies and losing friends? Can he do that taking countries hostage? Is the international community so weak, disorganised and vulnerable that it will simply bend and crawl? Do sovereign nations have no options?

What is so special and challenging about Trump's "America First" platform? When was the last time the United States placed another country's needs and wants ahead of its own for Trump to now claim that it is time for the US to declare America First? America has always been first for its leadership after the Second World War. It has refused to step away from the countries it defeated and occupied in that war. On the other hand, it engaged in new wars to secure control over new territories, and then claimed it was ensuring global peace and stability in the name of a "rules-based liberal international order". This was true even when it invested in the defence of countries that it either occupied, like Japan, South Korea and most of western Europe, or in supplicant countries of the Anglosphere.



AKSHITA AGARWAL

INDIAN AGRICULTURE is at a critical juncture, balancing the need for food security, rural livelihoods, and sustainability amid global and domestic challenges. While strides have been made in productivity, India continues to lag in adoption of several modern technology innovations. To build a vibrant agri economy by 2047, here are seven imperatives for the Indian agri industry.

First, use of AI in agriculture. India is starting to deploy AI for critical use cases such as weather forecasting, pest detection and control, and crop yield optimisation. However, penetration is limited to a small subset of tech-savvy farmers. In the US and Europe, generative AI tools have started offering precision farming at scale, integrating large datasets to provide real-time agronomic insights. For at-scale integration and accessibility of in India, it would be helpful to develop vernacular AI platforms for smallholder farmers, partner with AgTechs to create affordable AI solutions, and disseminate AI-based advisory services through government programmes.

Second, India has started in pockets with regenerative farming practices such as organic farming and zero-budget natural farming. However, monoculture practices and excessive chemicals and fertiliser use dominates most farming systems, leading to soil degradation and biodiversity loss. France and the US lead in regenerative agriculture through structural policies, farmer incentives and R&D on sustainable practices. For India, the focus should be on a national regenerative farming

FIELDS OF VIKSIT BHARAT

Seven imperatives for the Indian agri industry

India stands at a crossroads in modernising its agricultural practices. By embracing innovation and fostering public-private collaborations, it can become a global leader in sustainable and technologically advanced farming. The idea is not to copy-paste solutions that have worked elsewhere in the world, but rather to customise and adapt farming practices based on the Indian agri context.

policy and private sector-led R&D for capital efficient agri-ecosystem practices.

Third, robotics adoption in India is limited due to high costs and a large labour force in rural areas. Basic automation tools like seeders and sprayers are more common, but advanced technologies such as robotic harvesters are inaccessible to most farmers. To build a foundation for robotics and automation, India must develop low-cost robotic solutions tailored for small agri hubs, set up AgTech hubs for testing and deploying automation and promote public-private partnerships to scale robotics innovation. Fourth, India's alternative protein market is in its infancy, driven by startups. Affordability and scalability remain major barriers to adoption. The EU leads in alternative proteins with government-backed initiatives and cutting-edge R&D. In India, the focus must be on collaborating with global leaders to improve production, formulation techniques and public awareness on lab-grown proteins.

Fifth, digital twins are limited in Indian agriculture. Field trials are manual and time-consuming, increasing costs and delaying the deployment of new crop technologies. The US employs digital twin technology at scale to model field trials virtually, reducing costs and speeding up the launch of agri-inputs. In India, partnering with AgTechs to pilot such projects, training researchers in digital modeling and exploring tax incentives for investing in digital twin solutions can not only boost transparency but also unlock productivity.

cent of global income. Europe Union is down to 17 per cent, despite its export and Japan has contracted all the way down to 4 per cent. Then, too, it was the allies that got hit. Adversaries survived.

No wonder the export dependent Europeans and Japanese are in a funk now. But what of China and India. China increased its share after that unipolar moment from 4 per cent to 17 per cent, emerging as a contending pole. India did not do too badly either. India came out of an unprecedented economic crisis, made worse by American belligerence of the unipolar moment, and found its own path to renewed growth.

If a weaker China and a much weaker India survived that unipolar moment and threw spanner in the works of the "end of history" theorists, why should a stronger China and India worry too much about Trumpian turbulence today? Sure, both would be hurt by Trump's threatened tariffs, but Americans would be hurt too. Any sharp increase in US tariffs will hurt producers in China and India, but it will also hit consumers in America.

The global economy is far too integrated for even the most powerful entity to imagine that it can hurt without getting hurt. If the US looks inward to improve its infrastructure, invest in the education and health of its citizens, create more jobs at home for the unemployed that would be good for the world economy. If America first means investing US tax payers' money at home and not on soldiers who go to distant lands to die that too would be good for America and the world. The US still has the capacity to do global good and in helping itself it could help the world.

At least some of the alarm generated by Trump's return to office could well be motivated by those in Washington DC who either imagine they can scare countries into submission or hope to offer their lobbying services. That could also be true in many capitals around the world.

The writer was Member, National Security Advisory Board of India, 1999-2001 and media advisor to Prime Minister of India, 2004-08

JANUARY 21, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

JAYALALITHA DISMISSED

THE POWER STRUGGLE in the AIADMK took another turn with the party parliamentary board removing Jayalalitha, Rajya Sabha Member, from the post of deputy leader of the AIADMK parliamentary party. Jayalalitha has challenged the high command's decision. Party General Secretary P U Shanmugam said that the decision was taken following a letter "received from MGR". Jayalalitha described it as "100 per cent bogus".

TRAIN BLOWN UP

AT LEAST 34 people including 23 soldiers

were killed in Sri Lanka when Tamil guerrillas blew up a Colombo-bound train about 300 kilometres north of the capital. A senior government spokesman confirmed that the death toll was 34 and said it may run higher because of serious injuries sustained by other passengers.

ISRAEL'S EXIT

THE ISRAELI ARMY began the first stage of its withdrawal from southern Lebanon by moving support units away from the Lebanese city of Sidon. A source said that combat units will not be affected until the very last moment. The government set

February 18 as the deadline for the completion of the first stage of the withdrawal in the region of Sidon and the Zahraní estuary.

SPY SCANDAL

ALLAIN BOLLEY, DEPUTY military, air and naval attaché of the French Embassy, was asked to leave the country for his alleged involvement in the spy scandal in which about a dozen persons, including officials of the Prime Minister's office and other sensitive ministries have been arrested by intelligence agencies. Bolley pleaded ignorance about the involvement of any French diplomat or member of the Embassy in the spy scandal.

Ahmedabad



OUR VIEW

GUEST VIEW



How we should adapt to a Trumpian world order

We must avoid the lock-in of a trade deal, grab business openings and strengthen mutually beneficial ties, but hold firm on autonomy. Broadly, let's aim for what'll make India great

How should India advance its interests in the Trumpian world that was inaugurated on Monday? As US president, Trump is expected to alter American and global norms on trade, migration, climate change, relations between government and business, the use of military might and more. His avowed goal is to make America great again (MAGA). It is risky. Trumpian policies might hurt the US itself and the world at large. India must navigate its way through a world in flux, ruffling as few feathers as it can, while shielding its core interests. Trump will be in power for four years. How long his ideas last after that is uncertain, which means New Delhi should not lock India into long-term commitments that harm our interests merely to accommodate short-term pressure from Washington. Let's not rush into a trade pact with the US just to satisfy a mutual urge to announce a 'deal.' On trade, till there is clarity on the tariffs that Trump will actually adopt, which may differ from his rhetoric, there is nothing much we can do, except avoid locking ourselves into an agreement that runs a high risk of regret.

A sensible course would be to negotiate ad-hoc deals. For instance, if Trump wants lower import duties on big US motorbikes, we could grant him those, while seeking concessions in sectors that affect Indian industry more broadly. H1-B visas matter a lot to us, and, for the time being, Trump is backing advocates of visa liberalization like Elon Musk. We should build on this disposition. Trump's policies can change over his tenure. Our focus on expanding service exports from India should stay constant. On geopolitical matters, India and the US have concerns that both overlap and diverge. We

should strengthen ties on overlaps, while also quietly reinforcing our strategic autonomy in areas of divergence. The MAGA crowd may bay for US cudgels taken up against those seen as deviants from a Trump-set world order, be it over compliance with US sanctions or the pursuit of multilateral arrangements that lean in favour of the Global South. But New Delhi would have to stand firm and make trade-offs that minimize damage to our interests, while enhancing benefits for both India and the US.

This is not just a matter of clarity and diplomatic finesse. Withstanding geopolitical and economic pressure calls for vastly expanded and varied domestic capability. Sure, this cannot be created overnight, but a sound start must be made. Sensible policy formulation should be followed up with sufficient funding and resolute implementation. Trump seems set to admit a select group of chummy business owners to the inner circles of US policymaking and make arbitrary calls that seek to maximize short-term US benefits even if others suffer. With luck, such deviance by the world's largest economy will not warp the world order in a way that cannot be undone later. It would call for deft manoeuvring to defend existing norms by sub-global groupings and agreements to uphold rules that serve the world well, even if the US flouts them. Of particular concern is our effort to combat climate change. How Trump sees the threat does not diminish the reality of it, so the rest of us cannot afford any let-up on climate action. We should champion carbon capture-and-use technologies and businesses, step up both our adoption and advocacy of clean energy, and push ahead towards net-zero. India should be among the countries that Trump's policies make great.

India's credit guarantee scheme for startups holds high potential

It provides much needed collateral-free loans at a time when risk capital has been slowing down



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India's economy is poised to become the world's third largest and a key growth driver will be startups. Accordingly, with a view to building a strong ecosystem for nurturing innovation and encouraging investments in it, Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the Startup India initiative in 2016.

The government unveiled a plan comprising 19 action points across areas such as "simplification and handholding", "funding support and incentives" and "industry-academia partnership and incubation." In the last 10 years, over 120,000 startups have been registered in India, making it the third largest startup ecosystem and home to the third highest number of startup unicorns (privately held ventures with valuations of over \$1 billion), rising from just one in 2011.

The emerging trends in this rapidly evolving entrepreneurial ecosystem include (a) rising gender parity, (b) a mindset shift towards entrepreneurship and (c) digital public infrastructure that aids informal entrepreneurship. In terms of the broader business environment beyond technology, the gender gap between male and female entrepreneurship is narrowing. A confluence of government efforts and press coverage has helped bring about a wide mindset change from people being job seekers to job creators. Starting with school education, efforts in recent years have

focused on creativity and innovation. Digital payment interfaces (QR codes) are being used to pay instead of cash by businesses in even remote locations. For India to realize its Visions Bharat ambition of development by 2047, it needs to democratize entrepreneurship to reach more regions of the country.

The major components of "funding support and incentives" are (a) Fund of Fund Scheme (FFS), (b) Startup India Seed Fund Scheme (SISFS), and (c) Credit Guarantee Scheme for Startups (CGSS). The FFS, with a corpus of ₹10,000 crore, facilitates the equity funding needs of startups. The SISFS, with an outlay of ₹945 crore, aims to provide financial assistance in the form of grants to startups for proof of concept, prototype development, product trials, market entry and commercialization. The CGSS, with a corpus of ₹1,000 crore, enables startups to raise debt by providing guarantees to their lenders.

Lately, venture capital (VC) funding has slowed as funders have turned more cautious and selective. Exit options for VCs tend to prove costly for startups. The banking sector too perceives high risk of mortality associated with startups, coupled with lack of collateral. Hence, risk mitigation through a credit guarantee structure arose as a demand. As loans from banks offer startups a cheaper way to meet their long-term capital needs, the CGSS launch was a welcome government move.

It came into effect on 6 October 2022 and backstops debt funding up to ₹10 crore per borrower, enabling startups to access much-needed collateral-free debt. This scheme's key features include: (a) a completely digital and automated process; (b) member lending institutions (MLIs) checking if eligibility parameters are met; (c) collateral-free loans to startups recognized by the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade; and (d) lending through two models, namely (i) transaction-based on a single borrower basis for banks/non-banking financial companies

(NBFCs)/financial institutions (FIs), and (ii) umbrella lending on a portfolio basis for alternate investment funds (AIFs).

The scheme catalyses entrepreneurship by providing credit support to innovators and encouraging financial institutions to provide early-stage debt funds.

The scheme's MLIs are scheduled commercial banks, financial institutions, NBFCs registered with the Reserve Bank of India with a minimum net worth of ₹100 crore and credit rating of BBBB and above, and AIFs registered with the Securities and Exchange Board of India.

As on 31 December, the total number of lenders registered under the scheme stood at 28, which includes public sector banks, private sector lenders, all India financial institutions, foreign banks, NBFCs, small finance banks and AIFs. Cumulatively, 257 loans worth ₹601.86 crore have been guaranteed under the scheme so far and employment generation through these startups stands at 20,871 individuals. Women borrowers get special benefits.

The scheme covers 18 states across India, including Assam. More than 50 startups are located in Tier II (including Lucknow, Nashik, Jaipur, Cochin and Indore) and Tier III (including Akola, Medchal, Tonk and Rangareddy) cities, helping new businesses across the country. The list of borrowers supported include 19 export-oriented units and 19 import substitutive units. As many as 123 and 84 beneficiaries are from the manufacturing and services sectors, respectively. Major segments represented include IT (37), capital goods (26), textiles (22) and consumer services (20). As many as 17 startups have promoters from disadvantaged groups. Of the total portfolio, around 75% of the loans are for working capital support, helping startups meet their operational needs. This credit guarantee scheme, with customized changes over time, can help revolutionize India's startup financing ecosystem.

These are the authors' personal views.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

"I skate to where the puck is going to be, not where it has been."

WAYNE GRETZKY

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Trump's presidency: End of the Washington Consensus

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The second US presidency of Donald Trump will be the most consequential for any president after World War II. This assessment, shared by many analysts, is best articulated by conservative columnist David Brooks. Approval ratings for Trump's promised policies exceed the proportion of people who voted for him. Most Americans support strict action against illegal aliens, raising import tariffs, curbing immigration, cutting back support for Nato allies and reducing the size of government. These actions are on the cards. Whether the public also supports other far-fetched ideas like making Canada the 51st state, taking over Greenland and Panama, or renaming the Gulf of Mexico remains to be seen. These ideas are only talk as of now, and unlikely to be followed through. But the action on immigration, protective tariffs and reducing military aid for countries like Germany, Canada and Japan seem imminent.

It would mark a break in a scenario which has existed for four decades. America has

been the bastion of free-market capitalism and a champion of free trade. It is turning to protectionism and other forms of state intervention. It will pick winners and give fiscal support to domestic industries. In 1989, the British economist John Williamson coined the phrase "Washington Consensus." It template for a set of policies that became a template for developed countries and then emerging economies pursuing reforms, including India after 1991. The Berlin Wall fell and Soviet Union split only after that phrase. It is shorthand for unrestricted free-market policies and minimal government intervention. Its prescription was low fiscal deficits, tax rates and import tariffs removing controls on foreign exchange and investment; deregulating banking and interest rates; reducing state ownership of businesses; and privatizing public sector companies. Many of Trump's proposed policies are big deviations, if not U-turns on these principles. Punitive high import tariffs are the direct opposite of the dogma. Under the slogan of "Make America Great Again," his government is willing to support American firms with subsidies to help them compete against the Chinese. Besides this, Trump and his supporters want to go against Big Tech companies, threatening them with antitrust

action, even split-ups. Similar sentiment has been expressed against large financial institutions as well. Summing up protectionism, winner-picking, antitrust threats, tariffs, etc, a former Republican Senator said it amounts to an "attack on economic freedom and free enterprise" and that it was surprising that even conventionally pro-free-market Republican party members seem to support these measures.

Is this the end of the Washington Consensus? It very much seems so.

To be fair, cracks began to be seen 20 years ago. Thanks to the Consensus, the International Monetary Fund was about to make free capital account convertibility a prerequisite for all charter members, just before the Lehman crash of 2008. But the global financial crisis, followed by a sovereign debt crisis in Europe, put paid to any further mindless free-market liberalization, especially in the financial sector. Rising youth unemployment, increasing income and wealth inequality and divergences in wages and profit

growth put a serious question mark against the axioms of the Washington Consensus. Brexit and Trump's 2016 win offered more evidence of cracks. By 2004, the phrase "Beijing Consensus" had been coined for policies of China's economic development model. It emphasized sovereignty and independence,

plus calibrated and gradual reform, rather than neo-liberal shock therapy, and experiments rather than ideologically driven policies. It also meant a big government role in promoting development, peace and stability. Skeptical of Beijing's overarching control over its economy, economist Larry Summers suggested a "Mumbai Consensus" as a better way for the mid-21st century. He said it was neither dictated by the world's largest absorber of immigrants, legal or illegal, and took an indulgent view before the rise of Donald Trump.

Be that as it may, Trump is charting a new course for America's trajectory that departs from the Washington Consensus. Earlier,

apart from championing free market policies, the US was ready to be the "spender of last resort" and ensure the security of global trade routes, be it via the Suez Canal, Persian Gulf, East China Sea or the Panama Canal. By one estimate, the US has spent over \$7 trillion on the safety of West Asian trade routes alone. The US also had a strong US military presence in some Nato ally countries, even as prosperous ones did not even spend 2% of their GDP on defence. America has also been the world's largest absorber of immigrants, legal or illegal, and took an indulgent view before the rise of Donald Trump.

All this global commitment will be ruthlessly re-examined during Trump 2.0, as America turns more isolationist. Never mind that in the post-war period, the US earned handsome dividends from the dollar's hegemony, seigniorage income, access to world markets and resources, and as a magnet for the world's entrepreneurial, science, engineering and art talent. The term of the 47th US President is unprecedented in many ways. He is the first former and first incoming president who has been convicted of felony. America's people and democracy have eclipsed concepts of legality not just in allowing, but welcoming him to its top office. The world order is set to be rejigged.