







| GUEST VIEW

MINT CURATOR

# Don't vacillate on a framework to regulate crypto assets in India

We must catch up with others and institute an oversight mechanism that can assure investors the safety of their investments



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In early 2019, a committee I headed as secretary, department of economic affairs, proposed a law for digital currencies that would lay down the statutory base for a blockchain-based crypto assets ecosystem. There was no follow-up on it and India still has no statute or regulation that defines 'crypto assets' and the rules of running a crypto business in the country.

In the meantime, the world has moved rapidly towards mainstreaming crypto assets and cryptocurrencies. The US Senate recently passed the GENIUS Act, legalizing privately issued dollar-backed stablecoins. The market value of cryptocurrencies now exceeds \$3.25 trillion. If all cryptocurrencies are taken as a single currency, it would be the world's tenth largest by value.

Can India continue to ignore crypto assets? Why should India not go about building a sound statutory and regulatory ecosystem for them?

The consequences of inaction: I have closely watched India's crypto ecosystem over the past decade. Despite the absence of regulations, many crypto exchanges were set up. Operating outside the law or in a grey zone without a legal framework, they flourished for some time by conducting an incoherent mix of legitimate and illegitimate transactions. Then crypto gains were brought under the tax net, trading almost collapsed and some frauds came to light.

GainBitcoin, a Ponzi-style multi-level marketing scheme that ran from 2015 to 2018, allegedly duped thousands of investors of an estimated ₹6,600 crore by promising fixed monthly returns of 10% on Bitcoin deposits, leaving scheme subscribers with worthless 'market capitalization' tokens. The Central Bureau of Investigation has been investigating it and conducting raids.

WazirX, India's largest crypto exchange, faced Enforcement Directorate searches in August 2022, which led to the global exchange Binance publicly distancing itself from WazirX despite an earlier ownership claim, causing widespread confusion. In 2024, WazirX suffered a massive hack that resulted in the loss of 45% of the user assets (worth \$230 million) held by it. There is no recourse in sight for the investors who lost their crypto assets. In a Singapore court, WazirX proposed a restructuring plan to distribute the remaining user assets. The proceedings reveal a tale of compromises, hidden actors and regulatory violations, including operations conducted without a digital token service provider (DTSP) licence. They also exposed an offshore entity registered in Panama that held effective operational control.

Under the radar are numerous fly-by-night operators with various schemes aimed aggressively at retail investors in small cities. Some online exchanges are fake; others end in rug pulls, leaving asset buyers clueless once these platforms vanish.



To prevent such fraud, India needs smart, enforceable and investor-centric crypto regulations.

Let crypto crises not go to waste: All the crypto crises we have faced, involving substantial erosion in the wealth of crypto investors, have reinforced what I have long maintained: India's approach to crypto assets has been piecemeal, passive and systemically unsustainable.

We must bring crypto-asset operations in India within the ambit of a defined and enforceable legal and regulatory framework that would help create a fair and transparent system of ownership and trading. We should break the existing legal and regulatory logjam by separating trading, custody, lending, broking and technical services. This will help eliminate problems of groupthink and moral hazard (risky actions taken in the belief that someone else will bear the consequences). We also have to provide legal recourse to investors if a platform fails or causes them other forms of suffering.

This is a moment of reckoning: We can avoid the flawed models of early crypto adopters. We know how to build large-scale digital systems. We built Aadhaar for identity, the Unified Payments Interface for payments and the goods and services tax network for taxation. We can surely build a reliable governance framework for digital assets and exchanges that operate as marketplaces for trades. These exchanges would ensure liquidity under the watch of independent custodians and a comprehensive regulatory mechanism.

We can lean on global experiences. The EU's Markets in Crypto-Assets Regulation, for example, lays down clear responsibilities for operators and

custodians. The GENIUS Act of the US focuses on regulating stablecoins. Even Pakistan is currently establishing a crypto-regulatory authority. India, a country that pioneered innovative infrastructure for fintech and digital payments, must not remain on the sidelines. We need to create space for well-regulated digital assets to thrive.

India's new crypto assets ecosystem should have four cornerstones:

**First, clearly segregated functions for crypto exchanges, brokers, aggregators, custodians and other entities:** These must be recognized as distinct players with defined roles.

**Second, compulsory licensing:** All entities in the ecosystem must operate within sound financial regulatory oversight.

**Third, full and functional transparency:** Institute regular audits, disclosure norms for operational structures and mechanisms for incident reporting.

**Fourth, insistence on Indian jurisdiction:** Asset ownership and contractual agreements must be legally enforceable under a specific Indian law.

In addition, we need strong penalties for fraud and false advertising to deter all actors with any mala fide intent.

If we build a strong statutory and regulatory ecosystem for crypto assets, Indians would be able to participate in this market with confidence in the safety of their investments. Global investors will see India as a sound market. With clear obligations to meet, operators would focus on responsible innovation and safeguarding investor interests.

Delays are costly, but India still has a leadership opportunity here. The time to act is now.

## Kraft Heinz split: Cold cheeses are a burden for its hot sauces

Hiving off the weak unit could well result in greater value overall



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When schools returned to in-person learning in the fall of 2021 after the pandemic, parents scrambled to find Lunchables to put in their children's backpacks. Today, the meal kit of processed meats and cheese may be off the menu amid the desire for healthier food, but its manufacturer, Kraft Heinz, is firmly on it.

The company is exploring spinning off the division that makes Lunchables, alongside Kraft cheese and Oscar Mayer hot dogs from its faster-growing arm that makes ketchup. A split could deliver modest value for shareholders. The biggest upside, though, would come from tempting bidders to pay up for each of the individual companies.

To recap: Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway and private equity firm 3G Capital acquired J.H. Heinz for \$28 billion, including debt, in 2013. Two years later, they merged it with Kraft Foods, the US grocery business that had been spun out of what would become Mondelez International (more on that later).

But Kraft Heinz has grappled with changing consumer tastes and, most recently, the rise of GLP-1 weight-loss drugs. As sales have come under pressure, its shares have lost 70% since 2017. Little wonder then that the company said in May that it was "evaluating potential strategic transactions" to boost its stock price.

The logic for a split is straightforward. Kraft Heinz's sauces, spreads and condiments business, which generates annual sales of about \$11 billion, is growing faster than processed meat and cheese. People are seeking more flavour in their food, particularly if their appetites shrink—either because they are getting older or taking obesity treatments. Freed from their more sluggish sibling, brands like Grey Poupon mustard and Lea & Perrins sauce could command a higher valuation multiple.

There is a precedent here—ironically from Mondelez. After Kraft was spun off, Mondelez retained the snackier international, confectionary and snacking segments. It has delivered a total return of over 200% since October 2012, almost double the S&P 500 Packaged Foods Index, and trades at a forward enterprise value-to-EBITDA multiple of about 15.

Kraft Heinz's slower-growing grocery arm, which would have sales of about \$14.5 billion, would be valued less generously. It would still be highly cash generative, though, so it could appeal to an investor looking for a steady dividend payer. Analysts at T.D. Cowen estimate that the sau-



A company's whole is sometimes worth less than its sum of parts. **BLOOMBERG**

ces, spreads and condiments division could be worth \$29.5 billion and the grocery arm about \$25 billion. Together, that's only just ahead of Kraft Heinz's enterprise value of \$51 billion.

Given that much of the upside might be swallowed by the higher costs of operating both companies, why bother with a breakup? Because both companies might prove tantalizing to a bidder.

This is exactly what happened in the case of Kellogg. The company spun off its North American cereals business as W.K. Kellogg Company in late 2023. The snackier snack-foods arm, maker of Cheez-It and Pringles, was renamed Kellanova.

Almost a year ago, Mars paid \$36 billion, including debt, for Kellanova, a 44% premium to the share price in the preceding 30 days. Last week, privately held Ferrero International, maker of Nutella, agreed to buy W.K. Kellogg, whose brands include Froot Loops and Corn Flakes, for an enterprise value of \$3.1 billion. The \$23-a-share offer equated to a 40% premium to the share price in the preceding 30 days.

Kraft Heinz's sauces, spreads and condiments arm would fit in McCormick's portfolio, an analyst at Bloomberg Intelligence told me, although there may be competition concerns. And now that Unilever is offloading its ice-cream business, might it be interested in bulking up in dressings?

As for the grocery business, it could appeal to a private equity buyer drawn to its cash flow. One complication is that Kraft Heinz is expected to have net debt of just over \$18 billion at the end of this year, and much of that is likely to be allocated to the food maker. This might make it harder for a financial buyer to load up on borrowings. Still, if this hurdle could be overcome, there could be scope to add other low-growth but cash-generative food businesses to build scale.

If both of Kraft Heinz's component parts are as successful in selling themselves as Kellogg's, this would certainly be a tasty treat for investors.

Since news of Kraft Heinz potentially doing the splits broke at the weekend, there has been much discussion of de-consolidation in the consumer sector. But like Lunchables leaving school bags, this looks more like a prelude to a corporate disappearing act. **BLOOMBERG**

| THEIR VIEW

# India should adopt AI for superior climate forecasting

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For much of modern history, weather forecasting has battled public scepticism. In 19th-century England, Admiral Robert FitzRoy's early forecasts were mocked as "guesses dressed up as science" and umbrellas were used out only when sunshine was predicted. Until recently, India's own meteorological service faced similar mistrust, with people joking that IMD stood for "It Might Drizzle." However, this is beginning to change. India now boasts of satellite infrastructure for climate and weather monitoring that ranks among the world's most advanced.

INSAT-3D, 3DR and newly launched 3DS satellites monitor the atmosphere, land and oceans. These will be complemented by NISAR, an upcoming NASA-ISRO mission, which will track ecosystem shifts, ice melt, sea levels, groundwater and natural hazards. India also has 17 earth observation (EO) satellites, including Resourcesat, Oceansat, Cartosat and Scatsat, which track land use, agriculture, forest cover, water resources and

ocean conditions. Megha-Tropiques and SARAL, part of a collaborative mission with France, aim to keep tropical weather systems, sea levels and ocean circulation under watch. The National Information System for Climate and Environment Studies (NICES) is responsible for integrating satellite data to create long-term climate records and generate variables like snow cover, vegetation indices and glacial lake characteristics. These efforts support the forecasting and tracking of critical climate events. Despite such capabilities, India is at the front line of the global climate crisis, grappling with flash floods, droughts, cyclones and heatwaves.

With a fragile Himalayas range and a long coastline, India's geography amplifies its exposure to climate risks. A 2021 study by Council on Energy, Environment and Water revealed that over 80% of our population resides in districts acutely vulnerable to climate shocks, while much of the country lacks the adaptive capacity to withstand them. India has seen average temperatures rise, with longer and more intense heatwaves. By 2065, these could last up to 25 times longer, posing severe health and agricultural threats. Meanwhile, erratic rainfall and a surge in dry spells have pushed nearly 600 million Indians into water stress.

These challenges demand that we reassess our climate preparedness and explore technologies such as artificial intelligence to prepare better. To achieve our net-zero target for emissions by 2070, climate risks must be assessed across a range of future economic scenarios and their associated carbon footprints. Traditional climate models rely on complex equations to simulate the planet's systems. Globally, AI is now being used in three key ways to enhance climate modelling. First, AI-based emulators like QuickClim and ACE can mimic traditional models by learning patterns of emissions, climate outcomes and their links, enabling faster and cheaper simulations. QuickClim, developed by the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation, used 15 emulators trained in 30 minutes each to make accurate temperature projections. ACE, developed by Allen

Institute for AI, outperformed conventional atmospheric models on speed and precision.

Second, foundation models like ClimateX go beyond replication to uncover new patterns in climate data, offering deeper insights into global climate dynamics using observations that go back more than a century.

Third, hybrid models blend machine learning with physics-based approaches to improve accuracy in complex areas such as cloud and snow formation. Projects like CLIMA (under Caltech, MIT and NASA JPL), Nasa and the European Space Agency's Earth system "digital twins" and the EU's Destinifit initiative aim to create simulations to better predict climate events and minimize uncertainty.

Similarly, AI is transforming weather forecasting by producing accurate predictions up to 10,000 times faster than traditional models, while reducing energy and computing costs. Trained on decades of weather data, AI models can quickly analyse complex atmospheric patterns and deliver

near-real-time forecasts. Notable innovations include Google DeepMind's GraphCast, which uses historical and current data for six-hourly weather forecasts. Huawei's Pangu-Weather delivers accurate weekly forecasts within seconds by processing all weather variables. Nvidia's Earth-2 combines AI and simulation tools, such as FourCastNet, to model extreme weather events such as hurricanes.

While these are encouraging developments, a key challenge in AI-based prediction remains AI's "black box" problem, which makes it difficult to trust or fix AI tools. This has drawn the scepticism of climate scientists, who still lean towards traditional models because of the complexity of Earth's systems and uncertainty over future scenarios. Although AI-based models show promise, their ability to forecast an evolving climate scenario remains uncertain.

India has made significant strides in satellite technology and climate data collection, but the threats of climate change demand a more forward-looking approach. Indian research organizations and leading tech companies must step up to the task of improving the speed and accuracy of climate and weather forecasting. This is vital to our long-term climate resilience.

The use of AI tools can plug gaps in our traditional models if we deploy them carefully



## OUR VIEW



## India's energy transition path is set to get steeper

*With low-hanging fruit plucked, the country's challenge of scaling up renewable energy is getting harder, especially since we need to connect rural India. A new roadmap is in order*

India recently achieved a milestone in its global commitments on climate action, with renewable energy touching the half-way mark in overall electricity generation five years ahead of schedule. The voluntary pledges were made as part of the Paris pact of 2016, when close to 200 countries under the UN's aegis agreed to set themselves targets for the reduction of carbon emissions. The power sector is India's single largest polluter, given our heavy reliance on coal as a fuel to generate it. While our fast-tracked renewable capacity addition is testimony to a slew of policy measures taken to spur solar electricity production, falling global prices of solar panels—they crashed by 90% over the past decade—have made a significant difference too. Shortages across India had signalled demand and we got a robust solar response.

Today, when the sun shines, we have surplus electricity. The state-run power utilities of various states have been turning away new solar supplies even where bulk producers offered competitively priced deals bundled with storage batteries to ensure round-the-clock supply. They may well be expecting prices to soften further, even as global warming steepens the demand path. Over the last three years, residential consumption has grown at 10% annually on the back of brisk air-conditioner sales. Household consumers now account for almost a third of all power consumed in India. Supply shortfalls in recent times, however, have been plugged by electricity sourced from fossil fuels. This reflects a lag in bridging weather-related supply gaps from wind and solar sources. Pumped hydro storage projects are part of the solution, but these take time. Using batteries would be faster; once expensive, they have

grown cheaper and await a scale-up to tackle the 'intermittency' of renewables. While state utilities will need to sign bulk deals for solar power bundled with storage, we must also enlarge our rooftop solar (RTS) capacity.

Decentralized panels mean that much less electricity is hauled across large distances, reducing infrastructure costs and transmission losses. The penetration of RTS, however, remains at a modest 16% of total utility-linked solar capacity. Here's the challenge. Utilities are not keen to promote RTS, as it may herald the partial exit of large household consumers, which is bad for them since they pay close to the actual supply cost. Second, under the Centre's scheme to support RTS installations, utilities pick up excess electricity from these consumers during the day, when power rates are low, and then provide equal supplies in the evening without any extra charge even though this power is about four times costlier; this distorts their account books. On the other hand, for smaller domestic consumers, the incentive to install panels and sell utilities rooftop power is blunted by the heavily subsidized tariffs they pay. While the Centre has sweetened the RTS deal with cheap loans to help rural households pursue economic activity, the attendant tariff distortions need a sunset clause. This calls for a new roadmap that can unleash the true power of decentralized solar panels. To achieve this, we need local market intermediaries that link up decentralized supplies in local geographic areas, so that excess daytime power can be traded efficiently and storage players can also plug in; the power exchanges we have today do not engage retail consumers. Mass-market trading must evolve quickly for India's energy transition to gain pace and aid inclusive growth.

## THEIR VIEW

## Fast income growth is critical to a consumption-driven economy

*India's economic expansion hinges on household income and job security to a considerable extent*



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India's economy is consumption-driven, with private final consumption expenditure contributing nearly 60% to India's gross domestic product (GDP). The consumption trend also has a strong bearing on private investment and hence is critical for the overall growth of the economy. After the pandemic, we saw a sharp bounce-back in consumption, supported by pent-up demand. While that demand has fizzled out in recent years, worries have arisen that our consumption recovery is not broad-based. In the last year, robust agricultural activity has supported rural demand, but there are concerns of weak urban demand.

An important factor for a sustainable pick-up in consumption is optimism among consumers about their present situation and future. According to the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) routine survey of households, the Current Situation Index (CSI) of urban consumer confidence—which reflects perceptions of current economic conditions, employment, price levels and income—has recovered from its pandemic lows but remains in pessimistic territory. Rural consumer confidence, the index reading of which was in the pessimistic zone, has turned neutral. The central bank's survey also shows that income perceptions of rural and urban households are weak, although there has been an improvement lately.

The household sector's economic health should not be viewed in isolation. It must be seen in the context of India's broad macroeconomic balance sheet, particularly of the government and corporate sectors. Since the pandemic, both the general government and non-financial corporate sector have entered a phase of deleveraging. Government debt, which peaked at around 88% of GDP during the covid pandemic, had moderated to 82% by December 2024, aided by fiscal consolidation and robust growth in nominal GDP. Similarly, corporate debt has declined significantly from 68% of GDP in 2017 to just over 50% after the pandemic, thanks in part to the corporate tax rate cut in 2019.

It is important to recognize that the two sectors undergoing deleveraging—the general government and corporations—are key sources of employment and household income through wages, transfers and subsidies. A simultaneous deleveraging cycle in both these sectors may have adverse implications for household income, particularly at a time when household balance sheets increasingly have loans to be paid back.

Muted household income growth is also reflected somewhat in corporate payrolls. Our analysis of a large sample of around 670 listed non-financial companies reveals that employee cost growth slowed to 7.2% in 2024-25, the weakest since 2018-19 (excluding the covid-impacted year of 2020-21). Average annual employee cost growth was 10.7% over the period from 2018-19 to 2023-24. That rate of moderation is largely driven by the infotech sector, which constitutes 44% of total employee costs in our sample. The sector is an employment powerhouse in urban India, but has shown signs of recruitment stagnation in recent years. Our study shows that aggregate headcount at the top five domestic infotech firms plateaued in 2024-25 after a 4% contraction in 2023-24. The growth in employee costs for these firms in our

sample slumped to just 5% in 2024-25 from an average of 14% between 2018-19 and 2023-24. While sectors such as infrastructure, pharmaceuticals and capital goods continue to report double-digit growth in staff expenses, they do not fully compensate, given the significance of the infotech sector in formal urban employment.

India's deceleration in corporate expenditure on remuneration directly hits household income, worsening the economy's consumption weakness. Periodic Labour Force Survey data also shows that real wage growth for salaried as well as casual workers has been muted in the past few years. Meanwhile, geopolitical risks and global trade uncertainties have heightened the risk of a moderation in export growth, with implications for household income and consumption.

Some near-term factors do support consumption demand. The monsoon's progress has been good so far, resulting in better kharif sowing and reservoir levels. This should help strengthen rural demand. Benign retail inflation, specifically in food items, should also support consumption growth.

Policymakers have taken cognisance of headwinds to consumption. Recent RBI rate cuts and the government's income tax relief are steps in the right direction. However, for sustainably stronger consumption, we must ensure ample job creation and household income growth. Government initiatives like its employment- and production-linked incentive schemes should help in job generation. Moreover, given the large number of people entering the job market every year, we may need to take a sector-focused approach. We also need greater emphasis on the formalization of jobs as a way to ensure social security, higher wages and better work conditions. Only when households are confident of their earnings prospects over the foreseeable future will we see a pick-up in consumption spending that is both robust and durable.

## 10 YEARS AGO



## JUST A THOUGHT

The Earth is a fine place and worth fighting for.

ERNEST HEMINGWAY

## MY VIEW | MODERN TIMES

## Why there's a difference between power and influence

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There is a difference between power and influence. Confusing the two lies at the heart of the gamble of several American billionaires who are covertly or overtly backing Donald Trump's war against Western values. Trump's America is somewhat familiar to people outside the West. For what he has changed about his nation is that he has brought third-world practicality to an unnatural but exquisite ideal—that no one is above the law, not even if most of the nation endorses one man to be above it.

An odd thing about democracy is that its best parts are meant to counter the will of the people in case the collective will turns out to be morally corrupt. This is the role of institutions like the judiciary. Democracy is wary of the fact that voters can come under the sway of popular leaders. And the majority need not always be right, at least not more right than the dead people who founded democracy.

What Trump has done, and what we thought could never happen in America, is that he has made institutions submit to a

president. He has done this through threats against those who do not toe his line.

Not only Elon Musk, but several American billionaires have backed Trump in the probable hope of benefiting from aligning with an authoritarian. Some may feel his policies are good for them and the country, even if democratic values get battered. But they have no idea what is going to hit them. They risk losing their true power, which may lead them to realize that influence is just a henchman of power.

The whims of an authoritarian, as Musk has discovered, can change fast. Maybe Trump's billionaires assume that if things go wrong, they can cut their losses. After all, they are powerful too and could try to fight back even if key institutions are compromised. The irony is that they have been spilt by a true democracy for so long that they seem to take their fortunes for granted. They should learn from third-world countries that a billionaire is no match for a popular authoritarian.

In backing Trump's transformation of America, the super-rich have sacrificed their true power for mere influence.

Influence is a kind of currency. It can be bought, and it buys. It is an investment, and can increase in value. Gains can be made by

acquiring assets like media vehicles or funding political campaigns. Once, influence meant a force so independent that the political class had to woo it. Consider the *New York Times*. Now, influence chiefly means something that has submitted to politics. The influential today are interchangeable.

It comes directly from people. Power arises from the misconceptions of millions vested in one person. Misconceptions are important in mass movements. Through these, people build the myth of a leader in their own image. That is why some people can't be mass leaders—they are too clear to be misunderstood.

The larger the number of people from whom one's power comes, the more powerful one is. A hugely popular politician's power comes from hundreds of millions of people. A billionaire's power comes from one person or a few in the hierarchy.

Even in proper democracies, most politicians themselves do not have power. What they have is influence. They are not popular

enough to have true power and frequently have to depend on people misunderstood as legends. A hallmark of a mature democracy is that extreme popularity is not concentrated in a single person. A society where no one has amassed political power but some have amassed vast wealth is a paradise for the

latter. This is what the West is and what America was until Trump. Outside a mature democracy, a billionaire is vulnerable. The world is full of authoritarian regimes that have shown how billions can seem powerful until the next day, when suddenly they are not.

Consider Jack Ma, the co-founder of Alibaba. A way of the world is that if a man has a billion dollars, everything he says is taken as wisdom. And Jack Ma was full of that. He was an articulate Chinese entrepreneur. Until suddenly he went missing. When he re-appeared, he seemed transformed and restrained.

China might be filled with billionaires, but the world is in no doubt who holds power there. In Russia, oligarchs like Mikhail

Khodorkovsky, who mistook their influence for power and tried to take on Vladimir Putin, were ruined. In Saudi Arabia, Prince Mohammed bin Salman detained billionaires, including some members of royalty, at the Ritz-Carlton in 2017 until they pledged their loyalty and wealth to him.

In backing a non-Western regime in America, its rich have set in motion a process that the third world knows well. In anocracy, wealth must choose a side. It cannot remain neutral. America is not there yet, but a path has been charted. Several billionaires seem to have fallen in line. You may argue that they had no choice. But the disenchantment and resistance of the wealthy is the very foundation of political revolutions.

Political reform occurs in a society not because good triumphs over evil, but when an old elite is relegated to the second rung and fights back by sponsoring the rise of more convenient morals. The third world offers proof that when the second rung doesn't manufacture a revolution, and a strongman wins, society begins to decay.

In contrast, good things happen when aristocrats bring down the ruling class. The foundations of European democracy are about that—wealthy merchants asking a rogue king to follow the rules.



# Why 78% coal plants won't need to add anti-pollution devices

NIKHIL GHANEKAR  
NEW DELHI, JULY 20

THE ENVIRONMENT Ministry on July 11 exempted a majority of India's coal-based thermal plants from installing systems that are designed to remove sulphur dioxide (SO<sub>2</sub>) emissions, a key contributor to air pollution. Known as flue gas desulphurisation (FGD) devices, these systems cut SO<sub>2</sub> from flue gas, which is a residue from thermal plants.

Of the remaining plants, those around Delhi-NCR have to comply with a December 2027 deadline and the rest will be asked to fit the devices on a case-to-case basis. Originally, these plants had to install FGD devices by 2017. However, over the years, they have received several extensions to comply.

**Why are SO<sub>2</sub> emissions from thermal plants an issue?**

Once released into the atmosphere, SO<sub>2</sub> usually reacts with ammonia (NH<sub>3</sub>) to produce ammonium sulfate, which is responsible

for roughly one-third of India's fine particulate matter (PM<sub>2.5</sub>) pollution, according to recent research by the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA). PM<sub>2.5</sub> is injurious to human health as it can lead to chronic diseases such as asthma, heart attack, bronchitis, and other respiratory problems.

Direct exposure to high levels of SO<sub>2</sub> can irritate the eyes, throat, and lungs. Long-term exposure can result in increased risk of heart attacks, strokes, and premature death, according to CREA.

SO<sub>2</sub> also affects the environment as it contributes to the formation of acid rain, which can damage ecosystems.

One of the biggest sources of SO<sub>2</sub> emissions in India is the power sector, especially the coal-based thermal plants. The CREA research found the SO<sub>2</sub> levels were higher in 2023 compared with 2019, with a notable increase in regions dominated by coal-based thermal plants.

This highlighted "the influence of power plant emissions on air quality", the research further said.

**What has the government done to address the issue?**

In 2015, the Environment Ministry notified the first-ever emission norms for control of SO<sub>2</sub> and other harmful substances from coal-based thermal plants. They were required to install FGD devices by December 2017.

However, this did not happen as the deadline was extended four times at the request of thermal plants.

They argued that the installation of FGD devices was costly, and could cause several issues such as disruption of power supply due to shutdown for installation, and an increase in electricity bills.

To address these concerns, the Centre amended the emission norms in 2021. It put 596 coal-based thermal plant units (one thermal plant can have multiple units) in three categories.

**Category A:** Plants located within a 10-km radius of the National Capital Region

(NCR) or cities having a million-plus population. Their deadline for compliance was 2022.

**Category B:** Plants located within a 10-km radius of critically polluted areas or non-attainment cities (cities that have exceeded National Ambient Air Quality Standards for five consecutive years). Their deadline was 2023.

**Category C:** Remaining plants whose deadline was 2024.

Note that nearly 78% of the plants were put in Category C. About 11% were in Category A, and the rest were in Category B.

The latest change in the norms has exempted Category C plants from installing FGD devices. Category A plants, in operation and under construction, have to comply by the end of 2027. The Centre will decide compliance for Category B plants on a case-by-case basis. The Environment Ministry has also said that plants supposed to retire before December 2030 will not be required to

meet the SO<sub>2</sub> emission norms, provided they submit an undertaking for exemption.

**What is behind the latest change in norms?**

According to the Centre, the change in the norms is based on three studies, which suggest FGD devices are not necessary for coal-based thermal plants. These studies are by the Indian Institute of Technology-Delhi, the National Institute of Advanced Sciences (NIAS), and the National Environmental Engineering Research Institute (NEERI).

The studies have argued against the installation of FGD devices, saying that SO<sub>2</sub> levels around the plants are well within the norms prescribed under the National Ambient Air Quality Standards. They have also suggested that the government needs to focus on curbing not just SO<sub>2</sub> emissions but rather the overall particulate matter pollution around the plants.

The IIT-D and NIAS studies have said that while reducing SO<sub>2</sub> emissions, the operation of FGD devices has increased carbon dioxide

and PM pollution. All three studies were commissioned by the government or its agencies. For example, the NEERI research was commissioned by NITI Aayog.

**Why have experts criticised the change in norms?**

Experts have said that the claim made by the studies that SO<sub>2</sub> levels around plants are low is misleading. For instance, CREA in a statement said, "The air quality monitoring stations (CAQMS) don't capture the real impact of power plant pollution because they don't track whether emissions drift upwind or downwind, and they certainly don't account for chemical reactions that convert SO<sub>2</sub> into other pollutants like PM<sub>2.5</sub>."

A 2021 analysis by the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) had also presented notable findings. It said that plumes from power stations travel long distances of 300 km, and during this time, they get converted to secondary pollutants. The analysis also found that the atmospheric lifetime of SO<sub>2</sub> was about 10 days.

## EXPLAINED GLOBAL

### JEFFREY EPSTEIN GRAND JURY RECORDS: WHAT COMES NEXT?

US PRESIDENT Donald Trump last week directed Attorney General Pam Bondi to ask a federal judge to release transcripts of grand jury testimony related to the 2019 indictment of Jeffrey Epstein for sex trafficking.

On Friday, Bondi followed through. In court filings, she asked federal judges to unseal grand jury transcripts from Epstein's case, and from the prosecution of his longtime associate Ghislaine Maxwell.

**Why is grand jury material sealed?**

Grand juries — groups of citizens who hear evidence from prosecutors and witnesses in secret — are intended to be a screening mechanism, one that serves as a check on prosecutors to make sure that the government has a solid case before it brings criminal charges against someone in open court.

Their proceedings are kept secret to protect the reputations of the people under government investigation who may turn out to be innocent or who are never charged with a crime. Secrecy also makes it easier to obtain full and truthful testimony from witnesses.

Prosecutors, investigators and jurors are generally barred from revealing not only grand jury testimony, but also the very existence of a grand jury proceeding. Violators can be punished for contempt of court.

The rules around witnesses are less strict. Grand jury investigations sometimes become known to the public when prosecutors issue subpoenas to witnesses for their testimony.

**What are the rules that govern the unsealing of grand jury testimony?**

The operating manual for grand jury secrecy is Rule 6(e) of the Federal Rules of Criminal Procedure. That rule details the process for filing a petition asking the court to unseal grand jury material, and a number of exceptions under which releasing it can be legally justified.

Courts can unseal grand jury materials for national security reasons, to help a defendant dismiss a different grand jury's indictment or at the request of a foreign court for use in its own criminal investigation.

The unsealing of grand jury materials is not a rubber-stamp process. The Florida courts refused to unseal Epstein materials until the state Legislature intervened by passing a new law. And federal courts remain divided on whether judges have



US Attorney General Pam Bondi. AP

the inherent power to unseal grand jury materials, outside of the exceptions listed in Rule 6(e).

**What would be the process for unsealing the Epstein grand jury materials?**

The Justice Department has taken the first step, by formally filing two petitions in the Southern District of New York, where Epstein and Maxwell were charged. In the Epstein case, the petition was submitted to Judge Richard M. Berman, who was nominated to the federal bench by former US President Bill Clinton, and who was overseeing Epstein's case in the weeks before the latter's death.

Berman can now give the parties in the case the opportunity to be heard, and possibly other interested parties such as Epstein's victims and media organisations. If he then rules to unseal some grand jury material, it would be up to him to decide what documents to make public. In his filings, the Justice Department said it would redact "victim-identifying information" and "other personal identifying information" before release.

**Would the release of the Epstein grand jury materials answer the public's questions?**

Generally, grand jury evidence is narrowly tailored by prosecutors to fit the criminal charges they want to file. So even if judges agree to unseal the grand jury testimony, it is unlikely to offer anything approaching an exhaustive accounting of what FBI agents and prosecutors learned about Epstein's activities.

THE NYT



HARISH DAMODARAN

AT 2.1% year-on-year, India's consumer price index inflation in June was below the 2.7% of the United States and 3.6% of the United Kingdom. That gap was wider in food, with the annual price increases at 3% for the US, 4.5% for the UK and minus 1.1% for India.

Both overall retail and consumer food inflation falling to their lowest since January 2019 is a huge relief, especially for the Reserve Bank of India. The central bank was, at least till six months ago, struggling to rein in inflation and, hence, unable to cut its policy interest rates. Much of it was courtesy of food, where India experienced sustained high inflation from roughly mid-2023 to the end of 2024.

That ended with a surplus monsoon in 2024, translating into bumper crops. As the market arrivals of these crops — kharif (cultivated during the monsoon season) plus rabi (winter-spring) — picked up, food inflationary pressures eased from early 2025 and slipped into negative in June.

**Cereal comfort**

The effects of favourable soil moisture and replenished groundwater as well as reservoir levels from abundant rainfall — 76% above the historical average or "normal" for the 2024 monsoon season (June-September) — were best seen in wheat. Wheat stocks in government godowns last year on July 1, at 282.61 lakh tonnes (lt), were at their lowest for this date since 2008 and just above the minimum buffer of 275.80 lt.

But with a good crop harvested and marketed during this April-June, state agencies could procure 300.35 lt of wheat, from 266.05 lt in 2024, 261.97 lt in 2023 and 187.92 lt in 2022. As a result, wheat stocks on July 1, at 358.78 lt, recovered to a four-year high.

Combined with record public stocks of rice (table 1), they add up to a comfortable situation in cereals. The government has enough stocks to feed the public distribution system and also offload in the open market

**TABLE 1**  
CENTRAL POOL STOCKS  
ON JULY 1

	Wheat	Rice*
2017	322.75	264.68
2018	418.01	275.57
2019	458.31	354.63
2020	549.91	394.31
2021	603.56	491.1
2022	285.1	472.18
2023	301.45	409.59
2024	282.61	484.99
2025	358.78	556.55
Norm**	275.8	135.4

Nos. in lakh tonnes. \*Includes rice equivalent of un-milled paddy. \*\*Minimum operational stock plus strategic reserve for July 1. Source: Department of Food and Public Distribution.



for cooling down prices. This wasn't the case till a few months ago.

**Monsoon relief**

Equally encouraging is the monsoon's performance so far this year. The monsoon set in over Kerala on May 24, eight days before the normal date. Rainfall in May was a whopping 106.4% above the country's long period average (LPA) rainfall for the month. June, technically the season's opening month, also registered 8.9% above-LPA precipitation. The current month, too, has till now posted 5.4% higher than LPA rains.

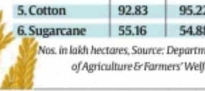
Cumulatively, all-India rainfall during June 1 to July 20 has been 71% above its historical normal for this period. Almost all states/regions — barring Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, eastern Uttar Pradesh, Marathwada, Assam, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh — have received above-par rains.

The impact of a second back-to-back good monsoon is seen in table 2. The progressive area sown under most kharif crops has gone up from last year. The exceptions are

**TABLE 2**  
AREA SOWN UNDER KHARIF  
CROPS AS ON JULY 11

	2025	2024
1. Rice	123.68	111.85
2. Coarse cereals	116.3	99.78
(a) Maize	61.88	59.73
(b) Bajra	44.01	29.59
(c) Jowar	8	7.39
3. Pulses	67.09	53.39
(a) Arhar	25.42	27.18
(b) Urad	11.46	11.54
(c) Moong	23.16	12.19
4. Oilseeds	137.27	139.82
(a) Soyabean	99.03	107.78
(b) Groundnut	32.99	28.04
(c) Sesamum	4.47	3.11
5. Cotton	92.83	95.22
6. Sugarcane	55.16	54.88

Nos. in lakh hectares. Source: Department of Agriculture & Farmers' Welfare.



arhar (pigeon pea), soyabean and cotton. Their acreages have, however, dipped not due to lack of water as much as prices.

Soyabean and arhar are trading in Madhya Pradesh's Dewas and Maharashtra's Latur wholesale mandis at around Rs 4,300 and Rs 6,500 per quintal respectively. That's below their corresponding government-declared minimum support prices of Rs 5,328 and Rs 8,000 per quintal for this year and even the Rs 4,892 and Rs 7,550 of the 2024-25 crops. In cotton, area reductions — largely in North India — have had more to do with the crop's susceptibility to pink bollworm insect attacks.

"There has been diversion of arhar area this year to maize. Among pulses, only mung (green gram) has witnessed increase thanks to good rain in Rajasthan and Gujarat, and also this being a short-duration crop maturing in 65-75 days versus 150-180 days for arhar," said Niti Kalantari, a Latur-based dal miller.

A similar acreage shift has been reported from soyabean to maize, which has become a remunerative crop because of it being in

creasingly used for production of fuel ethanol, in addition to animal feed and industrial starch.

Indian farmers planting less area under pulses such as arhar and urad (black gram) or soyabean is unlikely to have any major inflationary effect though.

The reason is imports. During 2024-25 (April-March), India imported a record 72.56 lt of pulses and 164.13 lt of vegetable oils. The Centre has kept the import window wide open for this fiscal too. Arhar, urad and yellow/white peas imports have been allowed at zero duty till March 31, 2026. Imports of mung (red lentil) and chana (chickpea) also attract just 10% duty. "The landed price of imported arhar from Mozambique and Malawi is only Rs 4,600-5,100 per quintal, while at Rs 2,900-3,100 for yellow peas from Canada and Russia," Kalantari said.

In edible oils, the Centre, on May 31, slashed the effective import duty on crude palm, soyabean and sunflower oil from 27.5% to 16.5%. That will, again, keep a lid on food inflation going ahead.

**Fertiliser shortfall**

Although the monsoon has had a great start, one cannot rule out its weakening or stalling in the coming weeks. The early rains, extending through July so far, have basically given a boost to kharif plantings. Any prolonged break phase hereon can affect the vegetative growth — the development of roots, stems and leaves — of the crop.

But a bigger source of uncertainty could be fertilisers, the demand for which has shot up on the back of the monsoon's timely advance. Opening stocks of urea and diammonium phosphate (DAP) on July 1, at 61.22 lt and 12.98 lt, were below the corresponding year-to-date levels of 103 lt and 19.18 lt respectively. So were that of complex fertilisers: 41.20 lt versus 50.48 lt.

The lower stocks are due to fall in imports — of urea (from 80.06 lt in 2023-24 to 69.10 lt in 2024-25) and DAP (from 55.96 lt to 45.60 lt), mainly from China: urea (from 21.48 lt to 10.41 lt) and DAP (from 22.87 lt to 8.43 lt).

China's export restrictions have led to a global supply squeeze, particularly in phosphate fertilisers, reflected in landed prices of imported DAP into India soaring from an average of \$525 in June 2024 to about \$810 per tonne now. Whether these shortfalls will have any impact on crop yields remains to be seen.

# Husain's horses: Galloping 'across horizons, from Karbala to Ashwamedh'

VANDANA KALRA  
NEW DELHI, JULY 20

MAQBOOL FIDA HUSAIN, one of India's most recognised artists, is known for his bold and striking depictions that drew inspiration from a multitude of sources, from Indian mythology and folk traditions to western art movements.

The motif most associated with Husain are his horses. These majestic creatures feature across Husain's oeuvre: he was painting horses in the 1930s, while making a living as a cinema-hording maker in Bombay, as he was in the late 2000s, while in a self-imposed exile from India.

**Diverse influences**

Growing up in Indore, where his father was a timekeeper in a textile mill, Husain often shared fond memories of playing with clay horses as a child, and riding carousel

horses at village fairs.

A friend of his grandfather, who worked as a farrier (someone who takes care of horses' hooves), gave young Husain close access to the agile animals, allowing the budding artist to study their anatomy in detail. He was also inspired by the papier-mâché replicas of Duldul — Prophet Muhammad's white mule — paraded in the streets during Muharram processions.

"My horses, like lightning, cut across many horizons. Seldom their hooves are shown. They hop around the spaces. From the battlefield of 'Karbala' to Bankura terracotta, from the Chinese Tse pei Hung horse to St. Marco horse, from ornate 'Ashwamedh' [the] cavalcade of my horses is multidimensional," Husain had said in 1987, according to a note on auction house Christie's website.

While the artist's dynamic lines were guided by the works of German expression-



ist Franz Marc and Italian sculptor Marino Marini, the fragmented, angular forms reflected a cubist vocabulary.

**Diverse depictions**

Rarely static, Husain's horses are powerful creatures that exude immense grace.



(Left) Untitled, MF Husain. Horses remained an inherent part of his artistic vocabulary. DAG/Express

"The horse, to [Husain], represented masculinity, and he painted them singly, in pairs, or in herds. Strangely, he never painted their hooves. His horses were depicted in motion, capturing their elegance and speed," Ashish Anand, managing director and CEO of the art company DAG, told The Indian Express.

Passage of Time, painted in neutral shades in 1954, was one of Husain's early major canvases featuring the horse as the

central figure. He painted several untitled works depicting horses in the 1950s and 1960s, before creating Duldul in 1967 with thick impasto and fractured lines.

"Sometimes he also represented them alongside female nudes, as in his wonderful painting of the Three Graces (1990). One of his largest paintings, titled Lightning (1975), is entirely made up of galloping horses. Later, his Raj series (1980s) showed maharajas and viceroys playing polo mounted on horses," Anand said.

In 1991, Husain depicted Zuljanah, Imam Husayn's loyal horse celebrated for his valour in the Battle of Karbala. Karbala Horse (Zuljanah) shows the dark equine striding across Euphrates.

Painted in the late 1990s, Seven Horses alluded to the Hindu mythological depiction of Surya, the sun god, whose chariot is pulled by seven horses.

Husain's very last series, meant to be an ode to diversity and pluralism in India, also featured horses. Commissioned in 2008 by Usha Mittal, the wife of steel baron Lakshmi Mittal, the series remained incomplete due to the artist's demise in 2011.

**Appreciated & critiqued**

Globally recognised as his signature motif, Husain's horses have drawn both criticism and acclaim. Among others, author Mulk Raj Anand reportedly described them as "bourgeois subject matter". Some art critics also feel that Husain repeated the motif rather too often, particularly after the 1970s.

For Husain, however, horses remained an inherent part of his artistic vocabulary and symbolism. "Horses have always been a part of Indian art but it was Husain who made them a specific subject all his own. The only other artist who painted horses with as much zeal was Sunil Das, but he depicted them realistically while Husain's work was expressionistic," said Anand. "Representing horses' energy and dynamism, Husain's paintings, often massive, command attention in any room where they are displayed."

This is a part of a series on Indian masters and the motifs that appear repeatedly in their works.

Next: S H Raza's Bindu



# 9 THE IDEAS PAGE

## The soil of a nation

To improve both crop and human nutrition, India needs a paradigm shift — from indiscriminate use of fertilisers to tailored and science-based soil nutrition management



FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH  
BY ASHOK GULATI,  
NETAARDUS VERGUTZ AND  
RITIKA JUNEJA

WHO WOULD HAVE imagined that India, which lived from "ship to mouth" with heavy dependence on food aid under the US PL-480 programme in the 1960s, would emerge as the world's largest rice exporter? In 2024-25 (PY25), India exported 20.2 million tonnes (MT) of rice in a global market of 61 MT. The country also runs the world's largest food distribution programme, the PM-Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY), which provides 5 kg of free rice or wheat per person per month to more than 800 million people. Yet, the Food Corporation of India holds about 57 MT of rice — the highest stock in 20 years and nearly four times the buffer norm of 13.54 million tonnes as of July 1, 2025.

Twenty, too, has needed significantly. The extreme poverty head count (those earning less than \$3/day at 2021 PPP) dropped from 27.1 per cent in 2011 to just 5.3 per cent in 2022. Notwithstanding these achievements, malnutrition amongst children remains a challenge. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) (2019-21) reports that 35.5 per cent of children under five years of age are stunted, 32.1 per cent are underweight, and 19.3 per cent are wasted. Food security in India has evolved beyond merely ensuring caloric sufficiency; it must now encompass nutritional security as well.

One critical, and often overlooked, factor here is the health of soils. Soil micronutrient deficiencies not only impair agricultural productivity but also degrade the nutritional quality of crops. Crops grown on nutrient-deficient soils often mirror those deficiencies, leading to a silent but pervasive form of malnutrition in humans. Take zinc. Its deficiency in soils translates into low zinc content in cereals like wheat and rice, which in turn is linked to childhood stunting — a condition that affects the physical development, long-term cognitive health, as well as the professional life of a person.

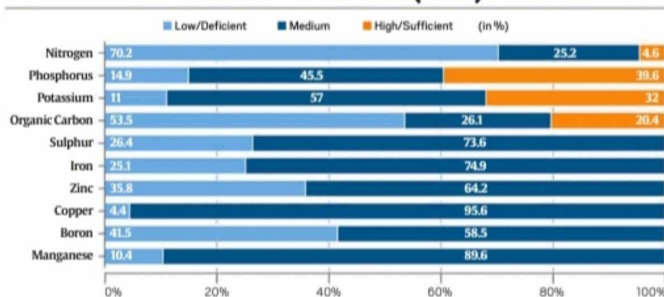
Let us now turn to the status of Indian soils. Of more than 8.8 million soil samples tested under the Soil Health Card Scheme in 2024, less than 5 per cent have high or sufficient nitrogen (N), only 40 per cent have sufficient phosphate (P), 32 per cent have sufficient potassium (K) and just 20 per cent are sufficient in soil organic carbon (SOC) (see graph).

Importantly, SOC is a critical parameter defining the physical, chemical, and biological properties of soil — these govern its holding capacity and nutrient use efficiency. There is also a debate as to how much SOC is considered sufficient. As per the Indian Institute of Soil Science (IIS), SOC in the range of 0.50-0.75 per cent is adequate. But the World Food Laureate, Rattan Lal, who has worked on soil health throughout his career, prescribes that the carbon content in soils should be at least 1.5 to 2 per cent. Our soils also suffer from a deficiency of sulphur, as well as micronutrients like iron, zinc and boron. These deficiencies range from moderate to severe. It won't be an exaggeration to say that many parcels of Indian soils need to be immediately taken to an intensive care unit (ICU) to restore them to normal health so that they can produce nutritious food on a sustainable basis.

We have also observed that in some parts of the country, nitrogen (N) is overused while phosphorus (P) and potassium (K) are underused. For example, in Punjab, nitrogen use ex-



STATUS OF INDIAN SOILS (2024)



Source: Soil Health Card, M/o Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare, Govt of India

C R Sasikumar

ceeds recommendations by 61 per cent, while potassium use is short by 89 per cent, and phosphorus use is short by 8 per cent. Telangana also mirrors this imbalance — it overuses N by 54 per cent but its use of K is 82 per cent less, and that of P is 13 per cent less. The situation is similar in several other states. The highly imbalanced use of N, P and K and the neglect of micronutrients leads to suboptimal agricultural productivity. Nationwide, the fertiliser-to-grain response ratio has declined significantly from 1:10 in the 1970s to a mere 1:2.7 in 2015.

Moreover, the application of granular urea results in substantial nitrogen losses, with only 35-40 per cent of the nitrogen being absorbed by the crops. The remaining nitrogen is either released into the atmosphere as nitrous oxide — a greenhouse gas that is 273 times more potent than carbon dioxide — or leaches into groundwater, contaminating it with nitrates and making it unsafe for consumption. So, in a way, the imbalanced use of N, P and K is also increasing the pollution, rather than increasing grain yields. Additionally, a significant portion of urea is diverted to non-agricultural uses and also finds its way to neighbouring countries. This needs to change.

To restore soil health and improve both crop and human nutrition, India needs a paradigm shift — from indiscriminate use of fertilisers to tailored and science-based soil nu-

Crops grown on nutrient-deficient soils often mirror those deficiencies, leading to a silent but pervasive form of malnutrition in humans. Take zinc, for example. Its deficiency in soils translates into low zinc content in cereals like wheat and rice, which in turn is linked to childhood stunting — a condition that affects the physical development, long-term cognitive health, as well as the professional life of a person.

trition management. This calls for more precise and customised fertilisation strategies, which are informed by rigorous soil testing, and aligned with the nutritional needs of different soils and crops.

Only when soils receive the nutrients they produce food that nourishes rather than merely fills stomachs. This is no longer just an agricultural issue; it is a public health imperative.

Recognising the urgency of this challenge, the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER) and OCP Nutricrops have committed to collaborating to improve soil health in India and beyond. OCP Nutricrops brings cutting-edge expertise in soil nutrition and fertiliser solutions aimed at addressing global challenges in sustainable food production. The collaboration aims to develop, implement, and scale region-specific, data-driven soil nutrition solutions that enhance crop productivity while improving their nutritional profile.

Thus, to truly move from plate to plough — and back to plate — we must start by healing Mother Earth. Only then can we walk as a healthy nation.

Gulati is distinguished professor at ICRIER, Vergutz is chief scientific officer at OCP Nutricrops, and Juneja is research fellow at ICRIER. Views are personal

## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Given that all political activities of the Awami League have been banned by the government... it is deeply disturbing that its supporters have once again resorted to violence."

— THE DAILY STAR, BANGLADESH

## Orwell in Gaza

As Israel's war rages, the debasement of language, the inversion of meaning, is complete



NAVDEEP SURI

ASTRING OF recent developments forced me to pull out my daughter's copy of 1984 from her bookshelf. I had first read the Bihar-born George Orwell's classic as a teenager some 50 years ago and wanted to revisit some of his precise vocabulary: Big Brother is Watching; War is Peace; Ignorance is Strength; Two Minutes Hate; Doublethink; Newspeak; Unperson; Thoughtcrime; Thought Police; and so much more.

The trigger was a statement made by Israel's Defence Minister Israel Katz about plans to set up a "Humanitarian City" on the ruins of the bombed-out town of Rafah, located near the border with Egypt on the southern extremity of the Gaza Strip. Without the slightest hint of irony, he proposed to "concentrate" 6,00,000 Palestinians in an area in which access would be strictly controlled, and residents would not be permitted to leave. He also reiterated his ambition to encourage the "voluntary migration" of Palestinians to other countries. In Orwellian Newspeak, forced expulsion is being called voluntary migration and a planned concentration camp is being described as a humanitarian city. The "encouragement", of course, comes in the form of mass starvation, destruction of water, electricity supplies and over 90 per cent of all housing units, and the continued targeting of medical infrastructure.

Another classic Newspeak is the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation (GHF), set up and funded by unknown or dubious entities to replace the UNRWA that was established by the UN in 1949 to provide support to Palestinian refugees. But Israel banned the UNRWA, choked essential food and medical supplies, and then responded to the growing global outrage by establishing a sham organisation whose aid-distribution centres have been described as a killing field.

Between the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) and the armed contractors of GHF, some 880 Palestinians have been killed and over 5,000 wounded since the GHF started its operations in late May 2025. Meanwhile, formula milk for babies remains scarce and six children have been killed earlier this week while trying to get drinking water. In a rare admission, the Israeli government attributed this one attack to a "technical error" in the missile that it fired into the crowd.

Doublethink — that act of simultaneously holding two contradictory beliefs — comes through the daily assertions of the IDF being "the most moral army in the world". Even after they have killed over 58,000 civilians, two-thirds of them women and children, the respected *Lancet* journal thinks that this figure represents an underestimation of around 41 per cent. CNN and The New York Times have estimated Palestinian fatalities to be significantly higher than the official count. And Israel, "the only democracy in the Middle East", not only prohibits international media from entering Gaza, but has killed at least 186 mostly Palestinian journalists, according to the Committee for Protection of Journalists.

And there is the BBC which commissioned and then refused to screen a film titled Gaza: Doctors under Attack because it

made a persuasive case that the IDF had deliberately and repeatedly targeted each one of Gaza's 32 hospitals. It also reveals that a completely disproportionate number of doctors and medical personnel have been killed and arrested since October 7, allegedly because the hospitals were built on Hamas tunnels. It was left to Channel 4 to muster the courage to show the horrors of Gaza. Israel's advanced satellite and drone capabilities make sure that *Big Brother* is *Always Watching*. IDF has made extensive use of Lavender, an AI-based system developed with technology from US-based Palantir, to process large amounts of data including geospatial and signal intelligence, human sources and open-source information, to develop a list of some 40,000 suspects. The system produces target recommendations and the IDF's armed drones use face recognition systems to lock on these targets and fire. Gazans are being used as guinea pigs to refine this platform and when civilian casualties occur, who is to blame? The lines between ethics, law and accountability have been virtually erased. Newsreader Palantir chairman Peter Thiel was distinctly evasive when these questions were posed to him in an interview, mumbling, "I'm not on top of all the details of what's going on in Israel, because my bias is to defer to Israel."

Meanwhile, legal scholars, foreign policy experts and even a handful of Israeli politicians have now started to ask the forbidden question: Do Israeli actions in Gaza constitute ethnic cleansing, war crimes or even genocide? Read this and form your own view: Article II of the Genocide Convention of 1948 says that "genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group: Killing members of the group; Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; Deliberately inflicting living conditions calculated to bring about the group's physical destruction in whole or in part..."

Former Israeli prime ministers Ehud Barak and Ehud Olmert now acknowledge that the actions of the Benjamin Netanyahu government in Gaza constitute war crime. Leading Jewish historians like Raz Segal, Amos Goldberg and Lee Mordechai have described it as a genocide. A group of 10 Holocaust survivors have issued a signed letter condemning Israeli actions as genocide. The Jewish Voice for Peace issued a statement on Holocaust Remembrance Day to call for an end to "the Israeli government's genocide against the Palestinian people". But the students of Harvard and Columbia or the musicians at Glastonbury are not allowed to say this. Criticism of Israeli actions in Gaza is now equated with blood libel if you are a Jew and with antisemitism if you are not. Either way, it attracts the wrath of the ever-vigilant Thought Police.

And what is more Orwellian than the bizarre spectacle of PM Netanyahu — designated as a war criminal by the International Criminal Court — proposing Donald Trump for a Nobel Peace Prize while the US President sanctions senior ICC and UN staff for doing their job. Or, the intellectual gymnastics of the president of the European Commission, tying herself in knots as she tries to balance her angst over Ukraine with her nonchalance on Gaza.

Truly, as Orwell wrote in *Animal Farm*, "All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others."

The writer is a former ambassador to Egypt and UAE

## Inequality's many champions

Even 'empowered' women are powerless daughters, mothers, students, employees



MRINAL PANDE

TYPICALLY, THE POLITICS of gender in India has been a backlash against the perceived educational and financial independence of women. The reactions, particularly on social media, to the recent murder of a young tennis player allegedly by her father show that there are groups that view the rise of women celebrities and influencers as a threat to a system that rests on male power. The murdered girl's father told the Haryana police that he had been driven to the act because he had been constantly taunted for "living off his daughter's income".

Barely a week later, Balasore district in Odisha faced a public bandh with angry citizens demanding justice for a 20-year-old student who had immolated herself after the college turned a deaf ear to her repeated complaints about a senior faculty member harassing her sexually. Former CM and Leader of Opposition Naveen Patnaik said in a post on X that a failed system did not help a female student struggling for justice.

There is little sensible discussion over such deaths. Both deaths coincidentally oc-

curred in BJP-ruled states and are being politicised by the Opposition. This has resulted in the usual whataboutery from the ruling party's quarters: Why focus only on BJP-ruled states? What about the rape-murder of a doctor on a West Bengal campus? Some have called the Haryana incident an "honour killing" since the family was prosperous, and the FIR states that the father of the player-turned-coach was angry with his increasingly defiant daughter. Even the term he used in his confession to his cousin used patriarchal chauvinism: "Maine kungvayh kiya hai" (I have committed filicide).

Ironically, it is obvious from both these cases how, whatever the ground reality, gender equality has acquired the aura of an ideal social-political stance for all Indian political parties. Even while defending perpetrators from their fold, all parties are quick to proclaim support for *nari shakti* and *nari mukti*. When elections are due, they promise subsidies and cash donations — now an inalienable part of all manifestos. But the promises printed on posters plastered all over town

with the party supremo's beaming mugshot hide the ugly reality that the daily news unveils. From Vinesh Phogat and Radhika Yadav, to the Balasore case, we can clearly see the injustices that prevail within homes and workplaces even for women who appear to be protected, well-off and financially independent. Whatever the politicians' proclaimed position, scores of young Indian women are learning how their deemed empowerment may reveal another facet of their powerlessness as daughters, mothers, sisters, students and employees.

Committees to register complaints against sexual harassment at the workplace often underscore a woman's powerlessness to access justice. We also realise how daily actions and quips, seemingly innocent or unintended, remind women of all ages of the Lakshman rekha marking boundaries of female ambition and what society/employees will expect of them after elections and *Mahila Shakti Divas* and *Ladli bahin*/beti celebrations are over. Inequality has many champions on social media. Not just trolls

but many well-known influencers openly victim-shame and promote prejudice. This impacts the young indelibly.

We can claim to have some of the most progressive laws to help and protect women from sexual predators. In reality, women see the law and instruments of the state treating those without connections in high places as abstract creatures with abstract rights. In Amrit Kaal, no law will sanction a father shooting his daughter. But the state often only intervenes once the most serious crime has already been committed. No state allows *kanwariyas* to assault a girl on a scooter with shoes because she defied their holy cargo either. But this happened. No law in India will silence women or stop them from filing complaints of abuse against predatory male bosses. Women, though, know the standard reaction of college authorities, company boards and office fact-finding committees in these circumstances.

The writer is former chairperson, Prasar Bharati

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### A NECESSARY DUTY

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, UPSC's helping hand' (IE, July 19). The Constitution underlines the mandate of the Public Service Commission for the Union and States under Articles 315 and 320. Impostors passing out as recommended trainee officers in various services exploiting the shortcomings in this body reflect the failure of its constitutional duty. If at all, it's the DoPT and the various arms of the government that should be offering necessary assistance.

Abhinav Shah, Lucknow

### WEST'S HYPOCRISY

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'The sanctions stick' (IE, July 18). The NATO chief's warning that countries such as India, Brazil and China can face secondary tariffs if it continues to do business with Russia follows from US President Donald Trump's pressure on Russian President Vladimir Putin into agreeing to a ceasefire with Ukraine, that too within 30 days. But why target Russia's trade partners like India, China and Brazil? The MEA's sharp re-

buttal does, indeed, highlight the West's stunning hypocrisy in this regard.

Kumar Gupta, via email

### US MUST DO MORE

This refers to the report, 'US adds TRF to terror list for Palghat strike' (IE, July 19). The recent decision by the United States to classify The Resistance Front (TRF), a known Lashkar-e-Taiba proxy, as a global terrorist entity, marks a positive step in acknowledging India's long-standing concerns about cross-border militancy. This move comes in the wake of the brutal Palghat attack and numerous other incidents targeting Indian forces, all of which point towards the TRF's violent agenda. However, symbolic designations alone are insufficient. Washington's previous overtures to Pakistan's military leadership sent mixed signals, despite the bond shared between PM Modi and President Trump. If the US truly seeks to strengthen its partnership with India and uphold regional stability, it must take bolder steps to keep Pakistan in check while keeping in mind India's national security.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali





## The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY  
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

## Unlocking investment

In a world of shrinking investment appetite and rising competition, capital will chase confidence, clarity



SACHCHIDANAND SHUKLA

## A PRISM OF EXCLUSION

In Assam, eviction drives by Himanta Biswa Sarma government raise troubling questions of due process

THE RECENT WAVE of eviction drives in Assam raises troubling questions. In the past month alone, the state has conducted five major drives across four districts, including Dhubri, Lakhimpur, Nalbari and now, Paikan reserve forest in Goalpara, removing at least 3,300 families from forest land, grazing land and government revenue land. These have been framed as an exercise in reclaiming encroached land in accordance with the standing order of the Gauhati High Court to minimise man-animal conflict. However, from Darrang and Luning in 2021 to Barpeta in 2022 to now, the execution of these drives, and the polarising political rhetoric surrounding them, serve to underline a troubling reality: In Assam in the recent past, all too often, governance appears to function through the prism of exclusion, not inclusion.

To be sure, underlying the state's initiatives are legitimate concerns — environmental degradation, land management, and deep-seated anxieties around migration and identity that have persisted since Partition and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. According to the Union Environment Ministry, as of March 2024, Assam had the second highest encroachment of forest land in the country, after Madhya Pradesh. But weaponising these concerns to target specific communities — most evident drives have focused on areas with large populations of Bengali-origin Muslims — underlines a politics of dispossession. Over the past weeks, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma has spoken of "demographic invasion" by "people of one religion," of "land jihad," and of his determination to "protect Assamese constituencies" in places where "an effort has started to change the demography of Upper Assam." Such rhetoric from the chief minister — not for the first time — stands to transform administrative action into communal performance. It recasts vulnerable citizens as outsiders, an especially cruel turn in a state where, post-National Register of Citizens, nearly 19.6 residents had been rendered suspect, forced to prove their citizenship without state support. According to the state government, over 1.19 lakh bighas of land have been reclaimed since Sarma came to power in 2021 and over 50,000 people have been evicted. These statistics encompass homes, schools, livelihoods, lifelines and lifetimes. Many of the evicted are displaced victims of river erosion, economic marginalisation, or historical neglect. An absence of humane policy response stands to render eviction not as an administrative necessity, but as a form of institutional violence; not enforcement but erasure.

With assembly elections less than a year away, the Assam government's campaign against purported outsiders in the state has gained political urgency. But electoral arithmetic must not override constitutional responsibility and due process. If the aim is environmental or administrative correction, it must be carried out without inflammatory rhetoric or partisan action, and with a commitment to transparency. It means building trust, offering rehabilitation, and recognising that the rights to shelter, belonging and dignity are fundamental. When the state trades empathy for political expediency, it is the notion of justice that gets bulldozed.

## NOT SO PRIVATE

SC ruling on covert evidence in matrimonial disputes raises larger questions about right to privacy in the digital era

THE SUPREME COURT ruled last week that secretly recorded conversations between spouses are admissible evidence in matrimonial disputes. The Court set aside a 2021 Punjab and Haryana High Court judgment that barred a husband, who sought a divorce, from using secretly recorded phone conversations with his wife as evidence in court. This was a crucial question for the apex court to settle, since several high courts had given different rulings on the issue. The Indian Evidence Act, 1872, codifies spousal privilege — a common law principle that a person cannot be compelled to testify against their spouse in a criminal case. While this provision carves out an exception for cases fought between the spouses themselves, high courts have been reluctant to allow secret recordings as evidence since there is a reasonable expectation of privacy in a marriage. The SC ruling is a careful balancing of the fundamental right to privacy and the right to a fair trial. It also raises larger questions about the right to privacy as understood in personal spaces in a deeply invasive digital era.

Divorce cases are often bitterly contested. At stake is not just a court decree for separation but a bundle of rights, from alimony to custody of children. With vast digital footprints even in the most private of spaces, the nature of 'evidence' to prove allegations in these cases has changed over the years. From CCTV footage, text chats, emails and video and voice recordings, evidence can be gathered with a single click. "The phone on which the conversation was recorded is no different from an eavesdropper," the Court said. These are not aspects that lawmakers would have envisaged when codifying the law on spousal privilege. On the issue of privacy, the Court said that there is no right to privacy between married spouses. The ruling says that the right is applicable against the state and not against private individuals, even if that is within marriage, where a degree of privacy is expected. This interpretation is at odds with how larger SC benches have interpreted the right to privacy. The Court has in previous judgements called for a horizontal application of the right to privacy, exercised against the state and a fellow citizen.

Allowing covert evidence in matrimonial disputes is consequential. It could have a bearing on other kinds of matrimonial issues, including marital rape, where the question of how credible evidence will be gathered is often raised. Even as the SC has allowed covert evidence, trial courts will still have to balance the relevance of such evidence, as there exists a significant gender gap in smartphone ownership and access to technology.

## FREEZE FRAME

E P UNNY

More than Testis, Mumbai CM is promoting a vague, vintage machine that keeps anti-left.



THE GLOBALECONOMY is witnessing a seismic shift in foreign direct investment (FDI) flows, with emerging markets and developing economies (EMDEs) bearing the brunt of the decline. According to the World Bank (WB), FDI inflows to EMDEs have weakened steadily as a share of their GDP since the global financial crisis, plummeting to around 2 per cent of GDP in recent years. To put this in absolute terms, EMDEs received \$435 billion in FDI in 2023, the lowest level since 2005. During the heydays of the 2000s, FDI inflows to EMDEs had jumped five times in nominal terms, equivalent to about 5 per cent of their GDP in the typical economy at the peak in 2008. But, with the world seemingly shutting down for business with the imposition of barriers on trade as well as investment flows and cross-border investment, trade agreements have slowed sharply. Between 2010 and 2024, just 380 new investment treaties came into force, less than half of the 870-odd treaties between 2000 and 2009. Thus, the global FDI slowdown is no longer a blip, but is now morphing into a persistent trend, dragged by structural headwinds, geopolitical uncertainty, policy inertia and regime shifts.

India, while better placed than many, finds itself caught in the crosscurrents of this global rebalancing and its FDI experience mirrors the global trend, albeit with unique twists. While gross FDI inflows rose to a robust \$81 billion in FY25 — a 14 per cent increase, net FDI plunged 96 per cent year-on-year to just \$0.35 billion, its lowest level in nearly two decades. This was due to rising repatriations, booming outward FDI and low reinvestment of profits.

Globally, services, construction, and clean energy are dominating new greenfield FDI, overtaking traditional manufacturing. In India too, manufacturing and financial services remain strongholds, but there's rising interest in energy and communication. Also, FDI remains geographically skewed — Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu have improved their standings, while Gujarat and Delhi have seen sharp declines.

With a global reset in policy making and changing rules of engagement, there is a

need for a comprehensive framework enabling policy makers to insert India into the international economy, and use investments to diversify exports, create more and better jobs and thus improve the standards of living of citizens. India must adopt a proactive strategy that attracts foreign investment and maximises its benefits.

According to the WB, FDI inflows have a positive impact on economic output in EMDEs, but the magnitude of the impact is conditional. In the average EMDE, a 10 per cent increase in FDI inflows is estimated to increase GDP by 0.3 per cent after three years. However, the effect is much stronger — up to 0.8 per cent — in economies with greater trade openness, stronger institutions, better human capital development, and lower informality.

India's path forward under these circumstances is rather obvious. By creating a favourable investment climate and opening up to trade further, India can unlock its growth potential and attract FDI that can drive economic development. There are several things the country can do.

First, with its eyes trained on raising its competitive advantage, India must continue to move away from the erstwhile scepticism over trade deals towards signing deals with willing and more trade-friendly countries and blocks. That, along with a probable US trade deal, could be the icing on the cake to top off the flurry of FTAs and early harvest deals, signed with Australia, the UAE, and the UK lately. The latest trends show that firms want to locate FDI only in countries that are geopolitically aligned with the country of origin and FTAs could reinforce that. The WB avers that an investment treaty tends to raise FDI flows between signatory states by more than 40 per cent. Also, economies with higher trade integration receive more FDI inflows — an extra 0.6 per cent for each percentage-point increase in the trade-to-GDP ratio and an extra 0.3 per cent for each percentage-point increase in value-added trade as a share of exports, a measure of participation in global value chains.

Second, as highlighted by the Economic Survey, it must take deregulation in right

earnest and move quickly on to ideas such as the Deregulation Commission. Cutting red tape and enforcing contracts swiftly are a prerequisite. Reducing regulatory burden certainly makes it easier for firms to invest in and improve upon the efficiency of investment.

Third, logistics and trade bottlenecks should be addressed with alacrity. Trade-facilitation reforms, including digitisation and other inefficiencies that raise clearance times at ports etc must be prioritised. For example, the Kolkata port has the highest import clearance time across all seaports, averaging over 140 hours.

Fourth, in an increasingly globalised world, characterised by rising levels of international production, trade, competition and interaction, the need to "connect the dots" between international rulemaking, domestic reforms, ministries and agencies becomes increasingly evident. The Centre, states and all related agencies must work in unison.

Last, but not the least, states must take the lead in creating a conducive framework. FDI into states is generally influenced by the ease of doing business, government support in land acquisition, logistics, availability of infrastructure, and requisite manpower. As projects are usually established within states, more effort is required at their level to attract FDI.

However, investment policy is dynamic — there is no "one size fits all" solution. An approach that works within one state for one type of investment at one particular time may need to be continually revised, adapted, and improved upon to take into account the underlying dynamics, the transformation of different types of business, and the circumstances.

India's fundamentals — demographics, digital depth, and democratic stability — are attractive. But in a world of shrinking investment appetite and rising competition, capital will chase clarity and confidence. The ball is in India's court. It's time to not just invite investment, but to deserve it.

The writer is group chief economist, LGF. Views are personal



VANDANA VASUDEVAN

## THE FLAW IN THE EXAM

They must have a clear purpose, be conducted fairly. That's not a tall ask

LAST WEEK, MY son's school had a felicitation ceremony for the Class XII students who had done well in the CBSE Board exams. The plans of the top three students revealed how little those results mattered. The first was an engineering aspirant who was going to go where his JEE rank would take him. The second was taking a gap year to "find herself" and the third was going to a posh private university in the city which accepts all who can pay their fees. The 98 per cent and 97 per cent on their mark-sheets were irrelevant to their choices and unlikely to ever matter in their lives.

Class X and XII Board exams have been a milestone event in the lives of generations of Indians. But changes in higher education in recent times have left students, parents and teachers puzzled about the importance of these Board exams. The Class XII Boards were critical because the results would determine which college you got admission into. However, with the introduction of the Common University Entrance Test (CUET) in 2021, the XII Boards performance has become irrelevant to those interested in pursuing a BA/BCom or BSc degree. For engineering, there is JEE, most medical colleges are covered under NEET. Architecture, law, design or science research institutes all have their own entrance exams and require minimum qualifying marks in the XII Boards of 45-50 per cent. So the question is: Why should students care about their performance in the XII Board exams anymore?

The Board exams hold great importance only for the tiny slice of well-heeled Indians

planning to go abroad for their undergraduate studies because the universities in the West use it as an indicator of academic caliber. For the vast majority aiming to study in India, the XII marksheet, once a revered document, is now just another ID proof. Meanwhile, teachers are still trying to adjust to the new reality. They are increasingly dealing with students who have a lachrymose approach to assignments and tests, many of them not even bothering to submit their work or attend school regularly.

China, with whom we like to compare ourselves, has an exacting exam at the end of school called Gaokao. There is no ambiguity about its importance. The Gaokao score is the singular determinant of whether students can enter their preferred university or college. In the three days of June when the exam is held, the government clears roads, arranges transport for high-school students to teach exam halls and enforces noise control measures around exam centres.

On the other hand, we have a dozen different exams, most of which are mired in controversy because either they have been leaked or there were errors in the paper. The NEET 2024 paper leak was only the most high profile among a long line of such fiascos. New reports have tracked down as many as 70 paper leaks in the past decade from competitive exams to state high-school exams across Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Telangana, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and Bihar. Months later, if at all, the exams are conducted again,

crushing aspirants' morale.

There are other ways in which competitive exams are flawed. Errors, typos and misprints, are unfortunately all too commonplace, confusing students who waste precious time trying to decode mistakes. The Common Law Admission Test (CLAT), taken by an estimated one lakh students in December 2024, is a case in point. Following an array of confusingly worded questions and wrong answers, several students filed cases against the Consortium of Law Schools, the body that conducts CLAT. After the Supreme Court's intervention, results were declared after a five-month delay. This year's intensely competitive JEE Mains had a record number of incorrectly framed questions.

For a 16-17 year old, a public exam is their first brush with the "system." They trust the process and assume that the establishment will function as it should. When it doesn't, it is a shock. Cynicism about the country, and their own future in it, is planted early. In its present state, the mere pursuit of higher education in India is daunting and designed to frustrate rather than nurture youthful talent. The grind that children put in for their Board exams must be respected by making each exam have a clear purpose, setting the paper responsibly, and conducting it fairly. That's a small ask for the precious demographic dividend, expected to give India its competitive edge for the next couple of decades.

Vasudevan is the author of OTTP Please!

## JULY 21, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

## KANISHKA MYSTERY

THE SOVIET UNION denied reports that the Air India Kanishka had been brought down by a Soviet spy rocket. "It seems that there was a Soviet spy rocket that might have fallen from an old balcony of a London or New York House on the head of a helpless passerby," the TASS political commentator Sergei Kulik said in reference to a report by the London Daily Mail.

## FLASH FLOODS

FLASH FLOODS and heavy rains have

claimed 23 lives in Punjab, 16 of them in Jalandhar, and disrupted rail and road traffic in the state. In Bihar, the overall flood situation worsened in at least five districts. The situation in West Bengal was also grim, with the Ganga in full fury at Farakka and Namikhat in Malda district. However, it was yet to touch the danger mark.

## AIML LEAVES LDF

THE ALL INDIA Muslim League (AIML) decided to sever its 11-year-old alliance with the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and walked out of the Left Democratic Front in Kerala. The decision taken by the working com-

mittee of the AIML and its state council was announced here by the AIML legislature party leader, P.M. Aboobacker. The LDF's strength in the state assembly has dropped to 60 from 64, with the four-member AIML group parting its ways with the Marxist-led front.

## PUNJAB POLLS

WHILE THE UNION agricultural minister, Bala Singh, hinted at holding elections in Punjab in the near future, the AICC (I) General Secretary Rajendra Kumar Bajpai told newsmen in Delhi that the party had not yet taken any decision in this regard. Election in Punjab, she said, depended on the situation in the state.





## A long list

The designation of TRF as a terror group should put more pressure on Pakistan

**T**he decision of the U.S. to designate The Resistance Front (TRF) group that claimed responsibility for the Pahalgal terror attack in April 2025, as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) and a Specially Designated Global Terrorist is a development that should undergird the global fight against terror. The Ministry of External Affairs has called it "a timely and important step". For one, the U.S. State Department has acknowledged the severity of the Pahalgal attack. It also names the TRF as a "front and proxy" for the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), which Pakistan claims it has rendered "defunct". Even though the U.S. added groups such as the LeT and the Jaish-e-Mohammad to its FTO list in 2001, they have masterminded attacks in India since then. The U.S. has also partially made amends for the TRF's name having been kept out of the UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution condemning the Pahalgal attack, apparently at Pakistan's behest, but with the concurrence of the U.S. and other P-5 members. It is hoped that the designation will now help India's case in designating the TRF at the UNSC, under the 1267 Committee for sanctions, also strengthening the trans-national legal pursuit of those behind the attack.

While this is a positive step, it is necessary to put the Trump administration's other actions since the Pahalgal attack into perspective. After India launched Operation Sindoor, the U.S. has countered India's narrative on the four-day conflict on several occasions. Mr. Trump, as well as Secretary of State Marco Rubio, have repeatedly made the claim that the U.S. negotiated the India-Pakistan ceasefire, and averted a nuclear conflict by using trade ties as leverage – an evidence which Pakistan has been happy to endorse. Mr. Trump's unprecedented White House lunch and praise for the Pakistan military chief, Field Marshal Asim Munir, came hours after the government had said that Prime Minister Narendra Modi had cleared the picture with Mr. Trump, and brings into question just how much pressure the U.S. is willing to put on Pakistan to act against terrorism. The Trump administration had held out the promise of doing more to support India in its fight against terrorism by fast-tracking the extradition, in April, of Tahawwur Hussain Rana, who was wanted by India for the 2008 Mumbai attacks. It is hoped that the TRF's listing means that the U.S. is recommitting to that objective. Given that the real challenge lies more in credibly ending Pakistan's support to these groups, New Delhi must focus on its efforts, diplomatic as well as legal, to ensure justice for the victims and to prevent further terrorist acts.

## Republican rumblings

Donald Trump is facing pressure from within his own support base

**P**resident Donald Trump, under pressure from a segment of his support base, has instructed his Attorney General, Pam Bondi, to request a court to unseal grand jury transcripts related to sex offender and former friend of the President, Jeffrey Epstein. While Mr. Trump had vowed, during his presidential campaign, to unveil the files, in recent days he has faced mounting pressure to supply all relevant and new information pertaining to the case. The latest turn in the murky saga relating to Mr. Trump's prior association with Epstein, the former financier who died by suicide in a New York prison cell in 2019 while awaiting trial on sex trafficking charges, came after a report claimed that Mr. Trump, in 2003, sent a "bawdy" birthday letter to Epstein with references to a shared "secret". Mr. Trump has filed a libel lawsuit against the newspaper and its publisher Rupert Murdoch. He went on to post, on the Truth Social platform, "Based on the ridiculous amount of publicity given to Jeffrey Epstein, I have asked Attorney General Pam Bondi to produce any and all pertinent Grand Jury testimony, subject to Court approval. This SCAM, perpetrated by the Democrats, should end, right now!"

Mr. Trump's publicity woes regarding Epstein have been compounded, however, not due to any action by Democrats, but the fact that far-right MAGA groups, including conspiracy theorists such as QAnon, who believe that the U.S. government, media, and financial worlds are controlled by elites associated with a global child sex trafficking operation, have been applying pressure on the administration within Republican circles. Even prior to the latest report linking Mr. Trump and Epstein, the President had said that some "stupid Republicans... have fallen into the net" in asking for more information to be released. Now, it is possible that lawmakers in the House of Representatives will have the opportunity to vote on the decision to release the documents relating to the prosecution of Epstein, relying on a legislative mechanism known as a "discharge petition". A bipartisan team, led by Republican Thomas Massie and Democrat Ro Khanna, has proposed this petition under the moniker of the "Epstein Files Transparency Act", which, if it is passed with 218 signatures, could require the Attorney General to "make publicly available... all unclassified records, documents, communications, and investigative materials in the possession of the Department of Justice..." relating to Epstein. Mr. Trump may soon discover that while it helps his policy agenda to have a federal government trifecta and a sympathetic Supreme Court, his political prospects ultimately rest upon his support base, and it is one that is capable of abruptly turning the tide against him.

# Reform cannot wait, aviation safety is at stake

**T**he Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau's preliminary report on the Air India Boeing 787 air crash in Ahmedabad, on June 12, 2025, was released last week, on July 12. The report remains inconclusive, with critical uncertainties on whether pilot action was inadvertent or deliberate. I would argue that the lack of faith among pilots and those who track aviation like myself about the robustness of the investigation and its findings – whether correct or not – emanate from a deep lack of trust in the entire aviation system in India that often penalises its personnel, excessively, rather than holding airlines and regulators to equal scrutiny.

I would like to use this opportunity to, once again, call for a complete reform in the aviation sector. A genuine 'culture of safety' must permeate every layer of the aviation system. This includes fair employment terms and, crucially, access to mental health care without punitive consequences resulting in the automatic grounding of and loss of income for air crew at a time when the current system, ironically, jeopardises their psychological well-being.

The complex web of aviation safety is highly technical, but years of study with aviation professionals have helped me understand its intricate technicalities. The aviation system broadly involves multiple elements: the aircraft itself (design, airworthiness, and maintenance) and the people who operate it (maintenance engineers, technicians, pilots and cabin crew). These are, broadly, the responsibility of the airline operator, while airport infrastructure, air traffic control systems and its personnel are the responsibility of the Airports Authority of India (AAI) and/or the aerodrome operator. The Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) has regulatory control over airlines, the AAI and the airport operators. The Ministry of Civil Aviation (MoCA) has supervisory control over the DGCA and the AAI. Aviation accidents never result from a single failure but stem from multiple failures that align together, as in the Swiss cheese model. Each safety layer has flaws (holes); when these holes align across layers, an accident occurs.

### The fight for safety through courts

I have filed over 15 Public Interest Litigations (PIL) in the various High Courts and the Supreme Court of India after studying the links between aviation technicalities, regulations and data. I approached the judiciary because aviation authorities in charge of safety, became the violators. No one is held accountable for air crashes or the lives lost, in turn emboldening violations despite knowing that existing known safety breaches can cause deaths.

Court interventions have saved lives, as seen in the case of the crash in 2018 at Ghatkopar, Mumbai, when a small plane fell into a building site. In 2016, the Bombay High Court had issued a stay that halted construction near Mumbai airport. Had it not been issued, a 13-storey building would have stood in its place at the site.

Mumbai's airspace is among the most hazardous globally – there are over 5,000 vertical obstructions within a four-kilometre radius and in violation of the Inner Horizontal Surface (IHS) criteria. Despite a pending PIL, obstacles in the no-obstacle approach and take-off funnel rose from 125 in 2010 to over 1,000 in 2025, highlighting regulatory opacity and potential



**Yeshwanth Shenoy**

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The air crash in Ahmedabad is a moment for action – a genuine 'culture of safety' must flow to every layer of India's aviation system

misrepresentation by the DGCA, the AAI, airport operators, and the MoCA before the Bombay High Court. Had the High Court been informed about this accurately, the spread of these obstacles could have been stopped.

### Regulatory loopholes that pose a threat

Until 2008, airspace around airports was strictly regulated. The Aircraft Act and Statutory Order 988 of 1988 enabled the strict control of construction of buildings around airports. In 2008, a non-statutory committee was formed, effectively bypassing the legal safeguards that once ensured obstacle-free zones. It approved 25 buildings in prime locations in Mumbai using an aeronautical study conducted by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), which ought not to have been a part of a move to recommend construction which was illegal and of extra height. By the time ICAO distanced itself from the misuse of aeronautical studies, the AAI had begun conducting its own assessments which were less stringent.

The appellate committee granted permission for extra height recklessly. Around the year 2015, these obstacles, in addition to being physical barriers to safe flight movements, began interfering with radar and communication signals. The appellate committee also came out with guidelines and capped the maximum height at 90 metres in the Inner Horizontal Surface (IHS) and recorded that "any further deterioration in obstacle profile in and around airport is likely to aggravate the situation". Despite this, the appellate committee allowed obstacles to come up with impunity jeopardising safe flight operations. Ironically, the appellate committee that had permitted the safety violations was given statutory recognition through the 2015 Rules – despite these rules not allowing height relaxation.

The panel comprised officials entrusted with aviation safety and included a Joint Secretary in the Ministry of Civil Aviation, a Joint Director General in the DGCA, and a Member (Air Navigation Services) in the AAI. Thus, any complaint about obstacles is essentially judged by the very entities that sanctioned them.

Under pressure after a PIL on obstacles, the MoCA amended the 2015 Rules to limit the no objection certificate (NOC) validity to 12 years – an admission of the issue but an evasion of responsibility. How does the MoCA justify approving 100-floor buildings when it knows that 45 floors would become illegal in 12 years? This raises critical questions. What are the mechanisms that exist to demolish floors that become illegal after the expiry of the NOC?

What began in Mumbai has now spread across India. Even greenfield airport projects such as Navi Mumbai (Maharashtra) and Noida (Uttar Pradesh) have obstacles sprouting around them. Navi Mumbai Airport will start operations with a "displaced threshold" – which means aircraft will be unable to use the full runway because of the obstacles and increasing risks to air safety, thereby turning the airport into a monument of corruption and indifference by aviation authorities.

There is widespread systemic breakdown. First, aircraft design and airworthiness. The DGCA's limited internal technical capability forces it to be over reliant on foreign regulators such as the Federal Aviation Administration (U.S.) and the European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA),

as seen during the engine failure issue (Pratt & Whitney) that IndiGo experienced in 2017-18.

Second, aircraft maintenance standards. Aircraft Maintenance Engineers (AMEs) work under severe stress without duty time limits. The DGCA has allowed airlines to delegate AME tasks to less-qualified, lower-paid "technicians" – a cost-cutting move that undermines safety. Duty-time limitations recommended for AMEs by the court of inquiry following the crash in Mangalore (May 2010) remain unimplemented. Third, the flight crew. Airlines violate Flight Time Duty Limitations for pilots, and the DGCA grants exemptions which allow pilots who are fatigued to operate. The DGCA's unique NOC requirement restricts pilot mobility across airlines, increasing stress and enabling airlines to coerce pilots into breaching regulations. Cabin crew, whose primary role is passenger safety, are often dismissed as mere hospitality workers, which is a dangerously reductive view.

Fourth, airline operations. Airlines prioritise the goal of profit, adopting policies that consistently undermine safety. Despite the DGCA suspending personnel for safety violations, airline officials often retain high positions, controlling operations. DGCA-appointed officers in airlines, who are expected to enforce compliance, often have no real authority, making accountability toothless.

Fifth, air traffic management. The AAI faces a severe shortage of Air Traffic Controller Officers (ATCO) – an issue that has been flagged even by parliamentary committees. The provision to give licences to ATCO has not yet been implemented. Duty-time limitations for ATCOs – recommended by the Mangalore Court of Inquiry – remain unimplemented.

Sixth, silencing whistle-blowers. Whistle-blowers are often demoted, transferred, or terminated – a trend that has discouraged the reporting of critical safety issues in the AAI and airlines.

When aerodromes operate in violation of safety standards, any other shortcomings in any of the other components become potentially fatal – as seen in Ghatkopar (2018), Kozhikode (2020), and now Ahmedabad (2025). Non-compliance in aviation stems from a lack of safety culture, not ignorance. Crashes are not mere "accidents" – they are the inevitable result of years of systemic neglect and policy violations. Without immediate systemic improvements, the next disaster will not wait for five years, but is just around the corner.

### The role of the judiciary is important

The judiciary, which has always been the silver lining in India's constitutional set-up, has been inactive on aviation issues, relying on the state's technical expertise on the subject. It must address the deterioration in the aviation sector and hold authorities accountable. Additionally, the judiciary's conservative approach to valuing human life needs to change.

In India, human life is undervalued, for example, as seen in railway accidents and motor vehicle deaths – a few lakhs of rupees. When this is the worth of a human life, safety upgrades that cost crores of rupees become easier for stakeholders to ignore. Immediate and comprehensive reform is needed. The aviation system requires accountability, oversight and a safety-over-profit commitment.

Reform cannot wait. Lives are at stake.

# India can reframe the Artificial Intelligence debate

**L**ess than three years ago, ChatGPT dragged artificial intelligence (AI) out of research laboratories and into living rooms, classrooms and parliaments. Leaders sensed the shock waves instantly. Despite an already crowded summit calendar, three global gatherings on AI followed in quick succession. When New Delhi hosts the AI Impact Summit in February 2026, it can do more than break attendance records. It can show that governments, not just corporations, can steer AI for the public good.

### India can bridge the divide

But the geopolitical climate is far from smooth. War continues in Ukraine. West Asia teeters between flareups. Trade wars are rising faster than regulators can respond. Even the Paris AI Summit (February 2025), meant to unify, ended in division. The United States and the United Kingdom rejected the final text. China welcomed it. The very forum meant to protect humanity's digital future faces the risk of splintering. India has the standing and the credibility to bridge these divides.

India's Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology began preparations in earnest. In June, it launched a nationwide consultation through the MyGov platform. Students, researchers, startups, and civil society groups submitted ideas.

The brief was simple: show how AI can advance inclusive growth, improve development, and protect the planet. These ideas will shape the agenda and the final declaration. This turned the consultation into capital and gave India a



**Syed Akbaruddin**

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As the host of the AI Impact Summit next year, India can set the course – steering AI for the public good

democratic edge no previous host has enjoyed. Here are five suggestions rooted in India's digital experience. They are modest in cost but can be rich in credibility.

### Pledges and report cards

First, measure what matters. India's digital tools prove that technology can serve everyone. Aadhaar provides secure identity to more than a billion people. The Unified Payments Interface (UPI) moves money in seconds. The Summit in 2026 can borrow that spirit. Each delegation could announce one clear goal to achieve within 12 months. A company might cut its data centre electricity use. A university could offer a free AI course for rural girls. A government might translate essential health advice into local languages using AI. All pledges could be listed on a public website and tracked through a scoreboard a year later. Report cards are more interesting than press releases.

Second, bring the global South to the front row. Half of humanity was missing from the leaders' photo session at the first summit. That must not happen again. As a leader of the Global South, India must endeavour to have as wide a participation as possible.

India should also push for an AI for Billions Fund, seeded by development banks and Gulf investors, which could pay for cloud credits, fellowships and local language datasets. India could launch a multilingual model challenge for say 50 underserved languages and award prizes before the closing dinner. The message is simple: talent is everywhere, and not just in California or Beijing.

Third, create a common safety check. Since the Bletchley Summit in 2023 (or the AI Safety Summit 2023), experts have urged red teaming and stress tests. Many national AI safety institutes have sprung up. But no shared checklist exists. India could endeavour to broker them into a Global AI Safety Collaborative which can share red team scripts, incident logs and stress tests on any model above an agreed compute line. Our own institute can post an open evaluation kit with code and datasets for bias robustness.

Fourth, offer a usable middle road on rules. The United States fears heavy regulation. Europe rolls out its AI Act. China trusts state control. Most nations want something in between. India can voice that balance. It can draft a voluntary frontier AI code of conduct. Base it on the Seoul pledge but add teeth. Publish external red team results within 90 days. Disclose compute once it crosses a line. Provide an accident hotline. Voluntary yet specific.

Fifth, avoid fragmentation. Splintered summits serve no one. The U.S. and China eye each other across the frontier AI race. New Delhi cannot erase that tension but can blunt it. The summit agenda must be broad, inclusive, and focused on global good.

### The path for India

India cannot craft a global AI authority in one week and should not try. It can stitch together what exists and make a serious push to share AI capacity with the global majority. If India can turn participation into progress, it will not just be hosting a summit. It will reframe its identity on a cutting edge issue.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Trump's claim

The U.S. President, Donald Trump, seems to have dropped another claim – that five jets were shot down during the India-Pakistan conflict (Front page, "Cong. seeks clarity over Trump's

remarks on jets", July 20). India cannot afford to remain silent whenever Mr. Trump makes a serious remark, especially when it one that has direct implications for the country's image, identity,

security and reputation. Nothing will be lost if an authentic statement on the issue is tabled in the monsoon session of Parliament.

V. Johan Dhanakumar, Chennai

### Ensure road safety

Omni bus drivers, especially on the Madurai to Chennai

route, drive in a reckless manner. The vehicles also have very powerful head

lights, causing difficulty to other road users. The police and RTO officers must act.

S. Prakash, Tiruchi, Tamil Nadu

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



## Temples of social justice

**R**ecently, a political controversy erupted in Tamil Nadu on the issue of diverting temple funds for building colleges. Beyond the political debates, the issue throws light on a unique social justice model around the regulation of secular practices associated with religion. This model, predominantly developed in the erstwhile Madras Presidency, draws strength from a 200-year-old legislative framework which continues till date. It has gained more acceptance in south India. As elections approach in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, clarity on the issue will help diffuse attempts to polarise voters around it.

### Religious endowments law

Through the Religious Endowment and Escheats Regulation 1817, the East India Company set up the earliest legislative architecture around regulation of religious endowments. When the British Crown assumed direct control over Indian territories in 1858, Queen Victoria issued a proclamation stating that the sovereign would restrict interference in religious affairs. This was necessary as there was concern about losing face from the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny, which was triggered by religious issues.

However, the withdrawal of the British government from religious affairs was not complete. In fact, in the Madras Presidency, various British officials argued for continued oversight of religious endowments. Finally, the British government settled for a balanced approach: the sovereign would not interfere with practices that were essentially religious, such as rituals, but would exercise control over the lands and secular aspects of the religious endowments.

The idea of the government supervising religious institutions came to be crystallised when the Justice Party was elected in 1920. One of the earliest legislative interventions by the Justices was Bill No. 12 of 1922: Hindu Religious



**Manuraj Shunmugasundaram**  
Advocate practising before the High Court of Madras and DMK spokesperson



**Swetha Sethubaskaran**  
Advocate practising before the High Court of Madras

Endowments Act. When it was introduced in the Madras Legislative Council, it faced opposition, mainly due to the provision in the law that allowed surplus temple funds to be diverted for other purposes.

The nub of the issue was whether funds provided to a temple could be used for secular purposes. The matter was debated and settled in 1925, when the law was enacted. Since then, every revised version of the plenary law, including the current law – The Tamil Nadu Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Act, 1959 – has retained the provision of surplus funds.

Section 36 of the 1959 Act permits the trustees of religious institutions to appropriate any surplus funds for any purposes listed under the law, with the prior sanction of the Commissioner. 'Surplus' means any amount remaining after adequate provisions have been made for the maintenance of the temple and training of its officials. The Act also empowers the Joint Commissioner or the Deputy Commissioner to appropriate funds in cases where the original purpose has become impossible to fulfil.

Endowments to temples have a long and rich history. Temples received lavish donations from the sovereign rulers from as far back as in 970 AD, when the Chola emperor was at its peak. Historian Anirudh Kanisetty writes that Sembayan Mahadevi, a Chola queen, made strategic donations of land and kind to temples. The practice continued during the Vijayanagara kingdom. Temples were not just places of worship; they were socio-cultural hubs and were also used for educational purposes. This is confirmed by the inscriptions on temple walls and the spacious *mandapams* (pillared halls) which were used to hold educational or cultural events. So the original intent argument would also support the theory of utilising temple resources for educational purposes.

The 1959 Act has been tested

and upheld by constitutional courts. Among the permissible uses of surplus funds under the 1959 Act is the establishment and maintenance of universities or colleges (Section 66). These educational institutions are also required to make available the study of the Hindu religion or Hindu temple architecture. Seen within this framework, building colleges from temple funds is not only legal, but a logical extension of these provisions.

### Social justice legacy

The controversy around the use of temple funds cannot be restricted to discussing legal propositions, however; it also carries ideological and sociopolitical significance. In the pre-colonial era, the motivation for the rulers to support large-scale endowments was that the temples acted as channels through which state resources could be allotted for important welfare projects. Through colonial rule, the British East India Company and the Crown viewed sovereign involvement in the management of temple affairs as necessary for reasons of revenue and maintenance of local control.

Over the last century, the Self-Respect Movement, which emerged from the Madras Presidency, viewed the regulation of temples and oversight of their resources as a critical feature of anti-caste reforms. Without this, there would have been no temple entry legislation in 1936 and 1947. Today, Tamil Nadu and Kerala are among the few States where governments have appointed priests from backward classes after a prolonged legal struggle.

Ultimately, any argument against government control of temple affairs would be striking at the root of social justice. The role of the government in ensuring that surplus funds are appropriated in a lawful manner is settled. Any reversal of this would only result in a set back of the long legacy of social justice and religious reforms that south India has pioneered.

## Caught in the crossfire

Universities in Kerala cannot be made pawns in an ideological war

**STATE OF PLAY**  
**Sarath Babu George**  
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**O**ver more than half a decade, the relationship between the Kerala government and the Raj Bhavan has deteriorated. Where there was ceremonial civility and mutual respect earlier, there is now friction, partisanship, and constitutional brinkmanship. And caught in this crossfire are Kerala's public universities.

Successive Governors – Arif Mohammed Khan followed by Rajendra Vishwanath Arlekar – have clashed repeatedly with the CPI(M)-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) government, especially over matters pertaining to higher education. Increasingly, these disputes are no longer symbolic or rhetorical; they are affecting the functioning of academic institutions.

This dysfunction is most apparent in the ongoing deadlock over the appointment of Vice-Chancellors. Thirteen of the 14 State universities, where the Governor serves as Chancellor, have been without permanent Vice-Chancellors for months or even years. The logjam arises from disagreements between the government and the Governor's office over the constitution of search-cum-selection committees, effectively stalling leadership appointments in institutions.

The current flashpoint of this crisis is the University of Kerala. On June 25, a private event at the university's Senate Hall was abruptly cancelled on the grounds that it featured a controversial depiction of 'Bharat Mata' holding a saffron flag. Citing violations of university norms, Registrar



K.S. Anil Kumar issued orders to cancel the event, reportedly at the advice of the Syndicate, which is dominated by Left-leaning members. The Governor was informed of the cancellation, but chose to go to the Senate Hall nevertheless. The programme proceeded amid student protests and political tensions.

A week later, the Vice-Chancellor in-charge, Mohanan Kunnummal, suspended the Registrar. In retaliation, the Syndicate convened a meeting, and despite the Vice-Chancellor formally adjourning and exiting the meeting, proceeded to revoke the suspension, citing procedural overreach. The scenario has given way to an unprecedented situation where both the suspended Registrar and his temporary replacement claim to hold the same office.

As the stand-off persisted, students bore the brunt. Protests escalated and essential administrative processes, including the issuance of degree certificates, came to a halt. Dr. Kunnummal returned to the university only on July 18 and cleared the backlog, reportedly under the Governor's advice. Even then, Higher Education Minister R. Bindu's attempt to broker a truce has yielded little substantive change. The Vice-Chancellor remains adamant on the legitimacy of the suspension, while the Syndicate insists on its

revocation.

The Governor and the government also continue to spar over the appointments of interim Vice-Chancellors, with each attempting to assert their ideological and administrative primacy in the higher education sector. While the Left claims that campuses are being influenced by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the Governor's office claims that there is excessive political interference by the State. Mr. Arlekar's ideological proximity to the RSS and his public admiration for Hindutva ideologue V.D. Savarkar have only heightened tensions. With little sign of a thaw, the confrontation threatens to erode public faith in governance as well as in higher education.

The longer this constitutional tug-of-war continues, the greater the risk of irreparable harm to not just the reputations of these institutions, but also to the lives of thousands of students whose academic and professional futures are in limbo. The University of Kerala, the Cochin University of Science and Technology, and the Mahatma Gandhi University ranked between 9th and 11th places among State public universities in the NIRF India Rankings 2024. Their progress risks being undone by continued administrative paralysis and the increasing politicisation of academic governance.

Kerala's universities deserve better. They cannot be made pawns in an ideological war; they need autonomy, leadership, and stability. If the State's constitutional actors cannot rise above their entrenched positions, the students, and the credibility of Kerala's academic institutions, will ultimately have to pay the price.

## Will the BJP-TDP alliance signal a new political fault line?

Telangana is entering a competitive three-cornered phase, but one with asymmetrical stakes

### DATA POINT

**Pradeep Kumar Donthala**  
**Vignesh Karthik KR**

**T**he speculation over whether the BJP will support a TDP candidate in the upcoming Jubilee Hills by-poll signals a broader realignment in Telangana's political landscape.

The 2023 Assembly elections marked a rupture in Telangana's political trajectory. The decade-long dominance of the BRS, formerly the Telangana Rashtra Samithi, came to an end as the Congress returned to power under Revanth Reddy. While the spotlight has been on the Congress's resurgence, it is the unfolding re-entry of the TDP and the consolidation of the BJP-TDP-JSP alliance that holds deeper implications for the political landscape. To assess what this reshuffling portends, it is essential to revisit the historical trajectories of vote share transfers, social base shifts, and evolving patterns of caste and party alignment.

The TDP's renewed interest in Telangana is a strategic return rooted in its historical strength. From 1985 to 1999, it consistently won over 45% of seats in the region, drawing support from Backward Classes (BCs) such as the Yadavs, Gouds, Mudirajs, Munnuru Kapus, and settler Kammas in southern Telangana. Post-2001, due to its ambiguous stance on Statehood, its vote share dropped from 38.46% in 1999 to 15.32% in 2014, and to 0% in 2023 when it did not contest.

Correlation analysis of historical vote shares reveals a strong negative correlation (-0.89) between the TDP and the BRS, suggesting that the BRS's rise was built substantially on the crumbling edifice of the TDP's support base. This trend was visible across key districts (Table). In Karimnagar, the TDP's vote share plummeted from 46.5% (1999) to 0% (2023), while the BRS's vote share rose from 0%

to 37.9% over the same period. In Medak, the TDP's fall from 47.5% to 0% coincided with the BRS's rise to 45.3%. In each case, the migration of BC votes and settler votes from the TDP to the BRS was crucial for the latter's dominance.

However, the electoral tide began to turn after 2018. The BRS, having reached its peak in that election with a vote share of 47.32%, began to lose ground due to governance fatigue, internal fragmentation, and its failed attempt at national expansion. As dissatisfaction grew, especially among aspirational BCs and Dalits, a second wave of vote transfer began, this time from the BRS to the BJP. The BJP's Statewide vote share increased from 7.10% in 2018 to 13.9% in 2023, marking its best performance in Assembly elections in the State. Its growth was especially sharp in northern Telangana: in Adilabad, the BJP grew from 7.85% to 27.6%; and in Nizamabad, from 6.88% to 26.2%. Some Scheduled Tribe (ST) groups in northern Telangana, such as the Gonds, have also extended support to the BJP.

What makes this moment particularly significant is the overlapping social base of the three parties. Each has historically drawn from the same pool of Backward Classes, settler Kammas, and sections of Dalits, especially the Madigas. The BRS's dominance between 2004 and 2018 rested on its ability to combine Velama leadership with broad BC support. But with the NDA now consolidating this fragmented social base, the TDP is reactivating its settler and BC networks in urban centres and the BJP is consolidating Madiga and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) support in the north. The expectation from the JSP is to mobilise Munnur Kapus. The BRS finds itself in danger of being squeezed out from both ends.

While this churn weakens the BRS, it paradoxically strengthens the Congress in the short term. In 2023, Congress won because it successfully positioned itself as the

alternative amid a fractured opposition. Its vote share rose from 28.65% in 2018 to 39.40% in 2023, and it gained significant traction in southern districts. These gains came predominantly from traditional support among Reddys, Malas, and segments of OBCs disillusioned with the BRS.

The Congress is moving beyond its traditional Reddy and Mala base by courting OBCs through a 42% BC reservation plan and by making BC leader Mukesh Kumar Goud as the State Congress Chief. Its aim is to chip away at the OBC support of the BRS and BJP. This marks a conscious attempt to reposition itself as a platform for backward caste assertion in Telangana. Yet the NDA is posing a challenge with a broad caste alliance that includes Kammas, Kapus, Madigas and many non-dominant OBCs, backed by the BJP's cadre strength, the TDP's grassroots networks, and the JSP's powerful appeal among youth and Munnur Kapus.

Geographically, the NDA has managed to minimise internal friction: the BJP consolidates its hold over northern Telangana and urban pockets such as Hyderabad and Warangal, while the TDP is poised to recover ground in southern districts such as Nalgonda, Mahbubnagar, and Khajuraho. The alliance is thus strategically distributed.

The real concern for the Congress, then, is not its lack of social breadth, but whether it can institutionalise its emerging coalition into a stable political architecture. If the BRS fails to recover by reviving Telangana sentiment and decentralising its leadership, it risks becoming a spoiler in contests increasingly shaped by Congress-NDA rivalry. Telangana, therefore, is entering a competitive three-cornered phase, but one with asymmetrical stakes.

*Pradeep Kumar Donthala is a political consultant and Vignesh Karthik K.R. is a postdoctoral research fellow of Indian and Indonesian politics at KITLV-Leiden*

### Three-way contest

The data was sourced from the Election Commission of India and IndiaVotes

**Table:** District-wise vote shares of various parties in Assembly elections in the Telangana region. Data for the period before bifurcation also pertains to the seats in the Telangana region, even though it was part of united Andhra Pradesh then

District	Party	Avg.	1999	2004	2009	2014	2018	2023
Adilabad	TDP	19.0%	48.9%	37.6%	18.9%	8.6%	0.0%	0.0%
	BRS	26.3%	0.0%	17.8%	17.7%	43.4%	45.9%	33.4%
	INC	30.4%	38.1%	30.4%	30.2%	23.6%	30.6%	29.4%
Nizamabad	BJP	8.8%	0.0%	3.3%	3.9%	7.9%	10.0%	27.6%
	TDP	21.9%	46.6%	34.9%	37.7%	12.4%	0.0%	0.0%
	BRS	28.9%	0.0%	17.7%	16.7%	54.7%	49.7%	34.9%
Karimnagar	INC	35.5%	46.6%	35.2%	30.0%	31.5%	35.9%	34.2%
	TDP	19.9%	47.5%	35.4%	22.0%	14.6%	0.0%	0.0%
	BRS	29.8%	0.0%	24.9%	11.5%	42.5%	54.2%	45.3%
Medak	INC	32.8%	41.3%	26.2%	36.1%	28.9%	29.3%	35.2%
	BJP	6.9%	6.1%	4.3%	3.8%	5.9%	8.1%	13.1%
	TDP	26.0%	51.1%	44.2%	24.3%	24.5%	11.9%	0.0%
Ranga Reddy	BRS	23.5%	0.0%	21.7%	6.1%	26.2%	45.4%	41.7%
	INC	27.1%	41.0%	16.3%	32.2%	22.4%	21.8%	32.5%
	BJP	6.9%	0.0%	0.0%	6.6%	7.4%	8.6%	18.5%
Hyderabad	TDP	19.3%	43.2%	38.0%	13.6%	18.2%	1.7%	0.0%
	BRS	16.1%	0.0%	10.6%	3.7%	15.0%	33.8%	33.1%
	INC	22.4%	28.4%	25.3%	26.3%	14.0%	17.2%	23.3%
Mahbubnagar	BJP	15.2%	15.3%	10.4%	15.0%	14.8%	16.4%	19.4%
	TDP	23.3%	48.5%	39.9%	36.2%	12.6%	2.3%	0.0%
	BRS	23.5%	0.0%	10.9%	5.0%	36.1%	51.4%	37.7%
Nalgonda	BJP	3.5%	39.8%	78.3%	37.2%	32.6%	30.6%	46.8%
	BJP	6.4%	7.0%	6.6%	4.5%	6.5%	5.5%	8.2%
	TDP	17.0%	38.6%	36.9%	13.7%	13.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Warangal	BRS	22.2%	0.0%	10.9%	8.2%	32.5%	47.1%	34.7%
	INC	38.4%	41.9%	26.5%	38.5%	30.8%	39.8%	32.9%
	BJP	3.3%	2.4%	1.9%	2.4%	4.8%	3.3%	4.9%
Khammam	TDP	20.4%	44.7%	36.1%	20.6%	14.6%	6.6%	0.0%
	BRS	29.0%	0.0%	24.7%	22.0%	42.9%	48.9%	35.3%
	INC	35.7%	42.5%	23.5%	40.0%	25.5%	30.7%	51.8%
Nalgonda	BJP	4.7%	6.6%	3.5%	2.5%	6.0%	2.8%	6.8%
	TDP	20.9%	33.1%	35.6%	12.4%	30.3%	14.2%	0.0%
	BRS	13.9%	0.0%	0.7%	0.0%	8.0%	39.8%	35.0%
Khammam	INC	31.1%	35.2%	28.6%	33.2%	17.5%	26.4%	45.5%
	BJP	0.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.9%	0.0%	0.8%	0.6%

### FROM THE ARCHIVES

**The Hindu.**

FIFTY YEARS AGO JULY 21, 1975

### Second link-up a cliff-hanger

Moscow, July 20: Soviet space scientists spent seven cliff-hanging minutes during the second docking operation between Apollo and Soyuz-19 as the two spacecraft buckled and rolled and even began to rotate, a Soviet space official revealed today.

Dr. Vladimir Syromyatnikov, the head of the Soviet-American task force which designed and built the docking mechanism used to join the two spacecraft during their flight together through space, said the final link-up had taken place under "extreme conditions".

The pitching and tossing about of the two spacecraft between 12:33 and 12:40 GMT had been "rather unexpected", he said. Space controllers watching the action on their television screens lived through seven emotion-filled minutes, he added.

He said the fact that all went well in the end was proof of the ability of the mechanism to withstand all the shocks to which it was subjected. "We do not know the exact reasons for yesterday's incident and specialists from the two countries are at work analysing the causes," Dr. Syromyatnikov said.

The Soviet expert said it would not have been "tragic" if the mechanism had buckled during the docking operation because the astronauts would have then taken immediate steps to separate the two spacecraft ready for their return to earth.

The docking mechanisms were not directly attached to the space capsules used in the descent to earth, Dr. Syromyatnikov noted.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JULY 21, 1925

### Indian provincial services

London, July 20: Replying to a question of Sir Charles Oman, as to whether any measures were contemplated for assimilating the position of European and British subjects serving in Provincial Services in India to that of either Civil Services in respect of the retirement on proportionate pension, Earl Winterton said that no general extension of the right to retirement rules was contemplated, but the Government of India was examining, in consultation with the local Governments, the possibility of entertaining applications of individual officers whose circumstances may appear to be of a very exceptional nature.





## CONTRAPUNTO

If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us,  
do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?  
And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?  
—SHAKESPEARE

## College Cruelties

Another student suicide, another post-mortem.  
Systemic deafness to student complaints lives on

On the heels of the terrible self-immolation by a 20-year-old college student in Odisha, has come the alleged suicide of a 21-year-old medical student in Greater Noida. Among the common factors in the two cases, the parents say their child had been put under extreme stress through targeted harassment by faculty. Complaints to other faculty hadn't brought any relief. There are also letters. In the Odisha case, it seems fellow students were mobilised to support the faculty member and isolate the complainant. In the Greater Noida case, there is reportedly a suicide note naming professors for harassment and humiliation. Structurally, higher ed provides faculty with enormous power over students — from shaping ideas to careers. But the corresponding safety mechanism that's critical to maintaining the health of such a system, looks broken.

In March, when the Supreme Court set up a national task force to address students' mental health concerns and prevent suicides in higher ed institutions, it noted how student suicides have gone past farmers killing themselves due to agrarian distress. A lot of blame is put on toxic competitiveness and this issue too requires greater responsiveness from college administrators. But cases of harassment belong to a different category. It is an abuse of power by specific faculty members. It can be explicitly sexual in certain cases. In other cases it can take the form of verbal crudities, including those referencing a student's body or caste status. There can be unfair attendance, grading and assignment of coursework. How are students to be protected from such persecution?

In the Greater Noida case, both her family and fellows report the student being repeatedly derided in the classroom. Her parents took up the matter with college authorities, but nothing changed. In the Odisha case, the student went to police and to the college's internal complaints committee. Here, instead of relief she seems to have found a cruel stonewalling that drove her to despair. Is UGC unaware that many ICs are less than rigorous in giving a proper hearing to the complaints they receive? Even in metro cities, principals, senior professors, college boards and sundry others are known to put the spanner in various inquiries. Think too how IIT-Kharagpur alone has seen four 'unnatural' student deaths in seven months. Every such suicide follows our oldest institutes admitting to 'lapses'. But at least when students complain, the system should spring into action, to hear them and save them.

## The New Buzz

Unregistered drones are law enforcement's  
new challenge, one that's not easily solved

Civilian drones are proving to be a new headache for law enforcement across the country — an unsurprising fallout of drones becoming cheaper and more widely available. In towns and villages in western UP, for example, drones are regularly spotted after sundown. With growing suspicions that these are linked to local thefts or dodgy characters looking to make privacy-violating videos, people have been forced to mount rooftop vigils. Complaints of videography and snooping using drones, especially in relation to sensitive govt facilities, have been growing in Tamil Nadu. Other state authorities too are seized of the matter.

There are three issues here. First, compliance and enforcement of drone regulations are weak. To operate a civilian drone in India one needs to register the drone on the DGCA website, obtain a remote pilot licence, and be aware of flying regulations, including locations of no-fly zones. But most private drone operators don't bother, and there are now lakhs of unregistered drones. As of April this year, only 32,000 were registered against an estimated 6L-plus drones in the country.

Second, despite the fact that import of drones is banned in India, foreign drones — especially of illegal Chinese make — are found across grey markets throughout the country. Chinese drones are actually smuggled across India's porous borders. They are dismantled for the journey before being reassembled here. Third, given the rise of the attention economy, drone videos that infringe privacy are in high demand.

The sheer number of drones is seriously stretching limited police resources. One solution is faster development of the Indian drone industry to lower domestic drone prices. This will stem imports, and perhaps ensure better monitoring of drone use. But it's not a guarantee by any means. Drones are going the way of all tech breakthroughs — the baddies will more often than not outsmart the good guys.

## Gourmet UnDelight

Cheesy misadventures of a curd rice soul

Sivakumar Sundaram | timesofindia.com



It began, as most culinary tragedies do, with misplaced optimism. There I was, a proud South Indian, my taste buds raised on the moral clarity of curd rice and the structured precision of sambar, venturing into the treacherous terrain of French-Italian fine-dining in Chamonix. The menu whispered sophistication. The risotto screamed otherwise.

"I'll have the cheese risotto," I said, as if I knew what I was doing. "Well done, with vegetables." In my mind's kitchen, this translated to a suave vegetable pulav with a European passport and a cheesy accent.

The French waiter, whose smile was equal parts charm and confusion, nodded with the serene detachment of a man who had long stopped asking *why*. He had clearly survived worse, possibly someone requesting a side of pickle or a cup of filter coffee.

What arrived, however, was a steaming dish of emotional beige. Cheese-bound. Vegetable-free. Spiritually vacant. If curd rice is your grandmother's hug in edible form, this was a cold shrug wrapped in Parmesan. I looked at it. It looked back, unblinking.

I cleared my throat and summoned courage. "Pardon, I asked for vegetables." A pause followed, long enough to consider the mistakes that brought me here.

The plate returned ten minutes later, accessorised with a few carrot slices that looked like they had just been furloughed from a salad bar. For this cosmetic upgrade, I was politely billed €6 extra. Gulliver never comes cheap in France.

Still clinging to hope, I asked for tomato sauce, believing it to be chutney's third cousin, not quite native, but not entirely foreign either. Surely that would redeem things.

Alas, what followed was a culinary car crash. French-Italian sensibilities collided with South Indian trauma to produce something I can only describe as *Risotto da Kichdi*. A dish so confused, it could use therapy in three languages and subtitles in two.

The texture was porridge at a masquerade ball, dressed to impress but clueless on the dance floor. The taste wandered between cheese-induced amnesia and ambition that had clearly lost its GPS. And the soul? Let's just say it had taken the last gondola down the mountain and left no forwarding address.

I paid the bill, left the thrill, and walked out with a palate still waiting for closure.

Syed Ata Hasnain



"How could we be so naive as to allow a major military victory to founder... 30 years after the victory, we lost the very same nation we helped create?" This question has haunted many observers of India's strategic history with regard to Bangladesh, 1971. Answering it becomes essential, especially as we assess the follow-up to Operation Sindoor and India's long-term objectives in Jammu & Kashmir. These are all aspects of conflict management that are often neglected.

India's 1971 war with Pakistan, which led to the creation of Bangladesh, was among the most decisive military victories of the 20th century. It birthed a new nation and showcased Indian military strength and political will. Yet, over time, the warmth between New Delhi and Dhaka faded into estrangement. Today, Bangladesh is no longer among India's reliable partners. How did this happen? The answer lies in a key principle of strategic affairs: initiating and winning a conflict is far easier than managing the peace that follows.

Every conflict follows a progression. It begins with initiation — often dramatic and kinetic. Then comes stabilisation, where gains are consolidated, adversaries deterred, and legitimacy secured. After that, conflict termination — when hostilities cease or shift to a new equilibrium. Finally, the most overlooked stage — conflict resolution. This determines whether peace is lasting or temporary, and whether victory can be strategically harvested. India has historically prioritised the first two stages, often neglecting the latter. Bangladesh is a telling example. After the Pakistani surrender, we withdrew early, released over 93,000 prisoners of war, and facilitated Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's return. But we assumed Bangladesh's gratitude meant no further investment was needed. We saw its independence as our gift, forgetting that its people had fought for their freedom with their own national ethos.

In hindsight, we did little to nurture Bangladesh's national identity or support its sense of agency in liberation. We celebrated our victory but insufficiently endorsed the sacrifices of the Mukti Bahini and the

millions who fought, bled, and suffered. The absence of a shared commemorative space in Dhaka speaks volumes. The iconic photograph of the Pakistani surrender on Dec 16, 1971 features no Mukti Bahini or Bangladesh political representative.

This disconnect struck me years later during UN peacekeeping missions. Working alongside Bangladeshi army contingents, I noticed discomfort when Indian officers invoked 1971 as a basis for camaraderie. Rather than nostalgia, it often evoked silence or unease. None of us had been briefed on this sentiment before few in our military leadership had examined the post-victory



relationship. Perhaps our Pakistan fixation overshadowed that necessity. I wonder if it still does.

This lack of post-conflict political and psychological resolution is something we must avoid repeating in the context of Op Sindoor and the broader transformation in J&K since Aug 5, 2019. The abrogation of Article 370 was a tectonic political step, akin to a revolution. Op Sindoor followed six years later, aimed at deterring Pakistan's asymmetric warfare and dismantling terrorist infra. Tactically and operationally, Sindoor was a success. Strategically, it put Pakistan on the back foot. But will this victory endure?

The real battleground is not along the ceasefire line but in the minds of people. Conflict resolution in Kashmir — like in Bangladesh — will be long and demanding.

The goal is not merely territorial security or threat neutralisation, but trust-building, shared narratives, and lasting integration of hearts and minds. This means investing in J&K youth, enabling their full participation in India's mainstream, and building pride in a pluralistic national identity. It also means fostering friendships across states and faiths and creating platforms where Kashmiri youth don't feel "othered" or under suspicion.

We must also stay alert to emerging threats in psychological, cognitive, and virtual domains — areas where adversaries will try to exploit residual disaffection. The war of narratives is no less critical than the war of weapons. Psychological operations, disinformation, AI-driven perception shaping, and digitally-stoked grievances will form tomorrow's battlefronts. Are our institutions resilient enough to uphold the spirit of Aug 5 and Op Sindoor over the long haul?

The answer must be yes. But only if we remain vigilant and wise. History warns us that unmanaged victory becomes deferred conflict. The Treaty of Versailles ended World War I with pomp and ceremony, yet sowed the seeds of World War II. The 2003 Iraq War toppled Saddam Hussein but fractured the region. Victory, if not consolidated, creates space for the defeated to re-emerge. India now has a unique opportunity to shape a new era of peace in J&K. To achieve that, we must avoid complacency, stay alert to invisible frontlines, and remain committed to the long road.

Bangladesh's post-1971 journey is a cautionary tale. It reminds us that nations are built not just by battles, but by the stories and sentiments that follow. By the respect shown to partners, and the emotional bridges constructed long after the last bullet is fired. Bangladesh's choices today are shaped by internal churn, regional dynamics, and broader contestations. Its leadership is confused and diffused. A nuanced diplomatic outreach — one that acknowledges the pride of the Bangladeshi people in their liberation and co-creates a shared historical narrative — can re-anchor the Indo-Bangladesh relationship.

Applying this lesson to post-Sindoor J&K is equally important. The writer is a former commander of the Springer-based Chitrag Corps.

## Marathi Vs Hindi: Stakes Are Higher Than Politics

World history is full of examples of how a language extinction devastates the socio-cultural foundations of the region in which it is spoken. This is what 'language liberalism' doesn't get

Prabodhan Pol and Sumeet Mhaskar



In recent weeks, it's been Maharashtra that's been the battleground of the three-language formula prescribed by National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The policy requires schools to teach three languages, with at least two of them being Indian languages. Non-Hindi-speaking states have feared that the third language would effectively become Hindi.

In April, it was Tamil Nadu govt that vehemently opposed this Union govt move. In Maharashtra, too, opposition to this policy has been simmering for some time, mirroring the response in Tamil Nadu. But in June, protests escalated here. They gained momentum when schools reopened and the state govt issued a resolution making Hindi a compulsory third language for all Marathi and English-medium schools, from grades 1 to 10.

As complaints of the imposition of Hindi language grew stronger, Uddhav and Raj Thackeray also became involved in the protests, along with numerous social and political organisations. Overall, this opposition has anchored itself in protecting Marathi language and identity. This is why it remains in place even after forcing the state govt to withdraw its original orders.

While Uddhav and Raj Thackeray have led the opposition, political parties across ideologies have extended their support. Alongside, Marathi media, both print and electronic, has uniformly rejected the idea of imposing Hindi in schools in Maharashtra.

Conversely, mainstream Hindi and English media have approached the issue casually. They have criticised the protests and used the rhetoric of 'language liberalism' to justify the state's three-language policy.

Actually, national mainstream media has largely overlooked the concerns raised by protesters across non-Hindi speaking states. Historically too, political discourse has dismissed language movements in non-Hindi regions as parochial or nativist anxieties, rather than seeing these as acts of cultural preservation or democratic

dissent. This may be partly explained by the scarcity of Marathi-speaking journalists and cultural practitioners within mainstream English and Hindi media.

It is crucial to recognise that protests against language imposition are not merely sectarian or chauvinistic acts. Instead, they also reflect growing anxiety about marginalising regional languages within a broader homogenising nationalist agenda.

But historically, regional linguistic assertions in non-Hindi speaking regions have been dismissed as sectarian and seen as potential barriers to the 'greater' goal of national integration. Even in the early 20th century nationalist politics played a pivotal role in elevating Hindi to a position of national legitimacy, often at the expense of other regional languages.

The current push for Hindi in schools accelerates this agenda more forcefully. Not only does it establish hierarchies among languages, but such policies also risk transforming the cultural landscapes of various regions across India.

One of the distinctive features of Indian society is its unity in diversity. This diversity extends beyond geography, languages and cuisines to include whole cultural systems that operate differently across the country. It is precisely for this reason that the state must be sensitive to the demands of different regions, cultures and languages.

Language is not just a means of communication but also a carrier of history, culture and identity. This is what makes various regions in India unique and this is what must be preserved.

Numerous examples worldwide demonstrate that the extinction of languages has had devastating consequences for the social and cultural fabric of the regions

in which they are spoken. For instance, consider the transformations wrought by Spanish colonisers using a violent state apparatus to eliminate several languages and imposing Spanish across Latin America.

India can learn from such histories and choose an alternative path, preserving its rich mosaic of living languages, with all their vibrant oral and literary traditions. By contrast, any effort to centralise or privilege one language, especially Hindi, over others, risks repeating the colonial pattern of cultural erasure.

Furthermore, while discussing the preservation of language and its culture, it is equally important to consider the variations within the language. In Maharashtra, since the early 19th century, the mainstream conservative Marathi intelligentsia played an instrumental role in establishing Sanskritised Marathi as *Pramaan Bhasha* (standard language).

They labelled the vibrant language spoken by the masses as 'impure', creating a cultural hierarchy. They mainly concentrated on symbolic debates, such as the distinction between certain Marathi letters, prioritising cultural purity over meaningful reform. In this process, rural dialectal Marathi was marginalised.

The challenges confronting Marathi language and culture are both internal and external, further complicated by complex caste hierarchies. Unless those leading the current conservation movement acknowledge the effort to preserve the Marathi language and culture in the long run will remain incomplete. More crucially, a vital dimension of India's linguistic diversity will remain vulnerable.

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## Calvin &amp; Hobbes

Calvin & Hobbes

HOBBS: WAKE UP! I FORGOT TO DO MY MATH HOMEWORK.

IT'S TWO TO ONE AGAINST ME THIS MORNING.

BUT MISS WORMWOOD'S GOING TO COLLECT IT TOMORROW.

IF I DON'T HAVE IT, SHE'LL KILL ME! I HAD A NIGHTMARE ABOUT IT.

CAVIN: WELL, YOU'VE GOT TO DO THE ASSIGNMENT NOW, WHILE THERE'S STILL TIME.

THIS FEELS LIKE A NIGHTMARE TOO.

DO YOU THINK IF I WAKE UP NOW, SHE'D LET US HAVE COFFEE?

"Oh Radha, Radha! Take this soul that trembles in life's deep midnight, to thy Golden house."

Geet Govind, translated by Edwin Arnold

THE SPEAKING TREE

Radha & Rukmini: Two Facets Of Love In Krishn Lila

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Radha & Rukmini: Two Facets Of Love In Krishn Lila

steadfast. Her love stands for a sacred purpose. She represents *Apara Shakti*, Krishn's manifest energy that sustains worldly life.

Radha, the gopi of Vrindavan, is Krishn's *Hladini Shakti*, his bliss, inner song. Her love transcends all boundaries.

It is romantic, yes, but not merely erotic; it's the soul's cry for union with the infinite. Radha is *Puru Shakti*, the soul's longing for the Divine, unbound by law or logic. She is not another love; she is love itself, raw and pure.

To a layperson, Radha and Krishn's romance is emotionally relatable, a tale of longing, stolen glances, and secret meetings under moonlit skies. But to the seeker, it reveals a profound truth:

that the soul, like Radha, yearns not for a husband or a protector, but for oneness with the Divine Beloved. This is why their love stirred saints and poets alike. Meerabai, too, wept and sang for her love, not as a king but as her eternal lover. Her devotion mirrored

Radha's fearless and boundless love, pure, sacred, and beyond the bonds of this world. Rukmini's love is the temple. Radha's the sacred fire within. Rukmini walks with grace, and Radha dances in divine ecstasy. Both are true. Both are sacred. One

represents Krishn's presence in worldly life. The other reveals Krishn in his innermost heart. Sri Aurobindo saw Radha as the symbol of the psychic being — the soul's flame moving toward the Divine. In this light, Radha and Krishn are not two lovers, but the seeker

and the sought. Their union is not merely emotional. It is spiritual and cosmic.

Some traditions view Radha and Krishn as Shakti and Shiv, two forms yet ultimately one. Rukmini represents Krishn's role in society and dharma. Radha is his innermost joy. Both are divine movements of the same truth.

To truly understand Krishn, one must embrace both these aspects. He is the conch of Vrindavan and the sovereign of Dwarka. He is Radha's eternal beloved and Rukmini's devoted husband. One whispers the mystery of divine ecstasy. The other upholds the strength of divine grace.

Radha's love is the fire in his soul. Krishn's world, love has many faces. Each of them is sacred. Through them, we do not just learn how to love. We learn how to become Love itself.



## Dodging EU's New Crude Curveball

India can breathe easy if OPEC holds steady

India should be able to scale down its purchases of Russian crude—provided Opec raises output—following the EU's 18th sanctions package against Moscow, which targets Russia's oil and energy sector. The country has diversified its oil imports in anticipation of the EU move and should not find it difficult to revert to traditional suppliers in West Asia or ramp up sourcing from new suppliers in Africa and America. Opec is accelerating output hikes as it positions itself to restore market share lost on account of the Ukraine war. Non-Opec oil-producing nations are similarly placed vis-à-vis Russian energy exports.

New Delhi and Moscow share a strong strategic and economic relationship, and that should ensure Russian oil will find its way to India so long as it is being exported. The two countries have acquired a degree of immunity against western restrictions on payments and maritime trade. These efforts could be taken further through an agreed price for Russian oil. Sanctions on petroleum exports by Nayara Energy, in which Rosneft has a minority stake, also lack deterrent power because those exports can easily be diverted to non-EU destinations.

The EU is pursuing a course that has revealed its infirmities—particularly the lack of enforcement power over the price of oil, how much of it is pumped out of the ground and how it reaches buyers. The US has been sceptical from the outset, its misgivings arising from the prospect of de-dollarisation of the oil trade. For his part, Donald Trump favours tariffs over sanctions, and a bill making its way through the US Congress—threatening punitive tariffs on countries buying Russian oil—should have greater power of persuasion. But the bill comes up against the economic weight of BRICS, which poses a threat to the dollar's status as a reserve currency. That ought to limit the reach of US tariff action to police the global energy trade.

## Air Pollution Norms Went Up in Smoke

Bringing a decade-old tussle to a close, MoEF last week scrapped its 2015 norms for SO<sub>2</sub> emissions from coal-fired power plants (CFPPs), the chief source of these emissions. The rollback is significant given the country's reliance on coal, and it plans to add 80 GW of capacity by 2032. The country has been the world's top SO<sub>2</sub> emitter since 2017. Following this decision, NTPC asked BHEL to halt flue gas desulphurisation (FGD) installations at five under-construction CFPPs after Gol exempted most thermal plants from FGD requirements. As of February, 537 thermal units totalling 204 GW capacity were identified for installation of FGDs.

The rollback raises key questions on the role of science in policymaking, the priority given to environmental and human wellbeing and gaps in regulation. MoEF claims its decision is 'based in science', suggesting the 2015 norms were not. The new rules classify SO<sub>2</sub> as a pollutant based on geography, not plant size or emissions. About 11% of plants—those within 10 km of Delhi-NCR or million-plus cities—must install FGDs by December 2027. Another 11% may or may not, depending on an expert review committee. Ambient air quality now takes precedence over pollution-at-source, which National Clean Air Programme (NCAP) had emphasised.

None of the studies cited for the new rules were commissioned by the environment ministry. Weak implementation of continuous emissions monitoring made it difficult to challenge the rollback with source-level data. The real roadblock was who would foot the desulphurisation bill. Studies peg the cost at ₹0.5-1 crore/MW, adding ₹0.25-0.75/kWh to tariffs. Instead of addressing whether this cost would be passed on to consumers or subsidised, Gol returned to the old binary of cost versus environmental and human health.



### JUST IN JEST

What so much glee over two people caught being happy tells you

## Enough with the Meme Moralising

Done with dissing Andy Byron and Kristin Cabot? You know the two caught in a cuddle last Wednesday not by the Taliban in downtown Lashkar Gah, but by a kiss cam in a Coldplay gig in Foxborough near Boston. It turns out that in circa 2025, our feelings towards people 'having an affair' hasn't changed much since Michael Madhusudan Dutt left his wife Rebecca McTavish and four kids for Henrietta White in 1858. The thing about grown-ups is that they can form romantic-sexual bonds outside the contract of matrimony. It's not ideal, not always nice—for the spouse left outside the proverbial kiss cam. But it is what it is, and as real as normal people telling lies or non-smokers smoking on the sly.

Sure, it's also human nature to relish in some Schadenfreude: taking pleasure in someone else's woes, the woes in this case being 'outed' for engaging in guilty pleasures. But to relish this much, and with such self-righteousness, may provide clues to something else: subterranean envy in finding two people sharing something that you don't have, or once had. All this moralising camouflaged in memes is really old testament to the vicarious pleasure that villagers with smartphones (instead of pitchforks) are taking in having caught two people in *flagrante delicto*. While the only real sin that they committed was going to a Coldplay concert. How could they?

In a volatile world, expectations from central banks must be realistic—and guidance, less certain

## WHY BINGE-WATCH RBI?



Sugata Ghosh

Monetary policy is a spectator sport. It wasn't always. Once upon a time, the actions of the central bank only electrified trading rooms and jumpy traders. Today they stir the hopes and ruffle the plans of homemakers, school teachers, shopkeepers and pensioners who react like never before when interest rates change.

Household debts are well over 40% of GDP, up from about 30% a decade ago. Homes bought with borrowed money are the most longed for asset after gold. With more people trusting the stock market to lift their fortunes as secured fixed benefit pensions fade away and a high tax claws away meagre returns from FDs, RBI faces a vocal and burgeoning constituency.

A faceless multitude, anticipating that life won't get any tougher, absorbs live TV commentaries, text messages from banks and brokers, and the rise and fall of stocks that follow policy announcements. It can overwhelm a central banker already dealing with nudges from Gol and unrealistic expectations from corporates.

As governments have become less reliable, expectations from monetary authorities—often perceived to be more powerful than they are—have soared. Like in the days after the global meltdown, central banks have regained some of their lost ground in recent years.

In an unpredictable, threatening world, a central banker is tempted to experiment, make a quick difference, leaving everyone guessing what he'll do next.



Be seasonal, not episodic

As the new governor, Malhotra wants to leave his mark. In June, he surprised markets with a half-point rate cut against the widely expected quarter-point, coupled with a reduction in the reserve ratio, which released liquidity by letting banks park less cash with the RBI. He has Shaktikanta Das

by giving out forward guidance and handholding markets since Covid. But while they are expected to deliver, sometimes the unachievable, they have a bewildering job in a world that is more unpredictable and even threatening to alter the economic order that generations never questioned.

In such a world, a central banker, particularly someone who is yet to fully grasp the lay of the land, is tempted to experiment, make a quick difference, and thus walk into a spot, leaving markets confused and everyone guessing what he would do next. That, many believe, is where Sanjay Malhotra finds himself now.

More significantly, Malhotra changed the policy stance from 'accommodative to neutral'. A stance in monetary policy is some what like the 'outlook' in a sovereign rating. Roughly put, the market interprets 'neutral' as either a hike or cut in the next policy, compared with either a cut or status quo under an accommodative stance.

For Malhotra, 'neutral' was possibly a hint that there would be no cut in August, and perhaps a way to keep the doors open to a slim chance of a hike if tariffs or crude prices hardened.

But since June, inflation has fallen

a little more than expected. And, with Malhotra having said that RBI would be 'data dependent', the obvious question to crop up is: shouldn't he cut rates in August? With early festivals, when usually loans take off, shouldn't RBI make the most of the space created by softer inflation? RBI may prefer banks and borrowers to absorb the earlier actions, which could take 3 to 6 months to play out, before cutting again. But would that risk missing out on an opportunity to boost demand? Are lower rates the real trigger for borrowers? And should central banks become more light-footed and flexible with shorter pauses, reacting as and when surprises are thrown at them? There are no easy answers, though perhaps few would have raised questions had RBI let its stance remain 'accommodative' in June.

Interest rate actions are transmitted through bank loans and bond prices, which haven't fully responded to the June measures. Loan demand is yet to pick up, and banks have parked idle funds, for which they could not find enough borrowers, with RBI.

And, with the central bank mopping up unused liquidity, the inter-bank rate, a key money market indicator, hasn't dipped beyond a point. Having taken the uncommon step in June, there's only so much the central bank can do.

The unfolding story is a reminder that Gol, businesses and consumers must temper expectations from RBI, which, in turn, should not shy away from spelling out its limitations in a world of mercantile presidents, climate change and a looming battle of tariffs and currencies. Financial markets must realise that the central bank's forward guidance, which they have become so used to since the pandemic years, won't last forever. And, like everything else, monetary policy, too, can change.

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## Yog: Act of Defiance

ULLAS PACE

Yog stems from the root 'Yuj', meaning 'to unite'. But what is joined and to what end? It is the merging of the lower self: body, mind and intellect, each a conditioned fragment of consciousness, with the higher Self, the eternal. Turia, the fourth state of awareness. This union is not forged in haste, but through the quiet fire of meditation; a single thought held so wholly that all others fall away. In that stillness, the mind grows lucid, unwavering and potent. The gulf between the ordinary and extraordinary lies in one's power to focus.

Modern life thrives on fragmentation, characterised by the separation of the mind from the body, self from world and action from meaning. Yoga is the antidote to this fracture. It is the practice of reintegration, of remembering that observer and observed are one.

In a world obsessed with speed and consumption, yoga is an act of quiet defiance. It is the refusal to be enslaved by tyranny of thought, rebellion of stillness in a culture of noise. The vision of yoga is a solitary bliss, the truth becomes unmistakable that we are not separate threads, but the tapestry itself.

Ultimately, yoga is the journey of the self, through the self, to the Self.

## Chat Room

### Failure to Perform

Apropos the news report 'FSSAI Seeks More Time for Front-of-Pack Labelling Rules' (July 15). Food companies in India are required to print information about nutrients on the back of the packet, but these are difficult to read and understand for most consumers. Hence the global practice of front-of-pack labels with health quotient—a simple idea that lets consumers know if they are eating healthy or not. As a regulator, FSSAI must not lose sight of its mandate of equipping people to make informed food choices. Mahesh Nairani, Indore

### Hybrids Must Not Hijack EVs

Apropos the news reports 'Indians on the Hybridize to Electric Future' (July 20) and 'Flex Fuel and Electric to Sit at the Same Table in CAPE' (July 19). The growth of hybrid vehicles in tandem with EVs is a development leading more to ambivalence than clarity. Hybrid vehicles were a precursor to EVs as the technology was unproven and commercially unviable. The rising sales of hybrids will not help curb vehicular emissions at the pace required. Gol must ensure that CAPE's norms do not lead to unbridled growth of hybrid vehicles. This situation must be rectified through policy measures with clear plans for the future of electric and hybrid vehicles. Rajarao Kumar, Bengaluru



On the river interrupted

Apropos the news report 'China Begins Work on Brahmaputra Dam in Tibet' (July 20). The project violates India's rights as a lower riparian country. India must demand an institutional approach, based on global precedents, to enforce its water rights. Though the project works within Bangladesh and Bhutan on an accord that institutionalises water ties with China as erratic flows could impact farming, fishing and the quality of this threatening economic prosperity of the region. Pradeep Kumar, Surat

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## ChatGPT SHAIRO OF THE DAY

When a plane takes a dive from the skies, Every couch-bound uncle gets wise. With a tweet and a frown, They all double down—'Clearly hydraulics,' one confidently cries!



## WATER USE

How does the world use water? Data show the agriculture sector dominates freshwater withdrawals (72%). Rest is used by industry (15%) and the domestic (or municipal) sector (13%). But sector-wise withdrawals vary, depending on the country's level of development. The rich (higher-income) countries use comparatively more water for industry, whereas low-income countries use 90% (or more) of their water for agricultural irrigation.

Global freshwater withdrawals by major water-use sector km <sup>3</sup> /year			% of total freshwater withdrawal by income group				
Withdrawal	share of total, %		Agricultural	Industrial	Municipal		
	2000	2021					
Agricultural	2,365 (67)	2,855 (72)	UMIC	44	59	17	87%
Industrial	746 (21)	601 (15)	LMIC	66	16	17	1,326
Municipal	396 (11)	528 (13)	LMIC	88	4	8	1,657
TOTAL	3,507	3,984	LIC	90	3	7	131

Between 2000 and 2021, global freshwater withdrawals rose 14% (annual average of 0.7%). Most of this increase was in cities, countries and regions undergoing rapid development

Figs rounded, may not add up to 100. UMC/LMIC: upper-/lower-/middle income countries. Source: UN's World Water Development Report 2025

## MEME OF THE WORD



## Don't Make UPI a Tax Trap



Ateesh Tankha

Until recently Gol would have us believe nothing was more modern than UPI and GST. This was not a bad thing. The former has allowed 300 mn Indians to enjoy the convenience and speed of digital payments, the transaction value of which topped ₹20 tn in FY2025 while the latter has allowed indirect tax payments to exponential increase, achieving a record ₹22 tn in the same period.

But when the former is used to forcibly induce the latter, it is likely to stir rejection and resistance. Such is the case with the mounting volume of visible and anecdotal evidence in India—most recently observed in Bengaluru—of smaller merchants putting up 'No UPI, Only Cash' signboards. This is not a good sign. Digital payments operate in a two-sided market: users must discover enough merchants that accept this form of payment and merchants must experience material benefit to continue to accept the same. Thanks to the efforts of private operators, UPI user adoption and merchant acceptance grew exponentially. Any residual friction—usually the result of the fear of affordability—was minimised with the elimination of merchant discount rate (MDR).

But while consumers enjoyed the ability to make payments via mobile phones, many small and medium physical merchants (SMPMs) have not seen a material uptick in their businesses on account of UPI—neither higher sales from the same cluster of patrons nor via the addition of new customers. Most accepted UPI because it cost nothing, and because small denomination notes were hard to come by.

So, when the government, especially state governments, began to use

UPI transaction data to present small merchants with a consolidated GST bill, merchant outrage was a result of being asked to pay a levy they had never been expected to suffer before, and a lingering suspicion that they had been won over with honest freebies only to be betrayed in taxing convenience.

Things could have been managed differently. As a class, SMPMs are no different from early 20th century Americans. For the longest time, I-T had been deemed unconstitutional. Even after the passage of the 16th Amendment in 1913, when individual and small proprietorship earnings could be officially taxed (corporate tax for larger companies had only been introduced in 1908), less than 1% of the population complied. This continued, without state harassment until, in 1943, another Act allowed employers to withhold tax, making tax collection easy, frictionless and efficient. Another 25 years would elapse before the concept of an alternative minimum tax (AMT) absorbed those still remaining outside the tax net in the US.

As such, current SMPM misgivings are not without merit. Those that were forced to register for GST find that the simplified, but higher, tax rates eat into profits. Moreover,

other complexities like technological integration, compliance requirements and working capital challenges linked to paying a one-time monthly bill have made many qualifying merchants—even those with a sense of protest—shy away from exploring the advantages of this simplified tax scheme.

Furthermore, many SMPMs, originally exempted because their annual turnover did not exceed the minimum threshold of ₹40 lakh (₹20 lakh in the northeastern states), are being coerced by officials into paying a tax they cannot comprehend, and whose basis they vociferously deny. To this end, there is probably some truth in the rumour that state governments (especially those not aligned with the Centre) looking to make good on astronomical electoral promises, are trying to extract incremental state GST (SGST)—an intra-state toll within their control—from local merchants, to slowly erode these pro-poor welfare schemes.

And all on account of UPI transaction data. Merchant rejection of UPI is a worrying sign. It comes at a time when user growth is slowing, merchant onboarding is lagging and payment players have little incentive to boost usage. Meanwhile, RBI has mandated that ATMs carry more lower-denomination notes—making cash more accessible.

Much better that Gol rationalise GST rates for SMPMs, possibly creating a low and automatically deducted AMT after reducing GST threshold criteria, to make the levy both palatable (a few coppers could be shared with payments ecosystem to sustain UPI momentum). Gol would not, after all, want to declare that either UPI growth or GST coverage was uncertain.



Digital disruption

## MELODY FOR MONDAY

### Dog Drizzle Getdown Services

Settled down in your corner office on a praying mantis Monday? Let Getdown Services' 'Dog Drizzle' remind you how Friday night can feel on a Monday morning. The song's a virtuosic unbridled anthem that barks in the face of conventional genre boundaries. It's chaotic, catchy and catastrophic by clever.

Bristled-based duo Josh Law and Ben Sadler deliver a punchy blend of punk, rave and spoken-word lyrics that's both a middle finger to modernity and homage to kebab chains on ties. From the first dis-

torted synth squelch, 'Dog Drizzle' from the 2024 EP, 'Your Media's in the Post', pulls no punches. The lyrics cascade like a rant, equal parts demented nursery rhyme and anarcho-manifesto. Lines like 'I'm frothing at the mouth like a sentient kettle' stick with you because they demand to. Musically, it's a Frankenstein monster stitched from raw basslines, twitchy percussion and the sound of a petulant Casio keyboard having a breakdown. It works because it shouldn't. It's beauty and power lie in its refusal to be beautiful and powerful. It is quite like watching a dog chase its own tail.

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the hindu businessline.

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## Fluid situation

Liquidity surplus amidst low credit growth, a concern

**T**he Reserve Bank of India's concerted measures to tackle the liquidity deficit (where inflows into the banking system are less than outflows) in the first quarter of this calendar year have made a big difference. System liquidity turned into surplus since April and monetary transmission has improved. But even as market rates have moved lower, credit offtake is weak, recording a growth of 9.5 per cent in June.



This is almost half the growth rate recorded last year and way below the 10-year average growth rate of 11.5 per cent. Clearly, surplus liquidity alone is not enough to drive credit offtake. Surplus liquidity in the banking system has been very high, averaging over ₹2.5 lakh crore since May 16. The RBI conducted several variable rate reverse repo auctions to suck out the excess liquidity. This situation contrasts with the liquidity deficit in the first three months of this calendar year on account of the seasonal increase in currency in circulation and RBI's forex interventions to support the rupee. The current liquidity surplus accrues from the RBI injecting almost ₹9.5 lakh crore of durable liquidity in the system since January through open market operations, longer duration variable rate repo auctions and forex swaps.

This surplus is likely to move higher due to the RBI surplus transfer to the government of ₹2.68 lakh crore and the 100 basis points cut in cash reserve ratio which is expected to inject durable liquidity of ₹2.5 lakh crore in the banking system by December 2025. Easy monetary policy is unlikely to translate into higher credit growth in the coming months. While the retail loan segment has been impacted by the macro-prudential tightening by the RBI in the last two years, industrial credit is unlikely to pick-up given the suspense around trade tariffs. The RBI cannot expect banks to lend more merely because they are holding large unutilised surplus or because the cost of funds has moved lower. Companies are likely to wait for the uncertainty to end before embarking on fresh investments.

Meanwhile, market rates point to monetary transmission taking place. The three-month CD and CP rates have fallen more than 150 basis points since the March peaks. The weighted average call money rate currently stands below the repo rate of 5.5 per cent. Treasury bills yields are 140 basis points lower compared to last year. Therefore, liquidity infusion has done its bit, even as transmission in the case of bank lending and deposit rates is likely to be slow given the large stock of outstanding loans and banks' requirement to protect margins. The question now is whether liquidity surplus will turn into a problem by way of inflation in the medium-term, given that credit growth is tepid. The impact of too much liquidity infusion on financial stability must not be overlooked. In all, the RBI needs to reassess its management of liquidity in due course. A situation of 'too much money chasing too few goods and assets' should be avoided.

## OTHER VOICES.

## The Guardian

The truth about Donald Trump and conspiracy theories

Donald Trump has lived on conspiracy theories — "birtherism" lies that Barack Obama was born outside the US; the lunacies of the Q-Anon movement; false claims that the 2020 election was stolen from him. All centred on the idea that the "deep state" was lying to, and thus cheating, ordinary people. It's hard not to feel Schadenfreude now that he's at the sharp end of a theory that he at times encouraged and allies eagerly pushed: claims that the prison death of the paedophile Jeffrey Epstein might not be suicide after all, and that wealthy and well-connected associates were trying to hush up connections to the financier. Mr Trump's attorney general, Pam Bondi, promised that "truckloads" of documents would help reveal the truth and claimed that a client list was "sitting on my desk right now". (guardian, July 18)



Is Europe 'losing out' in trade cooperation with China?

In the EU have been making frequent accusations against China of using exports to offload its so-called "overcapacity", thereby flooding European and global markets. They insist that China's industrial strength stems from large-scale government subsidies which create unfair competition, and have declared their intention to launch more anti-subsidy investigations into foreign-invested companies. Some European media claim that China's engagement with Europe is solely aimed at making money off it, while some have fuelled the notion that Europe is "losing out" in cooperation with China. According to data, as of June 2025, the EU has launched more than 260 original trade remedy investigations against China. (euractiv, July 18)

LINE&  
LENGTH.

TCA SRINIVASA RAGHAVAN

**F**or the last several months there has been persistent talk of the RSS and the BJP not agreeing on who the next president of the BJP should be. From this it is being inferred that there is a rift in the lute, especially after the redoubtable JP Nadda, the current and outgoing president of the BJP, said about 18 months ago that it didn't any longer need the RSS.

What the outcome of this tussle will be isn't quite the mystery that our political pundits think it is. Indeed, the answer can be found in history books. Both old and new incidents of this kind, in India and abroad, are replete with power struggles between, as it were, coaches and captains. The captain has always emerged victorious.

True, it has taken time but in the end the old guard have had to make way. That's how this cookie crumbles.

The latest and most egregious example is, of course, in the US where Donald Trump ousted the old party bosses who saw themselves as the keepers of the traditional Republican ideology. Trump outmanoeuvred them and has won two elections without them.

Then there was Tony Blair in the UK in 1995 who saw off the old bosses of the Labour Party, the guardians of labour orthodoxy. He did that by persuading the party to vote out Clause 4 of the party's constitution that called for "common ownership" of industries, etc., that is, government ownership.

Here in India it was Indira Gandhi who wiped out the founding spirit of the Congress in 1969 by splitting the party and purging it of the old leadership. She then did what Clause 4 of the British Labour Party enjoined it to do, namely, hectic nationalisation.

## NEW VOTER PREFERENCES

It's possible to give dozens more examples but the point is clear: a time comes in politics, when, just as a snake sheds its old skin, political parties also shrug off the old command and control arrangements. For the BJP and the RSS, as well as the Congress and the Gandhi family, I daresay, that time seems to have come.

## RSS vs BJP: Guess who will win

The difference between the BJP and the RSS is that while the former has to win elections, the latter doesn't. It only needs to enjoy the fruits of power. Likewise the Gandhi family



This is because the tactical and strategic choices and changes have to be handled by the practising politicians of a party, not its ideological benefactors. The RSS and the Gandhi family aren't like the monarchs who stay on and on and on regardless of what politicians are up against.

The key point to grasp is that while ideology is immutable, because otherwise it would not be ideology, politics is mainly about being accommodative of social needs. People change with time as do their voting preferences. So must politics.

The difference between the BJP and the RSS is that while the former has to win elections, the latter doesn't. It only needs to enjoy the fruits of power.

**A time comes in politics, when, just as a snake sheds its old skin, political parties also shrug off the old command and control arrangements**

Likewise the Gandhi family.

Net-net, both have become anachronistic political liabilities. They need to be written down and off.

That's why these two political formations are at an inflection point. The political parties over which they hold sway don't actually need them anymore and, in fact, might be better off without them because they are an electoral nuisance.

## BACKSEAT DRIVING — A BAD IDEA

That could be one reason why the RSS has assiduously propagated the idea that, in the 2024 general election, the BJP came down to 240 seats from 303 because RSS workers didn't campaign for it.

But, and this is important, while it's probably true that the RSS was far less supportive in 2024 than before, we don't know how many of the 63 seats the BJP lost were solely because of this. After all, if the RSS was that critical, the BJP should have not won even those 240 seats.

The truth in all likelihood is that the BJP lost around 35-40 seats because the

Congress effectively spread a lie about the abolition of reservations. It was a plausible lie because the RSS has been ambivalent about reservations. That's one reason why the Congress lie was so convincing.

But it was the BJP that paid the price. The RSS was then able to successfully suggest that it had managed to show the BJP its place by not helping it. Now that's become the dominant belief amongst political pundits. Like all dominant beliefs, this one is also only 50 per cent true.

The issue right now is whether it makes political sense to let the RSS appoint the new BJP president. The answer is no. After all, its chief ministerial choices in the last two years have done a lot of damage.

When in 2005, faced with a similar choice between ideological purity and practical politics, another ideology-based party chose ideology over political good sense. It rewarded ideological hardliners ahead of political players.

By 2015 the party had become a political joke. Its name? CPM.

## Railways should change track on passenger services

The behemoth can pare its losses if it rationalises its mix and pricing of AC and non-AC coaches and trains

Sudhanshu Mani

**T**he latest fare hike by Indian Railways is baffling. While fare increases are politically sensitive, the Railways seems to have taken the bull by the horns — with a shaky grip. Estimates suggest the move may yield only ₹600-700 crore annually, less than 1 per cent of its current ₹80,000 crore passenger revenue — neither here nor there.

Contrary to popular belief, Railways' passenger business need not be a perennial loss-maker. With the world's largest captive customer base — Indians eager to travel for work, faith or fun — the demand for trains is insatiable. What is needed is a smarter calibration of services, not defeatist resignation.

The Railways' stated mandate is to focus on intercity and long-distance travel, leaving intra-city and suburban services to State and city authorities. Yet, despite the massive losses from existing suburban operations — Mumbai being the starkest example — the Railways continues to repeat past mistakes, as seen in its recent foray into the Bengaluru commuter rail project.

It's time such services were hived off to dedicated authorities with independent finances, responsible not just for capital investment but also for operations — on the lines of Metro

systems across the country.

Let's examine the current model, class-wise. Passengers in AC-1, Executive CC, and even AC-II often choose rail over air or road for convenience rather than cost. Subsidising these classes is unjustified — fares should include healthy profit margins. Even greater returns can be achieved by enhancing service quality, potentially through reviving the shelved Private Train Operation project, to match the expectations of a rising middle class.

## AC COACHES SLASHED

AC-III/AC Chair Car are already marginally profitable, and their numbers should be increased. Instead, the Railways flipped logic on its head when it reacted to travails of common travellers about reduced non-AC coaches; it slashed AC coach production and doubled down on manufacturing non-AC ones. These non-AC coaches, almost akin to steel boxes with minimal amenities — and likely to remain in service for the next 36 years — will stand as a stain on the vision of Viksit Bharat in 2047.

The Railways should introduce AC seater coaches with 100-plus seats with fare kept below AC-III and it would encourage migration of many non-AC travellers to this class, rendering it free of losses; even Vande Bharat can have such



DEDICATED TRAINS. A must for catering to lowest-rung passengers

coaches. For the lowest-rung travellers like poor migrants, not mere comfort but dignity is important and the Railways must run dedicated non-AC trains on every major route — ensuring every passenger gets a seat, so no one is forced to stand or travel in toilets over long distances.

With airlines successfully leveraging dynamic pricing, the Railways must move beyond its tentative past efforts and adopt a robust, AI-driven, route- and train-specific dynamic fare model to maximise revenue without hurting occupancy.

All low-hanging fruits should be promptly addressed — extending all well-patronised trains to 24 coaches, and using data analytics to rationalise

stoppages that slow trains and clog the network and reassessment of current modal mix with thousands of short-distance trains — many with average leads of less than 70 km — saturating precious line and terminal capacity. In any case, travel time is of essence and the Railways' strategic goal must be to raise average train speeds to the 80-100 kmph. Apart from that, the capacity must be expanded parallelly; more tracks, more trains and more platforms.

Massive investments have already gone into dedicated freight corridors, with more to follow — covering energy-intensive, port connectivity, and high-density routes — per Budget 2024. This is welcome, but it must be accompanied by a clear-eyed review of the Eastern and Western DFCs to assess if it has resulted in faster or more passenger services. Additionally, the Delhi-Mumbai route, with higher structural headroom, is ideal for reviving the double-decker train concept — this time with user-friendly coach design.

If these measures are implemented, the tyranny of the waitlist shall be largely eliminated and confirmed accommodation on demand can actually become a rule and not an exception.

The writer is Retd. GM, Indian Railways, Independent Consultant and Leader of Vande Bharat project

## ● BELOW THE LINE



## Andhra rice politics

Andhra Pradesh politics is affecting the exports of white rice, in particular. It all began at Kakinda port, which is State-owned. It has now extended to the Vizag port, with the Andhra Pradesh government reportedly seeking to crack down on the diversion of rice intended for distribution through ration shops. In Kakinda, the State government put a check-post inside the port, affecting traffic movement. In Vizag, however, the State has had to put up the check-post outside the port. Is there a political sub-text here between the Centre and State? Probably, the

Centre is insisting it doesn't want State politics within its ports and to intervene in national commerce.

## TN's paddy controversy

A few weeks ago, a group of farmers staged a blockade on arterial Anna Salai in Chennai, seeking payment of ₹800 crore for the paddy procured from them. But a little bird said the issue here is with the Tamil Nadu government allowing NCCF

(National Cooperative Consumer's Federation) to procure paddy. NCCF, in turn, asked the Tamil Nadu paddy and rice processing cooperative to buy it. The paddy is milled and used by the State Civil Supplies Department for distribution through ration shops. However, with the Food Corporation of India offering rice at a lower price through the Open Market Sale Scheme, the Civil Supplies Department did not need the paddy procured by the cooperative. As a result, farmers have not been paid for the paddy procured from them. The blockade, the little bird

says, was an effort to divert the attention and blame the Centre.

## Tesla all the way

The debut of Tesla in India got a lot of coverage — print, electronic and social media. There was also activity of a different kind to get on to the Tesla electric bandwagon. At least two major insurance firms lost no time in announcing customised insurance schemes for Tesla owners, who were described as "discerning" customers. Financiers were not far behind with one auto finance company saying it was the first to be appointed a "preferred" financier for Elon Musk's cars in India. Not to be left behind, a legal firm jumped in and announced that it had advised the developer in renting its premises to Tesla.

## Health policing checked

Oh, what a delectable disaster has engulfed India's cherished samosa and jalebi! Some babu thought slapping warning labels on these crispy, syrupy treasures would "nudge" us towards kale-smoothie

enlightenment. Social media ignited like a Holik bonfire, with netizens howling. The government caught in this soap opera, backtracked, clarified there were no plans for cigarette-style doom labels. The samosa samas as always, the jalebi remains a dripping delight. Long live our deep-fried, sugar-soaked revolt against the health police's crusade.

## Advantage Hyderabad

Even as Karnataka and Maharashtra are caught up with issues around the language, Hyderabad seems to be a clear winner. Venture capitalist Tejesh Poonawalla's post on 'X' reflects the mood of a section of investors who look for a place where people are not bothered about what language you speak or where you hail from. Sharing a picture of a cozy coffee shop that his friend sent him, Poonawalla wondered where they could set up a similar shop, which is free from mobs that shut shops on the basis of religion or language by moral police or those with regressive hiring agendas.

"We need a place where young couples can chill, the infrastructure is world-class, the vibe is inclusive, and the city is clean and global!" And the reason for his joy? "Not Hyderabad!" he asked.

Telangana Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy shared his post, thanking him for replying for him in the city.

## Day of YouTubeurs

PR agencies in Chennai organising business press meets are facing a major problem. In the past, the hall would be full with business journalists. But, today, there are not many business journalists and hardly any presence of mainstream media in press meets, putting the PRs in an embarrassing situation in front of their clients.

The halls are, however, packed with YouTubeurs. The clients though are unhappy due to the low number of views and lack of response to the videos. "We are now very scared of organising a press meet," says the staff in a leading PR agency.

Our Bureau



## Risky options

Sebi should continue to educate retail investors

The regulatory action against Jane Street has brought renewed attention to the equity derivatives market. It may be premature to comment on the Jane Street affair since there is a fine line between manipulation as alleged, and price arbitrage as Jane Street claims. However, it is clear that there are imbalances between the cash and derivatives segments of the equities market, which is what hedge funds and sophisticated traders look to exploit. As a senior official of the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) recently pointed out, the nominal turnover of the derivatives market was 350 times that of the cash market and this was not a normal situation. While India's market capitalisation makes it the fifth-largest stock market by size, its derivatives market is the world's largest by volume.

A large number of retail traders dabble in futures & options (F&Os), drawn by high leverage and hopes of high returns. However, many studies by Sebi have indicated that over 90 per cent of retail traders lose money in the F&O segment. Their collective losses totalled over ₹1 trillion in 2024-25. Derivatives are a zero-sum game. So, some traders are gaining by the amount equivalent to what others have lost, less the exchange fees and taxes. It is true that the money might be more gainfully deployed in targeting long-term capital appreciation via investment in more productive assets like shares, rather than being speculated away in wasting assets like options, which expire on a given date. Not without reason has the regulator given many warnings to retail traders detailing the risks of derivatives trading, and it reportedly intends to roll out an even more comprehensive awareness campaign. It may also be looking at measures to curb trading in instruments on expiry day. This is especially popular with retail traders. Options are very cheap just hours before they are due to be extinguished. Hence, there is more bang for the buck for leveraged traders and small price swings can result in huge gains or losses.

However, there are several things the regulator should consider before announcing new measures. It took steps in November last year to curb speculation in derivatives and those have had an impact since the volumes are now lower. More curbs, and the impact of reported scrutiny of the operations of hedge funds, may lead to a further decline in volumes. This would make it hard for the F&O market to fulfil useful purposes like ironing out price imperfections through its mechanisms of arbitrage, offering cost-effective hedging possibilities, and creating depth for the equity market. In this context, the old maxim of 'caveat emptor', or 'buyer beware', comes into play. Those who have lost money know they have lost money and every derivatives-trading platform now flashes warnings about the dangers. If retail traders choose to take risks anyway, it may not be prudent for the regulator to stop them so long as market stability is unaffected. What the regulator may continue to do is to spread awareness through sustained educational campaigns.

Besides, it has been argued that one of the reasons for the imbalance volume ratios is lack of leverage in cash equity and lack of activity in the secondary bond market. Hence, it is correct that there are abnormally high volumes in derivatives. However, if market mechanisms and regulations focus on improving the cash market turnover in both the debt and equity markets, the imbalances may start to correct.

## The art of meetings

Cabinet secretary offers progressive suggestions

Cabinet Secretary TV Somanathan has opened a fresh front in the campaign for transparency and accessibility in governance. Last week, he wrote to Union secretaries, suggesting that they shed their 'perceived reluctance' to interact with people not associated with the government but who may wish to meet them in connection with the work involving their ministries. He pointed out that such meetings had utility in terms of offering insights into 'the actual state of affairs in the field' and clarify misunderstandings about government policies or intentions. Most significantly, he suggested, these meetings should take place in the office rather than in unofficial settings such as clubs or hotels.

The Cabinet secretary's missive is certainly progressive in intent. By encouraging a structured approach to interactions with non-officials, the aim, no doubt, is to make the bureaucracy more proactive and responsive to the needs of the people. It is significant that Dr Somanathan's letter even spells out the range of people bureaucrats could meet in their office — contractors; members of trade unions, political parties, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs); employees in the private sector or chambers of commerce; and someone under investigation by a law-enforcement agency or having a dispute with the department on a contractual matter or an issue that is *sub judice* or under arbitration (interestingly, this list does not include journalists). To address the issue of discomfort at meeting people who may be controversial in the eyes of the political dispensation, Dr Somanathan has suggested that the secretary concerned could ask another officer to be present.

The latter suggestion may add a degree of probity to the interaction but it has its limitations. As controversies over coal block allocations, disinvestment, and the 2G telecom scam have demonstrated over the past two decades, the statute of limitations does not appear to apply to bureaucratic decisions. If anything, the travails of bureaucrats involved in these issues — for some of them decades after retiring — have done much to stifle bureaucratic decision-making. In this climate of fear, it is unlikely that the addition of another official as a witness will help since the account of the interaction will remain in the realm of hearsay. In this respect, it would be a good idea to include as standard practice the concept of the 'memorandum of conversation' or 'memcon', a written record of conversation made immediately after the event and kept in the official files.

The practice is less intimidating than taking minutes or recording conversations, which may deter an open discussion. This is the discipline that is routinely followed by diplomats (the external affairs ministry is excluded in the letter) and, in the United States (US) and other Western governments, by senior intelligence agency chiefs. For instance, then Federal Bureau of Investigation chief James Comey's memcon of his dinner with President Donald Trump at the White House, revealed important facts about Russia's interference in the US elections of 2016 without compromising his own integrity. Thus, while Dr Somanathan's suggestions will help improve policy and decision-making in the government, the challenge will be to ensure that more senior bureaucrats pay heed to his suggestions.

# The waters will rise near Bombay

Rising sea levels materially change our thinking about coastal real estate on a 25-year horizon

ILLUSTRATION: AJAYA MOHANTY



There has been a deceleration in the global policy work on decarbonisation, starting in the first Donald Trump presidency in the US (2016) and then Russia's invasion of Ukraine (2022). The outlook on emission is now more challenging. We all have to shift from planning on something near the median scenario to something closer to the high-emission scenarios.

What does this mean for Bombay? In high-emission scenarios computed by the International Panel for Climate Change, the sea level at Bombay is likely to rise by about 25 cm by 2050. This reflects the thermal expansion of sea water and the global melting of ice in a warmer world.

Alongside this, there is a local geological phenomenon that affects Bombay, which is subsidence. Bombay is subsiding by around 2 mm per year. This reflects factors including sediment compaction, groundwater extraction, and the load of the urban built environment upon the reclaimed land. This phenomenon is likely to add about 5 cm to the rising waters by 2050. Putting these together, the sea level at Bombay is likely to rise by about 30 cm or about 12 inches.

When we look beyond 2050, high-emission scenarios are much worse than the median scenario. So we should think that the waters will rise by about 12 inches to 2050 and then things will get much worse to 2100.

In a swimming pool, we can readily visualise a water level that's about 12 inches higher. We tend to visualise ourselves standing at the Alsa beach, and water at the knees reaching up to the waist. But the sea is not a swimming pool. It is full of motion. When the average sea level rises by a small amount, this has big implications for the urban environment.

It directly elevates the probability and severity of

coastal flooding events, particularly during astronomical high tides and meteorological storm surges. Areas currently experiencing occasional 'nuisance flooding' will encounter such events with greater regularity and increased inundation depth.

The drainage system will worsen. The existing urban drainage infrastructure largely relies on gravity for discharge, and will work less well. This will impede the efficient discharge of rain and river water. This will give more prolonged waterlogging after precipitation events. Ideally, good city governance should involve investment in building and operating adequate pumping stations.

The higher sea level will impact transportation networks (roads, railways, metro lines), utility conduits (sewage systems, water supply pipes, electrical cables), and building foundations in low-lying zones. The combination of more frequent inundation and more saltwater exposure will induce accelerated degradation, higher maintenance costs, and a reduced asset lifespan. Private and public actors would ideally master the resourcing and management to combat this higher depreciation rate and stave off catastrophic failures.

Under realistic Indian conditions, there will be flaws in public and private actions. The pumping stations will be inadequate, the operation and maintenance of assets will be patchy, and so many things will go wrong.

The problem of global warming is often seen as something speculative, something that will happen in the deep future. The reasoning above locates us in a specific Indian setting (ie Bombay) and a date that fits within normal human planning horizons (ie 25 years out). For anyone below 75, these are scenarios that matter.



SNAKES & LADDERS  
AJAY SHAH

## Milk that has its source in soil

A novel class of plant-based beverages, mimicking normal milk and termed fancifully, yet aptly, 'vegan milk', are steadily gaining popularity the world over, including India. Dairy men are, however, reluctant to equate them with bovine milk, which they maintain, has some unmatched attributes. Made from a variety of plant sources, such as soybean, almond, rice, cashew, oat, coconut, walnut, peanut, and hemp seed, these fabricated milk substitutes are deemed suitable for people suffering from lactose intolerance, allergy to dairy milk, or high blood cholesterol, which exacerbates the risk of heart ailments and strokes. These are also preferred to regular milk by health freaks who want nutritious products low in fat and calories. These are most prevalent in regions where milk supplies are meagre.

In India, vegan milk has managed to carve out a niche market though the country, being the world's largest producer of dairy milk, has copious milk supplies. The per capita availability of milk in India is 47.7 grams per person per day, far higher than the global average of 32.2 grams and the ideal daily milk consumption, as recommended by the Medical Council of India, of 280 grams. Most manufacturers of various types of vegan milk are augmenting the nutritional status of their products by fortifying them with proteins, enzymes, lipids, and minerals to too health-conscious consumers. Even artificial colours, flavours, and taste boosters are added to enhance their market appeal, and promote demand among consumers looking for variety in non-carbonated soft drinks.

Among the types of vegan milk available in the market, the most common ones are soy, almond, cashew, oat, and coconut milk. Each of these has a dis-

tinctive nutritional profile to suit the discriminating consumers. Soy milk, for instance, is a rich source of protein, lipid, and carbohydrate. In terms of calories and protein content (7-9 per cent), it is almost similar to a cow's milk. Almond milk contains more unsaturated fat than saturated ones, and is, therefore, considered suitable for weight-conscious people. Coconut milk, made from the coconut's white meat and water, has a high content of fat but very little protein and carbohydrate. Oat milk, on the other hand, has dietary fibre, which is good for digestion and for managing blood cholesterol and sugar.

However, notwithstanding such virtues of the plant-based beverages, dairy scientists have reservations about labelling them 'milk'. They argue that 'milk' is a well-defined term reserved for secretion from the mammary glands of animals, including human beings. Even the internationally recognised code for food standards, formulated by the United Nations-backed Codex Alimentarius Commission, describes milk as 'the normal mammary secretion, without any addition or extraction, intended for consumption as liquid milk or for further processing'. The term 'vegan milk' is, thus, a misnomer, the animal husbandry pundits maintain.

A policy paper titled 'Milk vs Plant-Based Dairy Analogues: Myths and Facts', brought out by the National Academy of Agricultural Sciences (NAAS) in April last year, states that plant-based beverages should not be dubbed 'milk', 'milk substitutes', or 'milk analogues'. These can seldom match the food matrix of normal milk even after fortification with various nutrients. Milk from cattle, buffaloes, and other species, such as goats, sheep, camels, and

An integration of these physical climate risks into financial decision-making is necessary for accurate market pricing. For individuals and entities considering real estate investment in Mumbai, eg for long-term use or for bequest, the 30-cm effective sea level rise by 2050 constitutes material non-financial information for thinking about future utility and future asset valuation.

Real estate investors need to think about three kinds of concerns. Anticipated risks of future floods and increased operational costs will reduce investor and end-user demand, exerting downward pressure on property prices in vulnerable locations. Costs of property ownership will increase due to higher insurance premiums (or the potential withdrawal of flood insurance coverage), augmented maintenance expenditures for floodproofing, and potential structural repairs necessitated by water damage. The market for properties with significant climate-risk exposure may become less liquid as the pool of informed buyers shrinks.

These problems also impact upon the thinking of financial firms. The scenario for 2050 is becoming material for the planning horizon for firms with real estate exposure. Real estate in Bombay alone is perhaps worth half to one trillion dollars, and adverse events for this will ricochet through the system of asset prices. Lenders face credit risks associated with potential collateral devaluation, and increased default probabilities from borrowers incurring climate-related losses.

In India, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has been making progress on these questions. They are close to releasing rules for banks and financial institutions regarding the disclosure and management of climate-change risks. This will give regular disclosures about climate-related risks within loan portfolios, along with mitigation strategies, targets, and stress tests. It will take substantial work, by financial firms, to develop these capabilities, and a three-year lead time is envisaged prior to mandatory disclosures.

Given the strategic apathy of many Indian financial firms, new kinds of disclosures will first reflect mere compliance with RBI rules, with contracting out to consultants and software vendors. A great deal of new knowledge building will be required to utilise this data more deeply for reshaping investment strategies and the behaviour of a variety of firms. Understanding and responding to climate change will become a differentiating factor shaping an edge in the performance of better firms.

Such reporting will reshape incentives at many levels. Investors in financial firms will be able to prioritise in favour of the better prepared ones. Financial firms will face market-based incentives in favour of more climate-resilient assets. Properties demonstrating resilience to projected hydrological changes will likely command a premium, while those with identified vulnerabilities will experience adjustments in market value. In similar fashion, climate change needs to be woven deeply into financial regulation across the financial system, including the regulators and the Employees' Provident Fund Organisation.

The author is a researcher at XKDR Forum



FARM VIEW  
SURINDER SUDI

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mares, consumed by human beings for ages, is a complex mixture of more than 500 biologically active macronutrients and micronutrients, which play a significant role in human nourishment, besides having various therapeutic traits. Milk is nearly a complete food for human growth and the maintenance of body systems. 'The demand for plant-based milk substitutes does not arise out of necessity, but rather out of the pursuit for more affordable and fancy food sources,' the NAAS panel points out.

Nevertheless, the market for vegan milk, as determined by the demand-supply dynamics, has already acquired sizable dimensions at domestic and global levels, and continues to expand further. The growth has been much faster in the United States, Europe, and the developed countries of the Oceanic regions than in other parts of the world. GlobalData, an international business information firm, expects the Indian market for milk alternatives to swell by 6-8 per cent a year between 2023 and 2027. Another body, the International Market Analysis Research and Consulting Group (IMARK), is even more optimistic on this count. It estimates the present worth of India's vegan milk market at around \$85.5 million, and projects it to rise annually by over 10 per cent to reach \$2,166.30 million by 2033. The global market of these milks, on the other hand, is reckoned to have burgeoned from \$11.16 billion in 2018 to \$19.67 billion in 2023, showing an annual growth rate of 12 per cent. The chief growth drivers are the milk types made from soy, almond, oat, coconut, and rice.

Thus, regardless of their merits and demerits, varieties of vegan milk seem to have come to stay in the global and domestic food markets. Whether to use the word 'milk' for them, or coin another term, however, remains a moot point.

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## How the CIA lost its way



SCOTT ANDERSON

On June 21, President Trump took to the airwaves to announce that his secret directive for the bombing of Iran's nuclear facilities had just been carried out. "Tonight," he proclaimed, "I can report to the world that the strikes were a spectacular military success," with those facilities "completely and totally obliterated."

Trump's triumphalist tone was swiftly undercut by a preliminary Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) analy-

sis that found the airstrikes were likely to set back Iran's nuclear capabilities by a mere few months. The furious president not only doubled down on his 'obliterated' claim but insisted that further analysis would confirm it. Sure enough, his Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) director, John Ratcliffe, soon scurried forward to cast doubt on the DIA's assessment and to insist that "new intelligence" from an unidentified source confirmed the sites had been "severely damaged," not quite Trump's adverb of choice, but close.

Nothing on the ground is any clearer now, but to many observers one thing is clear: These events served as yet another example of the rank politicisation of America's pre-eminent intelligence agency. As Tim Weiner demonstrates in *The Mission*, this trend is likely only to accelerate with Trump in the White House.

Both as a one-time reporter for *The New York Times* and a book author, Weiner has made tracking the fluctuating fortunes of the American intelligence community his life's work. His masterly *Legacy of Ashes*, detailing the CIA's first half-century, won a National Book Award in 2007. *The Mission* picks up where that book left off, narrating the agency's history beyond the fall of communism. It is exhaustive and prodigiously researched, but also curiously ungainly.

The story begins in the 1990s. Grasping for a new mission in the wake of the Cold War, the CIA played a supporting role in the war on drugs, and then, after the 9/11 attacks, the war on terror. Agents hunted for the al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan and tortured high-value prisoners in hopes of gaining information on future attacks. Much of the testimony, Weiner writes, was gathered by a quickly raised army of often

inexperienced interrogators. At the same time, Weiner notes, intelligence officers often felt their intelligence was beside the point. As one former CIA Iraq operations chief insists, "These guys would have gone to war if Saddam had a rubber band and a paper clip."

Throughout *The Mission*, Weiner hammers on an agency that seems to be repeatedly blinded by its sense of American supremacy. In the past decade and a half, the CIA has been caught off guard again and again, including in China, where the country's intelligence services apparently excel at rooting out and killing American assets. The agency was also back-footed by the onset of the Arab Spring uprisings in 2010. Weiner writes, because US spies depended on the accuracy of information coming from agency counterparts within the dictator-



THE MISSION: CIA IN THE 21ST CENTURY  
by Tim Weiner  
Published by Mariner  
452 pages \$35

regimes that were about to crumble in the unrest.

Weiner saves his greatest scorn, however, for the first Trump administration, detailing how the vast web of contacts between his campaign staff and Russian intelligence officials as well as Trump's subsequent efforts to bring the CIA to heel, even as he leaned on his intelligence advisers to vet his rash proposals. "How could we do it?" Trump's first CIA director, Mike Pompeo, later recalled the president musing, "If we went to war with Mexico?"

There is something simultaneously illuminating and saddening in contemplating the course the CIA has travelled during the past quarter-century. In this regard, one episode Weiner recounts stands out. In 2007, the CIA gathered compelling evidence that Syria, a friend of the US, was well on its way to

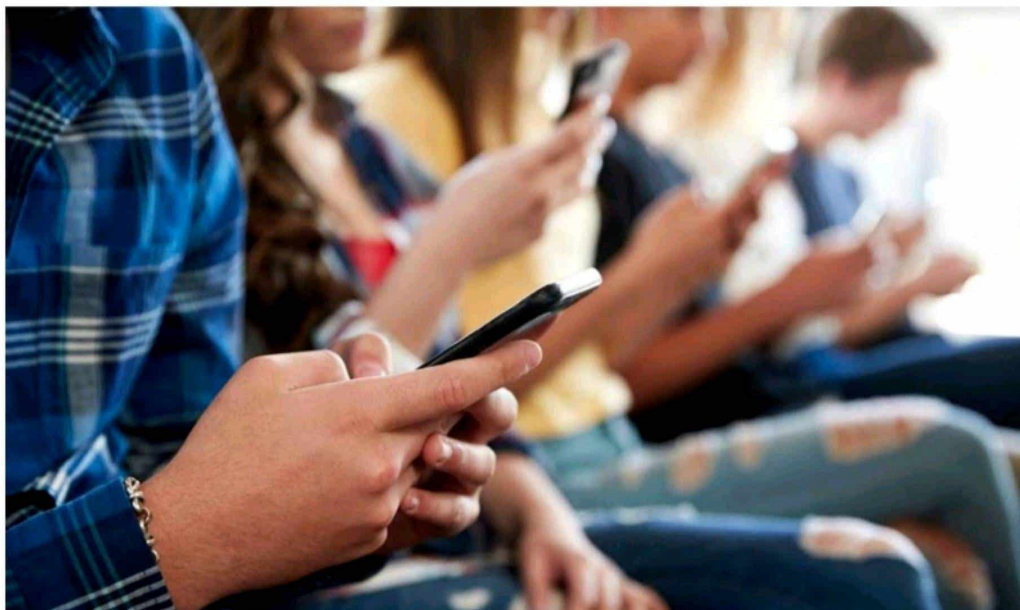
building a nuclear weapon. The news set off a spirited debate within the Bush administration over whether it should launch a pre-emptive strike to eliminate the site. The idea was vehemently opposed by one of Bush's closest advisers — "We don't do Pearl Harbors" — and the bombing scheme was shelved (though it was taken over by a country willing to do the job: Israel).

Compare that with Trump's 'Pearl Harbor' assault on Iran's nuclear facilities even though the CIA and almost every other member of the Bush administration had concluded that Iran was not developing a nuclear weapon. The attack starkly underscored just how shamelessly the American intelligence community has already succumbed to Trump's will. In this regard, Weiner's warnings about the peril facing both the CIA and the US seem prophetic.

The reviewer is a contributing writer for *The New York Times Magazine* ©2025 The New York Times News Service



## CACHE



Denmark, Greece, Spain, France, and Italy are some of the first countries that will work alongside the Commission with the aim of launching their own national age verification apps. GETTY IMAGES

## What is the European Commission's age check plan to keep children safe online?

European Commission is developing an age verification app under the Digital Services Act to prevent minors from accessing harmful online content while claiming to protect adult users' privacy; many critics argue that the move risks compromising privacy and fails to effectively safeguard children

Sahana Venugopal

### The story so far:

The European Commission is working on an age verification app that is meant to stop children from accessing unsafe content online while protecting the privacy of adult internet users. Critics, however, claim this comes at the cost of user privacy.

### What is the European Commission age verification debate?

The European Union has, in the recent past, enacted multiple pieces of legislation to regulate the operations of large online platforms such as e-commerce giants, social media companies, and even pornography-hosting websites. In particular, the European Commission has highlighted some risks that children face when they are online, including platform designs that encourage digital addiction, cyberbullying, exposure to harmful content, and unwanted contact from strangers.

Digital advocates have previously recommended that the user interface of a large digital platform could be adjusted on the basis of the user's age, with children receiving private accounts and having their safety or well-being features turned on by default. When it comes to platforms such as porn sites, children ideally should not be able to access or even accidentally see explicit content. One way this could be done is through an app that verifies the user's age online, in order to be certain that children are not using adults' accounts.

The European Commission on July 14

presented guidelines concerning the protection of minors on online platforms, along with a prototype of an age-verification app under the Digital Services Act (DSA). Development of the age verification blueprint began early this year and is built on the same technical specifications as the European Digital Identity Wallets (eID), which are slated to be rolled out before the end of 2026, according to the European Commission, with two services meant to be compatible.

Denmark, Greece, Spain, France, and Italy are some of the first countries that will work alongside the Commission with the aim of launching their own national age verification apps in the future, in their own languages.

"During the pilot phase, the age verification solution will be further enhanced with new features. Apart from eID, further updates will include additional options for users to prove they are over 18. The age verification will also be enhanced with the latest technical solutions (zero-knowledge proof) to ensure the highest level of privacy protection," said the European Commission in its post.

### How will age verification affect the privacy of adults?

While those in favour of creating a safer internet for children are in support of making age verification mandatory to access porn websites, critics of the move believe that it violates privacy rights and can put their security online at risk or make their browsing activities easier to track and monetise.

However, the European Commission has defended the privacy standards of its

prototype app and said that it will enable age verification while preventing privacy violations. The regulator added that the technical specifications and the open-source age verification blueprint were freely available to view and use as well.

"It will, for example, allow users to easily prove they are over 18 when accessing restricted adult content online, while remaining in full control of any other personal information, such as a user's exact age or identity. No one would be able to track, see, or reconstruct what content individual users are consulting," stated the Commission.

Meanwhile, at the topmost levels of the French government, President Emmanuel Macron also supports age verification and even wants to ban social media for users who are under 15 years of age.

France is one of the countries that will first try out the age verification app prototype.

There are also ongoing discussions as to whether certain social media platforms that contain adult content, such as X, can be classified as porn platforms. This also has implications for the user experience of adult social media users across the European Union.

### Why are some porn companies against age verification?

While most companies agree that children using the internet should be protected from explicit content, cybersecurity threats, and social media addiction, they often disagree on the ideal way to go about this process.

For example, Pornhub-owner Aylo's main contention is whether age verification takes place at the website

level or not. In a company post on June 26, Aylo stressed the need for "device-based age verification." According to the company, age verification should have been carried out by Apple, Google, and/or Microsoft long before an underage user even arrives at an adult website such as Pornhub.

For close to two weeks in June, internet users in France who tried to access pornography platforms such as Pornhub, YouPorn, and RedTube encountered a largely black screen with a notice, or a historic painting with a call to action against the French government's move to implement mandatory age verification for adult platforms.

Aylo also warned that users unable to access Pornhub would go to smaller, less regulated sites potentially hosting illegal content. It unblocked its websites in late June after a Paris administrative tribunal's decision over the rule's unconfirmed compatibility with EU laws. But Aylo's next actions remain to be seen as the top administrative court affirmed this month that age verification was a must.

"Data breaches happen daily. Forcing you to enter sensitive personal information repeatedly creates an unacceptable security risk we refuse to impose on our users. We refuse to compromise your privacy with measures that, ironically, fail to effectively protect children," said Aylo in a statement on its website on July 15.

"To make the internet safer for everyone, every phone, tablet or computer should start as a kid-safe device. Only verified adults should be allowed to unlock access to age-inappropriate content," said the company.



### KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

## I am keeping my lips zipped about the bet

It was fairly obvious by then that Swiatek was going to blow away Anisimova

S. Upendran

"Did you find the time to watch the Wimbledon finals on TV?"

"I watched the men's match completely. But when it came to the ladies final, I watched only the first three games before switching off the TV."

"Only three games?"

"It was fairly obvious by then that Swiatek was going to blow away Anisimova."

"Blow away?"

"The expression 'blow away' has many different meanings. But in the context of sports, it is mostly used to mean to defeat someone comprehensively."

"In other words, you outperform everyone else."

"I guess you could say that. Here's an example. After the second round, Iga Swiatek just blew away her opponents."

"How about this example? During the first half of the game, the two teams were evenly matched. In the second half, however, our opponent blew us away by scoring seven goals."

"Ouch! Here's another one. We thought Sindhu would blow away the competition. We were shocked when she lost in the first round."

"That's what makes every tournament exciting. So, did Sujatha buy you breakfast? After all, you did take a bet with her that Swiatek would win."

"That's true. But Sujatha is going through a tough time. So, I'm keeping my lips zipped about the bet."

"Does it mean the same thing as 'keeping your lips buttoned'?"

"Very good. When you keep your lips zipped, what you are doing is keeping quiet. The Manager was angry and wasn't willing to listen to reason. So, I decided to keep my lips zipped."

"Keeping one's lips buttoned is the best thing to do when someone is angry."

"Exactly! So, how are things at your office? Heard you're getting a new boss."

"That's true. He'll be joining us in a week or two."

"That's a long time! What are you guys going to be doing?"

"What we've been doing the past few days, I suppose! Sleepwalk through the workday."

"Sleepwalk through the day? What are you talking about?"

"Do you know what sleepwalk means?"

"Doesn't it mean to walk in one's sleep?"

"I'm told I used to sleepwalk when I was a kid."

"I believe my uncle sleepwalks even now."

"Sleepwalk has other meanings as well. It's frequently used in informal contexts to mean to say something without really thinking."

"And you're not thinking because you're asleep? Since your mind is not functioning or has been switched off, you're not really worried about the consequences of what you do or say."

"Very good!"

"How about this example? Last night, I saw a movie where most of the actors sleepwalked through their roles."

"So, what you're suggesting is that the actors were wooden. There was little or no life in their acting."

"Yes."

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## Word of the day

### Forswear:

agree to give up or do without

Synonyms: avoid, withdraw, deny

Usage: He decided to forswear junk food to stay healthy

Pronunciation: /fɔːrswɛər/

International Phonetic

Alphabet: /fɔːrswɛər/

For feedback and suggestions for Text & Context, please write to letters@thehindu.co.in with the subject 'Text & Context'

## THE DAILY QUIZ

A quiz to mark the 56th anniversary of humans landing on the moon

V. V. Ramanan

### QUESTION 1

Easy one to begin with. What was the mission called and what were the codenames for the Command Module and the Lunar Module?

### QUESTION 2

From which place did the rocket blast off and what was the place on the moon where the lunar module landed?

### QUESTION 3

What were the first words spoken from the surface of the moon after the landing?

### QUESTION 4

Neil Armstrong carried something that had made

history in 1903 during the voyage. What?

### QUESTION 5

What connects James Lovell, William Anders and Fred Haise to the Apollo XI mission?

### QUESTION 6

What specifically did Michael Collins omit from the insignia design for the mission, as the trio felt the design had to be representative of everyone who had worked toward a lunar landing?

### QUESTION 7

What were the trio's version of 'life insurance' for their families in case they did not make it back to Earth?



### Visual Question:

This is a moon rock brought back by the Apollo XI crew. What was it christened as? WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. Mandela belonged to which ethnic group in South Africa? Ans: Xhosa

2. What is the name of the political party that he served as the president of? Ans: African National Congress

3. What is the term used to define the separation of people into racial or other ethnic groups in daily life? Ans: Racial segregation

4. uMkhonto weSizwe was associated with Mandela. What was it? Ans: It was the paramilitary wing of the African National Congress

5. What was the name of the trial that took place in apartheid-era South Africa between 9 October 1963 and 12 June 1964, after a group of anti-apartheid activists were arrested on Liliesleaf Farm? Ans: Rivonia Trial

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

Visual: In this image, Mandela has raised his clenched fist. What is it called? Ans: Amandla Salute  
Early Birds: Sunil Madhavan | Parimal Das | Pranab Biswas



# Text & Context

THE HINDU

## NEWS IN NUMBERS

**Rabies deaths reported in Karnataka since February**

**19** In the past six months, Karnataka has recorded more than 2.3 lakh dog bite cases, indicating a sharp increase compared to the corresponding period last year, according to official data released on Sunday. In all of 2024, the State reported 3.6 lakh dog bite cases and 42 rabies deaths. PH

**Number of children in Onge tribe who have cleared class 10 exam**

**9** "This is the first time Onge students have reached this educational milestone. Their admissions were formalised and their classes commenced on July 15," said Prakash Tirkey, school teacher at Dugong Creek in Little Andaman. Onges are semi-nomadic and used to be fully dependent on hunting and gathering for food. PH

**MPs who have signed notice to bring motion against Justice Varma**

**100** Union Parliamentary Affairs Minister Kiren Rijju on Sunday said over 100 MPs have already signed a notice to bring a motion in Parliament for the removal of Justice Yashwant Varma, crossing the threshold of support required for tabling the impeachment exercise in the Lok Sabha. PH

**Number of schooling years children could lose due to heatwave**

**1.5** in years. A report compiled by UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring team, Monitoring and Evaluating Climate Communication and Education project and University of Saskatchewan has pointed out that over the past 20 years, schools were closed in at least 75% of the extreme weather events, impacting five million people or more. PH

**Number of new polling stations created in Bihar**

**12,000** A release issued by the election department on Saturday said that the total number of polling stations has risen to 90,712 from 77,895, after the establishment of 12,817 new ones in Bihar. PH

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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## Is Israel committing genocide in Gaza?

Why did South Africa take Israel to the International Court of Justice? What does international law say about genocide? Do international experts believe Israel has genocidal intent? Can the UN take stronger action? What role are powerful countries playing?

### EXPLAINER

Aaratrika Bhaumik

#### The story so far:

In January 2024, South Africa initiated proceedings against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), alleging that Israel's military campaign in Gaza amounted to genocide. The application was filed just over two months after the Hamas-led attacks of October 7, 2023. Although the court has not yet ruled on the merits of the charge, it has issued a series of binding provisional measures, including repeated directives to ensure the unimpeded delivery of humanitarian aid into Gaza. These interim orders reflect the court's preliminary assessment that a "plausible" risk of genocide exists. In the months since, conditions in Gaza have grown increasingly dire. In March, Israel violated a six-week ceasefire and resumed its assault on the besieged enclave. Entire neighbourhoods have been reduced to rubble, families decimated, and access to food, water, and electricity remains critically limited. As the humanitarian crisis worsens, a global consensus is emerging. Heads of state, senior United Nations officials, and leading international jurists are increasingly characterising Israel's conduct in Gaza as genocidal.

#### What is genocide?

The term genocide was coined in 1944 by Polish-Jewish jurist Raphael Lemkin and formally recognised as a crime under international law by the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in 1946. In the aftermath of the horrors of the Holocaust, the UNGA unanimously adopted the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Genocide Convention) in 1948. The Convention defines genocide as acts committed with "the intent to destroy, in whole or in substantial part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group". It is considered the gravest of international crimes, and its prohibition constitutes a non-derogable peremptory norm (*jus cogens*) of international law.

Because of its status as a *jus cogens* norm, the duty to prevent and punish genocide gives rise to an *erga omnes* obligation — one owed to the international community as a whole. This means that all states, regardless of their direct involvement in a conflict, are legally bound to act against genocide wherever it occurs. It is on this basis that South Africa, a party that is technically unrelated to the conflict in Gaza, claims standing to bring the case to the ICJ.

Proving that genocide has occurred requires establishing two essential elements: the act itself and the intent behind it. The first element, known as *actus reus*, refers to one or more of five specific acts committed against a protected group. These include killing members of the group; causing them serious bodily or mental harm; deliberately inflicting conditions intended to bring about the group's physical destruction; imposing measures to prevent births within the group; and forcibly transferring children to another group.

Equally critical is the *mens rea*, or mental element, which requires not just a general intent to carry out these acts, but a specific intent (*dolus specialis*) to destroy the group, in whole or in part. This rare intent is what sets genocide apart from other mass atrocities. While other crimes may involve the indiscriminate or deliberate killing of civilians as



**Tensions rise:** Genocide is characterised by the targeting of individuals as members of a group, with the aim of annihilating the group's capacity to survive or reconstitute itself. APR

individuals, genocide is characterised by the targeting of individuals as members of a group, with the aim of annihilating the group's capacity to survive or reconstitute itself as a political, social, or cultural entity.

#### What are the main claims against Israel, and how has Israel responded?

Francesca Albanese, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories, told the Human Rights Council last year that there were reasonable grounds to believe Israel had crossed the threshold for committing genocide. In her report, she pointed to the systematic destruction not only of residential areas but also of critical infrastructure, including hospitals, universities, mosques, water systems, agricultural zones, and cultural heritage sites, as evidence of a policy aimed at making Palestinian life in Gaza unsustainable. Her assessment has been echoed by prominent rights organisations such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights.

The scale of destruction appears to lend further credence to these claims. In June, a UN Commission of Inquiry found that Israeli air strikes, shelling, burning and controlled demolitions had destroyed more than 90% of schools and university buildings across the Gaza Strip. According to local health authorities, over 58,000 people have been killed, including more than 17,000 children. Gaza now reportedly has the highest per capita number of amputee children in the world. As the starvation crisis deepens, civilians have reportedly been shot while waiting in queues for food and essential supplies.

In its submission to the ICJ, South Africa accused Israel of "weaponising international humanitarian law" to shield its actions from accountability. Since the

precludes a finding of genocide if any alternative motive appears plausible. In 2023, several states, including Canada, the Netherlands, the U.K., Germany, France, and Denmark, raised concerns over this high bar in a joint declaration filed in the genocide case instituted by Gambia against Myanmar. They cautioned that such a restrictive approach risks making genocide "near-impossible" to prove. Instead, they proposed a "balanced approach," urging courts to weigh all available evidence and discard inferences that are clearly unreasonable. In other words, the presence of other conceivable motives should not automatically negate a finding of genocidal intent.

This view is consistent with international criminal jurisprudence. Both the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) have recognised that genocidal intent can coexist with other motives. In *Prosecutor v. Goran Jelisic* (2001), the ICTY held that "the existence of a personal motive does not preclude the perpetrator from also having the specific intent to commit genocide."

However, even under the ICJ's exacting standard, several experts believe that Israel's conduct fulfils the criteria for genocide.

In November last year, Israeli genocide scholar Shmuel Lederman acknowledged that the operational patterns of the Israeli Defence Forces closely mirrored the incendiary rhetoric of senior officials. Similarly, Omer Bartov, a professor at Brown University and former Israeli soldier, recently wrote in *The New York Times* that both official rhetoric and developments on the ground had led him to the "inescapable conclusion" that Israel is committing genocide against the Palestinians.

#### What is the road ahead?

A final verdict by the ICJ on South Africa's genocide allegations against Israel is likely to take years, as it must follow extensive hearings on jurisdiction and the merits of the case. By the time a judgment is rendered, the devastation in Gaza may already be irreversible, particularly in light of Israel's continued non-compliance with the court's binding provisional measures. As a result, the proceedings are increasingly being seen as a litmus test for the credibility of the so-called "rules-based international order".

Within the UN framework, a strong case has emerged for suspending Israel from the UNGA, citing its persistent violations of the Charter and binding Security Council (UNSC) resolutions. Article 6 of the Charter permits the expulsion of a member state by the Assembly on the UNSC's recommendation if it consistently breaches the Charter's core principles. In 2024, the UNGA adopted a resolution calling for economic sanctions on Israel, including an arms embargo.

Yet, major Western powers, including France, the U.K., Germany, and Canada, have confined their responses to muted diplomatic criticism, particularly following the collapse of the ceasefire in Gaza in March. The U.S., in particular, has continued to shield Israel from accountability by repeatedly vetoing most UNSC resolutions demanding an immediate ceasefire. In the absence of decisive multilateral action, one can only hope that President Donald Trump may once again intervene and nudge Mr. Netanyahu to agree to a renewed ceasefire and bring an end to the ongoing bloodshed.

### THE GIST

➤ In January 2024, South Africa initiated proceedings against Israel at the ICJ, alleging that its military campaign in Gaza amounts to genocide, based on a plausible risk and supported by statements from Israeli leaders and patterns of destruction.

➤ Establishing genocidal intent is difficult, as states rarely express it openly. The ICJ's stringent evidentiary standard has been criticised for making genocide "near-impossible" to prove, even when actions and rhetoric strongly suggest such intent.

➤ While the ICJ has issued binding provisional measures, Israel's non-compliance and continued assault raise doubts about the credibility of the rules-based international order. Calls for UN sanctions grow, but powerful states like the U.S. continue to block decisive action.



## SCIENCE

# Mental fatigue can trick the brain into taking the easy way out

Even sedentary work can feel exhausting when sustained for hours together. This exhaustion is called cognitive fatigue and builds up with continuous effort to maintain focus on daily tasks. While cognitive fatigue affects our performance and focus, a new study has found that it also influences decision-making by making one prefer easier tasks

Sheetal Potdar

**A**fter a long day at work, it's easier to flop on the couch than hit the gym. Scrolling over social media wins over reading a book. Our exhausted brains favour easier tasks, even if – according to a new study in the *Journal of Neuroscience* – those tasks offer fewer benefits.

Even sedentary work can feel exhausting when sustained for hours together. This exhaustion is called cognitive fatigue and builds up with continuous effort to maintain focus on daily tasks. While cognitive fatigue affects our performance and focus, the new study has found that it also influences decision-making by making one prefer easier tasks.

"Everybody has different capacities for work," Vikram Chib of the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine and the lead author of the study said. "We all have a subjective sense of effort – what you may find easy, I might find difficult." The study also provides a neurobiological model to explore how fatigue can influence everyday decisions.

## 'Really cool'

But first, how does sustained effort build up to cognitive fatigue, and how does it affect decisions about exerting further effort?

To answer these questions, researchers recruited healthy volunteers to repeatedly perform a working memory task. These individuals focused on a screen flashing different letters one by one. In the easy version of the task, they had to recall if the current letter matched the preceding one. As the task got harder, volunteers had to recall if the current letter matched with those displayed anywhere between two to six letters prior. After performing the harder tasks many times in a row, participants reported feeling fatigued.

Next, the participants were offered two choices: easy version of the task for less money or difficult version of the task for more money. Fatigued participants chose the easy option even if it meant earning less money, whereas they opted for harder tasks for more money when they were rested.

"It was really cool to see something we expected but was never quantified before, that fatigue actually influenced the participants' choices," Dr. Chib said.

While the participants made their choices, the researchers tracked their brain activity using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI). This noninvasive technique allows scientists to pinpoint brain regions that are active during a task. As participants performed the working memory task and reported



Mental fatigue can directly change the value of some effort, making the task seem more demanding than if a person was rested. TONY TRAN/UNSPLASH

feeling fatigued, fMRI revealed the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (dlPFC), located just behind the forehead, was activated, in line with its understood role.

fMRI scans also revealed the right anterior insula was active when the participants made their choices. This region judges whether the effort required for a task is worth the reward. In previous studies from Dr. Chib's group, the insula had been found to estimate the effort of performing a physical task while physically fatigued.

## Pushing harder

In this study, the role of the insula was extended to evaluating cognitive effort. "This is our current working model of where effort is evaluated in the brain. The insula receives input of fatigue resulting from working memory tasks from the dlPFC and of fatigue resulting from physical tasks from the motor cortex, and it guides decisions about future effort based on the level of fatigue," Dr. Chib explained.

"A big strength of this study is that it finds connectivity linking exertion to choice," Antonius Wiehler, a researcher studying motivation and cognitive fatigue at the Paris Brain Institute, said. Indeed, Dr. Chib and his team found that signals from the dlPFC representing fatigue influenced the neural activity of the insula. This meant fatigue directly changed the value of effort, making the task seem more demanding than when a



A big strength of this study is that it finds connectivity linking exertion to choice

ANTONIUS WIEHLER  
Paris Brain Institute

person was rested.

The researchers also reported a peculiar observation: while participants reported feeling fatigued as they performed the hard tasks repeatedly, their performance didn't dip. The researchers interpreted this to mean that as people performed harder tasks, the fatigue made them pick easier tasks rather than compromise their performance.

Dr. Wiehler, who wasn't part of the study, agreed: "When the stakes are high and the benefits are clear, such as in this study, people can still use cognitive resources despite needing elevated effort. However, when benefits are uncertain or subjective, like in market decisions, the increased cost leads to behavioural changes."

We have all experienced this in our daily lives: when a deadline looms, we push ourselves harder to finish a task at hand despite needing more effort.

The study also opens new questions. Dr. Wiehler, who induces cognitive fatigue on much longer time scales (up to six hours) in his research, wondered, "How are short-term and long-term fatigue

effects related? How are cognitive capacities restored after a night of sleep?"

Can cognitive fatigue influence effort-based choices for any task? "We have a new study coming up where we report that cognitive fatigue, as induced here with the working memory tasks, makes participants choose even a physical task requiring less effort," Dr. Chib said. In other words, there may be a neurobiological reason to avoid the gym when one is mentally exhausted.

## Time for a break

Cognitive fatigue is a common symptom of many neurological and psychiatric conditions. Patients who have suffered stroke and those suffering from multiple sclerosis, chronic fatigue syndrome, depression, anxiety, and schizophrenia have reported mental fatigue. Yet the way fatigue manifests in these conditions is poorly defined. The new study is a step towards developing ways to manage fatigue by understanding how it affects effort and decision-making in the brain.

How can we avoid fatigue skewing our daily decisions? Dr. Chib advised being "mindful about taking breaks. While we haven't directly tested it, reframing tasks can also help." The next time you catch yourself making a poor but easy choice while mentally tired, you know it's time for a break.

(Sheetal Potdar has a PhD in neuroscience and works as a science writer. sheetalpotdar@gmail.com)

## THE GIST

Volunteers in a study had two choices: an easy version of a task for less money or a difficult version for more. Fatigued participants chose the easy option even if it meant earning less, whereas they opted for harder tasks for more money when they were rested

Researchers reported that while participants reported fatigue as they performed hard tasks, their performance didn't dip. This was interpreted to mean that as people performed harder tasks, the fatigue made them pick easier tasks rather than compromise performance

Cognitive fatigue is a symptom of many neurological conditions. Yet the way fatigue manifests here is poorly defined. The new study is a step towards developing ways to manage fatigue by understanding how it affects effort and decision-making in the brain

## BIG SHOT



Firefighters combat a wildfire on peatland in Riau province, Indonesia, on July 20, 2025. These fires can be challenging to extinguish due to the nature of peat, which burns slowly and deeply, producing smoke and haze, which can spread to neighbouring countries like Malaysia and Singapore, causing air quality issues. AFP

## WHAT IS IT?

# Moon Day: remembering the leap

The Hindu Bureau

**Q** International Moon Day is celebrated every year on July 20 to commemorate humankind's first landing on the moon by the Apollo 11 mission in 1969. The UN General Assembly formally recognised this date in 2021, following a proposal recommended by the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS). The commemoration also aims to highlight the collective progress of all nations in exploring the moon.

On the day, activities like public events, sky-gazing, educational outreach, and science competitions are organised worldwide to inspire curiosity and foster interest in space science, especially among the youth. According to the UN, International Moon Day also serves to promote sustainable practices in space, international cooperation, peaceful exploration, and the responsible use of lunar resources.

There have been minor criticisms related to the chosen date. Some commentators have noted that while the Apollo 11 lunar module landed on July 20, Armstrong's first step technically occurred at 2:56 UTC on July 21. This ambiguity has occasionally prompted debate over whether July 21 is more accurate to commemorate. There is also



An aircraft passes in front of the moon; the red glow is attributable to smoke particles from North American wildfires, a day ahead of the full supermoon on August 18, 2024. REUTERS

occasional commentary questioning whether the date, rooted in an American achievement, fully encompasses the international spirit intended by the UN, more so since other nations have contributed significantly to lunar exploration.

Despite these discussions, July 20 remains globally recognised for now as the date humankind first leapt beyond the earth.

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# Opinion

MONDAY, JULY 21, 2025

## Karnataka vs Andhra

This is a sub-plot of a larger narrative of states fiercely competing for investments

**T**HE FACE-OFF between Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh to attract aerospace companies exemplifies the fierce competition between states to attract foreign and domestic investments. This should be welcomed provided it does not entail a subsidy race to the bottom that seriously strains the finances. This spat is reminiscent of Maharashtra's angst over losing out to Gujarat for a big-ticket semiconductor facility a few years ago. Karnataka similarly is miffed by Andhra's invitation to aerospace companies to consider shifting their operations as plans for a proposed park near Bengaluru's Kempegowda International Airport run into land acquisition problems from protesting farmers. Andhra's minister for human resources development, information technology and real-time governance, Nara Lokesh—who is also the son of the chief minister—indicated that 8,000 acres of ready-to-use land just outside Bengaluru was available, besides an attractive aerospace policy with best-in-class incentives. Karnataka accused Andhra's minister of fishing in troubled waters and declared that not a single industry will move out of the state due to land shortage.

A complicating factor for Andhra's ambitions to set up an aerospace ecosystem is that foreign and domestic investments are concentrated only in a few states like Karnataka. These are mostly richer states that have a head start in industrialisation. On foreign direct investments, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Gujarat, Delhi, and Tamil Nadu together accounted for over four-fifths of equity inflows last fiscal. These five states also account for half of the filed industrial entrepreneur memoranda and proposed investments. The tendency of investments to be attracted to such states only reinforces the Biblical axiom, for whosoever hath, to him shall be given! This reflects the agglomeration factor as these states offer significant advantages for investors with their manufacturing ecosystem in terms of availability of skilled labour, supplier base, and prospect of knowledge spillovers to collocate near existing units. Karnataka's comparative advantages are considerable as it accounts for 65% of India's aerospace and defence sector. For such reasons, the proposed aerospace park can come up in an alternative location in the state.

The disproportionate share of the richer states in investments does not imply that they do not compete among themselves. Or that rivals like Andhra cannot break into this select group. Karnataka and Tamil Nadu have aggressively wooed Foxconn, the contract manufacturer for Apple. Despite being a bastion of industrialisation, Maharashtra steadily lost out to the more business-friendly Gujarat not just in semiconductor but also in aerospace like the Tata-Airbus project as investors rued the "lack of conducive" atmosphere in the state. Land acquisition problems have also bedevilled the state as was underscored by Janshyd Godrej, chairman and MD of Godrej and Boyce, who told the Financial Times that getting land for a new manufacturing site about an hour's drive southeast of Mumbai took a decade.

The advantages that Andhra has vis-à-vis Karnataka is not just its substantial land bank but also the fact that its policies are in alignment with those at the Centre. Andhra has also unveiled a vision document for 2047 to become a developed state with a focus on stimulating agriculture as well as building a robust manufacturing sector. Investors are bound to be drawn to Andhra due to its large English-speaking population and a vast diaspora of scientists, engineers, and software professionals based in the US and other developed nations who are significantly contributing to the state's economic development.

## F1's growing pains with Apple TV+ would be worth it

**FRESH OFF EARNING** a box office hit with F1, the movie, Apple Inc. has reportedly outbid ESPN for the US broadcast rights to F1, the actual sport. While F1 has not announced that it has accepted the deal, the nine-figure offer would enrich the elite racing championship, but it comes with a painful trade-off. Since 2018, F1's American viewership has more than doubled on ESPN. Requiring these casual fans to buy an Apple TV+ subscription will throw that cable-led growth into sharp reverse.

F1 needs to do the deal anyway. To grow, the racing series requires young and affluent fans who are attracted to its personalities, luxury branding, and cool factor. Apple can deliver that audience better than any traditional sports broadcaster—even one with ESPN's reach. Liberty Media Corp., the American cable and media giant, acquired F1 in 2017 and went to work changing the model. US rights were given—literally for free—to ESPN in 2018 (some races are broadcast on ABC). At the time, NBC, F1's previous partner, wasn't happy about F1's plans to launch its own streaming service, F1 TV. The partnership has worked out well. In 2018, ESPN reported that an average of 554,000 viewers tuned in to races. By 2025, the number had jumped to 1.3 million. That larger audience is worth more money. The network is paying around \$85 million (up from nothing) for the series, according to Yahoo.

F1's own 2025 survey found that over half of its fans' interest in the sport is shaped by fashion, style and social status. The challenge for leagues is how to capture and monetise that fusion. Younger fan bases are far less likely to subscribe to cable and have access to ESPN or even ABC than earlier generations of fans. Instead, they're online and streaming. That's where sports are moving, too, even at the risk of alienating older fans. For example, this year, NASCAR saw a 17% viewership decline after it moved five races from Fox, F1 and the USA Network to streaming-only platform Amazon.com Inc's Prime Video.

Apple has reportedly experienced this trend, too. In 2022, it became the exclusive streamer for Major League Soccer, taking over the league's rights after they'd been spread across national and regional networks. Although the company doesn't release viewership figures, Puck recently estimated that the 2024 MLS Cup Final delivered all-time low viewership for the match, despite being available to stream for free.

F1 will almost certainly lose viewers, too, if it shifts to Apple TV+. But for the tech giant and the sport, the sacrifice is poised to pay off in the long term.

For starters, the racing series' luxury branding perfectly aligns with Apple's innovative and upscale image. That should help F1, for example, beat Pitt and Tim Cook debuted a breathtaking immersive video that sends the viewer hurtling around a track with the actor. It's not hard to imagine such videos becoming a new baseline for experiencing races in the future.

Meanwhile, Apple technology—especially its forays into virtual and augmented reality, such as the Vision Pro—is a potential game changer for how fans experience motorsports. While promoting F1, for example, Brad Pitt and Tim Cook debuted a breathtaking immersive video that sends the viewer hurtling around a track with the actor. It's not hard to imagine such videos becoming a new baseline for experiencing races in the future.

To be fair, ESPN and other sports broadcasters are also shifting into streaming. ESPN, for example, is launching a new flagship app this fall. What differentiates Apple is that it has established itself as an entertainment lifestyle brand beyond racing and other athletic events. For a new generation of fashion-first, brand-obsessed racing fans, that's a more valuable subscription than one that's sports-first. For F1 and Apple, it's a match made at the track.



ADAM MINTER  
Bloomberg



**HEALTHY INDIA**  
Union minister of youth affairs & sports Mansukh Mandaviya  
A healthy body can only lead to a healthy mind and a healthy mind can catalyse the nation towards Viksit Bharat

## FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH

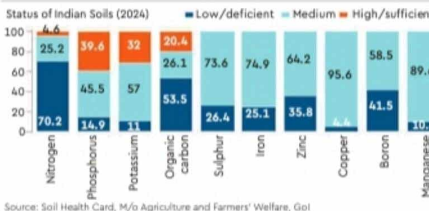
NEED PARADIGM SHIFT FROM INDISCRIMINATE FERTILISATION TO SCIENCE-BASED SOIL NUTRITION MANAGEMENT

# Healing soils in India

**ASHOK GULATI, LEONARDUS VERGUTZ, & RITIKA JUNEJA**

Respectively distinguished professor at ICRIER, chief scientific officer at OCP Nutricrops, and research fellow at ICRIER

## IMBALANCED INDIAN SOILS



Source: Soil Health Card, M/o Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare, Govt

als like wheat and rice, which in turn is linked to childhood stunting, a condition that affects both physical development and long-term cognitive and income potential.

Of more than 8.8 million samples tested under the Soil Health Card Scheme in 2024, less than 5% of Indian soils have high or sufficient nitrogen (N), only 40% have sufficient phosphate (P), 32% have sufficient potassium (K), and just 20% are sufficient in soil organic carbon (SOC). Importantly, SOC is a critical parameter defining soil's physical, chemical, and biological properties as these govern its holding capacity and nutrient use efficiency. There is also a debate on how much SOC is considered sufficient. According to the Indian Institute of Soil Science, SOC within 0.5-0.75% is adequate, but World Food

Laureate Rattan Lal, with his life-long work on soils, prescribes that the carbon content in soils should be at least 1.5-2%. Our soils also suffer from a deficiency of sulphur as well as micronutrients like iron, zinc, and boron, ranging from moderate to severe. It won't be an exaggeration to say that many parcels of Indian soils need to be immediately taken to the intensive care unit to restore them to normal health so that they can produce nutritious food on a sustainable basis.

In certain pockets, nitrogen is overused while phosphorus and potassium are underused. For example, in Punjab, nitrogen use exceeds recommendations by 61%, while phosphorus use is short by 89%, and potassium use is short by 8%. Telangana also mirrors this imbalance—overusing N by

54% but using 82% less K and 13% less P. The situation in many other states is also similar. This highly imbalanced use of N, P, and K and the neglect of micronutrients leads to suboptimal results on agricultural productivity. Nationwide, the fertiliser-to-grain response ratio has declined significantly from 1:10 in the 1970s to a mere 1:2.7 in 2015.

Moreover, the application of granular urea results in substantial N losses, with only 35-40% of the nitrogen being absorbed by the crops. The remaining N is either released into the atmosphere as nitrous oxide—a greenhouse gas that is 273 times more potent than carbon dioxide—or leaches into groundwater, contaminating it with nitrates and making it unsafe for consumption. So, in a way, this imbalanced use of N, P, and K is creating more pollution than increasing grain yields. On top of this, a sizeable part of urea is diverted to non-agricultural uses and also leaks to neighbouring countries. This needs to change.

To restore soil health and improve both crop and human nutrition, India needs a paradigm shift—from indiscriminate fertilisation to tailored and science-based soil nutrition management. This calls for a more precise and customised fertilisation strategies, informed by rigorous soil testing, and aligned with the specific nutritional needs of different soils and crops. Only when soils receive nutrients do they produce food that nourishes rather than merely fills stomachs. This is no longer just an agricultural issue; it's a public health imperative.

Thus, to truly move from plate to plough—and back to plate—we must start by healing the Mother Earth. Only then we can walk as a healthy nation.

Views are personal

# Tech made life easier, but focus harder



**SRINATH SRIDHARAN**

Corporate advisor & independent director on corporate boards

The greatest risk of emerging technologies is not that machines might outthink us, but that we might forget how to truly think at all

**WE LIVE IN** an age where constant distraction has quietly become the architecture of our daily lives. Waking hours dissolve into reels looping endlessly, emails and group chats that demand instant replies, and the incessant ping of notifications we can neither silence nor ignore. Even the physical world conspires: the horns and clamour of city streets, the bright flicker of billboards at every turn, and the permanent display of screens in every hand.

At the heart of this is something deeply human: the yearning to belong, to be acknowledged, to be seen. Yet these instincts are harnessed to turn attention into currency, something in our social fabric begins to fray. Almost imperceptibly, our choices shift: cafes chosen less for warmth than for the photographs they yield; celebrations measured less by joy than by digital applause. Across generations, the impulse is the same—to avoid the discomfort of stillness.

The smartphone becomes at once passport and prison: it offers a window to the world, yet quietly insists that our own lives remain incomplete unless broadcast and endorsed. In this dissonance, families lament children distracted at dinner, marketers puzzle over how to cut through feeds refreshing faster than thought, and professionals find themselves drained by the invisible labour of staying relevant.

The steepest cost is paid in attention itself. Once, it was unremarkable to hear a friend's story without glancing at a

device, or to finish reading without interruption. Today, even modest focus feels aspirational. The discipline of concentration now flickers like a candle in a storm. What makes this more unsettling is how willingly—even gratefully—we have surrendered mental agency. Memory is outsourced to search engines, curiosity to trending topics, navigation to satellite maps. In the pursuit of convenience, we have traded the slow, effortful journey of understanding for curated feeds and algorithmic nudges.

Machines do not seize our cognition by force; they wait for us to hand it over, one notification at a time, lulled by the illusion of control. And so, without irony, we gather in conferences to debate whether artificial intelligence might someday overtake us, missing the quieter truth—it already shapes us, not by overthinking, but by deciding what we think about. The real peril is not that machines will become human, but that humans might forget how to be.

Yet, these choices were never inevitable. The architecture of distraction was deliberately designed and refined by companies trading attention for profit. If distraction can be engineered, it can also be moderated—through thoughtful policy, ethical design, and responsible stewardship. Regulators and policymakers, tasked with protecting public interest,

must look beyond data privacy into deeper questions: Does our digital infrastructure serve the human mind, or subvert it? The debate must extend into cognitive health and the strength of social cohesion.

Ultimately, what we need is deliberate and fair social engineering of technology. This is neither a retreat into nostalgia nor an argument against innovation. Rather, it is a conscious act of stewardship—to design digital systems that protect human cognition, nurture thoughtful citizenship, and preserve our capacity for reflection in an age of relentless distraction. In doing so, we affirm that technological progress must serve society—not silently reshape it in ways we recognise when it is too late.

Technology's advance is now irreversible. The question that remains is how to balance human effort and cognition against what we gradually surrender in our quiet addiction—our adoption—of machines. It is tempting to call this collective folly. Yet history shows that knowing a risk rarely stops us from courting it. Be it smoking, alcohol dependence, or other seductions of modernity, we embrace what harms us for reasons as layered as comfort, belonging, and escape. This too is part of being human—to see the cliff's edge, to know it, and still inch closer, unable—or unwilling—to turn away.

The economic toll of distraction

remains largely unseen yet deeply felt: the erosion of productivity blunted by constant interruption, creativity reduced to derivative imitation, workplaces demanding instant responses and lamenting shallow thinking. As India leans into digital transformation, leaders would do well to ask what unseen drag this culture of distraction imposes on innovation, strategy, and sustained growth.

Beyond the economic calculus lies a more profound question: What kind of society are we shaping? A generation conditioned for reaction over reflection, and quick outrage over quiet reasoning risks losing its capacity for empathy, critical thought, and democratic deliberation. The damage can seep into public life itself—corroding trust in institutions, deepening polarisation, and narrowing the shared civic space where ideas once contended openly on merit. We must ensure technology remains an instrument of collective progress rather than an unseen force subtly reshaping society.

Even in these truths, something stubbornly human endures. At family weddings, playing with a child, or when connectivity falters, we remember how to simply be. Perhaps it is in these non-negotiated, or even inconvenient moments that we glimpse what it truly means to live—and to live as human. So too must our resolve: To reclaim our attention as the foundation of what makes us who we are. The true test of progress is not how fast we invent, but whether we remember to remain human in whatever we create.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### 2025's monsoon session

From the look of it, the monsoon session of the Parliament commencing from Monday is going to be stormy. At the same time, it falls on all members, no matter where they are seated, to weather the storm and ensure that it does not become a washout. The Parliament should serve the purpose for which it is constituted constitutionally. Parliamentary

democracy calls into play all of the fine qualities of the parliamentarians. Obviously, Operation Sindoor will figure prominently, and on the special interest revision (SIR) of the electoral roll in Bihar, questions will be hurled at the government thick and fast. On the foreign policy front, India's open alignment with Israel has depleted its moral authority on the world stage. The Parliament may also see heated exchanges over the new education policy and Hindi imposition.

Delimitation is another thorny issue the Parliament will grapple with.—G David Milton, Maruthanadoc

### On Russian oil

Apropos of "Russian oil roll" (FE, July 19), while India's procurement of discounted Russian oil delivers immediate economic gains, a narrow focus on short-term cost savings risks undermining its long-term strategic interests. Deepening energy ties with sanctioned and diplomatically

isolated Russia may complicate India's relationships with key Western partners, which are essential for tech, defence, and diplomacy. A more future-ready strategy is to accelerate the domestic energy transition investing in renewables like solar, wind, and green hydrogen not just to reduce exposure to geopolitical risks, but to boost energy self-reliance.—Amarjeet Kumar, Hazaribagh

Write to us at letters@expressindia.com





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

—Rammath Goenka

## STRIKE BALANCE BETWEEN JUVENILE INNOCENCE AND CALCULATED CRIMES

THE guidelines for trying juveniles accused of heinous crimes still need fine-tuning, given the dilemmas the victims, their families and prosecutors face. A case in point relates to the minor, accused of alleged drunk driving at high speed and killing two IT professionals in Pune last May. Debates continue even a year later on whether he should be tried as an adult. The prosecutors deem it a heinous crime, which legally obligates the minor's trial as an adult. The defence argues that only sections prescribing a minimum seven-year punishment are considered heinous; the accused cannot be tried as an adult since none of the charges prescribe such a penalty. The Juvenile Justice Board sided with the defence, also disallowing the preliminary evaluation of the minor's mental capacity and maturity to realise the consequences of his actions for trying him as an adult.

This is the grey area that needs attention. In the case of rapes by juveniles, the Nirbhaya case prompted an amendment to the law, deeming rapes as heinous and trying minors as adults. The juvenile boards now apply this yardstick in rape cases. However, death cases are complicated, as in the Pune instance.

We need a more assertive and uniform legal mechanism to clarify these ambiguities. The judiciary must ensure the juvenile board's discretion is pragmatic and not subjective. If the benefit of doubt favours the juvenile accused on technical grounds, it often sidelines the severity of the offence. All caused deaths should be declared heinous, its definition not bogged down by sections and punishments. A psychological evaluation must be mandatory, and, in addition to corroborative evidence, it should consider the accused's actions before and after the incident.

Juvenile law correctly emphasises reformation over retribution, but it must reflect the evolving reality of juvenile criminality. The State and the judiciary act as guardians of juveniles accused, assuming that, by their age, they cannot fully comprehend their criminal actions. Today, most juveniles, irrespective of the social settings of oppression or indulgence, are no longer naïve or impulsive. Offensive digital and social media content influences them, and many engage in crimes with full awareness, even brutality. Courts must treat all juvenile offenders as products of systemic failure, but exercise rigour in heinous cases where they exhibit violent free will or total indifference.

## MEDICAL TRUTH NEEDS TO EXPOSE COSMETIC FICTION

URATED perfection and influencer culture are driving the innocent pursuit of youth and beauty in a perilous direction. Fair skin, unblemished faces, and lustrous hair are the ideals of attractiveness, and exploiting this aspiration, the cosmetic industry is peddling an array of skin-whitening agents, DIY beauty kits, supplements, and so-called "miracle" injectables. Easily accessible and under-regulated, influencers and beauty experts relentlessly promote them. Self-help classes market magic cures, such as glutathione and Vitamin C injections, which the movie and modelling industries use regularly. As are steroid creams, Vitamin D supplements, skin patches, and hair health products. Unmonitored sales and prolonged use can play havoc with one's health.

At the heart of this trend is a generation growing up on internet advice and reel-life illusions, as well as assured beauty shortcuts to social acceptance and success. However, beneath the promises lies a menacing truth. A recent study revealed that formaldehyde, commonly used in embalming and industrial manufacturing, is also heavily used in cosmetics, face creams, and body lotions for darker skin. Darker-skinned consumers are disproportionately exposed to these toxins. Societal pressures make them consume more beauty products that may contain hazardous chemicals, such as parabens, sulfates, and phthalates. At least 30 percent of users have reported adverse reactions. The film industry plays its own role, celebrating the likes of Shah Rukh Khan and Tom Cruise for their youthfulness and seeking unattainable vanity goals.

The fallout is becoming apparent as dermatologists report an increasing number of cases of skin damage, infections, vitamin overdose, hormonal and reproductive complications, and a disturbing rise in mental health issues linked to the misuse of steroid creams. The medical fraternity attributes this to the influence of social media and inadequate medical monitoring and prescription practices. Consumers fail to realise that these quick fixes, while enhancing beauty, have multiple side effects. Melanotan nasal sprays often lead to melanoma, and self-injecting Botox filler kits can cause infections and even blindness. It is high time that public discourse caught up with medical reality. Regulation of risky products and their marketing is necessary. Beauty norms should be challenged in visual and broadcast messaging and societal trends. Brands have to be accountable for the safety of their products as well as the narratives they create. Ethical guidelines must be drawn up for influencers to follow.

### QUICK TAKE

#### CLEAN THE SLATE

"T'S a "surprise on the positive side", the Supreme Court noted when a Tamil Nadu legislator with no crime record whatsoever appeared before it in a case last fortnight. That is a forceful reflection of today's politics when a politician's unblemished record is a wow moment. The court's reaction, a mixture of irony and disbelief, is also an indictment of the system in which routine political malfeasance undermines effective governance. Look at the numbers—251 MPs have criminal cases, 170 of them facing serious charges, the apex court heard recently. Nearly 45 percent of 4,092 MLAs have lengthy rap sheets. Criminality must cease to be a *fait accompli* for political success.

ALL the peninsular states have dramatically reduced extreme poverty and made considerable improvements in living standards, human development, and economic modernisation. These are fantastic achievements when measured against the abysmal state of affairs in North and East India. However, the next phase of economic transformation necessitates a strategy of prosperity that secures higher incomes for the majority of people to improve the lives of their families—without relying on public subsidies. And the biggest challenge to executing such a strategy will be reversing the persistent and ubiquitous inequality that characterises the contemporary economic landscape of the peninsula.

To understand this better, it is essential to distinguish between inclusion and redistribution. Consider a family of working adults. One earns 80 percent of the family income, and the rest, 5 percent each. The top earner will subsidise the others, but that will make the family entirely dependent on this single earner. In a family where all four members contribute 25 percent each to the total income, the question of dependence does not arise.

When growth enriches the few at the expense of the many, governments spend more on redistribution to compensate for inequality. This gives rise to "schemes" to provide the majority with subsidised medicines, affordable meals, pensions, income support, and free transport, among other benefits. These subsidies are more affordable to the rich or a State. Hence, a lot of people who suffer from unequalising growth in the peninsula are better off than those in poorer states.

However, fiscal policy is a hard taskmaster. States with a \$3,500 per capita income (PCI) are spending the same proportion of their budgets on providing compensating subsidies as states with a \$1,100 PCI. Both categories of states have no resources to invest in growth, employment and human capital. The peninsular states will be at higher levels of income and human development due to past progress, but will also be stuck in a development trap. The success of peninsular states in fostering growth is precisely why they need to pay the most urgent attention to reducing inequality, not inequality of consumption through redistributive subsidies, but inequality of participation in delivering growth and enjoying the income rewards that come with it.

Take Kerala. It has the highest per capita income (PCI) of all major states and top-notch human development. However, there are not enough quality jobs for a well-educated

The success of peninsular states in fostering growth is why they must pay attention to reducing inequality of participation in delivering growth, not of consumption through redistributive subsidies

## ONLY INCLUSIVE GROWTH CAN CUT SUBSIDY BURDEN

RATHIN ROY

Distinguished professor at Kariyappa School of Public Policy, Hyderabad, visiting senior fellow, Overseas Development Institute, London

### THE PENINSULA



ed young population. Female labour force participation is falling. Income and consumption inequality in Kerala are now among the highest of all Indian states. This means that the state government must undertake increasingly heavy fiscal lifting to compensate those not benefiting from the Kerala story.

Tamil Nadu (TN) has the highest manufacturing-GDP ratio in the peninsula. Consumption inequality is declining. While deprivation and inequality between rich and poor districts are pronounced, state government interventions and subsidies have considerably improved the quality of life in poorer districts in recent years. Yet, wages offered by foreign mega corps like

Samsung and Foxconn are too low for these workers to be eligible to pay income tax.

So, manufacturing has not been the engine of inclusive prosperity in Tamil Nadu. The state continues to subsidise these workers and their families with meals, education, and transportation, despite their employment in high-quality manufacturing jobs. It also spends a significant amount of public money offering incentives to foreign investors, but the resultant investments do not deliver a quantum increase in inclusive prosperity—the rich continue to disproportionately enjoy the income and wealth benefits of the manufacturing boom, leaving the government with the

## A TIME FOR THOUGHTFUL GESTURES

RENUKA NARAYANAN

### FAITHLINE

good, healthy option as a gesture that any one of us could make, and not only on an Ekadashi.

Delhi NCR is presently awash with kavadias on their way to Haridwar to fetch Ganga water for the shivlings in their temples at home. Sometimes it feels like an invasion because there are lumpy gangs among them who resort to violence and the destruction of cars and shops in the city. The police seem to be firmly on their side. I feel bad about this because the genuine pil-



Donating to those in need, whether food, clothes, water or money, can deepen one's personal journey and friendship with God this Kamika Ekadashi. Genuine giving comes from the heart, centred on the well-being of others rather than personal gains

grims marching stoically under the sun on the long road to Haridwar get a bad name because of the rowdies. Many devout householders, shop owners and even companies set up camps along the route for the kavadias, offering them five food, baths, and mats to rest on under a canopy.

One year, at a big kavadiya camp at Buddha Jayanti Park in Delhi, one such group of hosts, traders from Karol Bagh market, told me piously, "We do it for us, not them, because it's good merit". The rewards they're after are "peace and prosperity". These camps usually serve heavy, oily, fried food—puri, kachori, samosas, potato

curry, and loads of sweets, which does not sound helpful at all for those walking long distances.

I often wonder if these hosts could be persuaded to change their offerings to fruit, milk and nutritious vegetable curries with rotis or rice. It could be economically managed with a bit of planning to really help sustain pilgrims, rather than making it about themselves. But that requires self-awareness or, at a cosmic level, awareness-building programmes by the state governments along the route, a 'chintan manthan'.

Another hurdle is the immovable wall of established tastes. Bhandaras or community meals in temples usually feature fried food. Even fasts are broken with fried food. So, it seems pretty impossible to change the 'halwai habit', a halwai being the professional cook hired to turn out the puris and potato curry. So, I'm wholly hesitant to suggest it to anyone, but can't help wondering each Shrawan why nobody wants to consider offering appropriate marching food, maybe tasty sattva rotis and alternative sabzi. I can't practice what I preach because I am inclined to other causes.

However, some very nice gestures can happen too, in Delhi. Last week, a dear friend of decades, a UP-ite, threw an 'all-girls' birthday lunch as she does each year. Her friends from school, college and work are invited. She sets up a QR code for a charity of her choice and asks us to contribute whatever we want to that cause. This time, she chose an animal shelter called All Creatures Great and Small. No pressure. Just a sweet poem about it on WhatsApp, saying 'If you like'. She treated us to sangria, Thai food and date pancakes with coconut jaggedy ice cream. Some guests preferred to bring presents, which was also acceptable. Many others were pleased to have the chance to contribute somewhere genuine, knowing she would have researched it properly, and were happy to respect her wishes. Her gesture was very much in tune with the spirit of this Ekadashi, wouldn't you say?

(Views are personal) (shekha06@gmail.com)

### MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

#### Parliamentary conduct

Ref: Monsoon session: Answers MP's must seek in parliament (Jul 20). The parliament must demonstrate the most democratic form of debate, with the speaker possessing paramount authority. It is not possible to clap with one hand. Similarly, the treasury and opposition benches must co-operate for a smooth conduct of the monsoon session of the parliament.

HP Milton, Bengaluru

#### Greasy move

Ref: Samosa and jalebi face baby's betrayal (Jul 20). The health ministry's directive to display warnings regarding the fat and sugar content in traditional Indian snacks is a misguided attempt at health reform. This move demonstrates a lack of understanding of the onus of dietary hazards, and betrays our culinary heritage.

Sridevi Tejaswani K, email

#### Trump-Epstein palling

Ref: Return of the man who knew too much (Jul 20). As stated in the Wall Street Journal's recent piece, US President Donald Trump and Jeffrey Epstein's camaraderie goes way back, casts a definitive shadow on Trump's presidency.

G David Milton, Kanyakumari

#### Proportional attention

Ref: The other class struggle (Jul 19). Rounded seating arrangement in school classrooms gives teachers a better view to interact with, and attend to, children. This, however, is only possible when an adequate teacher-to-student ratio is established, which must be a priority for both public and private institutions.

Sreenivasan Raman, email

#### Mentoring mentors

Ref: BGS student dies by suicide, faculty held (Jul 20). The recent reports of female students taking the extreme step due to harassment from teachers indicates a deterioration in the value system. This coming from people responsible for mentoring and imparting knowledge on their wards is all the more worrisome indeed.

R Sriprasad, email

#### Nimisha's lifeline

Ref: Blood money: Forgiveness for a price (Jul 20). While the execution being deferred comes as a temporary relief for Nimisha, her family, and all the people waiting for her return; the end goal still remains. It is the heartfelt desire and wish of the people of the entire nation that Nimisha gets released and comes back home safely through whichever way viable means required.

R Sampath, Chennai



# THE ASIAN AGE

21 JULY 2025

## Parliament must discuss Trump claims, Bihar SIR

The elephant in both Houses in the new Parliament building during the Monsoon Session will be Donald Trump. The Opposition has been clamouring that the government provide clarity on his 60-second pronouncements on the military operations against Pakistan codenamed Operation Sindoor and the subsequent truce that was called, as he claims, at his behest.

The government has consistently denied any US role in the ceasefire being called after four days of intense hostility in early May in the wake of the Pahalgam terror attack that took place on April 22. Mr Trump's latest revelation of five jets, presumably of both sides or only of India or of Pakistan, having been shot down has added further intrigue to the puzzle over war losses. While Pakistan taking a battering on its air bases is evident in 'Notams' still being issued for certain airports, India has not explicitly said how many jets it may have lost in unprecedented dog fights said to have taken place on the first day of India's military operations. While war losses are customary, it is only right that the government take the Parliament of people's representatives into confidence and share the pluses and minuses of Op. Sindoor.

It is virtually by rote that the government states at pre-session all-party meetings its willingness to discuss all issues raised by the Opposition. But the common experience is that Parliament sessions are run down over procedural wrangling and/or the Opposition's unwillingness to accept the modalities of discussion as laid out by the Speaker and presiding officer of the two Houses.

Parliament sessions have often been punctuated by disagreements over procedures, sometimes leading to Opposition boycotts of almost whole sessions. It is generally resolved to have an open and meaningful session after the government seeks and is promised the cooperation and coordination of the Opposition for the smooth running of Parliament. But this tends to become meaningless in the cut and thrust of politics when polarisation takes over, leading to walk-outs, boycotts and demonstrations outside Parliament.

As the world is in a crucial phase of an unfolding sequence of contemporary events amid churning of global trade, the waging of war and military operations, including by India and Pakistan, it is only fair that the government comes forth willingly to share what has happened since the Pahalgam terror event.

There have been misgivings over several other issues, besides the Pahalgam attackers not having been brought to justice and Mr Trump's repeated claims, said to number 24, of breaching truce to top from the Nobel Peace Prize including his common boast that trade with the United States was the stick and carrot he used to make the subcontinental nations to see sense.

The Election Commission's proactive updating of poll rolls in its SIR initiative that, many fear, would lead to selective erosion of people's right to vote is certain to come up to the government after the Bihar assembly elections exercise is being held now close to the polls in Bihar. Incidents of lawlessness and harassment and rape of women are by no means restricted to states ruled by any of the two major alliances. But the Opposition must be allowed to bring up topics that are of national concern for debates in Parliament.

## Govt food advisory half-baked

An intra-governmental advisory issued by the Union health ministry recommending the installation of food safety and standards offices on June 21, 2025, kicked off a furore nearly a month later, with critics portraying it as an attempt to target Indian street food vendors.

While the advisory merely included illustrations of the oil and sugar boards, they depicted mostly Indian foods, apart from items like pizza, burgers, chocolate, ice cream, French fries and lassi. This triggered controversy on social media, where the government was criticised for allegedly mandating warning labels for jalebi, samosa and laddu.

The backlash was so intense that the government, instead of clarifying the actual contents of the advisory, dismissed the media messaging as fake news. A day later, the government issued a clarification about the initiative. It stated that the advisory was aimed at nudging people to eat healthier by raising awareness about the harmful effects of hidden fats and excessive sugar in various food items.

Excessive consumption of oil and sugar is a key contributor to rising rates of obesity, diabetes, hypertension and other lifestyle-related diseases.

The economic impact of obesity alone was \$28.95 billion in 2019. By 2050, this figure is projected to rise to \$81.53 billion. The cost is expected to escalate further to \$83.6 billion by 2060.

The boards were intended to be installed as part of the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India's Eat Right India programme, which was launched in July 2018.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, during his Mann Ki Baat address last month, rightly called upon people to reduce oil by 10 per cent. Earlier, he encouraged people to shift to millets, which are considered a healthier cereal than rice or wheat.

Though the government has been working with a long-term strategy, the health ministry's decision to attach examples led to serious blowback. Just like culture and language, food is also closely tied to people's hearts — and votes. Officials, therefore, should be more mindful of their messaging in the future.

### THE ASIAN AGE

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Subhani



## How pluralism, liberalism define Hyderabad identity



Sanjaya Baru

Sanjayavacha

Cosmopolitanism has its roots in Hyderabad. It was no happenstance that India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, had called Hyderabad India's "second capital" and Secunderabad's Rashtrapati Nilayam was made the summer home of the President of India. A few years ago Bengaluru tried to lay claim to the status of a second capital, but the growing linguistic chauvinism of this once cosmopolitan garden city has put paid to such claims.

It is, therefore, in the fitness of things that Telangana chief minister Revanth Reddy issued a message last week stating: "No matter which language you speak, what clothes you wear, who you live with, who you believe in, or the choices you make, Hyderabad welcomes you with open arms. Come to Hyderabad to work, to connect, to study, to invest, to explore, to grow, to settle, to do business, to thrive and to belong."

Chief minister Reddy deserves full marks for issuing this statement. Though, to be sure, he is carrying forward a legacy that he has inherited. From the beginning of the twentieth century the Nizam's regime recognised the value of inviting talent from across the country and took a liberal approach to providing employment to all those who came from distant lands. Post-independence governments followed this tradition despite many challenges.

Of course, the process began even earlier when the rulers of erstwhile Hyderabad had begun hiring North Indian Kayasthas into their administration. The fact that the Hyderabad State encompassed Kannada-speaking northern Karnataka and Marathi-speaking Vidarbha meant that along with Urdu, the official language of the state, Telugu, Kannada and Marathi were spoken within

the precincts of Old Hyderabad. The British cantonment in Secunderabad attracted Tamil and Malayalam-speaking communities from the Madras Presidency and Punjabi speakers from the north.

Hyderabad's economic prosperity attracted Rajasthani and Gujarati communities. Different localities became identified with different linguistic groups. Kannada and Marathi were heard more often in places like Kachiguda, Himayathnagar and on Tilak Road. Tamil in Jeera and Marredpally. There was more of Telugu with a coastal Andhra accent spoken in Nallakunta and Chikilipalli, while Urdu and Dakhni — a mix of Urdu, Telugu and Marathi — would be heard all around the Old City.

It was, therefore, ironic that Hyderabad became the capital city of India's first linguistic state, the erstwhile Andhra Pradesh. Yet, successive generations of political leadership and the city's elite did not allow linguistic chauvinism to raise its head. True, many from the coastal region complained till the 1970s that one could not get around in Hyderabad without some knowledge of Dakhni and Hindi and knowing only Telugu did not help. However, over time the use of Telugu has become more widespread and, more importantly, most linguistic groups have become bilingual. Only the Urdu and Hindi speakers took a long time to become bilingual, but even they have learnt to speak, if not read and write, Telugu.

It is this historical and social evolution of Hyderabad that has made it cosmopolitan and prevented the kind of linguistic chauvinism that has come to take hold of so many states — from Tamil Nadu and Karnataka in the South to Maharashtra and Gujarat in the West, Bengal in the East

and most of Hindi-speaking northern India. Even the nation's capital has become increasingly mono-lingual, with Hindi dominating, after having passed through periods when the city was at fault with Urdu and Punjabi.

Linguistic cosmopolitanism alone is not the distinguishing feature of Hyderabad. It has also been able to accommodate with ease different religious groups and has been open to waves of what have been referred to in the past as "non-muslim" and "outsiders". When Telangana separated itself from Andhra Pradesh, there was a move to conduct a population census to "weed out" outsiders. Earlier agitations for a separate Telangana were even referred to as "Mulk agitations".

Telangana's first chief minister, Chandrababu Naidu (KCR) sent a wave of panic among Greater Hyderabad's Andhra community when he made provocative speeches against "outsiders". However, wiser counsel quickly prevailed over the leadership, thanks in large part to the foresightedness and liberalism of KCR's son K.T. Rama Rao.

Together, KCR and KTR chose to take forward the development priorities they inherited from predecessors like N. Chandrababu Naidu and Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy. During the Covid-19 lockdown, when thousands of migrant workers were laid off and distraught around the neighbourhoods, the state government remained mute spectators of mass migration of the distressed working class returning home on foot. The Andhra KCR went on television and urged "north Indian brothers" not to leave the city and assured that the state government would take care of them. Mr Revanth Reddy's

recent advertisement declaring that "Hyderabad Welcomes Everyone" takes forward this liberal approach to governance.

Indeed, it is this ingrained cosmopolitanism of Hyderabad that today sets it apart from Bengaluru and Chennai. The linguistic parochialism in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu is challenging the further development of Bengaluru and Chennai. In Mumbai, we see the resurgence of Marathi chauvinism and Gujarat has always been a one-language state even if two most famous national leaders promote Hindi across India.

Mr Revanth Reddy's recent poster welcoming all to Hyderabad goes far beyond language. It is perhaps the most liberal statement of inclusiveness issued by any political leader in recent times. Feel at ease in Hyderabad, it says, irrespective of what belief you hold, what faith you pursue, what dress you wear, what sexual orientation you have. As a Hyderabad, I can vouch for this claim. Though, one must be aware, that threats to this syncretic culture lie barely under the surface.

Given the competition between Hyderabad and Bengaluru, the linguistic chauvinism of even the Congress Party in Karnataka, with chief minister Siddaramaiah admonishing non-Kannada business leaders for not learning the language, Hyderabad has the opportunity to once again regain its status as India's second capital. And, unlike India's first capital, it can grow as a true cosmopolitan and liberal urban space.

What Hyderabad still needs are better roads, cleaner air, more green spaces, better traffic management and less noise pollution. The religious as well as ethnic mix of both Hindus and Muslims, with too many loudspeakers over far too many mosques and temples, are a blemish on the streets adorned by ministers and an assortment of self-important people have made Hyderabad far too noisy.

Sanjaya Baru is a writer and an economist. His most recent book is *Secession of the Successful: The Flight Out of New India*.

### LETTERS

#### OVERWORKED PILOTS

Considering their demanding schedules, jet lag, being away from family and pressure to perform and be deemed fit, pilots go through a lot of stress daily. This indeed has been an issue brewing for long. The crash of the AI-171 flight in Ahmedabad last month only brings it to the forefront. Experts from the aviation industry have been considering the need to take initiatives to ensure the mental well-being of pilots. A holistic approach to health and safety in the aviation sector is needed urgently. Only this will ensure pilots remain in peak condition, resulting in safer skies.

R. Sivakumar  
Chennai

#### EU HYPOCRISY

APPROPOS your edit "India's priority should be early grade deal with US" (July 19, 2025), the EU's sanctions on Gujarat's Vadinar refinery reek of hypocrisy, given its own member states freely import their fuel. India's protests ring hollow in a world reshaped by geopolitical interests. As Donald Trump hints at punitive tariffs on Russian oil buyers, India must tread carefully. While strategic diversification is key, securing a balanced trade deal with the US is vital, not just for exports, but also for global positioning. Caught amid Washington's shifting sands, India must act swiftly to safeguard its economy and diplomacy.

K. Chidnam Kumar  
Bengaluru

#### FIRST AMONG EQUALS

THE DEMISE of M.K. Muthu, DMK patriarch late Karunanidhi's eldest son, who was thrust into the Tamil cinema to counter the influence of maverick actor and AIADMK founder M.G. Ramachandran but never made his mark of an actor, at the age of 77 is sad. Muthu was also a talented playback singer. He later had a difference of opinion with Karunanidhi, and he went to start his own rival party AIADMK. However both father and son patched up their differences in 2009. He is survived by his daughter, Thenmozhi.

Sankar Paul  
Chakdaha, West Bengal

\$500 for the best letter of the week goes to Sankar Paul (July 20). Email: asianage.letters@gmail.com.

Kamal Davar



## Restoring India's fractured ties with Dhaka should be key Delhi priority

Nations in the pursuit of their identified interests display some consistency, by and large, for long durations in their policies to achieve their objectives. Yet, at times geopolitics does witness unexpected traumatic changes whose outcomes, if not accorded adequate priority with alacrity, can be harmful even to powerful nations. How can Bangladesh, born in mid-December 1971 with the active help of its larger neighbour India, that sacrificed over 3,500 soldiers in the 1971 India-Pakistan war, ever forget New Delhi's massive contribution to its independence and later to its economic growth and development? But India now faces, on its eastern flank, a credible threat from till recently a devoted friend now turned bitter neighbour.

Since its liberation from its oppressive West Pakistani rulers, who ordered the butchery of lakhs of their then East Pakistani brethren and whose soldiers and irregulars raped thousands of women, the geopolitical wheel has turned full circle. Since its independence and liberation, Bangladesh enjoyed extremely good relations with India, despite some minor pinpricks over boundary-related problems and the sharing of river waters. India has a 4,023-km border with Bangladesh which

passes through India's West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram. Thus, Bangladesh's strategic significance for India's restive northeastern states and, with a politically unstable Myanmar and a perfidious China as neighbours, remains a matter of serious concern.

One of the other key problems between the two nations was the inordinately large number of enclaves in each other's territory, a difficult problem which was largely resolved in 2015. The other included large-scale illegal movement of people crossing the border into India seeking employment in Kolkata and elsewhere in the Indian hinterland.

India and Bangladesh have shared civilisational, cultural, ethnic and linguistic ties with each other as they have been part of the same heritage. After the Partition of India in August 1947, today's Bangladesh emerged as East Pakistan, ruled from Rawalpindi and Islamabad in the west. A quarter century was to pass before a new nation was born.

Till last year, relations between New Delhi and Dhaka remained cordial. Immediately after its independence, India's PM Indira Gandhi, who had played a sterling role in Bangladesh's birth, maintained warm relations with its first prime minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. But after Mujib's unexpected assassination in August 1975 by pro-Pakistan military officers, there was a fair amount of political instability at top political hierarchy level for many years. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Bangladesh drifted somewhat away from India and

joined the Organisation of Islamic Countries. Radicalism also reared its ugly head. Hindus, Christians and Buddhists were treated as second-class citizens for years, and recent events in Bangladesh confirm the treatment meted out to them.

Since the late 1980s, however, relations did improve between the two neighbours. Cooperation was achieved in many facets of trade, connectivity, power generation, exports, assistance during natural disasters, educational and cultural exchanges; military exercises and joint counter-terrorism efforts took place. The Awami League government of Mujib's daughter, Sheikh Hasina, in power over two terms — first from 1996 to 2001, and then for 15 years from 2009 to 2024 — ensured fraternal ties between the two neighbours. However, the dramatic ouster of Sheikh Hasina's government in Dhaka on August 5, 2024 and her flight to New Delhi led to a new adverse dimension in India-Bangladesh relations. Today's government in Dhaka, led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus chief adviser, is virulently anti-India and is warning up with both Pakistan and China. This is a matter of serious concern for New Delhi. Bangladesh would be well advised to note China's debt-trap diplomatic strategy with nations it ostensibly goes out to assist. India, as South Asia's leading power, will have to chart a clear-cut policy to restore fraternal relations with Bangladesh. Both nations, for their common good, must maintain peace and harmony with each other. Only recently, as some Hindus were

protesting in a peaceful manner at Gopalganj, Sheikh Mujib's birthplace, the Bangladesh Army fired upon them for no reason, killing at least 10 agitators. Instead of sympathising with the victims, Mr Yunus issued a statement condemning the Hindu protesters. The communal situation inside Bangladesh remains grim.

India now virtually has to contend with a "third front" threat emerging on its borders. It has to remain ever watchful of the joint threat faced from both China and Pakistan, especially to its strategic but highly vulnerable Siliguri Corridor, which is the only road link from the Indian mainland to its northeastern states. Thus, sooner rather than later, the Indian government will be well advised to invite Mr Yunus to New Delhi for a detailed and no-holds-barred discussion to explain India's "red lines" to Bangladesh and to point out the huge economic benefits which will accrue by ensuring peaceful relations. Additionally, India has to also ensure that its traditional secular credentials remain of a high order for others to follow. Also, New Delhi needs to open up channels of communication with the principal Opposition force in Bangladesh, Begum Khaleida Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party. Tough times lie ahead for Indian diplomacy.

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



## Govt transparency can contain Trump taunts and help India emerge stronger

For the nth time, US President Donald Trump has remarked about the recent conflict between India and Pakistan that followed the Pahalgam terror attack. Speaking at a private dinner with Republican lawmakers, he said, "In fact, planes were being shot out of the air. Five, five, four or five, but I think five jets were shot down actually." It goes without saying that such remarks are unnecessary as they hurt India's prestige globally without offering any benefits to the US or even Trump himself. While the US President has been less than prudent in making such utterances, the Narendra Modi government has not done much better on this count. The swift mobilisation and coordination of

armed forces reflected a high level of preparedness and resolve. For this, the Prime Minister deserves praise. However, beyond that, the government has done precious little to elicit applause.

Despite having the upper hand at a critical juncture, India did not sufficiently degrade Pakistan's military capabilities—particularly its air force. This was a squandered opportunity. Given the extent of the provocation and the clarity of intelligence on militant operations emanating from Pakistani soil, a more decisive and sustained military response could have had a greater deterrent effect. To compound matters, a perception soon took root that New Delhi had accepted a premature ceasefire, allegedly under pressure from

the United States. Although there has been no official confirmation of Washington's role, the circumstantial evidence—including the timing and statements by US officials, and subsequent diplomatic moves—suggests that American pressure could have indeed influenced New Delhi's decision-making. If true, this only reinforces the view that India ceded strategic ground just when it had the moral and military high ground. This impression, unless effectively countered, can prove damaging in the long run. It can send the wrong message to both adversaries and allies, thus affecting India's deterrence posture and complicating future military and diplomatic calculations. The government now needs to

set the record straight—and do that through transparency. An impartial and comprehensive inquiry must be conducted into the entire episode. The inquiry must investigate the military objectives, the chain of decisions taken at the highest levels, the diplomatic pressures involved, and the actual outcomes, both in terms of gains and losses. This would not only help bring clarity to the sequence of events but also serve as a vital learning tool for future conflicts. Over two months have passed since the hostilities ended, and the public, as well as Parliament, deserves to know the facts. How many casualties were there? What were the exact losses on both sides? What were the goals set out by the political leadership,

and were they achieved? Without this information, speculation will continue to fill the vacuum, potentially harming public morale and weakening trust in the government. In democracies, transparency is not a luxury but a necessity. A government that withholds information under the guise of national interest risks undermining that very interest by alienating its people. If the Modi government continues to remain tight-lipped, it will not only prolong the confusion and unease surrounding the incident but may also damage its own credibility in the eyes of the electorate. India must chart its own strategic course—assertively, confidently, and transparently. Only then can India emerge stronger.



## LETTERS

### A stormy monsoon session ahead

From the look of it, the monsoon session of the Parliament commencing on Monday is likely to be stormy. At the same time, the members should ensure that it does not become yet another washout. Obviously, Operation Sindoor will figure prominently in this session. The government will find itself in a difficult situation when the Opposition raises Donald Trump's claim that he brokered a truce between India and Pakistan using a trade deal as a bait and his revelation that five jets were shot down. The Centre must show intestinal fortitude to summon the US ambassador and register its protest against Trump's claims. The government should not refuse to divulge information which the people have a right to know on the pretext of safeguarding 'national interest'. For all the triumphalism over the Operation Sindoor, the government will have to admit its failure to nab the perpetrators of the Pahalgam massacre. On the special intensive revision (SIR) of the electoral roll in Bihar, questions will be hurled at the government thick and fast. On the foreign policy front, India's open alignment with Israel has depleted its moral authority on the world stage. The Parliament may also see heated exchanges over the new education policy and imposition of Hindi. Delimitation is another thorny issue the Parliament will have to grapple with. Prime Minister Narendra Modi should be a vigorous participant in the debates and make them lively without recrimination. To the extent possible, he should avoid foreign visits when the House is in session.

G. David Milton, Maruthancode (TN)

### Need for constructive discussions in Parliament

Fireworks are expected in Parliament when its winter session begins on Monday. The opposition benches will launch a blistering attack against the NDA-led BJP government on issues like Pahalgam, Trump's claim of brokering a ceasefire between India and Pakistan, and Bihar's Special Intensive Revision. The fierce debate will likely end in chaos with members jumping into the well, suspensions, adjournments, all of which are a waste of taxpayers' money. Parliament sessions are becoming increasingly unproductive and being held as a mere obligation to defeat the very purpose of the Constitution. Instead, all members must rise above party lines and work towards constructive discussions. The nation expects meaningful debates, not mere disruptions. Productive parliamentary sessions are essential for a healthy democracy, and it is imperative that our elected representatives take their responsibilities seriously.

Ganti Venkata Sudhir, Secunderabad

### Rains expose officials' lethargy

This refers to "Heavy rain brings Hyderabad to its knees (THI July 20). The city's struggle with heavy rains are not new, but what is more frustrating is the lack of a systemic response year after year. The city is bereft of a modern stormwater drainage system. Even mild showers cause flooding due to blocked or undersized drains. Many natural water sinks have been lost to unregulated construction, thereby reducing the capacity to absorb excess rainwater. Moreover, the government actions are reactive, not proactive, while officials don't believe in the once bitten twice shy adage. Coordination among GHMC, HYDRRA, and other agencies is inconsistent, particularly during peak monsoon. Structural reforms like drain expansion and lake restoration remain slow or stalled. There is a need to expand stormwater drains, increase manhole coverage, reclaim and protect lakes to serve as flood buffers and involve Resident Welfare Associations in flood preparedness.

Dr O. Prasad Rao, Hyderabad

### No use of plastic in AP

In Saturday's round of Swara Andhra and Swatch Andhra (SASA), the Andhra Pradesh government started a good initiative by campaigning against plastic use, especially single use plastic (SUP) across the state. In fact, plastic has become a way of life as people are using it for every corner, including during marriages, birthday parties and political meetings, least concerned that they are adversely impacting everyone's health. Efforts by the government and NGOs calling upon people to stop using plastic have not borne fruit. Unfortunately, even reuse and recycling of plastic has been below the expected levels. Now that the Andhra Pradesh government is determined to eliminate plastic use in the Secretariat by August 15 and stamp it out in its entirety across 17 municipal corporations by Gandhi Jayanti, one must join the movement against plastic use. Meanwhile, the government must monitor both public and private function halls to ensure that plastic is not used, in their respective premises.

Pratap Reddy Yaramala, Tiruvuru (AP)

thehansreader@gmail.com

## BENGALURU ONLINE

### BJP spreads lies, will never come for an open debate: CM

MYSSURU: Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah has accused the BJP of deliberately spreading lies about the state government's achievements and challenged the opposition to come in an open public debate—a challenge he claims the BJP continues to avoid.

Speaking to the media after offering bagina at the Kabinu reservoir, Siddaramaiah dismissed BJP's recent criticism regarding his alleged snub of Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar during a government event in Mysuru. "It is customary to welcome guests present at the event. Since the Deputy CM was not there at that moment, his name was not mentioned. BJP is just trying to create a rift between me and Shivakumar. Their efforts to gain political mileage through such claims are mere illusions," he said.

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

## Here is why India's declining consumption inequality deserves recognition

Soumya Kanti Ghosh  
AND Falguni Sinha

THE recent decline in India's consumption-based Gini coefficient—from 28.8 in 2011-12 to 25.5 in 2022-23, as reported by the World Bank—has prompted considerable scrutiny, particularly when juxtaposed with income-based estimates from the World Inequality Database (WID), which peg India's Gini at an ostensibly alarming 62 in 2023. Reconciling this apparent dissonance necessitates a closer interrogation of the underlying metrics, data sources, and conceptual frameworks. What follows is a reasoned engagement with the criticism—one that distinguishes methodological incomparabilities from substantive economic realities and highlights the perils of conflating fundamentally distinct measures of inequality.

At the core of this divergence is a critical conceptual distinction: the difference between consumption inequality and income inequality. In a country like India—characterised by a large informal workforce, extensive in-kind transfers, and a rapidly expanding welfare architecture—consumption is often volatile, underreported, or difficult to capture comprehensively. Consumption, by contrast, tends to be smoother over time and more reflective of actual living standards.

The World Bank's Poverty and Inequality Platform (PIP) adopts this logic, using either disposable income or consumption expenditure, depending on national context.

Firstly, it is worth pointing out that the World Bank in its paper titled "The World Bank's New Inequality



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

This raises a pertinent question: why has this not been more widely acknowledged? The answer perhaps lies in the tendency to selectively emphasise outlier estimates.

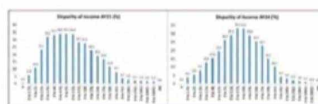
When the simple approximation given is used for comparison across nations, India's inequality even when measured in income terms is significantly lower than the United States and UK. Among the 48 nations where welfare approach is consumption based, India ranks third.

India's consumption-based Gini coefficient of 25.5 in the PIP database is also internationally striking. China's consumption Gini, for instance, stands at 35.7, according to the same database and using the same welfare concept. This 10-point difference is significant.

Secondly, why is the impact of large-scale social welfare schemes conspicuously spared from criticism? In a country like India, where large-scale social welfare programmes—such as subsidised food, LPG, housing, rural employment, health insurance, and direct cash transfers—have significantly boosted the living standards of the poor, consumption will inevitably be higher and more equitably distributed than income. These forms of public provisioning raise welfare especially in rural and informal segments.

In BE 2025, the Union Government's spending on beneficiary schemes amounts to ₹7.1 lakh crore, and states together add another ₹7.4 lakh crore. This totals to nearly ₹14.5 lakh crore.

According to PIFS data, the average monthly earning by regular salaried worker is approx. ₹21,000 and approx. ₹14,000 for self-employed. The average earning per day by a casual labourer is Rs 433. Using these approximations and accounting for dependency assuming a family of four, this translates to an income of ₹65,000 per capita. Assuming 80 per cent of the total beneficiary schemes reaches bottom 50 per cent, this translates into Rs 15,000 per year/person accounting for leakages and overlaps through direct and indirect



India's inequality even when measured in income terms is significantly lower than United States and UK. Among the 48 nations where welfare approach is consumption based, India ranks third. India's consumption-based Gini coefficient of 25.5 in the PIP database is also internationally striking. China's consumption Gini, for instance, stands at 35.7. This 10-point difference is significant.

benefits. This uplift of approx. 20% in effective resources translates into consumption. Thus, even under these conservative assumptions, this significantly compresses effective inequality.

These interventions have also led to a dramatic fall in poverty, with the extreme poverty rate dropping from 16.2 per cent in 2011-12 to 2.3 per cent in 2022-23. At the lower-middle-income line of \$3.65/day, poverty fell from 61.8 per cent to 28.1 per cent. Before accepting WID's estimates at face value, shouldn't we ask what exactly they are measuring? Coming onto the WID database, their benchmark income concept is: 'Pre-tax, post-replacement national income', that is, before taxes and transfers, except for social insurance components like pensions and unemployment benefits.

This means that they exclude most non-contributory welfare transfers—like India's Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT), food subsidies, LPG schemes, Ayushman Bharat, rural housing and more. India's social protection system relies much more heavily on non-contributory transfers than contributory insurance. These are not counted in the WID's income concept, even though they materially raise real income and purchasing power.

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

Secondly, WID relies heavily on tax records to compile its database. Now, even if we look at tax records, Gini coefficient estimated using ITR data of taxable income of individuals shows that individual income inequality has decreased from AY15 (FY14) to AY23 (FY22) from 0.472 to 0.402, 43.6 per cent individual ITR filers belonging to the Income group of less than Rs four lakh in AY15 (FY14) have left the lowest income group and shifted upwards.

A comparison of disparity in income during FY14 and FY23 shows that there is a clear rightward shift in the income distribution curve signifying people in lower income brackets are increasing their income to converge towards their share in population. The bell-shaped curve for AY24 speaks more!

In FY14, the share of the top one per cent in total income was 1.64 per cent,

smaller increases in tumour cell counts after 12 weeks of exercise. Their immune systems also appeared more robust, with stronger responses to abnormal cells. This research is still in its early stages, but it's encouraging to see that exercise doesn't appear to accelerate disease progression—and might even help to slow it. The biggest improvements were seen in people who started off with the worst symptoms or poorest physical condition.

In other words, those with the most to gain, gained the most. Older adults seemed to benefit from even modest activity. People receiving treatment were generally less active and reported lower quality of life than those who weren't, but their symptom levels were similar. That suggests physical activity might offer especially meaningful benefits for people going through treatment.

Exercise is already a well-established part of care for people with solid tumours such as breast or bowel cancer. What's different about CLL is that many people don't receive treatment for years—yet still experience symptoms and lower quality of life.

Our study shows that physical activity matters just as much for this group. Whether someone is on active monitoring or undergoing treatment, staying active can help ease symptoms, boost energy and improve daily life. It's a powerful reminder that even small steps can make a big difference and that living well with CLL isn't just about waiting for treatment. It's about reclaiming strength and mobility, one movement at a time.

(The writer is from University of Surrey)

## Exercise best bet for people with chronic lymphocytic leukaemia

DAVID BARTLETT

Chronic lymphocytic leukaemia (CLL) is the most common adult blood cancer in the western world, and it predominantly affects older adults. Most people are diagnosed after the age of 70, but increasing numbers of younger people, some under 60, are also being affected.

CLL starts when a type of immune cell called a B cell—normally responsible for producing antibodies—becomes cancerous. This not only stops it from working properly but also weakens the rest of the immune system. For many people, CLL begins as a slow-moving, low-grade disease that doesn't need immediate treatment.

These patients are placed on "active monitoring," where they're regularly checked for signs of progression. Others, especially those with more aggressive forms of the disease, will need immediate and targeted treatment to destroy the cancer cells. But regardless of the stage, CLL involves a prolonged and often unpredictable course.

It is associated with a higher risk of infections, secondary cancers and a heavy symptom burden that can affect quality of life for years. People on active monitoring often find themselves in a kind of medical limbo: well enough not to need treatment, but not well enough to feel secure. Fatigue, anxiety, social isolation and fear of infection are common. For those receiving treatment, side effects including nausea, bleeding, diarrhoea and extreme tiredness can make everyday life even more challenging. Because CLL weakens the body's ability to fight infection, many people begin avoiding places



The good news is that even gentle activity can make a difference. Low-intensity activities are safe for almost everyone and come with meaningful health benefits. Walking, yoga, swimming—anything that gets you moving—can help ease symptoms. In fact, research shows that just 12 weeks of regular exercise can reduce fatigue and improve day-to-day wellbeing.

where germs might spread: busy shops, family gatherings, even the gym. But while this instinct is understandable, it can come at a cost.

Over time, isolation and inactivity can chip away at physical fitness, reduce resilience and make it harder to recover from illness or cope with stress. The role of exercise is good for everyone but for people living with CLL, it can be life-changing.

Our research shows that physical activity is strongly linked to fewer symptoms and a better quality of life. Fatigue, the most common and often most debilitating symptom, was significantly lower in people who stayed active. Many also reported reduced pains and a greater sense of physical wellbeing.

Cancer-related fatigue isn't just feeling a bit tired. It's a deep, persistent exhaustion

that doesn't improve with sleep or rest. The exact biological reasons behind it aren't fully understood, but one thing is clear: regular movement helps. People who are more active tend to feel better—and live better. The good news is that even gentle activity can make a difference. Low-intensity activities are safe for almost everyone and come with meaningful health benefits. Walking, yoga, swimming—anything that gets you moving—can help ease symptoms. In fact, research shows that just 12 weeks of regular exercise can reduce fatigue and improve day-to-day wellbeing.

The PAR-Q+ (physical activity readiness questionnaire) is a helpful tool to assess whether it's safe to begin exercising. Once cleared, the aim is to work up to the recommended activity level: 150–300 minutes of moderate activity (like brisk walking or cycling) or 75–150 minutes of vigorous activity (like jogging or swimming), along with two sessions of muscle-strengthening activities per week. Start slowly and build gradually. Because people with CLL are immunocompromised, it's important to reduce infection risks while staying active. That might mean exercising outdoors, avoiding crowds, wearing a mask, or choosing quieter times at the gym. But, if precautions are taken, the benefits of movement far outweigh the risks.

Benefits of keeping active: In one of our pilot studies, people with CLL who had not yet started treatment showed