

## Editorial



## Rumour has it

Causes of the rail track deaths have more to do with deep-rooted malaises

**P**anic and confusion seem to have triggered the Lucknow-Mumbai Pushpak Express accident in Maharashtra that killed 12 people and injured at least 10 others. Eyewitness accounts talk about the rumour of a fire that led to an alarm chain being pulled and the train coming to a stop. Passengers often choose to get down when their train makes unscheduled stops and that is what happened near Pachora station in Jalgaon district. Those who disembarked on the side of an oncoming train on the adjacent track, the Karnataka Express, were mowed down. Reports talk about a curve that reduced the line of sight of the driver of the oncoming train who, nevertheless, promptly applied the brakes seeing the flashing lights, as in the procedure adopted to stop all other trains when one train stops midsection. The Karnataka Express was speeding and had a braking distance of some 750 m; the Rajdhani needs more than a kilometre to stop. It could have been worse had the brakes not been applied promptly, railway officials have been quoted as saying. Passengers disembarking a train and facing danger is not uncommon either. Auto doors that can be opened and closed only by railway personnel – a feature of the Vande Bharat and Rajdhani trains – may need to be fitted in general trains as well. Such doors come with their own logistical challenges such as a requirement that the door locking system of each bogie matches with the rest, but it may well be worth the cost.

The panic shown by the passengers is a typical response in India and is seen in stampedes. In 2017, a flower vendor on a rail platform bridge at Elphinstone Road station in Mumbai, apparently complained in Marathi of 'her flowers falling', which commuters misunderstood to mean that the bridge was collapsing, leading to a stampede that killed 23 people. Probably, the series of railway accidents in recent times was fresh in the minds of the Pushpak Express passengers and added to the panic. While those accidents, at first glance, were caused by human errors or local faults, they were also a result of a long-term and unaddressed need for enhancing railway safety. Further, initial media reports quoted railway officials talking about 'hot axle' and 'brake binding' that may have caused sparks and smoke, which gave rise to fears of a fire, and in turn the alarm chain being pulled. Brake binding happens when a brake is applied by the driver but after its release the brake does not disengage in one or more bogies. The wheels, instead of rolling, would only slide when speed picks up, leading to the emission of sparks and smoke. Brake binding is a case of poor maintenance. An inquiry by the Commissioner of Railway Safety concerned, an independent body of railway experts that does not come under the Railway Ministry, should uncover the true cause of Wednesday's accident.

## WHO is right

The U.S. must return to WHO's fold in its own interest

**P**resident Donald Trump's decision to withdraw the United States from the World Health Organization (WHO), based on charges of bias, is stunningly short sighted, and deeply concerning to the global health community. Pundits are predicting that this move, if not withdrawn, or reconsidered, may well unleash the butterfly effect – a cascading set of unpredictable consequences arising from even the smallest of changes in a system. Soon after his inauguration, Mr. Trump wasted no time in announcing the beginning of the process of ending the U.S.'s membership of WHO. In language that smacked of petulance, Mr. Trump, as he signed his first batch of executive orders, declared: "The World Health [Organization] ripped us off." The U.S. will now leave the United Nations health agency in 12 months' time and stop all financial contributions to its work. He accused the organisation of mishandling the COVID-19 pandemic, and of being partisan towards China, though the U.S. contributed more to its coffers. The move has not been entirely unexpected: during his previous term as U.S. President, he relentlessly criticised WHO for acting slow and being "owned and controlled by China"; in 2020 he initiated a move to halt funding to WHO, though it was scuppered as his term came to an end.

Why is the withdrawal of the U.S. significant? For starters, Mr. Trump is right – the U.S., which is a founding member of WHO, is also its biggest financial backer, contributing around 18% of its overall funding. Withdrawal of these funds will seriously impact health programmes being implemented across the world, including interventions for HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and the eradication of certain infectious diseases. WHO is also involved in ensuring equity of access to life-saving drugs for people across the world, building stronger health systems, detecting and preventing disease outbreaks. If Mr. Trump could set his petulance aside, it is clear that global health does not operate in silos, and neither a stern countenance nor physical boundaries can keep pathogens out of one's own geography. If any lessons have been learned at all from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is that no one is safe until everyone is safe, and that collaboration among nations, and open sharing of data and technology are essential to tackle pandemics. WHO has reached out to the U.S., hoping that it will reconsider its decision and engage once again with it. As fantastic as it may sound, medicine is no stranger to miracles of science, and the health community hopes one more will restore the U.S. back to WHO's fold.

**L**ast year, tuberculosis (TB) emerged, once again, as the leading infectious disease killer globally. The goals, i.e., End TB targets of 90% reduction in TB deaths, 80% reduction in new cases, and zero TB-affected families facing catastrophic costs by 2030, seem to be a distant dream. In 2018, India extended the highest level of political commitment for the cause by pledging to achieve End TB targets on an accelerated timeline by 2025. However, the COVID-19 pandemic was a huge pushback to the efforts.

According to the World Health Organization's Global Tuberculosis Report 2024, India continues to lead in the global TB burden (26% of cases) and is also the hub for drug-resistant TB (DR-TB) and TB deaths. While ambitious policies and initiatives are rolled out from the national level, the ground reality in India needs to be better understood to translate them into effective interventions.

## Focus on vulnerable groups

India's National Tuberculosis Elimination Programme (NTEP) clearly defines the high-risk or vulnerable groups that are at risk of contracting TB and developing adverse outcomes.

Dr. Pavitra Mohan, paediatrician and founder of Basic Healthcare Services, a non-governmental organisation working in south Rajasthan, says, "We get around 1000 persons with TB in our clinics every year and many of them have severe lung damage, owing to fine dust inhalation from mining and stone carving. They are at risk for TB due to contributory factors like silicosis, undernutrition, overcrowding, and uncontrolled co-morbidities like diabetes."

Migrant workers also have an added disadvantage of poor access to health-care facilities. Dr. Mohan says, "They prefer to go back to their native place if they fall ill and hence it is not easy for the healthcare delivery system also to keep track of their treatment."

While a lot of attention is being paid to tackling undernutrition among persons with TB (pwTB), a host of other contributory factors in each geography needs to be addressed, requiring multisectoral action.

TB is a curable disease with effective and free drugs from NTEP. A significant achievement for India is the treatment initiation in more than 95% of notified cases. This was possible, over the years, by establishing an exclusive procurement and supply chain system for the NTEP.



Swathi Krishna Narekattu is a public health physician and researcher based in Pune, working in tuberculosis, health policy and systems research



Parth Sharma is a community physician and public health researcher based in Delhi and is the founder of the public health advocacy organisation, Nivaran

The chances of ending TB by 2025 appear bleak, but there is some hope

However, in 2023, there was a country-wide break in the supply chain – it still continues in many parts. Shortage of key drugs in the centres, many of which are unavailable in the open market, left the beneficiaries and their families in a struggle. Nandita Venkatesan, data journalist and two-time TB survivor, says, "It takes many a mile for pwTB to reach the finishing line of treatment combating a wide range of side effects. Shortage of such critical medicines disrupts the treatment, risking resistance to antibiotics and poor disease outcomes. Moreover, having to buy drugs from outside leads to catastrophic health expenses."

## On extrapulmonary TB

Extrapulmonary TB (EP-TB) affects any organ of the body – lymph nodes, the kidneys, the brain, the spinal cord, bones, joints, and skin. However, the NTEP's main focus has been on pulmonary TB affecting the lung, as it is most common and transmissible.

The share of EP-TB is about 24% of the notified cases, but with wide geographical variations. It is often missed/delayed from being diagnosed due to symptoms which are vague and mimic other diseases. Dr. Deepak Chandra Badhani, a surgeon working in rural Chhattisgarh, says, "Doctors in Indian settings should have a high index of suspicion for TB in the cases they see. Proper history taking, thorough clinical examination and simple tests such as pus staining from a non-healing ulcer can help diagnose TB. But sadly, we wait for expensive, advanced tests just to start treatment and depend heavily on specialists to diagnose, leading to substantial delays and advanced disease." He lays emphasis on the training of general practitioners to pick up EP-TB at the earliest and of the need to sensitise frontline workers and integrating EP-TB into their screening algorithms.

A study by Daniels and colleagues in Mumbai shows that only 35% of private practitioners and 75% of government doctors could correctly diagnose a patient presenting with classical symptoms of TB. Dr. Vasundhara Rangaswamy, a microbiologist working in rural Chhattisgarh, says the reluctance to notify the disease further impacts diagnosis as private practitioners prescribe antibiotics and refer without any diagnostic tests.

TB is an area where guidelines are updated quite frequently. However, studies done by Shah and colleagues and also Hiremath and colleagues show that a shortage of adequately trained

human resources is a major challenge affecting implementation of the NTEP. Dr. Rangaswamy says, "Molecular tests are expensive and often take time to access as they are mostly available only at district level. Results take time due to the heavy workload and shortage of trained staff. In effect, patients have to travel and incur more expenses."

Dr. Mohan says, "The CBNAAT [Cartridge-based Nucleic Acid Amplification Testing] and Truenat machines are not available at many places, [as they are] mostly placed at [the] district level. And very often, when a machine is available, the lab technician will not be there and if the lab technician is there, cartridge supply for the test would not be there." The staff pattern within the NTEP does not meet the growing demands, with most now having more work.

## What needs to be done

Ownership at all levels is essential to make programmes work. Idukki district in Kerala collaborated with Kudumbashree, one of the largest women's self-help networks in the world, for their TB elimination efforts. This resulted in widespread community participation and advocacy by government/leadership levels created a huge impact. "It helped us achieve our targets and sustain the activities," says Dr. Cency B., former District TB Officer of Idukki district, and current Assistant Director, Kerala Health Services.

She says, "Advocacy by political leadership helps in providing platforms for cross learning from best practices across geographies. But programme implementers will have to go beyond their routine work scope to achieve this."

While the chances of ending TB by 2025 look bleak, there is some hope. India's case notification reached the highest level and deaths due to TB declined by 24% as compared to 2015, which is way more than the global decline.

The administrative levels of the NTEP are designed to adapt to the innumerable contextual challenges. New bodies of knowledge from different parts of the world need to be considered. Vietnam, a high burden country, recently showed the effective use of active case finding for TB (advocated for high-risk groups) among the general population, so that targeted interventions could work better. Perhaps India too needs to restructure and redefine its many conventional frameworks, to combat this deadly disease.

## A grey birthday for the Election Commission of India

**T**he executive Government is instructing or managing things in such a manner that those people who do not belong to them either racially, culturally or linguistically, are being excluded from being brought on the electoral rolls. Electoral rolls are a most fundamental thing in a democracy... Independence of elections and avoidance of any interference by the executive should be regarded as a fundamental right," said Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in June 1949 in the Constituent Assembly while introducing the Constitutional provision to set up the Election Commission of India (ECI). All of India's founding leaders agreed with this unanimously. Tomorrow (January 25) is the 75th anniversary of the birth of the ECI – also celebrated as National Voters Day (January 25). Sadly, India's founding leaders will feel let down by the ECI and not deem it to be a happy 75th birthday.

## The case of Maharashtra

Dr. Ambedkar was prescient in his warnings about electoral roll manipulation by the executive. While he was more concerned about exclusion of voters through identity discrimination, government interference in electoral rolls can also be through a process of mass inclusion of voters to tilt an election – as seen in the recently held Maharashtra State elections.

In the ECI enrolled 9.7 crore voters for the 2024 Maharashtra State election. The Narendra Modi government's Ministry of Health report estimated the entire adult population of Maharashtra (18-plus years), in 2024, as 9.54 crore. The ECI, by its own admission, registered 16 lakh more voters than the official estimate of the total adult population. Even if one were to accept that the government's estimate is only a projection, and can vary, it still implies that nearly 100% or more of all the adults in Maharashtra were registered as voters for the State election. This is very strange because the ECI neither enrolled nearly all adults as voters for the Maharashtra Lok Sabha election



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The sanctity of electoral rolls is the foundation of India's electoral democracy; the Election Commission of India has nothing to celebrate on the anniversary of its founding day

held just six months earlier, nor ever before in any of the other large States. Then, how were more people than the entire estimated adult population of Maharashtra enrolled as voters only for the State election?

## Mass enrolment in just months

This is because 48 lakh people were registered as new voters in just six months between the Lok Sabha and the State elections. For context, between 2019 to 2024, only 32 lakh new voters were enrolled. In other words, 50% more people were enrolled as voters in just six months vis-à-vis the previous five-year period. What led to this sudden, and intriguing, rush by Maharashtrais to register and vote in the State election alone?

Clues emerge upon careful analysis of the outcome. The BJP-led Mahayuti alliance gained 72 lakh more votes in the State election compared to the Lok Sabha election. One would logically presume that this gain by the BJP alliance was largely due to voters that voted for the Congress-led Maha Vikas Aghadi alliance in the Lok Sabha election who then shifted allegiance to the BJP alliance for the state election. But that is not the case. Only 24 lakh such voters moved away from the Congress alliance between the two elections. So, where did the BJP alliance get its remaining 48 lakh (72 lakh - 24 lakh) votes from for the State election?

It is not even the case that the BJP alliance got its remaining votes from other parties and independents, since this group also gained more votes in the State versus Lok Sabha election. It is then rational to impute that 48 lakh people who may not have voted in the Lok Sabha election, enrolled themselves as new voters for the State election and voted for the BJP alliance.

Astonishingly, the ECI has confirmed officially that it enrolled the exact same number, i.e., 48 lakh people, as new voters for the Maharashtra election. Is this a miraculous coincidence, a case of divine intervention or executive interference, as Dr. Ambedkar had warned 75 years ago?

What explains the sudden rush of new voters in six months for the State election? Are they real

votes? Or are they ghosts? Were their documents verified when they were enrolled as voters? How is it that all the new voters enrolled seem to have voted for just one alliance?

Regardless of one's political affiliations, to a rational mind, it is simply evident that there is something amiss with the electoral rolls in the Maharashtra election. Perhaps, there are sincere answers to these questions. If so, it is not logical to expect the ECI to release all the data in the public domain and issue clarifications in a transparent manner? But the ECI is conspicuously silent and arrogantly dismissive of these questions. A counter, which includes one by the Chief Election Commissioner, is that if there was such a large-scale addition of dubious or ghost voters, why were the Opposition parties with their war-rooms, not alert enough to catch this in time? This is a duplicitous way to absolve the ECI using the line of a political party's organisational inefficiencies.

It is unfair and illegal to add vast numbers of dubious voters to influence an election and its outcome. It is the ECI's constitutional responsibility to run a fair election. This is why India's founding leaders entrusted an independent ECI with the responsibility of preserving India's electoral sanctity and not to be reliant on political parties.

## Use Aadhaar

The Maharashtra incident reveals the importance of using Aadhaar to 'unghole' and de-duplicate electoral rolls and use its biometric verification for voting. Of course, not even a single eligible citizen should be denied his vote, and an appropriate backup process can be evolved for those whose biometric verifications fail. The sanctity of electoral rolls is of supreme importance and is the foundation of India's electoral democracy. Aadhaar verification of electoral rolls and voting is the birthday cake that the ECI must be given to preserve and strengthen India's electoral democracy. It is an idea that even Dr. Ambedkar and other founding leaders may approve of.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Online 'distractions'

At last, the Governor of Tamil Nadu may be right in one area (Tamil Nadu page, "Mobile phones and other screens are distractions," says Governor," January 23). Perhaps he meant it in a general sense, but it is worth talking about the recent move made by Sweden in a related area. In 2009, Sweden replaced books with computers. But in 2024-25, it has allocated £104 million to reverse this move. The country is

bringing back printed textbooks after concerns about digital learning and its impact on student focus and skills. In a world where tech is made out to be king in every sphere, this is a very significant move that needs study.

V. Subramaniam, Chennai

## Rail passenger safety

The Indian Railways must focus on prioritising passenger safety by implementing robust

measures and adopting cutting-edge technologies. With vast numbers of people relying on trains for transportation across the country, it is essential to safeguard them from catastrophes (Page 1, January 23).

Sathishkumar B., Vellore, Tamil Nadu

Despite all the technological advancements, there is no improvement in safety systems. A proper alerting system connecting all

compartments is still a distant dream. Our trains are overcrowded and tickets are issued in excess than the capacity. The Indian Railways should realise that it serves the nation and its motto should be on 'safety first' and not money.

Balasubramanian Pavan, Secunderabad

## Policing at a crossroads

The repeated intervention of the higher judiciary in the handling of sensitive cases

in Tamil Nadu signals a troubling lack of faith in Tamil Nadu's law enforcement. The recent case of assault in a university campus in the city, and its handling, underscores the perceived inability of the State police to deal with such matters effectively. The judiciary's strong comments to the government highlight the urgency of systemic reform. This erosion of trust in the State police jeopardises public confidence. The

government needs to act decisively to improve professionalism, and ensure gender sensitivity and accountability within the force. Restoring trust in law enforcement is critical to ensuring justice, public safety, and the state's credibility in maintaining law and order.

Gopalaswamy J., Chennai

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

## Is poverty being underestimated in India?

**P.C. Mohanan**

Former member of the National Statistical Commission

**N.R. Bhanumurthy**

Director of the Madras School of Economics

## PARLEY

Last month, the government released a factsheet on the 2023-24 Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES), which recorded a decline in poverty in urban and rural areas. Over the last few years, policymakers and academics have debated the issues of incomparable data sets, the unavailability of data, and the definition of an adequate consumption basket to determine a poverty line. Is poverty being underestimated in India? P.C. Mohanan and N.R. Bhanumurthy discuss the question in a conversation moderated by Samreen Wani. Edited excerpts:

**How do you define poverty? Is poverty being underestimated in India?**

**P.C. Mohanan:** We had a stable definition of poverty from the late 1970s to 2005. We started with the expenditure required for sustaining a minimum calorie diet and that used to be updated every five years using the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) data. When the NSSO started the whole exercise, its estimates of private expenditure and those of the National Accounts were very similar, so there was no controversy. But over the years, their estimates diverged so much that questions came up about the accuracy of the NSS data.

Then, the government appointed the Tendulkar Committee. At the same time, the NSSO also started experimenting with different methodologies to improve the collection of consumption expenditure and that meant using different recall periods. (A recall period is when a respondent is asked to recall their consumption expenditure over a specific time period.) After 2011-12, the government neither had official poverty estimates nor conducted a survey. People started using alternative estimates of expenditure and later, the multidimensional poverty index was used. So, using certain data sets, there have been claims that poverty has drastically come down. But that is questionable because it depends on the poverty line and the data.

**N.R. Bhanumurthy:** In the last two decades, the number of people below the poverty line has drastically come down, whatever line you take. But the delta between the two decades (the change in poverty estimation over a period of time) is very large for many reasons such as high GDP growth, increase in public expenditures through a number of flagship programmes introduced by the Union and State governments, and an improved public delivery system. In addition, we still have the National Food Security Act, which covers nearly 80 crore people. So, saying that people still live in



A beggar in Kozhikode city, K. RAGESH

extreme poverty would be counter-intuitive, if that is happening.

Initially, while defining poverty, we were talking about calorie consumption alone. Now, the definition has been broadened. And that is the way to go. If you use the Tendulkar line or the Rangarajan line, you might get different numbers, but the change between two rounds in both the methods would be more or less the same and close to 17% or 18%. Dr. Rangarajan himself estimated that poverty was close to 10% based on the 2022-23 survey. With the recent factsheet, I wouldn't be surprised if poverty would have come down further to single digits.

**What are your concerns with the HCES data?**

**PCM:** Over the years, there has been a divergence between the NSSO per capita household consumption expenditure data and those from the National Accounts. Some of the issues were because of the recall period. The NSSO started experimenting with different recall periods. While it set a seven-day recall period for certain items, it set a 30-day period for others. But these estimates then could not be compared with previous consumption estimates, which had different recall periods. We had the uniform reference period (URP), where we had 30 days of recall for all items, and the mixed reference period (MRP) using 30 days (food) and 365 days (for other goods). Tendulkar estimated poverty based on MRP. Then we had the modified mixed reference period (MMRP) – seven days for food items along with 30 days and 365 days for other items. This gives you a higher estimate of expenditure because your recall is better. If you use the higher expenditure distribution on a lower poverty line, which is what many researchers have done, naturally your poverty goes down. Rangarajan had suggested a different methodology in his committee report, but the government did not accept that. In the last two years, the NSSO has made a further modification



Very few people have tried to create a new poverty line for the new kind of methodology that the NSSO is following. This is a major gap.

P.C. MOHANAN

by visiting households in three sittings instead of one. This way, data reporting is better because respondents get more time and can recall better. The current methodology will still give us higher expenditure. But if you use this data on the older poverty line, your estimate will come down. Very few people have tried to create a new poverty line for the NSSO's new methodology. This is a major gap.

**NRB:** We need to improve the methodology. We cannot go with a URP because some expenditures would not have been made in the last seven days or the last month. Right now we are looking at a slightly broader aspect of consumption. If you look at the factsheet, food articles constitute less than 50% of the total consumption basket. So, it shows that we are not spending on food items alone and are looking at other services required for the household. In that sense, there is a need for us to re-examine the old methodology. The present criticism is with the estimate that suggests a decline in poverty by over 17% between two rounds. I would say that whatever poverty line we use, the decline in the number of poor between 2011-12 and 2023-24 would be closer to 17% or more.

**What do we know about poverty in rural and urban regions?**

**PCM:** The data show that the rural-urban differential in consumption is actually coming down. Rural areas are doing better. But the idea of a rural area that we have based on the 2011 Census, so a significant portion of the rural areas is basically urban or peri-urban in character. Earlier, food expenditure used to be the major component of rural consumption patterns. But the 2022-23 data show that a substantial number of items are the same in urban and rural areas now, which means rural consumption has actually changed in terms of diversity. We need to put a statistical base in place, including a Census, so we know what is rural and urban.

**NRB:** There should be clear-cut separation of what is rural and urban. If we decide to shift peri-urban to urban areas, I think urban poverty would have declined much faster than the preliminary estimates we have now. In any case, at the aggregate, we see a sharp fall in the number of poor, but in terms of consumption,

we have to look at public policy interventions.

**Where do you stand on an upward revision of the poverty line in India?**

**PCM:** A research paper by the Foundation for Agrarian Studies used the Rangarajan methodology on the 2022-23 HCES data. They estimated around 25% poverty. I'm not clear that by just updating a poverty line in that fashion, we would have a definite estimation. But we need to have some agreement on a methodology and the government needs to stand behind that. That is unlikely to happen.

**NRB:** With the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) laying down \$2.15/day as a poverty line, even their estimates suggest poverty was just about 12.9% in 2019. So, I don't agree with the 25% figure that Dr. Mohanan is quoting. NITI Aayog's estimates also don't really support that number. However, I agree with him that we need to have a clear-cut methodology for a poverty line estimation, but at the same time we need to stick to a single poverty line.

**There have been some criticisms against Niti Aayog's multidimensional poverty index. UNDP's index has 10 indicators and India's index has 12. Is this criticism valid?**

**NRB:** The UNDP has one methodology for all countries. It is only a framework that suggests what needs to be part of your consumption basket. But it is left to the countries to customise that methodology. Broadening that basket is the right way to do it. We have rightly added bank accounts and maternal health to the 10 indicators that the UNDP includes in its index.

**PCM:** I am not sure about that because multidimensional poverty tells you whether you are deprived of that particular indicator or not. Now there are many indicators which may not be applicable to a household. When you don't have a child, all those indicators related to a child are not relevant, so that household is not deprived of those things. Many of the indicators actually don't go down. Once you have access to electricity, a bank account, etc., you don't get deprived of those indicators in future. This index will never go up. Poverty estimates will continue to stay low because of the way the indicators have been selected. There is no scope for getting deprived in future. We don't measure income vulnerability and we need to do that.



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## NOTEBOOK

## The importance of the critical review

Well written critical reviews, more than the positive ones, add to the treasury of anecdotes and folklore that nourish a literary community

G. Sampath

The lit fest season is here, and like some migratory birds seen only in winter, books and authors are enjoying more conversational space, beyond the editorial equivalent of a wildlife sanctuary – the reviews section.

A quarter century ago, when I got my first byline as a book critic, almost every respectable newspaper and magazine had at least one weekly page, if not more, devoted to book reviews. There was this exotic species of journalist known as 'Books Editor', now sadly nearly extinct, whose sole remit was to read books, commission reviews, and attend launches. They would be courted by publishers in the morning, authors in the afternoon, and colleagues at all times of the day – begging to borrow a book from the growing pile of new titles on their desks.

The books page had no overt links to politics or business, nor was it comparable to the op-ed pages in terms of influence. Yet it was closely followed, and drew attention disproportionate to its acknowledged importance in the publication's scheme of things editorially, commercially, or budget-wise. It was seen as adding intellectual heft to the publication's brand identity.

Over the years, a number of factors have combined to erode the prominence and space that books commanded, with *The Hindu* being one of the exceptions. The first was a general sense that people are spending less time consuming books. Another was the exit of many small, independent publishing houses that encouraged unusual, local talent. Lastly, a pronounced tilt toward commercial non-fiction and market-tested genre fiction on the part of the big publishers left little scope for controversial works that could spark elaborate debates. At the same time, authors (and not just publishers) began to think of a review as a publicity prop rather than as a journalistic form with its own literary attributes.

One outcome of all this was that the negative review, especially the one where

the reviewer would, with justification, take the author to the cleaners, has become rare. The norm today is the favourable review. If the book is bad, the reviewer either gives a neutral synopsis of the book or does a balancing act by sandwiching the criticism between praise – this way the reader is forewarned, the writer gets blurb-worthy lines, and the reviewer is seen as 'objective'.

But what I have learned over years of reviewing is that being objective is not the same as being fair. Those who confused the two often became susceptible to what the legendary film critic Pauline Kael termed "saphead objectivity". A fair response to a terrible book is a proper pasting, and there is nothing objective about it. But that's more likely in a literary culture where writers, critics, and publishers are attuned to a robust tradition of dishing it out as well as taking it on the chin and readers appreciate the exchange, as happened during my stint as books editor with a now-defunct daily.

I had commissioned the review of a novel to a freelancer who, I learnt only later, had some history with the novelist. When the review came in, I was stunned by how harsh it was. I had my doubts, but there was deadline pressure, and I decided to back the reviewer's judgment. We went with it. The writer, an influential figure, did not like it. But he was quick to share it on Facebook. The terrible (for him) review garnered extensive publicity for the book.

But not all authors are sporting when it comes to negative reviews. Many take it personally. Though painful to the writer, well written critical reviews, more than the positive ones, add to the treasury of anecdotes and folklore that nourish a literary community. Not too long ago, the sort of banter between writers and critics we now witness at lit fest panels used to unfold on the books pages of newspapers. If books sections are to reclaim something of their erstwhile glory days, fair yet critical reviews would certainly help.

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## PICTURE OF THE WEEK

## An Aadhaar card for a tree



Workers install a plate with a QR code on a Chinara tree at the Nishat Bagh on the banks of the Dal lake in Srinagar. Under the 'Digital Tree Aadhaar' conservation initiative, Chinara trees, which are a cultural symbol of Jammu and Kashmir and are facing threats due to urbanisation, are being provided with unique identification codes. Scanning the QR code will give a person information about the tree's geographical location, health, and growing patterns. IMRAN NISSAR

## FROM THE ARCHIVES

The *Hindu*.

FIFTY YEARS AGO JANUARY 24, 1975

## All-India institute of epigraphy

Dharwar, Jan. 23: The need for the establishment of an all-India institute of epigraphy was stressed here yesterday by the Union Minister of State for Law and Company Affairs, Dr Sarojini Mahishi.

Inaugurating the first annual Congress of the Epigraphical Society of India the Minister

said the establishment of a co-ordinating body to undertake a thorough survey of all inscriptions in the country before they are damaged or lost was necessary since the reconstruction of Indian history could not be made without a scientific study of all inscriptions by competent scholars. She also recalled the contribution made by the epigraphy branch of the Archaeological Survey of India and certain State departments and universities towards the advancement of epigraphical research.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JANUARY 24, 1925

## Monkey gland traffic

A large number of the unfortunate monkeys destined for thyroid gland treatment are still cooped up in their wooden crates at Crawford Market awaiting shipment. They are to be taken on board a German ship in the course of a few days, their ultimate destination being Burningham.

## IN THE LIMELIGHT



Artistic maverick: Avant-garde director, actor, composer, and painter David Lynch passed away last week at the age of 78. AFP

## What lay beneath David Lynch's unique approach to cinema?

David Lynch's evocative style, marked by surreal imagery and unconventional storytelling, reveals a deep understanding of gendered existence, exploring the complexities of women's lives through empathy; his works unravel layered narratives, offering a look at trauma and identity

Nitiika Francis

A moldy, severed ear on a patch of suburban grass, filled with crawling ants. The head of an adult human sheared off and replaced by the visage of a grotesque baby alien. An extra-dimensional room fully curtained in red, inhabited by a giant, a dwarf, a cluster of nerves, and a dead girl.

David Lynch's filmography revelled in the evocative strangeness of images like this. The avant-garde director, actor, composer, and painter passed away last week at the age of 78 due to emphysema from years of smoking.

His trademark deviation from the realm of Hollywood storytelling, via surreal imagery that disrupts the spatial and temporal universe of a film or television series, proved to be so uniquely influential that this style garnered the title of "Lynchian".

The flavour of his craft came from his belief in putting forth an uncompromised vision that he, very famously, would not explain. "People have a yearning to make an intellectual sense of cinema. And when they can't do that, it feels frustrating, but they can come up with an explanation from within if they just allow it... What something is and what something isn't, and they might agree with their friends or argue with their friends. But how could they agree or argue if they don't already know it?" he wrote in his autobiography, *Catching the Big Fish: Meditation, Consciousness, and Creativity*.

### THE DAILY QUIZ

A quiz to mark the 80th birthday of noted Hindi film maker Subhash Ghai

V. V. Ramanan

#### QUESTION 1

Before becoming an actor, Ghai acted in some films. In which superhit flick did he play the role of Flight Lieutenant Prakash?

#### QUESTION 2

Name the two Shatrughan Sinha starrers, bearing the names of two popular cricketers of that era, that were the first two films of Ghai as a director.

#### QUESTION 3

Name the production company that he

formed in 1982 to produce his films.

#### QUESTION 4

Which Ghai film had the controversial song 'Choli Ke Peeche Kya Hai' pictured on Madhuri Dixit?

#### QUESTION 5

If Jackie Shroff debuted in 'Hero', which actress made her first appearance in 'Pardes'?

#### QUESTION 6

Name the film institute set up by Ghai in 2006.

#### QUESTION 7

Which film of his received the National Film Award for Best Film on Other Social Issues?

to be drawn, empathy is the most easily accessible component of Lynch's art.

Lynch pioneered surrealist cinema in Hollywood, an art movement that has, since its inception in the 1920s, deified the female and reduced her to a mysterious object of desire, a canvas to project ideas and thought-provoking visuals onto (see: Hans Bellmer's *The Doll*), rather than beings with inner complexities that deserve to be explored in their own right.

Lynch does not necessarily fall into this category. *Mulholland Drive*, widely regarded as his magnum opus, is at its surface a neo-noir about an amnesiac woman, Rita (played by Laura Harring), falling in love with Betty (played by Naomi Watts), another woman who is helping her solve the mystery of who she is. An hour into the runtime, and perhaps two hours into mulling over the film's ending, leads to a general conclusion that the film portrays the fractured psyche of a woman traumatised by the structural inner workings of Hollywood and the effects of sexual abuse via the casting couch.

In a scene now famous for its disturbing implications, a frazzled, more human Betty, who is in a different realm, identified as Diane Selwyn, sits on a couch and pleasures herself while profusely sobbing. The scene can be interpreted as a representation of women's complicated relationship with pleasure, especially in a space such as Hollywood, where the #MeToo movement in 2017 solidified that opportunities are withheld from actresses in exchange for sexual favours.

Watts' performance invokes pain and confusion in the viewer, while the story directs attention to an unavoidable strategy of presenting oneself as feminine; how much of one's sexuality is one's own choice? The blonde-brunette pairing of Watts and Harring, who is interpreted as a part of Diane's psyche, represents an internal Madonna-whore complex.

Lynch's empathetic lens on women allows him to deploy recognisable tropes without shoe-horning a woman's personhood into them. *Blue Velvet*'s Dorothy Vallens (played by Isabella Rossellini) is, at first glance, a typical damsel in distress; a battered woman abused by her deranged husband. And yet, when she encounters Jeffrey Beaumont (played by Kyle MacLachlan), she pulls a knife on him and forces him to hit her and submit to her.

In 1986, when this film came out, this depiction of Vallens was famously bashed as misogynistic by veteran film critic, Roger Ebert. "...when you ask an actress to endure those experiences, you should keep your side of the bargain by putting her in an important film," he remarked in his review.

In hindsight, however, both the female leads in the film, the brunette Vallens and the blonde Sandy (played by Laura Dern), are postmodern parodies critiquing the two tropes into which women are categorised; the quintessential good girl, Sandy is overtly sweet and inexperienced, while Vallens is an emulation of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, seemingly sexually empowered because she wants her subjugation.

Vallens is a reflection of the trauma endured by women who are driven towards sexual acts of self-destruction and an astute look into the complexities of sexual dynamics between genders.

#### Dissecting womanhood

Lynch's most extensive expansion of a woman's personhood, undoubtedly, can be found in his deeply influential collaboration with Mark Foster, *Twin Peaks*. The television series, whose first two seasons aired in 1990, was one of the first works to inject auteur directing into mainstream television. The show is driven by the mystery of who killed Laura Palmer (played by Sherry Lee) and, as it is unraveled, the audience is further

exposed to the person underneath the poised dead body that washed ashore in this small town, the homecoming queen tragically robbed of her youth.

Laura is seen as the perfect girl-next-door by the people of Twin Peaks, the ideal of American girlhood. As the episodes go by, we see her self-destructive escapades and tumultuous relationships with her mother, best friend, boyfriend, secret boyfriend, and cocaine. Lynch once again breaks apart the rosy image of American suburbia, this time with a sharp focus on the nuclear family. Laura was a victim of incest perpetuated by her father Leland (played by Ray Wise), and is portrayed as such; a victim. While Lynch and Foster do foray into glamourising her destructive tendencies with strobe lights and nudity, they ultimately attribute said tendencies to her father's abuse.

Here, empathy is imparted to these characters with a delicate nuance. Leland, as it turns out, was also sexually abused by his grandfather. While this explains his perpetuation of the same abuse, it does not, by any means, justify it. Leland is still portrayed as the devil incarnate, and is revealed to be the culprit.

In the final scene of the spinoff film, *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me*, which depicts Laura's last day on earth, Laura, now dead, is seen in the red room, a realm frequented by various characters of the show from time to time. She is visited by an angel and begins to smile widely as she weeps heavily, with a sense of relief. The detective who unravelled the mystery, Dale Cooper (played again by Kyle MacLachlan), stands beside her, hand on her shoulder, a vision of empathy, not truly understanding, but understanding.

In a turbulent world of sexual abuse, constant objectification, a flattening of personhood into archetype, death was the highest act of kindness that Lynch could bequeath upon his most polarising starlet.



### FROM THE ARCHIVES

## Know your English

K. Subrahmanian  
S. Upendran

"The second rule is..."

"Before you go to the second rule, I'd like to tell you something. I agree that what I write should be clear. I don't agree that writing should be simple. If you use simple words, your writing or speech will be colourless. It won't be impressive."

In other words, you are saying that 'expectation is forbidden' is more impressive than 'Don't spit'. It is unfortunate that a lot of people in our country are impressed by 'words of learned length and thund'ring sound'. Some of us think that we shall make a powerful impression if we use abstract words. The second rule I was about to tell you when I was interrupted by you is: 'Prefer the concrete to the abstract'.

Abstract refers to the ideal and the general. 'Concrete' refers to the material and the specific. Abstract nouns are generally uncountable and concrete nouns are countable. Child is a countable noun. Childhood is not. An abstract noun is generally the name of quality, action or state. Beauty, strength, poverty, growth are abstract words. Abstract nouns are generally derived from adjectives, verbs and common nouns. 'Mildness' is from 'mild', consideration is from 'consider', 'boyhood' is from 'boy'.

"Why should we prefer the concrete to the abstract?"

"The necessity of proper perception of the deterioration of the system of examination is of paramount importance. Can you change the sentence so that it can be understood more easily?"

"Let me try. The necessity of proper perception" can be changed to 'The need to perceive properly'; 'deterioration of the system of examination' to 'the deteriorating examination system'; 'is of paramount importance' to 'is very important'.

"Don't you think it is clearer when concrete words are used? Let us take another sentence: The implementation of this scheme will result in expenditure of an enormous amount of money. Can you change this into a simpler sentence?"

"One will have to spend a lot of money to carry out this scheme."

"You must cut out unnecessary abstract words. Then sentences become clearer, easier to understand."

"Abstract words shouldn't be used at all?"

"I don't say that. They can be used if they don't affect clarity. Don't think that a simple style is a colourless style. Look at the last paragraph of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address: 'But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate - we cannot consecrate - we cannot hallow - this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us - that from these honoured dead we take increased devotion - that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain - that this nation, under God shall have a new birth of freedom - and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.'"

Published in *The Hindu* on November 11, 1994

## Word of the day

### Knavery:

lack of honesty; acts of lying, cheating, or stealing

### Synonyms:

trickery, mischief, deceit

### Usage:

She was punished for her knavery when she stole money from her friend.

### Pronunciation:

newth.liv/knaverypro

### International Phonetic Alphabet:

/ˈnevərli/

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



#### Visual Question:

This is a still from which Ghai film that starred the veteran actors Dilip Kumar and Raaj Kumar. HINDU PHOTO ARCHIVES

#### Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz:

1. This country grants citizenship only under exceptional circumstances. If one is a cardinal residing in the country, or due to employment within the church, the citizenship is granted. **Ans: Vatican City**

2. Citizenship of the Mercosur is granted to eligible citizens of which bloc? Which are the countries part of the bloc? **Ans: Southern Common Market, comprising Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Paraguay and Uruguay**

3. These citizens are the members of this international association of 56 member states. **Ans: Commonwealth of Nations**

4. This form of citizenship exists within a smaller administrative unit, like a state or province, within a nation, granting residents certain rights and participation in local governance, distinct from their national citizenship at the country level. What is this citizenship called? **Ans: Subnational citizenship**

5. Nationality law can be broadly categorised into three principles. **Ans: Jus soli, Jus sanguinis and Jus matrimonii**

Visual: The protest is related to which country? **Ans: Australia**

Early Bird: Manasvi Dhavale

# Text & Context

THE HINDU

## NEWS IN NUMBERS

**Number of voters in Bihar over 120 years old**

**143** Bihar has a total of 7,80,22,933 electors of which 41,000 are registered centenarian voters according to the latest Election Commission data. The data shows that the State has 16,07,527 electors who are in the age group from 80 years to 120 years and above. ANI

**Number of schools closed in Bangkok due to air pollution**

**200** Air pollution forced schools in Bangkok to close on Thursday, authorities said, as officials urged people to work from home and restricted heavy vehicles. By Thursday morning, the Thai capital was the sixth most polluted major city in the world, according to IQAir. AP

**Funds to be raised by IREDA via qualified institutional placement**

**5000** in ₹ crore. State-owned IREDA said its board has approved a plan to raise funds through the qualified institutional placement route. The company said the financial resources will support the demand for green energy financing. PTI

**Record number of pilgrims taking a dip at Maha Kumbh**

**10** in crore. The ongoing Maha Kumbh has crossed a milestone for pilgrims taking a dip at the Triveni Sangam. The government highlighted that the number of pilgrims has been consistently rising, with lakhs arriving daily to bathe and gain spiritual merit. PTI

**Soldiers dead in an ambush by ex-Philippine rebels**

**2** Former Muslim rebels ambushed government troops assigned to escort UN staff visiting the southern Philippines wounding 12 others. The UN and the Philippine military both condemned Wednesday's attack on Basilan Island. AP

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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## Is France's influence in West Africa over?

Why did Chad, Ivory Coast, and Senegal ask for the withdrawal of French troops? What does the withdrawal signify for Europe's waning influence in Africa? How has Russia benefited from this?

### EXPLAINER

Anu Maria Joseph  
Padmashree Anandhan

#### The story so far:

In January 1, Ivory Coast President Alassane Ouattara announced that French troops would withdraw from the country by the end of the month. On December 26, in Chad, France handed over its military base in Faya-Largeau and began the withdrawal of troops following the termination of a defence cooperation agreement in November. On December 3, Senegalese President Bassirou Diomaye Faye called for the closure of all French military bases, commenting that their presence was "incompatible" with the country's national sovereignty. Senegal, Ivory Coast, and Chad have joined three West African countries – Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso – asking for French troops' withdrawal, marking a major blow to France's waning influence in the region.

#### Why did Chad, Ivory Coast, and Senegal ask for French troops' withdrawal?

First, the narrative on incompatibility with national sovereignty. France has around 1,000 troops in Chad, 600 in Ivory Coast, and 350 in Senegal. Since independence, France had colonial pacts with these former colonies to maintain economic, political, and military influences, referred to as 'Françafrique'. In Senegal and Ivory Coast, French troops have been stationed since 2014 as part of Operation Barkhane. For Chad, the defence pact existed for decades and does not align with its security requirements. Chad's President Mahamat Daby says ending the defence agreements is like taking back national sovereignty. Ivory Coast and Senegal have followed in similar footsteps for a reciprocal relationship that respects each other's independence and sovereignty.

Second, public dissatisfaction over French presence. French troops have been fighting insurgent groups linked to



**Power shift:** French troops have been fighting insurgent groups linked to the Islamic state and al Qaeda across West Africa since 2014. AP

the Islamic state and al Qaeda across West Africa since 2014. Despite their military presence, French troops failed to quell the insurgency in the region. Besides, it has spread, degenerated, and intensified across the region. This raised anti-French sentiments alongside a public demand for their withdrawal.

Third, West Africa's quest to move beyond France. Recently, many West African countries have shown interest in diversifying their relations from traditional colonial to new partners. The military governments in West Africa, Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, have built military ties with Russian mercenaries to fight insurgency. For military leaders, Russian mercenaries do not come with the baggage of adhering to democratic values. Besides, Russia has successfully spread an image as a better security provider in Africa.

#### What does French withdrawal mean for African countries?

For Africa, French withdrawal means the end of France's decades-long influence. However, in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, French withdrawal and Russia's arrival has not addressed or contained insurgency. Rather, these three countries rank among the top in the Global Terrorism Index 2024 by the Institute for Economics & Peace. The military regimes

have strengthened in the region with the new Alliance of Sahel states between Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. The common anti-French sentiments would likely bring Chad, Senegal, and Ivory Coast to join the Sahel alliance and an opportunity to boost regional counter-terrorism efforts.

#### What does the withdrawal mean for France?

The withdrawal would have four implications – first, the obituary of the 'Françafrique'. Under French President Emmanuel Macron, the withdrawal marks the end of 'Françafrique', giving prominence to maintaining a strong economic and diplomatic foothold. Second, the decline in political influence affects economic relations. Since 2010, President Ouattara has been in term with support from France; however former president Gbagbo's reemergence in 2020 challenged political stability. Without political influence, fulfilling France's economic interests can be problematic. Third, a waning military presence would impact international reputation. The military has supported pro-France African leaders to maintain political and economic stability. French Armed Forces have been stationed in support of UN operations since the Ivorian Civil War. Therefore, projecting France as a global fighter against terrorism and a defender

of international values and human rights will be undermined in the new reality. Fourth, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have pushed out French troops involuntarily, which are now either replaced by Russian mercenaries or engulfed in a military coup, making French influence impossible. It is uncertain for the Ivory Coast, given its political and economic ties with France even after independence.

#### Is there a larger waning European influence in Africa?

In the geopolitical era of conflicts, Europe's declining presence and the competition from Russia and China in Africa were the least focused. The EU is struggling with the shifting political landscape, security issues from the war in Ukraine, and larger economic strain; therefore handling autocracies, migrants, and anti-Europe sentiments has been put on the back burner. In the last few decades, Germany, France, and the U.K. have called down their development funding, leading to increased military coups and greater involvement of external actors. To gain a political and security presence in Africa, Russia has filled the military vacuum, while China asserts its economic influence through the Belt and Road Initiative. The EU's trade surplus has declined by 15%, from 55 billion euros to 35 billion euros between 2022 and 2023. In comparison, China maintains a surplus of more than 70 billion euros.

Militarily, Russia has benefited from the troops' withdrawals. Whether this will change the right-wing governments in Europe is worth asking. The 2024 manifestos of these parties can be useful in this regard. Their policies are more security-oriented in managing borders and migrants, rather than being economically driven. In the coming years, Europe's foreign policy approach will be more inward-looking, with few EU members looking to expand markets into Africa while facing competition from China.

The authors are Project Associates at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore

### THE GIST

West African countries are moving away from traditional colonial ties with France, seeking partnerships with global powers for security and economic cooperation.

Chad, Ivory Coast, and Senegal requested French troop withdrawals, citing incompatibility with national sovereignty and public dissatisfaction over France's failure to curb insurgencies.

France's withdrawal marks the end of 'Françafrique', diminishing its political, military, and economic presence in Africa, while Russia and China continue to expand their influence in the region.

## How does Trump's 75-day order affect the TikTok ban?

What law led to the banning of TikTok in the U.S.? Can the President override a ban upheld by the court?

John Xavier

#### The story so far:

In January 20, after taking office as the 47th President of the U.S., Donald Trump signed a 75-day lifeline. The short-video sharing platform went offline for U.S.-based users just a day earlier following a protracted legal and political battle that ended in a federal ban. TikTok appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court. The court upheld the ban, making both Google and Apple remove the app from their app stores. Web-hosting platforms were also ordered to cut ties with the platform or face fines of as much as \$5,000 per user.

#### Based on what law was TikTok banned?

The controversial law, 'Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act', signed by

former President Joe Biden aimed at blocking apps controlled by the U.S.'s foreign adversaries from operating in the country. It specifically targeted TikTok, owned and controlled by ByteDance, a Chinese firm. The goal is to prevent potential threats to national security from apps that may be used for espionage, data collection, and other harmful activities.

#### How does the law apply?

Under the law, some apps controlled by foreign adversaries can be prohibited from being distributed, maintained, or hosted in the U.S. However, it does allow an exception for apps that undergo a "qualified divestiture," meaning they can be sold or restructured in a way that reduces foreign control.

To enforce the ban, the U.S. Department of Justice (DoJ) has been given the authority to investigate and impose penalties on any entity that violates the law. The penalties are

determined based on how many users the app has. TikTok has over 170 million U.S.-based users. If the app is banned, users are entitled to request and receive all their account data – posts, photos, and videos – before the prohibition is enforced, ensuring they don't lose access to their content.

Any challenge to specific actions or decisions under the law must be made within 90 days of the decision. Legal disputes related to the law will be handled exclusively by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia.

#### What does Trump's order say?

Mr. Trump has noted that the timing of this enforcement is problematic as it doesn't give his administration enough time to assess the national security risks posed by TikTok or to negotiate a solution to address the risks without immediately shutting down the platform. And so, he has directed the Attorney General not to

enforce the Act's provisions for 75 days. During this period, the DoJ is prohibited from imposing penalties on platforms distributing or maintaining the app.

#### Can the President override a ban upheld by the Supreme Court?

While a section of legal experts may recognise the broad authority granted to the President under the Constitution of the U.S. in matters of national security and foreign relations, others will raise concerns that Mr. Trump's order could undermine the Congress's authority to legislate.

Another way to look at the order is through the lens of political expediency given the popularity of TikTok. Mr. Trump may be attempting to balance national security with public relations and economic interests. In this context, the order is a temporary measure to avoid an immediate shutdown and give the new administration time to negotiate a solution with TikTok's parent company, ByteDance, or implement mitigation measures.

Ultimately, the Supreme Court may play a key role in determining whether Mr. Trump's order is consistent with constitutional principles, especially if this matter is challenged in court. If the case reaches the apex court, it could result in a landmark ruling on the separation of powers and executive authority in national security matters.

### THE GIST

TikTok was banned in the U.S. under the 'Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act', which targets apps from foreign adversaries, to protect national security.

President Donald Trump issued a 75-day order delaying the enforcement of the ban, citing insufficient time to assess national security risks and negotiate a solution, though legal experts debate whether this could interfere with Congress's authority.

## SCIENCE

# The hidden dangers of Rhodamine B: a global and local perspective

Rhodamine B is a synthetic dye utilised in industries such as textiles, paper, and leather. Its application extends to scientific research due to its fluorescent properties. However, its use in consumable products is fraught with health risks. Studies indicate it can cause DNA damage, leading to mutations and potentially triggering cancerous growths

Monisha Madhumita

Imagine indulging in an appetizing looking, sweet treat, only to discover it contains a dye primarily used in textiles and linked to cancer. This alarming reality has prompted significant health interventions worldwide, including recent decisive actions in India.

Rhodamine B is a synthetic dye known for its bright pink hue, commonly utilised in industries such as textiles, paper, and leather. Its application extends to scientific research due to its fluorescent properties. However, its use in consumable products is fraught with health risks. Studies indicate that Rhodamine B can cause DNA damage, leading to mutations and potentially triggering cancerous growths.

Animal research has demonstrated tumour development in organs like the liver and bladder following prolonged exposure to the dye.

Recognising its potential dangers, many countries have put in place strict regulations on use of Rhodamine B. In the United States, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has long prohibited its use in food products, classifying it as unsafe for human consumption. A recent ban issued by the FDA in January 2025 further reinforces these restrictions, prohibiting the use of Rhodamine B in any food-related applications due to increasing evidence of its carcinogenic properties.

The FDA cited growing concerns over children's exposure to high levels of the dye in candies, baked goods, and other processed foods, prompting an urgent call for manufacturers to reformulate their products. This ban stems from studies indicating its potential carcinogenicity and other health risks. Similarly, the European Union classifies Rhodamine B as a substance of very high concern, restricting its use in cosmetics and other consumer goods.

## Indian perspective

In India, the rampant use of Rhodamine B in food items has raised significant health concerns. The dye has been illegally employed to enhance the visual appeal of various consumables, posing serious health risks to consumers. Over the last few years, action has been taken by various Indian states and these highlight the growing awareness of these dangers. In February 2024, Tamil Nadu banned the production and sale of cotton candy after the Government Food Analysis Laboratory in Chennai detected Rhodamine B in samples collected from



Animal research has demonstrated tumour development in organs such as the liver and bladder following prolonged exposure to the dye. FILE PHOTO.

vendors. Health Minister Ma Subramanian emphasised that the use of Rhodamine B in food violates the Food Safety and Standards Act of 2006, categorising such products as unsafe. The ban aims to raise public awareness about the hazards associated with coloured candies and ensure that only safe, colour-free cotton candy is available.

Following Tamil Nadu's lead, other Indian states and territories have taken similar measures. Karnataka, in March 2024, prohibited the use of Rhodamine B in popular street foods like "Gobi Manchurian" and cotton candy. Minister for Health and Family Welfare in the Government of Karnataka, Dinesh Gundu Rao, announced stringent penalties for violators, including imprisonment of up to seven years and fines reaching ₹10 lakh. Laboratory tests revealed the presence of harmful chemicals in numerous samples collected across the state.

Puducherry also followed suit by banning the sale of cotton candy containing Rhodamine B. Food safety officers have been directed to conduct inspections and take strict action against violators to safeguard public health. In May 2024, Himachal Pradesh instituted a one-year ban on the production, sale, and storage of cotton candy after detecting Rhodamine B in samples. This preventive measure aims to protect consumers from the potential carcinogenic effects of the dye.

Mohammed Mithi, Consultant Surgical Oncologist at Saifee Hospital in Mumbai, explains, "Synthetic dyes, including Rhodamine B, may pose carcinogenic risks due to certain chemical components. Some dyes, like azo dyes,



Synthetic dyes, when used in concentrations approved by regulatory bodies, are generally safe. However, in sensitive individuals, they can lead to allergic reactions such as itching, redness, and skin thickening

can break down into aromatic amines, which are known carcinogens. Laboratory studies have shown that specific synthetic dyes can induce DNA damage, oxidative stress, and promote tumour growth in animal models. While concrete evidence in humans is limited, long-term exposure to unregulated products remains a concern." He further adds that certain groups, such as children, the elderly, and immunocompromised individuals, are more susceptible to these harmful effects due to their body's reduced ability to metabolise and detoxify harmful substances.

Abyrmy Balasundaram, consultant dermatologist at Cosmediq Hair Transplant and Skin Clinic, Chennai, states, "Synthetic dyes, when used in concentrations approved by regulatory bodies, are generally safe. However, in sensitive individuals, they can lead to allergic reactions such as itching, redness, and skin thickening. Long-term exposure to synthetic dyes like Rhodamine B can result in chronic allergic reactions and permanent skin pigmentation changes. Although there is no definitive link to cancer in humans through topical application, it is always advisable to opt for products from reputable brands with

proper labeling."

She further notes, "The European Union was among the first to ban Rhodamine B in cosmetics in the early 1990s due to concerns about its potential carcinogenic effects and skin sensitisation risks. This move has paved the way for stricter global regulations on synthetic dyes in personal care products."

## India's food safety ecosystem

Priyadarshini Chidambaram, Community Health Specialist and Researcher, Bengaluru, says, "The ecosystem in India for research into food dye safety is weak. There is a need for proactive funding and commissioning of independent research by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) to study the impact of additives, especially synthetic dyes, on public health based on Indian diet practices through collaborations with academic and research institutions. We must build a robust system of rapid scientific reviews and proactive policy implementation to be on par with international recommendations on food safety instead of reacting to a public health crisis or just joining the bandwagon of international ban trends."

She adds, "There needs to be active testing for harmful food dyes and enforcement of strict action against both errant big brands and smaller establishments and vendors. The fact that a state-level ban was necessary to bring attention to harmful dyes like Rhodamine B is a wake-up call. It underscores the need for FSSAI to play a more visible role in educating the public about unsafe food practices. There is a definite knowledge gap among the public on food standards. We must harness the growing digital and social media influence to disseminate information on safe food additives and food label warnings. Community education and engagement are needed to tackle the menace of harmful additives."

The case of Rhodamine B serves as an important reminder of the hidden dangers that lurk in seemingly innocuous products. It underscores the collective responsibility of governments, industries, and consumers to prioritise health over aesthetics. By staying informed and vigilant, we can ensure that the foods we enjoy are not only appealing but also safe. As medical professionals aptly put it, "The health of a nation begins with the safety of its food. It's time we prioritise long-term well-being over short-term convenience."

(Dr. Monisha Madhumita is a consultant dermatologist at Savetha Medical College, Chennai and member of the International Alliance for Global Health Dermatology, London, UK. mail.monisha.m@gmail.com)

## THE GIST

In the U.S., the FDA has long prohibited Rhodamine B in food due to evidence of its carcinogenic properties. The FDA cited growing concerns over children's exposure to high levels of the dye in candies, baked goods, and other processed foods

In February 2024, Tamil Nadu banned production and sale of cotton candy after it detected Rhodamine B. Such products are graded as unsafe and substandard. The ban aims to raise public awareness and ensure only safe, colour-free cotton candy is available

According to doctors: "Specific synthetic dyes can induce DNA damage, oxidative stress, and promote tumour growth in animal models. While concrete evidence in humans is limited, long-term exposure to unregulated products remains a concern"

Rhodamine B serves as an important reminder of the hidden dangers that lurk in seemingly innocuous products. It underscores the collective responsibility of governments, industries, and consumers to prioritise health over aesthetics

## Study to determine how many people use life jackets

Zubeda Hamid

Just about a month ago, India was rocked by the death of 15 persons, including four women and two children, who died after an Indian Navy speedboat crashed into a ferry, leading to its capsizing off the Mumbai coast. The ferry was carrying passengers to Elephanta Island, a UNESCO world heritage site and popular tourist destination.

The incident threw the spotlight, once again, on water safety in India after survivors alleged that the ferry did not have enough life jackets for its passengers, and officials said the vessel was carrying over 100 passengers against its capacity of 90.

A staggering 71% of deaths caused by drowning in India are due to accidental falls into water bodies. In 2022, India reported 256 boat capsize as per the National Crime Records Bureau's (NCRB) statistics.

And yet, usage of life jackets and the implementation of regulations requiring life jackets on water transport facilities, remain poor, says Jagnoor Jagnoor, a public health researcher and programme lead for injury at The George Institute for Global Health.

To understand how often people wear life jackets and how more usage can be encouraged, the Indian Council of Medical Research's (ICMR), as part of its first-ever initiative on drowning prevention, has now begun a study.

Focused on fishermen, boat operators, and tourists in Tamil Nadu and Kerala, where water transport use is common, the study aims to find out how many people wear life jackets and why they choose to wear or not wear them. It also aims at developing a strategy to encourage more people to use life jackets



Fire, and Police personnel search for missing people on a lake. MURALI KUMAR K

by engaging with experts and local communities. The study will then evaluate if this plan was effective in increasing the use of life jackets and therefore reducing the risk of drowning. The project is also expected to develop a tested behaviour change intervention to improve the use of life jacket wear among boaters.

This is "the first research in India aimed at gathering evidence to promote life jacket use and reduce risk of drowning," the ICMR said in an email communication to *The Hindu*.

The ICMR is collaborating with The George Institute for Global Health, India, on this project. Dr. Jagnoor, who is working on the project said that overall, we know very little about where drowning happens, especially among adults. While globally, children aged under 5 account for the largest single share of drowning deaths, in India, the picture, as per NCRB statistics, is a little different: over half of all drowning deaths (51%) are amongst the economically active 18 to 44 age group.

More men than women in India die of drowning: over 80% were men, as per NCRB figures.

## Higher risk for males

"While the risk is higher for males, attributed generally to higher exposure to water and risk-taking behaviour, a chunk of drowning deaths in India are caused by hazardous occupational settings – livelihood hazards," Dr. Jagnoor said.

According to the ICMR, the project has received about ₹60 lakh in funding; it is one of three projects funded under ICMR's drowning prevention initiative with a total budget of around ₹2 crore. "Due to the huge coastlines in the Southern States and the frequent use of water transport, the study is based in these two States. It will involve 1,400 people using water vessels. It is being conducted in Alappuzha and Thiruvallur in Kerala, as well as Tiruvallur and Nagapattinam in Tamil Nadu," Dr. Jagnoor said.

Wearing a proper life jacket can increase survival chances in water accidents by over seven times, yet very few people use them consistently, the ICMR said.

While there has been an increase in awareness about ensuring there are life jackets and life buoys on board boats, fishermen still, for the

most part, do not wear life jackets while fishing, said E. Ragupathi, a boat owner and ex-president of the Chennai Mechanised Boat Owners Association. Primarily, he said, this was because fishermen found the jackets uncomfortable and cumbersome. "The life jackets available here are very thick – about eight inches or so – making them uncomfortable to wear for long durations. These are water-resistant, not waterproof. The better quality jackets used by the Navy, for instance, are only three inches thick and are waterproof. But even the government subsidies are for the thick, water-resistant jackets that have to be replaced every two years," he said.

Fishermen instead, use life buoys more. Mr. Ragupathi said, finding them more convenient and useful. He added however that even now, more water safety awareness is needed, along with basic first-aid training for the community.

A senior official of the Tamil Nadu Fisheries Department said that awareness of and enforcement of rules regarding life saving buoyancy/floatation devices to be carried on small vessels were essential. "Some small vessels do not carry them due to space constraints. But in cases of accidents, cyclones, or inclement weather, floatation devices become crucial in the sea."

(zubeda.h@thehindu.co.in)

## BIG SHOT



Mosquito repellent is sprayed as part of a prevention campaign against dengue fever in Banda Aceh on January 22. AFP

For feedback and suggestions for 'Science', please write to [science@thehindu.co.in](mailto:science@thehindu.co.in) with the subject 'Daily page'

# Trump rewrites US ties with Russia & China



**G PARTHASARATHY**  
CHANCELLOR, JAMMU  
CENTRAL UNIVERSITY &  
EX-AMBASSADOR

**A**T his end-of-the-year news conference in December, 2024, Russian President Vladimir Putin declared: "I must say that the situation is changing dramatically." He added: "There is movement along the entire front line every day."

Putin is given to choosing his words very carefully. It is now clear that it is only a matter of time before Russia achieves its territorial objectives of forcing Ukraine out of residual Russian territory, that Moscow now wants to soon regain and control. This is the territory that Moscow had historically controlled, along its southern shores. It now appears likely that Ukraine will be forced out of the territory it took control of prior to the conflict. Russia is, even now, recovering territory that it lost, since the conflict began.

Also, there is no doubt that this has been a case of the young and inexperienced Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, being

encouraged by the Biden administration and its NATO allies to enhance control of its south-eastern shores.

It is now evident that unlike the Biden administration, the Trump administration will not back the Ukrainians in their military operations to take on Putin's soldiers. In the process, the US seems to have forgotten that one of the main aims of the Russians has historically been to retain control of and unfettered access to the 'warm waters' across their shores. Joe Biden did not evidently take note of the importance that Russia attached to the territories it controlled in its east, which provide it with access to the sea, especially across Ukraine.

The most important change being seen with the advent of Trump is that a serious effort is underway for resolving these issues, to ensure that Moscow's access to the sea is fully secured. Moreover, there are signs that in eastern Ukraine, the Russians are carefully seizing control of territory across the Donbas region.

President Trump, however, appears to be deliberately oblivious of European concerns on Russia's territorial claims. He has described Putin's territorial claims as: "This is genius. Putin declares a big portion of Ukraine as independent. That is wonderful." This is astonishing as one could not have expected Washington to support Moscow's territorial claims!



**EMERGING DYNAMICS:** It is evident that Trump will not back Ukraine in its war against Russia. **AP**

Regarding US-China relations under President Trump, while India is making efforts to end tensions on its borders with China, there appears to be little possibility of any serious breakthrough happening in Trump's relations with China. Trump has not hesitated to ally to his differences with China's policies. This has been reinforced by his appointment of Senator Marco Rubio as his Secretary of State and of Representative Mike Waltz as National Security Adviser.

Rubio and Waltz are both characterised as "staunch China hawkers" in Washington. Rubio has been banned twice in 2020 from entering China. One wonders if the bans are still in place. Both these Trump appointees would not

Using India as a balance to keep China in its place suits President Trump, just now. India, in turn, still needs US cooperation.

exactly be welcome in China. Yet, another Trump ally, multi-billionaire Elon Musk, has a huge commercial interests in China, running into scores of billions of dollars. Trump is evidently keeping Beijing uncertain about his intentions.

Despite the rhetoric, Trump is quite obviously keeping his options open with China. Using India as a balance to keep China in its place suits President Trump, just now. India, in turn, still needs US cooperation in areas ranging from high-tech, defence production and space to other spheres of security exchanges and economic cooperation. This is occurring amidst a growing, highly educated Indian population in the US, which is currently estimated at 5.1

million.

The US-China relationship has, however, been heading for hard times, arising from the substantial mutual distrust and dislike between the leaders of the two powers. The restoration of trust and cooperation would take time, especially as the tone of the Trump rhetoric would have shocked people in the Middle Kingdom. But, Trump can always use the good offices of Elon Musk to address differences with China, given the vast relationship and vested interests that Musk shares with the Middle Kingdom. Already, there is speculation that China is considering a plan for Elon Musk to acquire TikTok's US business. Indians who find occasion to deal with Musk must bear this in mind.

Another important factor that one cannot ignore is that Trump has a good relationship with President Putin. And countries across the world understand this clearly.

The person to be hit hardest by these developments is Ukraine's besieged President Zelenskyy. He has made the rather serious miscalculation of believing that he could take on Putin's Russia in a territorial dispute, with backing by the US, led by Joe Biden. Sadly, Biden's successor Donald Trump is in no mood to back Zelenskyy.

A negotiating tool that Trump has at his disposal is the battery of punitive sanctions imposed on Russia, led

by the US. One of the final acts of the outgoing Biden administration has been the levy of a comprehensive sanctions package targeting Russia's energy sector, effective January 10, 2025. Trump has frequently expressed scepticism about the effectiveness of sanctions as a standalone tool and signalled a willingness to use their reduction or removal as leverage in negotiations with Moscow. This approach may include offering a relief in sanctions in exchange for Russian concessions on Ukraine, such as agreeing to a ceasefire or territorial compromises in contested independent regions, like Donbas.

For India, which has significantly increased its imports of discounted Russian crude despite the tightening noose of sanctions, any potential easing could be a significant relief, stabilising global energy markets and recalibrating supply chains. In fact, two Indian companies have been included in the January 10 sanctions list, embargoes for their alleged involvement in managing LNG carriers that transported cargo from Russia's Arctic LNG 2 project.

Given these emerging dynamics, India will need to carefully recalibrate its geopolitical and geostrategic ties, ensuring its interests are safeguarded while adapting to the evolving contours of the US-Russia and US-China relations under President Trump.

## India's museums reflect government apathy to heritage



**KISHALAY BHATTACHARJEE**  
DEAN, JINDAL SCHOOL OF  
JOURNALISM & COMMUNICATION

**I**N February 2024, Home Minister Anrit Shah, at an event in Mysuru, claimed that PM Narendra Modi had not only brought back respect for India's cultural heritage on the global stage but also revived 'centres of cultural consciousness.'

For centuries, museums have served as culture hubs. Early museums may have begun as private collections of kings and wealthy families who had art and natural objects and artefacts. Emperor Jahangir had an enviable collection of animals, plants and other oddities from around the world. It is believed that the world's earliest museum was built 2,500 years ago by a Babylonian princess, Ennigaldi-Nanna, dating from c. 530 BC.

My earliest memory is of an Egyptian mummy displayed in the Indian Museum in Kolkata. I recently revisited this amazing assembly of art, antiquities, fossils and zoological and botanical collections.

Established in 1814, the Indian Museum is the Asia-Pacific region's oldest museum. It was conceived as the 'Asiatic

Society Museum' under the Asiatic Society of Bengal and curated by Nathaniel Wallich, a Danish botanist. In 1865, the imperial government provided the finest site for this museum in Chowringhee.

It has been highlighted as one of the pioneering national institutions in the Constitution of India. Since then, the country has established hundreds of museums. Five of them are directly under the Centre's Ministry of Culture, 14 administered by departments like the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and the Railways and 300 are under state governments.

My first treacle on entering this grand museum is of dismay, followed by muted anger and helplessness. It is not uncommon in India to find antiquity being treated with indifference and restoration and documentation are inadequate. But to walk into a place of national significance where priceless exhibits are covered with dirt and are vulnerable to defacement was a horror.

As one enters and approaches the right flank, one finds the imposing Lion Capital of Ashoka, India's state symbol. Coated with dust and a torn curtain serving as the backdrop, this symbol of national pride presented a picture of shame. Almost a decade ago, another Ashoka Lion — a third century BCE sandstone Rampurva in this museum — was broken while shifting. It was reportedly repainted and put back on its pedestal using



**NEGLECTED:** Priceless exhibits are covered with dirt and are vulnerable to defacement at the Indian Museum in Kolkata. **INDIANMUSEUMKOLKATA.ORG**

epoxy adhesive.

City residents claim that several artefacts here have been damaged and some may even have been stolen. In 2004, a fifth century sandstone Buddha half bust was stolen.

As one wanders ahead, the disappointment gives away to frustration. My memory of the museum couldn't be refreshed as the Egyptian section was closed. The security across the galleries was lax and the documentation poorly displayed. The light was flickering, making it difficult to view the displayed objects and some corners were not even lit. Cobwebs covered large sections of the building and museum staff were not available. The staff at the run-down gallery shop (that sold only faded monographs and art prints) claimed that the authorities were aware of the situation, but they were understaffed.

The museum has a history

Museums and excavations cannot be used for a triumphant national identity. Museums tell us the story of our migrations that doesn't sit well with the revisionist history.

of apathy. In 1974, a large collection was stolen. A 2005 CAG report states that "there was no mechanism to assess the genuineness of these artefacts. Shoddy documentation of the acquired artefacts and the inability of the institutions to modernise their documentation systems with the help of digital technology, coupled with the absence of any physical verification during the last five years make the artefacts vulnerable to loss."

The ruling party believes that under Modi, India has undergone "cultural rejuvenation." The 2020-21 Budget allocated Rs 3,000 crore to the Ministry of Culture. It earmarked Rs 109 crore for setting up new museums and Rs 180 crore for developing and "re-cumulating" existing museums, starting with the Indian Museum in Kolkata.

The government has been trying to highlight India's

ancient heritage rather than curate with museum experts in a field that has the potential to use digital technologies and international collaboration. The focus should shift to collections, policies, funding, restoration, human resources, education programming and audience profiling.

In 2022, I was part of a UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) India research, mapping India's creative industries. Our major takeaway was the need for innovation and collaboration. There is a growth in the museum sub-sector, driven by interest in heritage and cultural tourism, with local groups creating local museums and heritage walks and experiences. But the oldest and most collections are in danger of being lost or damaged.

Museums serve as one of the most secular spaces and help challenge perspectives while connecting to heritage. Heritage can help bring communities together because it holds our collective memory and through that kind of storytelling, it not only takes us to where we came from but also prepares us to go into the future. Technology is transforming museums from being mere exhibition spaces to those of interaction and engagement. An effort is underway to decolonise museums. In 2021, the Royal Botanic Gardens of Kew, London, decided to decolonise their collections that were pigeonholed as East India Company or

Company Painting, erasing the names of the painters. This is an important way forward to acknowledging a nation's past, even if it is a dark one.

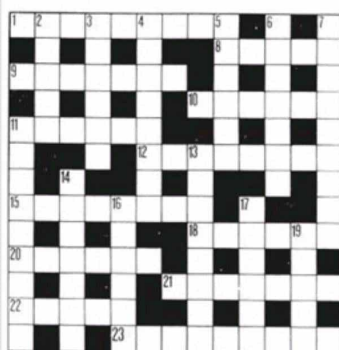
It is true that there has been historical inequality in remembrance and commemoration. Since the 1990s, the return of human remains is part of the curatorial practice in UK museums. The Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford has decided to return the human remains of Naga tribes to the Nagas.

But decolonisation can be misinterpreted as a culture war between those who subscribe to the Hindutva idea of history and those who do not. Like, the ASI has suddenly gotten busy excavating places of worship based on claims. The wheeled chariot excavated in Sarnath in Baghpat district of Uttar Pradesh has been linked to the 'Mahabharata' and, thus, to a martial Hindu past.

Museums and excavations cannot be used for a triumphant national identity. Museums tell us the story of our migrations that doesn't sit well with the revisionist history. The BJP is reluctant to accept that ancient populations and languages were mixed and that the Aryans may have been invaders. It wants a victorious Hindu past.

So, who will tell our civilisation story? Certainly, the nationalistic Indian government cannot be the guardian of our history. But it could and must protect and preserve whatever has remained from the past, a duty it seems to have forgotten.

### QUICK CROSSWORD



#### ACROSS

- 1 Fall guy (9)
- 8 See eye to eye (5)
- 9 Vocation (7)
- 10 Long thin piece cut off (6)
- 11 To bully (6)
- 12 Creating needless fear (8)
- 15 Paying no attention (8)
- 18 Quantity manufactured (6)
- 20 Slow to understand (6)
- 21 Fugitive (7)
- 22 Simultaneous firing of guns (5)
- 23 Discovery found to be illusory (5,4)

#### Yesterday's solution

- Across:** 1 Vicious, 4 Sound, 7 Near, 8 Parallel, 10 Make amends, 12 Smooth, 13 Uphold, 15 True type, 18 Flamingo, 19 Gibb, 20 Lured, 21 Empower.
- Down:** 1 Venom, 2 Crackpot, 3 Scared, 4 Stand up for, 5 Ugly, 6 Dullard, 9 Mastermind, 11 Body blow, 12 Souful, 14 Meagre, 16 Ember, 17 Fair.

### SU DO KU



### FORECAST

#### YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

#### CALENDAR

JANUARY 24, 2025, FRIDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1946
- Magh Shaka 4
- Magh Purnimite 11
- Hijari 1446
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 10, up to 7.26 pm
- Vridha Yoga up to 5.08 am
- Anuradha Nakshatra up to 7.08 am
- Moon in Scorpio sign
- Gandmoola up to 7.08 am

#### CITY

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	25	09
New Delhi	23	10
Amritsar	21	05
Bathinda	23	08
Jalandhar	21	07
Ludhiana	22	07
Bhiani	22	07
Hisar	22	07
Sirsa	22	08
Dharamsala	20	03
Manali	16	01
Shimla	16	02
Srinagar	12	-02
Jammu	24	07
Kargil	-01	-13
Leh	00	-14
Dehradun	—	—
Mussoorie	17	08

## The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

## The freebie race

Competitive populism dominates Delhi polls

CHRISTMAS is long over but Santa Claus is still around in poll-bound Delhi. Lohri is over as well, but reds continue to be showered on voters. It's a no-holds-barred race to woo the electorate with freebies and handouts. The ruling Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) as well as the two main Opposition parties, the BJP and the Congress, are pulling out all the stops in this high-stakes battle. Their special focus is on women, who have emerged as a make-or-break vote bank in recent years. AAP has promised to raise the financial assistance under the Mukhyamantri Mahila Samman Yojana from Rs 1,000 per month to Rs 2,100, while the BJP has come up with the Mahila Samridhi Yojana, under which Rs 2,500 each will be provided. Not to be left behind, the Congress has announced the Pyari Didi Yojana, which promises monthly aid of Rs 2,500 to all eligible women.

The BJP is bent on beating AAP at its own game, conveniently forgetting that Prime Minister Narendra Modi had disparaged rival parties for promoting red culture not so long ago. The saffron party's below-par performance in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections has made it realise that voters can't be taken for granted. It was the Mahila Ladki Bahin Yojana, ostensibly aimed at giving 'economic freedom' to underprivileged women, that had largely propelled the BJP-led Mahayuti to an emphatic win in last year's Maharashtra Assembly elections. The state government is now struggling to sustain the scheme, which goes to show how such handouts bleed the exchequer.

Former RBI Governor D Subbarao has rightly observed that competitive populism is fiscally perilous and inimical to the country's long-term growth. However, both Central and state governments, along with various political parties, seem less bothered about the implications of their recklessness. These are brazen attempts to bribe and influence voters, yet the Election Commission of India is looking the other way. The freebie culture is not only vitiating the electoral process but also making a mockery of Indian democracy.

## Dog bite crisis

Punjab needs proactive steps, not band-aids

PUNJAB's stray dog crisis is spiralling out of control, with over two lakh dog bite cases reported in 2024. Ludhiana, Patiala and Mohali are leading the pack, with Mohali alone recording 16,047 cases. Yet, despite the alarming statistics and public outcry, Punjab is dragging its feet on providing financial compensation to victims, as mandated by the Punjab and Haryana High Court.

The tragic mauling of a nine-year-old boy in Nabha is a grim reminder of the growing menace. The problem is rooted in unregulated garbage dumps and sites like 'hadi-da redi', where animal remains are carelessly discarded, creating a haven for feral dogs. Urban estates dumping bones and meat waste add fuel to the fire, making the problem even worse. The authorities appear more reactive than proactive. While the Nabha SDM has ordered vaccinations and audits reports, this piecemeal approach won't solve a crisis of this magnitude. Punjab needs a comprehensive action plan involving sterilisation drives, waste management reforms and education campaigns. Without this, incidents like Nabha will only multiply.

Adding insult to injury, the state has failed to honour the high court's directive to compensate victims adequately — Rs 10,000 per tooth mark and Rs 20,000 for severe wounds. For victims, this lapse is a double blow: suffering both physical trauma and bureaucratic indifference. The State Rabies Control Programme offers free vaccines, but lax enforcement of vaccination schedules could worsen health outcomes. As rising numbers of canine fury point to a silent emergency of epidemic proportions, Punjab must act decisively. It must collaborate with municipal bodies, health authorities and animal welfare groups to make cities safer for people and animals alike. Tackling dog bites needs proactive measures, not band-aids.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

## The Tribune.

LAHORE, SATURDAY, JANUARY 24, 1925

## Sunderland's stimulating book

IT was one of the crowned heads of Europe who, on the publication of Edmund Burke's memorable work on the French Revolution, exclaimed, "It is a good book, a very good book; every gentleman ought to read it." In a very different sense and from a very different point of view, one may say, with regard to the stimulating volume *India, America and World Brotherhood* which Messrs Ganesha and Co of Madras have just brought out from the pen of Dr JT Sunderland: "It is a good book, a very good book; every Indian and every Englishman ought to read it." A book of more absorbing interest to India in the state of transition through which she has been passing has, indeed, never yet been written by a foreigner or even by an Indian. Within the brief compass of scarcely more than 150 pages, the author has managed to present the whole case for Indian self-government in the most unanswerable form that anyone has presented it so far. He has advanced every single argument that can be adduced in favour of Indian self-government, and has given an effective reply to every single argument that has been or could ever be urged by those opposed to Indian national demand. And he has done all this in a language the sobriety of which is not its least charming feature, and what is equally important, not as England's enemy, but as her friend. In his own words, he has not written a word "in a spirit of hostility to England". "Although I am a citizen of America," he writes, "I was born in England, where I have many relatives and dear friends, and where I have spent much time."

## A forceful voice against corruption

Senior advocate Iqbal Chagla stood firm as the president of the Bombay Bar

TRYSTS AND TURNS  
JULIO RIBEIRO

I am sorry that I did not attend the cremation of Iqbal Chagla, son of the legendary former Chief Justice of the Bombay High Court, Mahomedali Currim Chagla, and father of a sitting judge of the same court, Justice Ryzas Chagla. My 95-year-old bones will not allow me to remain standing for more than a minute.

I phoned Iqbal's wife, Roshan, and explained my absence from my friend's funeral. Iqbal was truly a man whose courage must be spoken of and emulated. There are many individuals of integrity in all professions and walks of life, but very few who are willing to stick their neck out when a principle, to which he or she is wedded, is being blatantly flouted.

Iqbal was different. A highly respected and successful member of the Bombay Bar, he was elected its president for three consecutive terms from 1990 to 1999. During this period, he shot off letters to the Chief Justice, accusing four judges of the high court of blatant corruption. On behalf of the Bar and as its president, he demanded the resignation of these judges, failing which the Bar would boycott their courts. The threat worked.

Some five years later, the sitting Chief Justice was also forced to relinquish his assignment as Iqbal had found him lacking in integrity. These facts were brought to my notice by advocate Shivram Jain Kakadia, my junior colleague in the Public Concern for Governance Trust (PCGT). I am



TRIBUTE: Iqbal Chagla, who passed away recently, was a man whose courage must be emulated. X/Aparajitha

grateful to him for his inputs.

It is not often that one comes across a leader who decides to throw down the gauntlet. Even if she or he is personally above board, they are not willing to displease their colleagues who have succumbed to temptation. Then there are some who decide to mind only their own business, though they disapprove of what their friends are guilty of. The runaway corruption we witness today is left unchecked. Ordinary citizens are the main sufferers. They soon accept corruption as a fact of existence and just pay up like they would pay for groceries.

Ahead of a visit to the Supreme Court, Iqbal phoned the Chief Justice of India's (CJI) secretary for an appointment with the incumbent, Justice Sabyasachi Mukherjee, a good and reasonable man. He met Iqbal at his official bungalow. The first question Justice Mukherjee asked Iqbal was, "Mr Chagla, do you need to do this again?" He was relieved when Iqbal replied that he had not come to complain against any judge.

The CJI mentioned in the course of the conversation that he had faith in the Bombay

Very few people are willing to stick their neck out when a principle they are wedded to is blatantly flouted.

Bar, but was worried that Bars in other states could borrow a leaf from the book of their brethren in Mumbai. Justice Mukherjee need not have bothered. A senior lawyer like Iqbal was a rare commodity and you require a rare leader like him to motivate juniors and force the authorities to face the truth.

Iqbal was offered judgeship on the Bombay HC Bench. He turned it down. A little later, he was asked to accept a seat on the Supreme Court Bench. It was speculated that he would become the CJI in due course, thanks to his seniority. He turned down that offer as well because he felt that 19 months as the CJI were not sufficient to introduce changes that he felt were required to make the judiciary truly independent and just.

In any field of endeavour, whether it is the public or the private sector, the top man matters. His values and principles define his performance. His leadership skills are tested. If he is honest and just and practices what he preaches, those junior to him and whom he leads will surely sense the difference and follow him.

The Bombay Bar Association was a different entity under Iqbal's leadership.

Iqbal's daughter married Cyrus Mistry, who succeeded Ratan Tata as the chairman of Tata Sons, the body that controls and guides the Tata enterprises. Iqbal refused to comment on the misunderstanding between Ratan and Cyrus that resulted

in the latter exiting office after a short stint at the helm.

My IPS batchmate Raghavachari Govindarajan's son Mukund Rajan, a Rhodes scholar, was Ratan's right-hand man in the chairman's office. He was fond of Ratan and served him loyally. When Ratan passed the baton to Cyrus, Mukund continued in the same position. When Cyrus left, Mukund felt that a good man had been wronged. He quit along with his boss.

When Iqbal was asked about his views on the episode, he refused to comment. He only confirmed that his son-in-law was a good human being and he was pleased that his daughter had made the right choice of a husband.

It was three months ago that I spoke to Iqbal for the last time. Since CSR (corporate social responsibility) funds are being diverted by corporates to the PM CARES Fund, NGOs like the PCGT have been forced to seek funds from supporters and friends. The PCGT interacts with students, mainly those studying law. The NGO decided to approach leading legal firms and lawyers for assistance. I phoned Iqbal for help.

Though he was ill, he found time to support the PCGT's mission. Promptly, he sent a cheque for an amount that only Justice Gautam Patel of the Bombay High Court had exceeded. That gesture is not one a supplicant can obliterate from memory. It was a statement of trust and abiding friendship.

A couple of weeks ago, I had mourned the death of another good man, former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. It was sad to record the departures of men of integrity, the likes of whom are becoming scarcer and scarcer. This trend will continue as long as the political leadership gives precedence to victory in the polls over justice to common citizens.

## THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Corruption and hypocrisy ought not to be inevitable products of democracy. — Mahatma Gandhi

## How a thief should come and go

P LAL

THE recent break-in at the apartment of Bollywood star Saif Ali Khan was by all accounts, a shoddy job. Thieves of yore would not have touched him with a barge pole!

My career in the police taught me that professional burglars and thieves followed a strict code of discipline and procedure; they were trained by masters who had perfected the art of thievery. This was a profession where brains were more important than brawn. In the instant case, however, the use of a knife to attack Saif could have been avoided, had there been due compliance with the rules of the game.

The tribe of professional thieves claims that thieving was one of the 64 arts prescribed by some ancient Sanskrit texts, though it is doubtful whether the term *Hustalaahava* could be interpreted as 'thief'; it would, more aptly, mean 'sneak of hand'.

Some ganes also claim that Skanda or Kartikeya, one of the sons of Lord Shiva and Parvati, is their patron god.

Manoj Basu, a Bengali writer, in his Sahitya Akademi Award-winning novel *Nishikumbha*, later translated into English by Sachindralal Ghosh as *I Come As A Thief* (1971), spells out the attributes of a perfect thief, and how the master trains his 'disciple' in the art, less with theory and more with hands-on practice. He eschews lone-wolf adventures, which apparently was the case in the incident at Saif's residence, and lays stress on teamwork, with informers, scouts, operators and receivers playing their assigned role. As per reports in the media, the thief had no prior information about the apartment's occupants and the 'goodies' lying therein. He walked up barefoot with his face covered, but made the mistake of coming down with boots on and face uncovered.

According to Basu's book, a well-trained thief ought to sharpen his ears and depend more on 'hearing' than 'seeing', for he has to operate at night. Thus, with his ears pressed to the wall, he should be able to judge how many people are there in the room on the other side and how many are awake or sleeping, what is their gender, age and whether they are married. All this, only by their chatter or the sound of their breathing. The information is regarded as essential to fine-tune the strategy and timing of the break-in.

The practice of walking barefoot has to be perfected to an extent that one can walk on dried leaves of a peepal tree without producing any sound.

The ultimate test of the pupil so trained is to send him on an errand to remove the gold bracelets from the forearm of a newly married woman, sleeping alone, without her being able to sense it. At all times, the tribe of such proficient thieves is vanishing; they are being replaced by those like the one who entered Saif's apartment, resorted to violence and eventually got caught.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Illegal immigration

This refers to the news story '18K Indians face deportation as Trump admin cracks whip on illegal migrants'; it is laudable that the new US government is focusing on irregular immigration. The issue has long strained the nation's social, economic and legal resources. However, addressing this challenge demands a balanced approach that prioritises both national security and human welfare. Strengthening border controls is vital, but so is tackling the root causes of migration, such as poverty, violence and political instability in neighbouring countries. Collaborative policies with these nations can create sustainable solutions and reform immigration laws, including creating clear pathways for legal migration and asylum. A fair system respects the aspirations of those seeking better opportunities while maintaining the integrity of the nation's borders.

SAURAV SUMAN, PATIALA

## Lack of awareness on migration

With reference to 'Bitter pill for India'; Indians are considered among the most hardworking, honest and committed people in many Western countries. However, a large number of our people get duped by immigration agents and end up as illegal migrants. There is lack of knowledge about visa offers from countries and ambiguous and tedious application procedures for visas. The government, both at the Central and state levels, should work closely with embassies of sought-after countries and persuade them to adopt simple and easy procedures. At the same time, the government should educate its citizens about processes and eligibility so that nobody takes an illegal route for migration.

MANJEET SINGH SANDHU, AMRITSAR

## Lesson for India

Refer to the editorial 'Bitter pill for India'; there is a lesson for India to learn. Illegal entry not only breaches international law but places a financial burden on the respective government. Like the US, India must also enforce strict immigration policies, deport illegal immigrants and ensure

that only lawful residents have access to national resources, fostering both economic stability and legal accountability.

VUAY KUMAR KATIAL, PANCHKULA

## Gender sensitisation needed

Apropos of 'Sustaining hope'; empowerment of girls through education, better healthcare facilities as well as a change in the societal mindset are prerequisites. Haryana's girls are doing extremely well in sports; this is a proof that they can overcome social barriers. Boys and men need to be sensitised by inculcating values in them such as respect for girls. In a patriarchal society, parents need to shun their preference for sons and equally welcome daughters in their families.

RAVI SHARMA, DHARWAL

## Quad a fruitful association

With reference to 'In US, Quad signals firm stand against China's aggression at sea'; China is enforcing its own code of conduct to be followed by the claimant countries of the South China Sea, contrary to the UN's verdict on the demarcation of maritime boundaries. The Quad will regularly focus on the shared commitment of the four member nations to maintain peace, stability and security. It will also oppose any unilateral action seeking to change the status quo by force or coercion.

COL. RS NARULA (RETD), PATIALA

## Develop indigenous jet engines

Refer to 'Tejas takes flight, but will the US let it soar'; the article underscores the urgent need for India to develop indigenous jet engines. Rather than attributing delays or technology denials to the US, India must increase funding for research and development to build its own engines. While our achievements in space exploration are laudable, reliance on foreign technology for critical defence needs undermines these successes. Dependence on other countries for technology not only stifles the progress of defence programmes, but also diminishes India's global technological stature. Considering its aspirations of global leadership, India must address these challenges on priority.

CHANCHAL S. MANN, UNA

## CONTRAPUNTO

The real problem is not whether machines think  
but whether men do

- BF SKINNER

## Well Done, Musk

Stargate's under a cloud, Indian netas should also  
be more upfront about investor summit MoUs

Elon Musk, master of rocket flying, has called out Trump's other friends for kite flying. Shortly after Trump announced a \$500bn AI infra project called Stargate - "largest in history" - on his second day in office, Musk dissed its principals on X. "They don't actually have the money," he wrote. Stargate needs \$500bn to get off the ground. Musk claims "on good authority" that SoftBank, which is responsible for the financial side, "has well under \$100bn secured". He's been rebutted of course. OpenAI, Microsoft and Oracle opened their wallets to reveal \$101bn in ready cash; SoftBank's said to have another \$24.3bn on its balance sheet. But don't they have other fish to fry? Musk, despite his very public animus towards OpenAI's Sam Altman, might be onto something here. Remember Trump's 2017 announcement about a \$100bn Foxconn factory in Wisconsin that didn't materialise? So well done, Musk, and it would be good if netas in India also sometimes let light escape from the black hole of investor summits and billion-dollar MoUs that seem to have the shelf life of a birthday greeting card.

It would take a brave soul with spreadsheet smarts to top up all the trillions of dollars worth of MoUs that Indian states have signed with investors over the years. On Wednesday, Maharashtra announced a \$16L cr MoU haul (\$185bn) at the WEF meet in Davos. In its 2023 investor summit, UP signed 18,643 MoUs worth \$32L cr (\$370bn). Andhra signed MoUs worth \$13L cr (\$150bn) the same year and Bengal had proposals worth \$3.8L cr (\$44bn). That's well over half a trillion dollars between just three states, and when it comes to investor summits, Assam, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and others are also in the game.

How much investment actually happens in India? Govt data shows gross fixed capital formation rose from about \$33L cr (\$381bn) in 2014-15 to \$54L cr (\$624bn) in 2022-23. The record for one quarter is \$15.7L cr (\$182bn). But GFCF includes investment by govt, so clearly the investor summit MoUs are worth little more than their weight in paper. While states maintain opacity around MoU conversion rates, the reality sometimes slips out in headlines. For example, 90 of 1,045 MoUs (8.6%) signed at the 2018 UP summit had translated into investments over two years. In Haryana 36% of MoUs signed at the 2016 summit materialised by 2024.

## Fish ♥ Human

Animals, like us, feel lonely & need comforting.  
A Japan aquarium discovered this

That there is a loneliness epidemic across the human species is widely accepted today. Research into it has gone up, particularly since the pandemic. But we are not alone on this planet. We share it with millions of other species. Is it an anthropomorphic fallacy to ask if they are feeling lonely too? No. As anyone with a much loved four-legged family member will know. As biologists say, we can only gain knowledge about animals by actually looking at them (and not inactively through our mobile phones). A Japanese aquarium did so, and has brought us a fascinating finding.

After the aquarium in Shimomoseki closed for renovation, it noticed that their solitary sunfish had stopped eating. Previously, it used to swim up to the front of its tank whenever people came to visit. So, on the off chance that it was missing the visitors, they put cardboard cutouts of faces and aquarium uniforms on hangers, near the fish. And also started waving at it, lots. Soon enough, it was back to gobbling its jellyfish meals.

In German, sunfish are called "swimming heads". Scientific name, Mola mola, this big, bony creature has a back fin that folds in on itself, giving it an unusual circular appearance. It can weigh upwards of 2,000kg and live longer than two decades. The thing is, if the Shimomoseki sunfish is feeling lonely, what's going on at aquariums around the world? We pay too little attention to "zoochosis", distress and diseases of animals in confinement. At the same time, we find ever more comfort in stuffed toys. The Shimomoseki lesson is that the happiness of human and animal is intertwined. But for too long and too destructively, it's the pitiless Ahab in us who's prevailed. It's he who must be caged.

## Fashion and b-i o

Changing styles in everything from clothes to cars  
is what keeps the wheels of commerce spinning

Jug Suraiya

At first I thought it was a case of mass somnambulism, people walking in their sleep. Men and women were out and about wearing their night suits, pyjamas and tops of matching colour and design. Bunny explained to me that they were "sleepwalkers", and what they were wearing weren't night suits, but a new fashion statement called co-ords, in which the same material was used to make the tops and bottoms of the outfits.

This made me think of fashion in general and how it has to continually reinvent itself to remain, well, fashionable. And it often does so by going round and round in circles.

There was a time when unisex jeans had flared hems called bell-bottoms, and were the thing. Then the hems narrowed and became churidars. Then they narrowed some more and became skinnies. And when everyone's wearing skinnies and looking identical, fashion is likely to resurrect bell-bottoms.

Fashion applies not just to clothes but to everything, from cars, to TVs, to refrigerators, to smartphones. All these things, which are called consumer durables aren't durables at all, because fashion dictates that they keep changing.

Another term for fashion is built-in obsolescence, b-i-o for short. B-i-o is said to have been invented in the 1920s by the US automobile industry. Car makers were worried because everyone who wanted a car already had one, so the motor market wasn't growing, and they'd soon be out of business.

To stimulate consumer demand they decided to make minor design changes every year so the latest model would look different from earlier models, and if you didn't want to be seen as a cheapskate by your neighbours you'd buy the latest make.

And b-i-o was born. Makers of all products build in a feature, of component or design, which will make the product dysfunctional or undesirable in a limited time period.

This ensures a perennially renewable demand for all manner of products. Including those products called political parties. Except in their case, b-i-o isn't called b-i-o. It's called the anti-incumbency factor.

## Will 2025 Be Modi's 1991 Moment?

Challenge from Trump's disruptive policies is a chance for PM to push through radical reforms,  
like Manmohan did during a crisis, to ramp up growth & help create tech intellectual property

R Jagannathan



Trump's return is widely seen as disruptive. He did not disappoint, signing a rash of executive orders on Day One of his second term. Some of these will face legal challenges. But many will survive.

However, the oncoming disruption cannot be attributed to Trump alone. His very re-election is a result of several such disruptive political changes - especially against immigration - that were already manifest in US and Europe. Nationalist and nativist concerns have seen right-wing rise in EU politics. Trump merely brought into US those political undercurrents, making it more isolationist and nationalist.

Trump's executive orders included ending birthright citizenship, US's withdrawal from WHO and Paris deal, a crackdown on illegal immigration, and scrapping federal DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) programmes.

On H-1B, he seems in two minds, with one set of advisers including Musk arguing for its retention, and another - his MAGA electoral base - against it. On tariffs, apart from huffing and puffing, Trump has as yet made no big moves, though they're sure to happen.

India is prepared for a Trump disruption in some ways, both on illegal immigrants and legal ones. Not to speak of tariff wars expected. Reports discuss a behind-the-scenes deal to repatriate up to 20,000 undocumented Indians in US. Software companies like HCL Tech and Infosys are tapering down H-1B visa requirements, to minimise impact of any changes to the current system. HCL Tech says it needs not more than 500-1,000 H-1Bs annually as 80% of its staff are local US residents. Infosys has cut down its on-site-offshore work proportion to 24% from 30%.

Explosion of global capability centres (GCCs) in India means we can export software services from India. A Nasscom report on GCCs says that by 2030, some 2,300 GCCs will create 2.6m jobs here. Even the wealthy are now reportedly less willing to leave India. The Henley Private Wealth Migration report 2024 says 4,300 millionaires may have left India in 2024, down from 5,100 in 2023. Indians who see overseas grass as greener, just need some more convincing. Real issue is

whether India can quickly convert the Trump challenge into opportunity to reform and grow faster.

We must accelerate momentum of reforms the same way Manmohan Singh and Narasimha Rao did in 1991, and as Vijayadev did in early 2000s, when US sanctioned India over its nuclear tests.

India's objectives should be clear.

● Seek to entice our most talented citizens to return to India to create India's own IPR in tech, including in AI, pharma and social & mobile platforms. Prioritise job-generating growth so job-seekers and Indians repatriated can be gainfully employed. Questions to

ask - and it's for states must do much of this - are:

What'll it take for a Satya Nadella or Sundar Pichai, and other tech brains to relocate and create tech that India can own?

How can we create pharma products with newly discovered molecules?

How fast can we deregulate so businesses can flourish here?

Instead of obsessing over wealth and power of one Adani, can we argue how we can create 10 more Adanis, Ambanis, Tatlas, Birlas and Narayana Murthys in the next decade?

● Political reform must go hand-in-hand with economic reform because free culture is getting out of hand. ONOE holds out a ray of hope that free culture will be contained, but to pass, this law will need

opposition consent.

This means a grand bargain where states get more fiscal power in return for allowing ONOE to become law. States should also agree to the transfer of a larger share of their net revenues from GST directly to urban bodies that will be the real engines of growth and jobs in future. Census awaited, India is estimated to be over 50% urban, but policies tilt towards the rural.

● India should seek an FTA (free trade agreement) with protections limited only to sensitive farm products. Not only could it ward off Trump's much-threatened tariffs, it'll allow India to be part of US-led supply chain to balance our China-led manufacturing chain. India needs both Beijing (for manufacturing) and Washington (for services).

It's worth noting that India has a huge goods and services surplus with US (\$35bn and \$162bn in 2023-24, respectively) and a huge trade deficit with China (\$85bn).

Economic Survey 2024 suggested that instead of importing from China, Chinese companies can be encouraged to invest in India. But they won't relocate on the scale of, say, Apple unless India can be a base for exports to US. In a tariff war, a US-India FTA will enable China to export to US from India, apart from Southeast Asia.

US will push us to buy more - we'll remain vulnerable as US is the only one among our 10 major trade partners with whom we have a huge export surplus. We must open up, not under pressure, but with a view to taking our manufacturing and services to the next orbit.

● Priority to defence and internal security must centre on greater reliance on local expertise and manufacturing over the next five years. Security will then not be compromised by an overdependence on external suppliers.

India needs an economic leap of faith of the kind it managed in 1991. A mix of mercantilism in some areas like defence and cyber security, with open markets in ways that benefit domestic sectors.

Budget 2025-26 should have been the harbinger of change. But who needs a Budget for big-ticket reforms? Most of Modi gov't's reforms came outside of the Budget. GST, IBC, Aadhar and so on.

2025 is Modi's 1991 moment. He can use fear of Trump tariffs to reform. If he moves the right things, India can be a \$10tn economy by mid-2030s. If not, we'll just trundle along to the 2040s.

## Why It's So Fracking Hard To Make Big Oil Drill

What Trump actually means when he says he wants to pump out more hydrocarbons

Abhishank Gaur @timesofindia.com



"Drill, baby, drill!" became a Republican slogan in 2008 when US oil production slumped to 5.6m barrels a day - half as much as in 1970. Michael Steele coined it. Sarah Palin embraced it, but voters didn't buy it until Trump came along. By then US was well on its way to becoming the largest oil and gas producer - daily oil production touched 9.6m barrels in April 2015 - thanks to progress in 'fracking', a process that involves fracturing shale rocks to extract oil and gas.

In 2025, US expects average daily oil production of 13.7m barrels, another world record. But Trump wants to "frack, frack, frack", and drill even more. He says it's important to reduce energy prices and slash inflation. Hopes are up, crowds have cheered, and he's won the vote, yet "drill, baby, drill" might not happen the way he sold it.

Will US produce a lot more oil?

That's unlikely for several reasons - geology for one. Most US oil comes from fracking, but unlike conventional wells that increase yield gradually and then run at their peak for years or even decades, yield from shale peaks in the first few years and then dips. Experts say US firms increased yields rapidly from 2016 onwards by identifying the best fracking sites. Almost all the rich sites in North Dakota's Bakken Formation have been tapped. The Permian Basin in Texas and New Mexico will also peak by 2030. So, the era of easy production gains might be over.

Then there's the matter of US oil firms not drilling as much they used to. The number of active drilling rigs has halved to around 600 since Trump's first term. So, how are yields rising? The US Energy Information Administration says it's due to "more advanced drilling and completion techniques" - and enhanced fracturing designs. Because new wells are more than offsetting the

declining yields of older wells, a drilling spree is unlikely.

Also, pumping out more crude is pointless if you can't process it. Until a decade ago, US was heavily dependent on imports. So its refineries are designed for a mix of domestic and imported crude, which have markedly different properties. Infrastructure along the Gulf Coast, for instance, is primarily tuned to process imported oil. If you pump more shale oil, where will you refine it? Modifying or building new refineries is a

costly long-term project, so is the construction of new pipelines to carry oil from fields to refineries.

Will global oil prices fall?

They could, but do US firms want them to? Extracting oil from shale is a costly process. Norwegian energy research firm Rystad estimates that US shale oil currently has a breakeven price of \$45 per barrel, as against \$27 for oil from onshore wells in West Asia. If US produces too much, as it did in 2016, oil prices could crash, making fracking unviable.

Besides, US prices can't fall in isolation as oil is a global commodity. If America overproduces, other producer countries will slash output to shore up prices.

Saudi Arabia, for example, has long aimed for a \$100 per barrel rate to fund its transformation. It won't watch helplessly if oil prices slump. In April 2020, Trump himself had called up Putin and Saudi king Salman to slash oil production at the start of the pandemic.

What does US Big Oil want?

Petroleum industry requires investments of billions of dollars at every stage from drilling to refining. But at the moment America does not have an appetite for big oil and gas investments. Producers and investors have burnt their fingers in the 2016 global glut when prices crashed to around \$26 a barrel. Now with Europe weaning itself off oil and gas, and Chinese demand having peaked in 2023, oil firms are focusing on managing costs and maximising returns to investors.

At the same time, the fracking industry has consolidated and Big Oil - ExxonMobil and Chevron, for example - won't be swayed by political calls to drill more. Last Nov, Exxon CEO Darren Woods told CNBC, "I'm not sure how 'drill, baby, drill' translates into policy. I don't think there's anybody out there that's developing a business strategy to respond to a political agenda."

What is Trump's real plan?

Trump knows this well. The oil and gas lobby didn't contribute \$10m to his campaign for nothing. Is 'drill, baby, drill' empty rhetoric then? No, he's creating friendlier conditions for the industry so that it can plan future investments. For example, he'll allow more drilling on federal lands and offshore - currently only 24% of wells are on federal land. Removing incentives for electric vehicles also signals support for the oil industry - guzzles, baby, guzzles. Trump has already scrapped Biden's decision to not grant new licences for LNG export, greenlighting new investments in pipelines and terminals. A thriving oil industry will create jobs, guarantee US energy security, rid the country of its West Asian baggage, and enhance diplomatic leverage.

## Calvin &amp; Hobbes

WHAT IF SOMEBODY CALLS US A PAIR OF PATHETIC PERIPATETICS?

I'VE NEVER HEARD OF ANYONE TAKING THE TROUBLE TO RHYME WEIRD INSULTS.

BUT SHOULDN'T WE HAVE A READY RETORT?

Attributed to Lao Tzu

## Sustained Effort: The True Path To Success

Sivakumar Sundaram

The subject of work - How much? How long? To what end? At what cost? - has been doing the rounds for a while now. While there are multiple sides to every story, the scriptures are clear that hard work, discipline, and perseverance form the cornerstone of personal and societal growth and work best when aligned. This philosophy emphasises that success, however one defines it, is earned through consistent effort and virtuous action.

Chanakya Neeti, the classic treatise on governance and statecraft, highlights the responsibility of both rulers and householders to diligently work for the welfare of their domains. A notable verse states:

Raja prasthaktam papam rajinah papam parashaktam / bharta ca strikrant papam shishyapam gurusthata - king bears sins of the nation, priest bears sins of the king, husband bears sins of wife, and teacher bears sins of disciple. This verse underscores the cascading nature of responsibilities - from the pivotal role of a ruler in ensuring the

kingdom's prosperity through tireless effort and just governance to a householder's purpose to work earnestly to support the family, fulfilling both moral and material obligations. If you have taken up a role, then it is your duty to fulfil that role.

Chanakya also advises: Sukshama mulam dharmah dharmanyaya mulam arthah / Arthasya mulam rajyam rajyamulam indriyarthah - the root of happiness is dharma, righteousness; root of righteousness is artha, wealth; root of wealth is rajya, a strong state; root of a strong state is indriya, self-control.

Chanakya's underlying message is of overlapping orbits of influence through action. The essence of such actions is to be found in diligence and discipline, resulting in prosperity and happiness.

The Bhagavad Gita reinforces this wisdom with the verse:

Karmanye vadhikaraste ma phalestu kadachana / Ma karmfal heturbhu ma te sangostvakaramani - you have a right to perform your

prescribed duties but are not entitled to the fruits of your actions. Never consider yourself the cause of results, nor be attached to the outcome.

The Gita emphasises acting with dedication, without attachment to rewards or succumbing to the inertia of inaction. It aligns human effort with the three gunas - tamas, inertia, rajah, activity and sattva, wisdom. While tamas governs rest, rajah drives productivity and innovation, and sattva fosters contemplation and renewal.

Thrives only in rajah, where ambition and perseverance fuel success.

Human progress has been the consequence of constructive and beneficial action - destructive action also has its bearings, which gives us pause to reflect on virtues of tamas, non-action. Throughout human history, the greatest economic transitions and paradigm shifts have been marked by dedicated labour and tireless effort. Critiques of hard/long work hours often arise from a gilded minority detached from the realities

of a developing society yet to reach its apogee.

Ultimately, our scriptures remind us that fruit of life are proportionate to the effort we invest. Success is not merely a goal but a way of life, achievable through dedication, discipline, and a sense of purpose. While every individual has the right to choose his path and pace, it is through hard work that transformation and fulfilment are realised.

Like how rajahs benefit of sattva can lead to mindless action and destruction, the state of tamas can often induce individuals to a lazy lack of discernment that avoids the effort required to think critically or take constructive action. The result is a state of unproductive and offensive behavior.

In the many-forked flowchart of life within society, respecting individual choice is fundamental. But it is equally important to encourage a shift toward rajah wedded to sattva - a state of dynamic activity and creation - where the true potential of human effort can be realised for both personal and collective progress.



jugularvein

## FIRST COLUMN

### INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY: CHAMPIONING THE GLOBAL SOUTH

India's approach balances national priorities with global responsibilities



KUMARDEEP BANERJEE

India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar attended the US presidential inauguration earlier this week. President Trump's inauguration by itself is an epochal moment for global international relations. India outlined its foreign policy approach a few days ago, during EAM's address at Nani Palkivala's memorial lecture. He mentioned that India's foreign policy in 2025 reflects a deepening commitment to multilateralism, but also recognises the competitive realities of a shifting global order. The nation has embraced issue-based partnerships with major groupings like the Quad, BRICS, and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). India's ability to balance multiple memberships and partnerships underscores its evolving diplomatic strategy, driven by a pragmatic approach to international relations.

At the heart of India's foreign policy is a strong solidarity with the Global South, rooted in post-colonial values of independence, sovereignty and resistance to external pressures. This unique perspective sets India apart from traditional alliance structures, as it champions the rights of developing nations while pursuing its strategic interests. While India continued to engage in global dialogues, it maintains its core principle of non-alignment and the freedom to choose partners based on national priorities. Recent shifts in India's domestic policies—across politics, economics and security—have influenced its foreign relations.



Notably, India's relationship with the United States has transformed, moving past historical hesitations to embrace a deeper strategic partnership. This cooperation spans security, technology, trade, and science, benefiting both nations. India's diaspora also plays a crucial role, acting as a living bridge to enhance bilateral ties. Despite occasional policy shifts in the US, the foundation for a robust relationship is now firmly established. However, India's engagement with China remains a complex challenge. As the two largest Asian nations with over a billion people each, their dynamic is shaped by historical disputes and differing political systems. The boundary issue, exacerbated by tensions since 2020, continues to complicate bilateral relations. The guiding principles for India's approach to China are mutual respect, sensitivity, and shared interests, with an emphasis on long-term stability and a multi-polar Asia. In the Indo-Pacific, India has extended its East Asia policy, fostering deeper relationships with Japan, Australia and ASEAN countries, and strengthening the Quad alliance.

This partnership has progressed in areas such as climate action, maritime security, and digital connectivity. Similarly, India's collaboration with Russia remains a pillar of its foreign policy, with growing economic ties and shared strategic interests. India advocates for diplomacy in addressing global challenges, such as the Ukraine conflict, and seeks to provide solutions to global problems, including food security and climate change.

It has assisted smaller neighbours during crises, including the 2023 financial support to Sri Lanka, reinforcing its role as a regional leader. However, India's relationship with Pakistan remains strained due to ongoing cross-border terrorism. India is also engaged in strengthening ties with Myanmar and Afghanistan, maintaining its people-to-people connections despite political complexities. India's global ambitions are reflected in its increasing role in international organisations. As a proponent of multilateralism, India has pushed for changes in the United Nations, advocating for greater representation of the Global South. It also leads initiatives such as the International Solar Alliance and Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure. These efforts highlight India's growing responsibility as a global power, dedicated to addressing pressing issues like climate change, digital governance, and humanitarian crises.

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

## Budget 2025: A roadmap to empower farmers and reignite rural India



A S MITTAL

The Budget must go beyond promises—it must deliver feasible solutions to secure livelihoods, strengthen rural demand and bridge the rural-urban divide

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman gears up to present the Union Budget 2025-26 on February 1, the nation stands at a pivotal crossroads. With GDP growth projected to dip to a four-year low of 6.4 per cent in FY 2024-25, the spotlight turns to revitalising the rural economy, a cornerstone of the country's consumption-driven progress.

The urgent call for agricultural reforms has grown louder, fueled by ongoing farmer protests, including the fast-unto-death by 70-year-old farmer leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal at Punjab's Khanauri border, which has captured national attention, demanding a legal guarantee for Minimum Support Price (MSP). Agriculture, which employs nearly 45 per cent of the country's workforce and sustains over 60 per cent of its rural population, is at a breaking point. Stagnant productivity, declining incomes, and policy neglect have left farmers in crisis. This Budget cannot be limited to lofty promises—it must deliver practical solutions to secure livelihoods, strengthen rural demand, and narrow the rural-urban divide. Revitalising agriculture is not just an economic necessity but a moral obligation to foster inclusive growth. Here's how Budget 2025 can introduce transformative measures to bolster the agricultural sector and ensure rural spending—currently contributing 60 per cent of total consumption—fuels India's economic resurgence.

### 1. Boost Agriculture Budget and Research

The allocation for agriculture and allied sectors constitutes only 3 per cent of the Union Budget, which needs to be raised to at least 7.5%. Unspent funds in this category should be carried forward to address critical gaps in research, education, and infrastructure for crop storage and processing. Investing in agricultural research institutions to develop drought-resistant crop varieties and sustainable farming techniques can enhance productivity. Encouraging public-private partnerships in agrarian innovation can further drive the sector's growth.

### 2. Provide Legal Backing to MSP

The persistent demand for Minimum Support Price (MSP) with legal guarantees highlights the sector's vulnerabilities. Implementing the MS Swaminathan Commission's recommendation of setting MSP at C2 (comprehensive cost of production) +50 per cent and granting it legal status can ensure private buyers do not exploit farmers. This reform would not put a significant financial strain on the government but could protect farmers from distress sales. Furthermore, creating a robust monitoring mechanism to enforce MSP and extending its coverage to more crops can improve farmers' incomes. Enhancing the transparency of procurement processes through digital platforms and integrating MSP enforcement with local market committees can also make the system more reliable.

### 3. Enhance PM-KISAN Support

The Rs 6,000 annual support to around 10 crore small and marginal farmers under PM-KISAN to help meet their working capital needs, unchanged since its launch in 2018, has not kept pace with inflation. However, with inflation averaging 6 per cent over the past six years. The government should consider doubling this support to Rs 12,000 annually to address farmers' growing financial needs. This increase could significantly impact



INDIA'S FARMERS LACK A ROBUST SOCIAL SECURITY NET. A NON-CONTRIBUTORY PENSION OF RS3,000 PER MONTH FOR SMALL AND MARGINAL FARMERS AGED 60 AND ABOVE, OWNING UP TO 2 HECTARES OF LAND, COULD PROVIDE MUCH-NEEDED FINANCIAL SECURITY

small-marginal farmers, who struggle to meet their expenses amid rising input costs for seeds, fertilisers, and irrigation.

### 4. Transform the Kisan Credit Card (KCC)

The KCC scheme provides short-term loans with an interest subsidy for up to Rs 3 lakh. However, the rigid repayment schedule often forces farmers to rely on private moneylenders to meet short-term cash requirements.

A more farmer-friendly approach would be to convert KCCs into running overdraft accounts, increase the credit limit to Rs 10 lakh, and cap interest rates at 4 per cent. Removing usage restrictions on loans would further empower farmers to make long-term agricultural investments. Additionally, simplifying the KCC application process and enhancing awareness through rural outreach programs can improve access to credit. Expanding the scheme to include sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and farm labourers can promote financial inclusion in agriculture.

### 5. Introduce a Pension Scheme for Small Farmers

India's farmers lack a robust social security net. A non-contributory pension of Rs3,000 per month for small and marginal farmers aged 60 and above, owning up to 2 hectares of land, could provide much-needed financial security. Contributions from state governments could further augment this scheme. Implementing such a pension system can alleviate poverty among elderly farmers and reduce their dependence on family support.

### 6. Strengthen Animal Husbandry and Dairy Sectors

Livestock contributes over 25 per cent to agricultural GDP but suffers from fluctuating milk prices and restrictive cattle rearing and trade policies. A simple yet impactful step would

be legally mandating private dairies to match or exceed the milk procurement prices set by cooperatives like Amul. Additionally, incorporating milk and eggs into the mid-day meal scheme can improve farm incomes while tackling malnutrition among children.

Promoting cattle insurance schemes and increasing budgetary allocation for veterinary services can enhance livestock productivity. Encouraging the adoption of modern technologies like artificial insemination and genetic improvement can further boost the sector's contribution to rural livelihoods.

### 7. Reform Fertiliser Subsidy Policies

The current system treats fertiliser subsidies as farmer benefits but deducts the subsidised amount while calculating MSP. This practice lowers farmers' actual remuneration. MSP calculations should instead consider the market price of inputs, ensuring fairer returns for farmers. The government could also promote balanced fertiliser use by incentivising organic farming practices and providing subsidies for bio-fertilisers. A shift towards a direct benefit transfer system for fertiliser subsidies can reduce leakages and ensure benefits reach the intended beneficiaries.

### 8. Simplify Crop Insurance

The PM Fasal Bima Yojana requires farmers to navigate complex procedures to claim compensation. The government should shoulder the entire premium initially, including the state's share, and simplify the claim process. This would reduce the administrative burden on farmers while ensuring timely compensation for crop losses. Leveraging technology like satellite imagery and AI-driven risk assessment models can streamline the verification process and minimise disputes. Expanding insurance coverage to include post-har-

vest losses and natural calamities can make the scheme more comprehensive and farmer-friendly.

### 9. Reassess Inflation Control Policies

Policies like export bans, stock limits on agricultural produce, and the Food Corporation of India (FCI) dumping grains at below-market prices undermine farmers' profitability. These interventions should be re-evaluated to balance inflation control with fair returns for farmers. Encouraging exports of surplus produce and ensuring better storage infrastructure can reduce post-harvest losses. Developing a decentralised agricultural pricing system driven by real-time market data can align domestic policies with global demand trends. A Vision for Fairness and Growth India's agricultural sector has long been the backbone of its economy, yet farmers have faced systemic neglect and economic disparity. Over the last decade, the government has written off Rs12.30 lakh crore in big corporate loans, while farmers continue to struggle under mounting debt (Rs 18 lakh crore) and policies that fail to guarantee fair prices for their produce. The 2025 Budget presents an opportunity to correct these imbalances. By addressing these critical issues, the government can improve farmers' lives, spur rural demand, catalyse GDP growth and lay the foundation for a more equitable and sustainable agricultural future. It's time to honour the farmers who feed the nation by delivering the support they deserve.

(The Author is Vice-Chairman of Sonalika ITI Group, Vice-Chairman of the Punjab Economic Policy and Planning Board, Chairman of ASSOCHAM Northern Region Development Council. Views expressed are personal)

## Pioneering community-led groundwater management for a sustainable future

The Atal Bhujal Yojana, designed to address India's growing groundwater crisis, shifts the focus to a community-driven approach

The Atal Bhujal Yojana, or Atal Jal, is a pioneering government initiative spearheaded by the Ministry of Jal Shakti, in collaboration with the World Bank. This innovative program marks a significant departure from traditional top-down approaches to water management, instead empowering communities to take the lead in sustainable groundwater management.

A Bottom-Up Approach to Water Security Atal Jal has been implemented across 8,203 Gram Panchayats, 229 blocks, and 80 districts in seven states: Gujarat, Haryana, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh.

By directly engaging with marginalised farmers, the poor, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, minorities, and other vulnerable groups, the scheme promotes inclusive development and social equity. The core objective of Atal Jal is to increase groundwater availability and ensure its long-term sustainability. By bolstering groundwater resources, the programme aims to enhance agricultural productivity and build resilience against the growing threats of climate change.

Atal Jal is more than just a water management programme; it is a catalyst for social and economic transformation. By empowering communities and prioritising gender equity, the scheme is paving the way for a more prosperous and sustainable rural India. As this groundbreaking initiative continues to unfold, it offers a beacon of hope, illuminating a future where water security and equitable development go hand-in-hand. With its transformative impact reverberating through every layer of society, this groundbreaking initiative is a harbinger of hope, fortifying the future through equitable resource management and fostering prosperity among those it touches.



SHANTANU GARG

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The Atal Bhujal Yojana (Atal Jal) is a comprehensive initiative that goes beyond technical solutions to address the pressing issue of groundwater depletion. It is a multifaceted programme that combines technical interventions with social and behavioural change strategies.

### Empowering Communities

A key aspect of Atal Jal is its focus on gender equality and community empowerment. By involving women in decision-making processes and capacity-building programmes, the scheme empowers them to play a crucial role in sustainable water use. Women are encouraged to participate in meetings, community meetings, competitions, and social media campaigns, ensuring that their perspectives and needs are considered. Atal Jal employs innovative approaches to engage with communities. Through a variety of activities, including rallies, community meetings, competitions, and social media campaigns, the scheme raises awareness about groundwater issues and promotes sustainable practices.



Atal Jal employs innovative approaches to engage with communities. Through a variety of activities, including rallies, community meetings, competitions, and social media campaigns, the scheme raises awareness about groundwater issues and promotes sustainable practices. The programme also recognises the importance of educating the next generation and conducts essay and drawing competitions in schools. To further enhance its impact, Atal Jal utilises technology to monitor groundwater levels and disseminate information. The Atal Jal mobile app provides stakeholders and the general public with access to information about groundwater resources and management practices.

### A Sustainable Future

Atal Jal's well-defined sustainable practice involves training community resource persons and preparing water budgets in

collaboration with the Ministry of Panchayati Raj. This systematic approach ensures the long-term sustainability of the program and empowers communities to make informed decisions about water use. The success of Atal Jal is a testament to the dedication and hard work of the team behind the initiative. By combining technical expertise with a strong focus on social and behavioural change, Atal Jal is poised to become a model for future groundwater management programmes.

### (The writer is Programme Coordinator, the Green

Evolution, India, Nepal, Bangladesh & Coalition for Food Systems Transformation in India; views are personal)

## Trump's ultimatum

Trump's plain talk on the Ukraine war—'end it or face sanctions'—could mark a turning point in the conflict

In a dramatic intervention, US President Donald Trump has asked Russian President Vladimir Putin to bring an immediate end to the ongoing Ukraine war. Labeling the conflict 'ridiculous,' Trump warned of severe economic sanctions and tariffs against Russia if Putin failed to negotiate peace. The threat marks a sharp escalation in Trump's rhetoric on a war that has already claimed the lives of over a million soldiers on both sides. Speaking on Truth Social platform, Trump reaffirmed his affinity for the Russian people and his respect for Putin but did not shy away from criticising the Russian leader for prolonging the bloody conflict. "We must never forget that Russia helped us win the Second World War, losing almost 60 million lives in the process," Trump said, highlighting historical ties while urging an end to the ongoing devastation. Trump's approach combines a mix of hardline economic threats and diplomatic overtures. In his straightforward message he suggested that the economic repercussions of prolonged conflict would be catastrophic for Russia. He emphasised that his preference was for a peaceful resolution.

The Ukraine war, which began with Russia's invasion in February 2022, has dragged on for nearly three years. The conflict has claimed the lives of nearly a million Russian soldiers and 700,000 Ukrainian troops. These staggering figures underscore the war's devastating impact, making it one of the deadliest conflicts of the 21st century. Economic consequences have also been severe, particularly for Russia. International sanctions, coupled with the strain of prolonged military operations, have left the Russian economy struggling with inflation and stagnation. Trump pointed to these economic pressures as a potential leverage point, suggesting that a peace deal is in Russia's best interest. Trump's ultimatum reflects a marked departure from his earlier, more ambiguous stance on the conflict. Trump administration is in direct talks with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Trump himself plans to engage with Putin directly. He appears intent on delivering on that promise with a mix of economic coercion and diplomatic engagement. Despite the grim reality of the war, Trump's comments offers a glimmer of hope for an early resolution. He has emphasised that both Zelensky and Putin should pursue a deal, suggesting that the leaders' willingness would be pivotal in ending the conflict. Trump's ultimatum to Putin could signal a turning point in the Ukraine war, but the path forward remains fraught with uncertainty. While the economic pressure could incentivise Russia to negotiate, the deep-seated political and territorial disputes fueling the conflict may prove challenging to resolve. As the world watches, Trump's next moves—whether imposing sanctions, brokering a deal, or recalibrating military aid—will shape not only the future of the Ukraine war but also the broader geopolitical landscape. For now, one thing is clear: Trump is determined to make his mark on history by ending a war that has caused untold suffering and reshaped global politics.

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### PICTALK



Tourists pose for pictures at the Taj Mahal, in Agra

## Can suspending commodity derivatives rein in food price

The debate over whether speculative trading in futures commodity markets drives food price inflation remains unresolved in India and across Asia

While there are several concerns in India and across Asia, certain policy and key opinion circles that food price inflation is catalysed or influenced somehow by speculative trading in the futures commodity markets. Even while opinions are divided in policy circles and among economists who have studied and examined the nature of the relationship between food inflation and commodity and derivative futures trading contracts, and no empirical evidence hitherto seems to have been found despite numerous studies undertaken in India.

It would be worth mentioning that a detailed empirical research study conducted by leading researchers from the Indian Institute of Management Udaipur specifically studied three suspension events in India of futures traded commodities, which led the researchers to firmly state that the counterfactual for each of the examined episodes confirms that even in the absence of trading suspensions, food prices or inflationary trends would have followed their dynamic path.

Any upward price volatility could ostensibly be the effects or counter-effects of various extraneous domestic or global (especially geopolitical) factors. It is also equally understandable and natural for any governing policy institution to be both fully cognisant and mindful of food price inflationary trends, and the fact that rising food prices can have a cataclysmic effect on food security and thus, by extension could have substantive socio-economic impact.

Successful policy establishments and ecosystems have always been overly cautious, ever since futures trading commodity derivatives exchanges were established in the early 2000s. Despite the mandate of such commodity exchanges that futures trading contracts encourage effective and fair price discovery and risk hedging, which consequently safeguards the commodity value chain from price risk which is a result of a fundamental play between demand and supply the apprehensions



concerning these market-driven tools continued to remain, manifesting itself the way of multiple instances of suspensions on certain commodity derivative contracts.

While trading suspensions have been a constant feature since 2007-2008, under the advisement of the price monitoring mechanisms and agencies within the government policy ecosystem, there never has been an occasion when suspensions of commodity trading exceeded more than a year in a single stretch, barring the odd 'sensitive' food commodity. So as a commodity markets expert, with a domestic and world view of ongoing trading in global commodity markets, one begs to specifically ask - Do derivatives trading suspensions really rein in food price inflation? Researchers have constantly alluded to synthetic control methodologies to apply to trading for studying specific suspensions, their findings fairly and comprehensively conclude and determine that there is no empirical evidence that derivatives suspension had any impact whatsoever on food prices.

On the contrary, from specific instances studied, such as those of Bengal Gram (Chana)

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SUCCESSIVE POLICY ESTABLISHMENTS AND ECOSYSTEMS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN OVERLY CAUTIOUS, EVER SINCE FUTURES TRADING COMMODITY DERIVATIVES EXCHANGES WERE ESTABLISHED IN THE EARLY 2000S

In August 2021 and October 2021, analysis from the said report from IIM Udaipur shows that prices of both commodities, Chana and mustard oil, would have continued on the same price trend path even without the suspension. To specifically quote a potent segment of the said study – it clearly articulates that the conducted research does not find any role of futures market trading on price changes, nor does it find any empirical evidence of the impact of suspension of trade on price behaviour in the period after suspension. Rather, the analysis shows that prices of commodities such as mustard oil would have had a similar trend even without the suspension. Furthermore, the study finds that before the suspension futures market had a dominant share of 64 per cent in discovering the true and fair price of the mustard seed commodity derivative.

The study goes on further to articulate that commodity derivative suspensions hurt genuine participants discourage the growth of domestic agri-derivatives markets and resultantly impact the growth of price hedging prospects of the commodity value chain

including CBBOs (Cluster Business Organisations) and FPOs (Farmer Producer Organisations), while consequently hurting the value realisation and income levels of farmers.

It also adversely impacts India's position in providing a global price benchmark, despite the country being a major producer and consumer of several agricultural commodities. Needless to say, as an active observer of the Indian agribased commodity trading ecosystem, it behove advocacy and argument that summary commodity suspensions as a method to arrest or contain food price inflation should not be adopted and further the suspension of futures trading contracts of agricultural commodity derivatives must be revoked. In closure, one must say emphatically that the development of the agri-ecosystem is supported in India, which in turn will lead to fair price discovery and transparent hedging of price risks, eventually creating a positive socio-economic impact for farmers and the agri-ecosystem in India.

(The writer is national president of Commodity Participants Association of India; views are personal)

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### US withdraws from WHO



In a tearing hurry to make America great again, Trump bombarded his country and the rest of the world with a slew of executive orders. He withdrew the US from the World Health Organisation, alleging that the global agency had mishandled the COVID-19 pandemic. His own handling of the coronavirus catastrophe was dreadful—over 3.50,000 deaths were reported in the US in 2020, the final year of his first term—but those glaring lapses are of no con-

sequence to him now. He has washed his hands of international collaboration to combat any future pandemic. Trump also signed America's withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement, whose main goal is to limit global warming to 1.5 C above pre-industrial levels.

Last year ended as the planet's hottest on record, and the target looks even more improbable now with the US jumping ship. In an irrational way, the President pardoned 1,500-odd protesters who stormed the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, in a bid to prevent lawmakers from certifying his election defeat. The incident was a big blow to American democracy. In stark contrast, there is bad news for those desperate to sneak into the US, as Trump has declared illegal immigration at the US-Mexico border a "national emergency." It's America first for him—and the world must brace itself for the worst.

N Sadhasiva Reddy | Bengaluru

es strain public finances, divert resources from critical sectors, and create an unsustainable dependency culture.

Over time, this undermines fiscal discipline and hampers long-term development. In the democratic sphere, freebies erode accountability, manipulate voter choices, and shift focus away from systemic reforms. They often favour immediate political gains over addressing structural inequalities, weakening institutions, and fostering inequity. While welfare measures are essential for uplifting marginalised groups, they must be carefully balanced with sustainable policies. Policymakers should prioritise structural reforms, economic growth, and targeted welfare instead of indulging in competitive populism. Ultimately, a balanced approach is key to safeguarding both fiscal health and the integrity of democratic processes.

Gopalaswamy J | Chennai

#### RUPEE'S FURTHER DECLINE EXPECTED

Madam—India's Declining Rupee and its expected Impact on the Indian Stock

## AI and defence dynamics: Global trends and India's adaptation

India is harnessing AI to enhance national security, counter threats and establish itself at the forefront of the defence innovation landscape

Cross-border terrorism and geopolitical tensions, such as the Russia-Ukraine conflict and Israel-Iran hostilities, have driven unprecedented defence spending since World War II. To counter these threats, nations are leveraging artificial intelligence (AI) to build resilient defence systems. AI enhances national security by enabling robust decision-making to detect, analyse, and address complex threats across multiple fronts.

#### The Shift Towards AI in Defence

AI is transforming defence strategies, reducing reliance on human personnel. The US military's active-duty personnel are at their lowest levels in eight decades, while the U.K. has seen a 30 per cent reduction since 2000, largely due to AI-driven tools replacing soldiers in high-risk operations. With advancements in IoT and data analytics, experts predict a significant increase in AI-based defence systems globally. India's AI-Driven Defence Evolution



India, a leading G20 nation, is actively integrating AI into its defence framework to counter internal and external threats. Initiatives like the 2022 launch of 75 AI-enabled defence products highlighted India's focus on cybersecurity, automation, and autonomous systems. The Ministry of Defence (MoD) allocates \$12.6 million annually for AI projects, including the establishment of an AI center at the Military College of Telecommunication

Engineering (MCTE). Additionally, the 2024 launch of India's first AI Data Bank aims to enhance national security through real-time analytics and predictive capabilities. AI in Security and Surveillance AI aids investigation agencies in video surveillance and threat detection, analysing behaviour, communications and psychological patterns to identify risks. Using both Strong AI (mimicking human cognition) and Weak AI

(focused tasks), intelligence agencies enhance security, mitigate breaches and safeguard civilians and public institutions.

#### Challenges and Future Prospects

Despite promising advancements, AI adoption in India's defence faces challenges, including data privacy, cybersecurity and ethical concerns surrounding autonomous systems. To remain competitive, India must increase investments in research, collaborate internationally and address accountability issues tied to AI-driven military operations.

#### Conclusion

By adopting a risk-based regulatory framework, India can ensure the ethical and effective deployment of AI in defence. While challenges persist, the ongoing innovations and strategic initiatives signal a future where India's defence capabilities transcend traditional methods, embracing AI as a cornerstone of national security.

(The writer is Co-founder & CEO, Innofu Labs; views are personal)

#### PANIC KILLS PASSENGERS

Madam—Twelve passengers on the Pushpak Express were killed and 55 injured after jumping from the tight-packed unreserved coaches onto the track in panic, fearing a fire (they don't even notice or hear approaching trains), only to be run over by the Karnataka Express near Pachora railway station in Jalgaon district of Maharashtra. Unable to understand when the public will get some sense. Why do they need to wander on tracks even if they had jumped out of a train that they thought was on fire?

Though for this sad mishap we definitely cannot blame the railways from any angle. Even though people may have agreed with me that Indians have lost trust and faith in the railway administration to such an extent that without verifying the rumour, they believe it (smoke that perhaps sparked rumours of a fire) and act accordingly. This shows total distrust of the railways. This is not the first instance; the Jalgaon tragedy revives the painful memory of a similar accident in which 21 women and a boy lost their lives in Mumbai's Goregaon.

On October 13, 1993, passengers on Western Railway's 'ladies special' local between Borivli and Kandivli jumped off a first-class compartment onto the tracks after seeing smoke rise from the undercarriage of their stationary train. Whatever, we all know how our system works. It's the responsibility of people who travel to take care of themselves, not the railway. Yes, it is really tragic for people to lose their lives. It is a big loss to their families. A moment of profound grief and sorrow. May God give strength to all the deceased family members at this difficult time. May their souls rest in peace. Om Shanti.

Bidyut Kumar Chatterjee | Faridabad

#### FREEBIES HURT ECONOMY

Madam—The growing trend of offering freebies during elections, such as in the Delhi Assembly polls, poses significant challenges to both the economy and democracy. Economically, these promiss-

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[ OUR TAKE ]

## Spare the H-IB visa programme

America's labour worries are structural, and have very little to do with immigrants

Donald Trump's victory in the US presidential elections has come on the back of support from a very diverse coalition. His allies include the owners of cutting-edge technology and financial companies and some of the poorest and also nativist sections of the US economy and society. It is only natural that their aspirations from the new administration will be very different. One of the most important conflicts between Trump's diverse allies concerns a matter which is of great economic concern for India: the H-IB visa programme. The H-IB visa is issued to high-skill foreign workers, including Indian IT companies' employees.

H-IB is a key (although not as key as it once was) pillar of the business model of the IT industry in India and a source of great upward mobility for Indian professionals, many of whom have built lives and raised families (children born to them are US citizens on account of the birthright concept) in the US. To be sure, the H-IB visa has been a mutually beneficial programme and it has allowed the US to maintain its supremacy in innovation and services at large despite losing its dominance in manufacturing. This is why the likes of Elon Musk want the programme to stay.

However, a section of the American society, and Trump's core alliance, believes that programmes like the H-IB have only added to the misery of the American working class by giving some of the best jobs in the US to foreigners. This is why people like Steve Bannon are asking that the programme be scrapped. Trump, like all politicians, is trying to balance these contradictory aspirations. He has praised the H-IB programme on the one hand but also set in motion actions that will make it less attractive, even cumbersome, such as ending the US's longstanding policy of naturalised citizenship.

Politicians like to play the balancing game between shrill rhetoric and saner policies, and Trump is the master of this game. But what Trump and his nativist allies need to realise is that reviving the fortunes of the US working class needs a very different set of policies than going after skilled immigrant workers in the US. The former are suffering because they are poorly educated, and unlike their earlier generations, face an acute negative educational premium in the US labour market. Addressing this systemic challenge is far more difficult than targeting immigrants.

## UGC opens new front in federalism battle

The draft UGC (Minimum Qualifications for Appointment and Promotion of Teachers and Academic Staff in Universities and Colleges and Measures for the Maintenance of Standards in Higher Education) Regulations, 2025 has become a new flashpoint in Centre-state relations. Tamil Nadu took the lead in opposing the regulations, which provide greater powers to the chancellor/visitor of a state university (in most cases the governor) in the appointment of vice-chancellors (VCs). Days after the Tamil Nadu assembly passed a resolution against the regulations, Kerala followed suit in calling for a repeal of the draft. Reports suggest that even National Democratic Alliance members such as the Janata Dal (United) have raised apprehensions that UGC's proposals privilege the Centre in the running of state universities.

There is merit in their concern. The UGC Act of 1956 limits its role in determining academic standards in universities. The selection and the appointment of VCs of public universities have been the responsibility of the state government, and understandably so, since state universities are set up under legislation passed by the legislative assembly and provide funds for their establishment and running. The UGC can surely prescribe the guidelines to be followed in appointments, but the task of selection is best left to the local authority. The UGC draft, effectively, threatens to annul the state law, usurp the powers of appointment from the state executive and invest it in the office of the governor.

In states such as Tamil Nadu and Kerala, university appointments have become a bone of contention between the governor and the elected government with the former overruling the latter's choices for top posts and, in some cases, ordering the removal of persons appointed by the state executive. This is the backdrop of the Opposition-ruled states' concern that the Centre is weaponising the UGC to interfere in the state executive's domain. The administration of public universities deserves to be reformed. This task, however, needs to be addressed by the state government; the centralisation of administration is no solution.

## The health leadership opportunity for India

The public health ecosystem in the country will benefit if New Delhi ups its engagement with WHO in light of the US withdrawing from the global body

United States (US) President Donald Trump's executive order on the inaugural day of his second term, withdrawing the US from the World Health Organization (WHO), was not unexpected. But the proposed speed at which this will be implemented, without the normal one-year transition period, is alarming. The US is, by far, the single-largest contributor to WHO, paying nearly a fifth of WHO's expenses. In comparison, India's contribution is only a tenth of the US contribution, much of it going to traditional medicine and digital health. Beyond the financial implications, curtailing the flow of trained US experts, who are critical to many of WHO's programmes, will harm global health.

American expertise has been at the forefront of many global initiatives, including smallpox and polio eradication efforts, childhood immunisation, newborn and maternal sur-

vival, and pandemic preparedness, and this will be difficult to replace quickly. Since the US typically pays in arrears, WHO could be hard-pressed to pay its salaries and expenses in the short-term, which would create extreme chaos at a time when global health challenges like drug-resistant infections and pandemic threats, compounded by the human-induced climate crisis, are on the rise.

Even the most ardent supporters of the WHO would agree that the organisation needs serious reform. WHO today is archaic and highly bureaucratic. Its location in Geneva vastly increases WHO's operating expenses, and is more advantageous to the Swiss and other Europeans than it is to global health. WHO is a membership-driven organisation. That means that the head of WHO is elected by the health ministers of all 194 member-states, and the heads of other UN agencies who are typically appointed by the UN Secretary General. This leaves WHO exposed to politics and agendas that are unrelated to health. Although there are many countries WHO staffs, the organisation also carries significant amount of deadweight, and the quality of its output has been declining in recent years. Moreover, since most

its funding comes not just from designated contributions from member countries based on their size and income level but also from specific project-level funding, WHO staff naturally tend to focus on the priorities of those who pay for these projects.

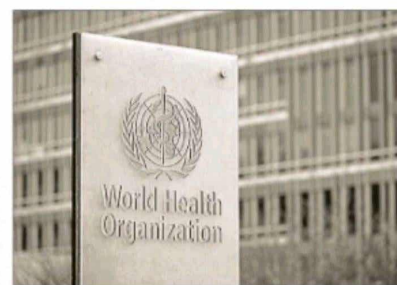
WHO is clearly in need of reform, and one can expect that the WHO leadership will be more receptive to new ideas when the organisation is under threat than it has been in the past. With the withdrawal of the US, the situation presents an opportunity for India to take leadership by engaging broadly and deeply with WHO, for three reasons.

First, it can frame the agenda for reforming WHO. The opportunity to show leadership with WHO, for three reasons. First, it can frame the agenda for reforming WHO. The opportunity to show leadership with WHO, for three reasons.

Second, engaging with WHO on multiple fronts, including on vaccines, improvements in child survival, digital health, and pharmaceutical manufacturing — something that India has done well — gives the country the opportunity to enhance its soft power and influence in many parts of Africa and some in Asia that



Ramanan Laxminarayan

Engaging with WHO on multiple fronts gives India the opportunity to enhance its soft power and influence in many parts of Africa and Asia. **ANP**

depend on WHO to guide their national health priorities and operations. Many expect China to fill these roles, but for reasons of shared language, historical links through immigration and trade, and relationships of trust, India is far better positioned to fill the gap.

Third, Indian engagement at WHO would benefit the health of our citizens, who now make up the largest population in the world. The experience and expertise we could gain from being part of a global enterprise could only enhance the quality of public health leadership within the country. A prime example is the current director-general of the Indian Council for Medical Research, who spent decades at WHO leading work on child survival before returning to India with that global experience and skillset.

India's initial contributions can be in kind. Sending experts on secondment to WHO to fill key gaps left by the US withdrawal could be done rel-

atively quickly and inexpensively. In addition, to claim senior leadership roles, India will have to increase its through voluntary contributions, but the cost is a small fraction of the tremendous benefits to be gained. These benefits would extend to the opportunity for a more robust innovation and research ecosystem within the country for biomedical sciences and public health. As borders in high-income countries close, India could well be a more attractive educational and training destination in these fields.

The US withdrawal provides an opening for India to lead on health, an important issue of concern to the world's population. Whether and how we take that opportunity or leave it to other countries remains to be seen.

Ramanan Laxminarayan is a senior research scholar at Princeton University and president of the One Health Trust. The views expressed are personal.

## Why India badly needs a trauma care ministry

As we head into India's annual Budget exercise, I have a suggestion for finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman. Even as she balances priorities and determines who gets how much out of the growing pie of tax money, can a new ministry (or department) for trauma care be considered?

Trauma is something Indians encounter on a daily basis. In its most common form, trauma is associated with road accidents but many other incidents and happenings in India lead to trauma of varying severity.

Here are a few instances. The pedestrian bridge collapse in Morbi, Gujarat, that caused 141 deaths and injuries to over 180 called for trauma care, as did the 200 consequential railway accidents reported across 17 railway zones in India. Over the last five years, these accidents led to the deaths of 330 people and caused injuries to close to 1,000 people.

Perhaps more than any other occurrence, rape, acid attack and domestic violence victims across India require consistent and intense trauma care. In a number of these cases, the mental trauma far exceeds the physical trauma but mental support in India remains virtually absent. Trauma is very much a part of the fabric of tourist destinations in India where those rescued from drownings on the beach or during adventure tourism-related accidents need urgent care.

The data on trauma-related deaths speaks for itself. Road accidents in India account for 200,000 deaths a year, and according to a 2020 report, approximately 45% of such registered deaths occurred without any medical attention. Add to these the fatalities that occur on account of other types of accidents (rail, fire, electrocutions, bridge collapses) and the numbers shoot up to almost 400,000 trauma deaths a year.

A recent Niti Aayog study titled *Emergency and Injury Care at Secondary and Tertiary Level Centres in India* reveals that although 91% of hospitals had in-house ambulances, only 34% of these ambulances had trained paramedics, and most hospitals lacked a pre-hospital arrival notification system.

In November 2024, SaveLIFE Foundation, a non-governmental organisation, moved the Supreme Court with a petition to ask the Union and the states to ensure comprehensive systems that guarantee a right to emergency trauma care. This would require the state to set up a seamless chain of survival

response — within what is popularly termed as the Golden Hour — that ensures an inter-linked delivery of services from the time of a traumatic incident to at-scene care, in-transit care and at-facility treatment.

Hospitals, clinics and health care centres in India are not categorised by the level of care they can provide. As a result, ambulances take road accident victims to the nearest facility for care, rather than to where they can be provided the care required. In the September 2022 accident involving former Tata chairman Cyrus Mistry, he was taken by ambulance to a primary health care centre, which was in no position to provide the care his brain injury required. In a recent road accident, the body of the victim lay on the road for four hours as a jurisdiction dispute ensued between the police from two states: Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. The public responded by calling the police, but the latter failed in their duties abysmally. Had the victim been taken to a hospital immediately, a life might have been saved.

The chain of survival requires citizens at the scene of the accident to be trained and in a position to administer some basic care, which is taught in schools in many countries. There needs to be a universal access number that integrates all emergency services like police, fire, and ambulance (like 911 in the United States) that is known to all citizens. India attempted a similar service (112) — available in all states and Union territories barring Kerala — but it is not universally known and does not integrate all emergency services.

Ambulances need to be well-equipped with trained paramedics adept at providing death-preventing treatment. There are wide state-wise variations in the quality of ambulances and paramedics. Last but not least, the emergency services to reach a facility certified to handle the type of injury or trauma the victim has undergone and, ideally, the hospital needs to have prior intimation of what to expect so the right treatment can be meted out almost instantly. For this, the hospitals and clinics need to be certified based on the level of care they are equipped to offer and this information needs to be handy with the ambulance services.

Even as the state governments begin work on the chain of survival, some level of basic trauma care training must be given at least to those who man petrol pumps, dhabas and small shops on the highways and those who man stalls and other services at railway stations. Anyone who is in a position to be a first responder needs to be given some basic training.

Readers may ask why, in this era of big government, we need yet another ministry for this. The answer is that trauma care is more specialised and time-sensitive than generalised medical care and is at present nobody's baby. The ministry of health and family welfare is responsible for some aspects, but a lot falls outside its ambit. Countries like Japan and the United Kingdom have set up new ministries to tackle the menace of social isolation as they perceived this to be the need of the hour for their citizens. India needs to take a leaf out of their books and examine its own needs more closely.

Anjali Bhargava writes about governance, infrastructure and social sector. The views expressed are personal.

Ambulances need to be well-equipped with trained paramedics adept at providing death-preventing treatment. **ANP**

S JAISHANKAR | EXTERNAL AFFAIRS MINISTER

We have always taken the view that if there are any of our citizens who are not here legally... we (are) open to their legitimate return to India

At a press conference in Washington, after meeting US secretary of State Marco Rubio



## Scientific temper, social benefit the only holy cows

Can there be "public science of cow sacrality"? Veezhithan Kamakoti, the director of the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Madras, recently attempted this when he advocated cow worship based on some scientific research and considerable religious passion. This did not go down well with many. Would public sociology of cow-sacrality be different from such advocacy and interpretation? Can it be non-controversial?

Cow sacrality is a significant religious article in India that has violent political possibilities, and academics of all hues must tread cautiously. Public sociology could, however, complement the public commitment to hard sciences by evoking a better understanding of culture and society. Cow protection, worship, and the passion surrounding *panchajanya* could even evoke violent "humaneness" among touchable Hindus, close in nature to the violent interferences of *jhat* in Islam. While the ethics of service and sacrifice is at the heart of cow worship, what is understated generally is the violent and hierarchical nature of such sacrifice. Chapter II in *Lives of Mansu*, for instance, advocates the following:

82. He who unhesitatingly abandons life for the sake of Brahmanas or of cows, is freed from (the guilt of) the murder of a Brahmana, and (so is he) who saves (the life of) a cow, or of a Brahmana.

83. If either he fights at least three times (against robbers in defence of) a Brahmana's (property), or reconquers the whole property of a Brahmana, or if he loses his life for such a cause, he is freed (from his guilt).

One can, therefore, kill another being or even sacrifice their own life to save a cow. A good public sociologist or even a lay scientist may, however, want to reflect on how and why a Brahmana and cow are equivalent. Is there some similarity in the genetic material of the cow and the Brahmana? Even if we leave aside the "untouchable", can a touchable *dharm*'s life not have equal value? The hierarchical values of caste, in several ways, construct the metaphysical purity of the cow and its worship.

The historical material significance of the cow in a rural economy strengthens the social superiority of the animal in India. It is not surprising to find the strength of cows in other cultures and civilisations, but the violent emotions and outcomes around cow worship are most peculiar to India and stem from the ethic of caste.

In our collective modern quest and search for the greatness of Hindu civilisation, cow worship is, of course, presented as a scientific practice by most pure caste scientists with very few contesting the idea. The sacrality of the cow has thus consolidated under Hindu modernity and beef consumers are increasingly out-casted as permanently impure. Studies have noted that the

withdrawal from beef consumption has been higher in urban areas as compared to rural areas across the Scheduled Castes. In the anonymous environment of an urban setting, Scheduled Castes conform to the beef abstinence norms and wear the masks of urban Hindu purity.

Religion and science can go together, but public science must avoid twisting science for religious purposes. Anything can pass as a method in science only if it enables the growth of science and scientific temper. When Hindu radicals in the Constituent Assembly were forcing recognition for the cow as an equal citizen, BR Ambedkar used scientific metaphors instead of religious ones to protect the cow in the Constitution. Is the cow sacred because of scientific reasons? Any scientific study on the extraordinary medicinal qualities of cow urine and cow dung needs to be comparative so as to avoid privileging a prejudiced view. It was only last year that the faculty-based ICAR-Indian Veterinary Research Institute (IVRI) found that the urine of the buffalo was more effective on certain bacteria and fresh cow urine may, in fact, contain potentially harmful bacteria and is not suitable for direct human consumption. Public use of science should instead question how and why cow urine is widely sold and consumed without approval from the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI).

Public engagement by social and natural scientists is necessary for making academics socially relevant. In a multi-faith country like ours, it is also a critical social responsibility that demands a universal understanding of service, sacrifice, and humaneness. What social qualities do we generate by emphasising the extraordinary powers of the Indian cow, its urine, and its dung as scientific and medicinal? Does it further civility or a violent public culture? Academics need to cautiously draw from multiple disciplines beyond myth and misplaced passion in any public science or sociology of cow worship. Science as a public good should be open-ended and not begin with prejudice, minimally.

Commitment to genuine cosmopolitanism and civility is a difficult value to find in caste-ridden societies. Should universities and educational institutions be different from caste-sociality? Universities and educational institutions must not run *gashalas* (cow shelters) nor should they be run like *panchajanya*. Compassion is not a Hindu-specific value or quality; it can only be universal — and not limited to the sacred cow.

Suryakant Waghmare is professor of sociology at Indian Institute of Technology in Bombay. The views expressed are personal.



# Opinion

FRIDAY, JANUARY 24, 2025

## It's raining handouts

Political parties must avoid reducing elections to one-upmanship on freebies

**E**ARLIER THIS MONTH, when the dates for the upcoming Delhi Assembly polls were announced, the chief election commissioner confessed that the panel's hands were tied on the thorny issue of "freebies" promised by political parties to voters. He also expressed difficulty to define it and sought legal, acceptable answers to what constitutes a freebie. In the absence of any legal diktat as yet, Delhi has given a free hand — as indeed have other states that held elections in the recent past — to parties attempting to outdo each other with a laundry list of handouts in their manifestos. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have made mirroring bids, some tinged with appeals to rival constituencies. The incumbent AAP was off the blocks with a promise of financial assistance to temple priests — lest it is perceived as indifferent to the clergy — apart from women and the elderly. It also promised to fund foreign education of students from underprivileged castes, and payments to its loyal base of auto-rickshaw drivers.

In 2022, Prime Minister Narendra Modi castigated other parties for propagating a "revdi culture". Ironically, the BJP's manifesto has sought to go one up on the AAP playbook. Among its pledges are greater monthly sums to poor women besides ₹21,000 to pregnant women, subsidised cooking gas, pension to the elderly, and aid to students. Elections in India have repeatedly shown that freebies pay rich dividends in terms of results. For instance, in Maharashtra last month the BJP-led alliance returned to power after its populist measures had incurred a burden of ₹90,000 crore and with fresh promises threatening to pile on recurring expenses. Competitive populism is par for the course, and is a growing trend that is unlikely to vanish as parties vie for electoral triumph as their ultimate, albeit myopic, goal.

A plea claiming freebies amount to bribery and impose unaccounted burden on the state exchequer is being heard by the Supreme Court which has sought responses from the Centre and the election commission. There is no denying that the demarcation between welfare schemes and freebies is blurred. Neither is incentivising voters illegal. In fact, schemes like the mid-day meal, a nationwide nutritional programme for government school children, began as a freebie in Tamil Nadu. Such welfare initiatives, including redistribution plans like the rural employment guarantee scheme, have helped alleviate poverty and reflect fiscally responsible spending. Governments should design plans keeping in view an adequate fiscal headroom. That is not quite the case in Delhi, which has so far been a revenue-surplus state. The national capital's finances are stretched, and its revenue surplus shrank to ₹4,966 crore in FY24 compared to ₹14,457 crore in FY23. For this financial year, the state government has allocated more than 8% of its total outlay on populist schemes.

If either the AAP or the BJP, who are in a two-horse race, were to fulfil their promises after coming to power, it could entail additional expenses of over ₹5,000 crore and raise the share of subsidies in Delhi's budget from 15% to 20% of its total expenditure. Increased spending on goodies have contributed to worsening finances of several Indian states, forcing them to borrow more at high cost, and the central bank has warned that they could hinder social and economic infrastructure. Political parties will do well to take note and avoid reducing elections to a clash of handouts.

## \$100-bn court challenge for Goldman and friends

**BANKS ARE USED** to fending off litigation. Goldman Sachs Group's most recent annual report includes 14 pages of fine print detailing all the proceedings it faces. But defendant has turned plaintiff. On Christmas Eve, bank trade groups filed suit against the Federal Reserve, arguing that its annual stress-testing process violates the principles of the Administrative Procedure Act.

Banks have complained about regulatory overreach before, now, encouraged by an increasingly friendly legal environment, they're bringing the issue to the courts. "For the industry, the bar to take this step was incredibly high," explained Goldman Sachs Chief Executive Officer David Solomon on his earnings call last week. "We believe it is our responsibility to continue to press for a more transparent regulatory process in order to foster a more efficient financial system that supports growth and competitiveness of the US economy."

Like other industry executives, Solomon has been frustrated by regulators' approach to capital. On top of a basic threshold, authorities require acrobatic tailored to banks' individual circumstances. One of these buffers is determined by an annual stress test conducted by the Fed. The problem, according to banks, is that this stress test is "adopted in secret" and produces "vaccinating and unexplained requirements and restrictions on bank capital".

Goldman Sachs is particularly implicated. Last year, the Fed projected that the firm's capital ratio would slip to 8.5% under a severely adverse economic shock, down from 14.4% at the time it conducted its exercise. The Fed shares its top level assumptions with banks — home prices dropping 36%, unemployment surging to 10%, equities crashing by 55%, that sort of thing — but keeps detailed modelling to itself. No surprise such a shock would deplete so much capital. But when Goldman replicated the process, it couldn't get close. Based on its calculations, its capital ratio would drop to only 10% in such a scenario.

The Fed didn't burnish its credentials when it admitted it made an error. Since 2020, it has allowed banks to dispute stress tests and although eight have tried, so far only Goldman has succeeded. In a letter to Solomon in August, the Fed conceded that it shouldn't have rolled forward some one-off costs. It revised up the firm's worst-case capital ratio to 8.8%.

But that still leaves a gap, which the court challenge is designed to address. The industry is demanding greater transparency in the way the Fed runs its tests. A win would enable banks to optimise their balance sheets more effectively, allowing them to free up capital. If Goldman's internal test serves as a proxy, capital release could amount to around \$8 billion at the firm.

As well as bringing this case, banks are also seeking relief from another of the capital conservation buffers that regulators impose. Global, systemically important banks like Goldman Sachs are subject to a surcharge that reflects, among other factors, their size, complexity, and interconnectedness. But this surcharge hasn't been recalibrated since 2015. Even the Fed admits that risk scores should be adjusted to account for inflation and economic growth. Under current rules, Goldman Sachs is on course for a 3.5% surcharge. A reduction to 2%, for example, would release another \$10 billion of capital.

Even before any changes, capital policy was becoming more bank-friendly. The so-called Basel 3 Endgame aimed at completing the post-crisis framework that capital conservation buffers operate in was first watered down and then left in limbo when its steward, Fed Vice-Chair Michael Barr, announced this month that he would step down. "Given the change in administration and the change of leadership inside the Fed, our expectation would be that there'll be a different approach than what has been put forward," commented Solomon on his recent earnings call.

Since the global financial crisis, levels of high-quality capital at banks have increased by over 3.5 times, according to the Bank Policy Institute, one of the trade groups that brought the case. At Goldman Sachs, the capital ratio has risen to 15.4% from 8.2% in 2010. With over \$100 billion of capital sitting on its balance sheet, Solomon will be starting to think about how he can deploy any excess that comes his way.



**MARC RUBINSTEIN**  
Bloomberg



## ● SWEARING BY STARGATE

Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella

I'm good for my \$80 billion. I am going to spend \$80 billion building out Azure. Customers can count on Microsoft with OpenAI models being there everywhere in the world

## ● AI STIRRINGS

THE WORLD SHOULD EXPLORE NIMBLE, COST-EFFECTIVE OPTIONS TO THE STARGATE APPROACH

# Setting a cat among the pigeons

**T**HE WORLD HAS been watching closely the developments in artificial intelligence (AI) in the US and China. Most of the noise has emanated from Nvidia, OpenAI, Microsoft, and Google, and the astounding valuations enjoyed by Nvidia and OpenAI. Nvidia's production of graphics processing units (GPUs) has created such demand that the valuation of the company crossed \$3.2 trillion. ChatGPT and, more recently, the video-to-text model Sora from the OpenAI stables can take credit for setting off the new wave of interest in AI and taken the company to a valuation of over \$150 billion in its last fundraising. Despite protests from climate change activists over the enormous energy-guzzling demands of GPUs and large language models (LLMs), applications have burgeoned in areas ranging from architecture, engineering, and construction to media and entertainment, automotive, scientific research, and manufacturing design. They have necessitated investments in edge-to-cloud computing and in supercomputers and workstations for applications in these fields.

In this context, it is not surprising that the hot news of the day is the Stargate project, a massive \$500-billion joint venture announced by Donald Trump, with Oracle and OpenAI as key partners. This initiative aims to boost AI infrastructure in the US, creating over 100,000 jobs and securing pole position for America's leadership in the context. It has also been conceptualised with multiple partners. Nvidia and Microsoft will continue to be the key technology partners. Oracle will be a technology contributor and also a major infrastructure enabler. And OpenAI will lead the project's operations with SoftBank overseeing the financial commitments of various parties.

## GANESH NATARAJAN

Chairman, 5F World, GTT Data Solutions Ltd

With an initial investment of \$100 billion already in place and plans to deploy the balance \$400 billion over the next four years, one can expect 20 massive data centres, each spanning over 500,000 square feet, to come up. This will be a key enabler to the new approach to industrialisation in the US and allow the country to lead in the much-anticipated advent of artificial general intelligence (AGI), and mitigate some of the fears and uncertainties associated with a future involving artificial superintelligence (ASI).

Stargate epitomises everything that Trump 2.0 stands for — namely a large, collaborative US initiative which celebrates large-scale technology providers like Oracle, Microsoft, and OpenAI, and underlines the MAGA vision of America being the creator and leader of all that is good and great for mankind. The approach builds on the big investment leadership of Nvidia and the LLMs of OpenAI. It will give the US the dominant 500-pound gorilla status in high-investment, high-energy-consuming AI infrastructure. It is surprising that IBM has not been invited to join the party. But there is no doubt that the early participants will be the big beneficiaries as already seen in the sharp jump in the stock price of Nvidia, which will be an

early winner with the huge capacity creation in data centres.

Industry and AI watcher Sangeet Paul Choudhary suggests that the new "sandwich" that is being created with Stargate will enable a strong base of infrastructure that cuts across industries and a top layer for market-facing technology aggregators like Meta, Amazon, and Google. This could create an economic framework for

early players to develop and deploy AI, capture the resultant market value, and simply "change the rules of competition for everyone else".

Stargate fits perfectly into the "largest beautiful" approach of the new administration and there is no doubt that the US can and will capture leadership in this "America first" approach to AI. But the

world should watch out for alternative models of using AI for corporate and public good that will emerge from research labs in China and possibly Japan, Vietnam, Korea, and later on Israel and Saudi Arabia.

China will be shut out of Stargate Technologies, and the lack of access to Nvidia processors will and probably already has resulted in the country focusing on a smaller but equally effective approach through narrow language models. Point

AI and Application AI solutions through small language models (SLMs) from China and possibly India could reinvent the future of AI.

At this point, the US is defining the rules of the game. A research report recently released by Stanford University's Institute for Human-Centered AI positioned the US far ahead of China and all others primarily because of the large \$60 billion dollar investment by the private sector in AI as compared to just about a tenth of that in China. However, China continues to file patents at a rapid clip and invest in technologies for the future. Its research community has proved extremely capable and prolific, particularly in the universities. In India, the public discourse and resolve to be leaders in research and innovation in this critical field shows great promise. But as always, the rhetoric on social media needs to be backed up by strong government and private sector research to merit a seat at the high table of AI for years to come.

If we have to put climate change and sustainability back on the table, the world should explore nimble, cost-effective options to the Stargate approach. With the strong backing of Chinese and Indian researchers and possible innovations coming from the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, we need a focused approach beyond chip manufacturing, process automation, and technology services for a true alternative to the might of Stargate. We are witnessing the beginnings of a revolution that is as significant as the wide proliferation of electricity in the world and the future of prediction, prescription, and dual intelligence where human advances in innovation and technology advances in AGI and ASI will see truly transform business and society. May the AI games begin!

# Time for India to break out of AI slumber



## SRINATH SRIDHARAN

Corporate advisor &amp; independent director on corporate boards

**AS A SILENT** but unpleasant parting gift to India, the Biden administration's "Framework for Artificial Intelligence Diffusion", spelt that the US wants to be the Big Brother for the emerging technologies of the 21st century. By instituting a three-tiered structure that restricts the export of advanced AI chips and model weights, the US has weaponised technology as a tool of geopolitical power.

This framework severely hampers India's access to critical resources and tools necessary for building advanced AI capabilities. It restricts the availability of high-performance AI chips, such as graphics processing units (GPUs) and specialised accelerators produced by companies like Nvidia, which are essential for training and deploying sophisticated AI models. These chips are the backbone of large-scale machine learning and high-end computational tasks, and without them India's ability to develop cutting-edge AI systems is significantly diminished.

Additionally, access to large pre-trained AI models and their weights, crucial for applications ranging from natural language processing to predictive analytics, is also curtailed. This forces India to either rely on outdated models or expend considerable resources building its own from scratch, widening the gap between it and the global leaders in AI innovation. But then, it may not be such a bad idea, provided we wake up now.

The restrictions further extend to cloud computing resources and proprietary AI software developed and hosted in tier-1 countries. Scaling computational platforms like AWS, Google Cloud, or Microsoft Azure, along with critical frameworks

such as TensorFlow and PyTorch, are foundational for AI research and development (R&D). The risk of limited access to these resources makes it harder for Indian institutions to compete with global players.

The framework also undermines India's capacity to develop AI for strategic applications like national defence, critical infrastructure, and security. Licensing and export controls compound the challenge by increasing costs and delaying access to essential technologies. This compromises India's ability to achieve technological self-reliance and leaves it vulnerable to geopolitical pressures and supply chain disruptions.

In the 1990s, India embarked on a bold and urgent journey to build its nuclear capabilities, recognising that global power dynamics and national security could no longer be determined by external forces. Faced with international sanctions and pressure, India pushed ahead with its nuclear tests in 1998, sending a strong signal of self-reliance and strategic autonomy. The government galvanised the nation's scientific community, prioritised resources, and channelled efforts into indigenous R&D. The result was a nuclear deterrent that not only fortified India's security but also elevated its global standing.

The key lesson from this mission is the need for urgency, national focus, and a clear, strategic vision when pursuing technological self-reliance. Much like the nuclear programme, India's AI mission must be driven by a similar sense of pur-

The US-led restrictions on AI technology access should serve India a wake-up call to prioritise the technology as a national security imperative

pose and immediacy, ensuring that investment in talent, infrastructure, and R&D is prioritised.

AI is poised to define economic power, societal advancement, and military superiority for decades. The nation that leads in AI innovation will dictate global standards, control critical supply chains, and hold sway over international alliances. Yet, our preparedness for this race is dismal.

The National Programme on Artificial Intelligence, initiated in 2018, has made scant progress. The IndiaAI Mission, backed by a budget of \$1.2 billion, is embarrassingly inadequate when compared to global benchmarks. The US has committed \$280 billion under the CHIPS and Science Act. China has invested over \$104 billion in private AI ventures, while its government invested over \$208 billion in AI start-ups globally. India's spending is a fraction of this.

India's STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) ecosystem, while prolific in output, suffers from a quality deficit. India produces lakhs of engineers annually, but few are equipped with the skills required for advanced AI research or development. Much of our academia is outdated, and industry operates in silos without investing much in R&D, and the research collaboration between them is limited. Without systemic reforms to enhance quality, India risks becoming merely a consumer of AI technologies developed abroad, as happened with the Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 rev-

olutions. Such dependency will not only stifle innovation but also leave us exposed to geopolitical pressures and supply chain vulnerabilities.

While India might raise this issue of unfair access with President Trump, it is naive to expect concessions without a heavy price. Given his transactional style, the question is what will we be forced to trade in return. This is the risk of dependency.

This could include easing market access for US products in India, compelling companies like Starlink and Tesla without resistance from entrenched Indian conglomerates, and providing greater flexibility to e-commerce giants like Amazon and Walmart — not just in retail, but in expanding their licensing access for financial services. The US might also push for a strengthening of defence ties, including high-value purchases. The question for India is whether the concessions Trump would demand come at too steep a cost.

Without indigenous capabilities, India will find itself at a disadvantage, unable to bargain effectively in global negotiations. The assumption that India's market size alone can secure favourable terms is both simplistic and flawed. AI innovation thrives on intellectual property, talent, and infrastructure — not just consumer demand.

India's approach to AI must shift from complacency to mission urgency, *jeopardy* innovation, while celebrated, will not suffice for the complexity of AI development. This requires sustained investment in R&D, robust computing infrastructure, and a talent pipeline capable of competing on a global scale. Public-private partnerships, cross-border collaborations, and policy coherence are critical.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Defence reforms

Appropos of "India's year of reforms in defence" (FE, January 23), there is a need to develop a national security strategy with political accountability in 2025. Strengthening civil-military coordination, military modernisation, and concentrating on indigenisation are the major reforms required. The Defence Research and Development Organisation's performance is not up to the mark and needs innovation.

Infusing more capital and capability in defence industry and joint ventures with the private sector is vital. The production-linked incentive scheme must be expanded to defence manufacturing along with corporate tax cuts.

—NR Nagarajan, Sivakasi

### Quad cooperation

The first Quad grouping meet between foreign ministers of the US, India, Japan, and Australia on the day

after Trump's takeover signals a firm stand against China's aggression at sea. Its coast guard is carrying out water cannon attacks on vessels passing through overlapping areas of the South China Sea with the economic zones of other South Asian countries. China is enforcing its own code of conduct to be followed by the claimant countries of the South China Sea, contrary to the United Nations' verdict on the demarcation of maritime boundaries. The Quad will

be held regularly, focusing on the shared commitment of these four nations to maintain economic opportunity and peace, stability, and security, while opposing any unilateral action seeking to change the status quo by force or coercion. It will help protect Indian maritime borders by keeping China at bay, besides boosting trade ties with others.

—RS Narula, Patiala

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

# Development of Nicobar and the Shompens' struggle for survival

PRIVANSHI SINGH

In a recent development, Prof Vishva-  
jit Pandya, director of the Andaman  
and Nicobar Tribal Research Institute  
(ANTRI), underscored the findings of his  
report on the Shompens, one of the pri-  
mary aboriginal communities inhabiting  
the interior forests and coastal areas of the  
Great Nicobar Islands (GNI). In an inter-  
view with a media outlet, he highlighted  
that the Shompens oppose government  
projects encroaching on their uphill forests,  
which are primarily around the Galathea  
River basin, where most of their camps are  
concentrated. The report, published in  
2020, underscores this sentiment, yet no  
response has been received from the Union  
administration so far.

The proposed Great Nicobar Project,  
planned for this region, involved construct-  
ing an international container transship-  
ment terminal, a greenfield international  
airport, gas and solar-based power plants,  
and township and area development pro-

jects. The project requires 166.10 sq km of  
land, including approximately 130.75 sq km  
of forest area, as detailed in the environ-  
mental clearance documents.

The Shompens are nomadic tribes liv-  
ing in the interior of this island beyond the  
beach forest zone, categorised as their  
microenvironments, which is their small-  
scale localised ecosystem critical for their  
livelihood. Currently, they are classified  
among the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal  
Groups (PVTGs) in India. According to  
the 2011 Census, their population stood at  
229 (141 males and 88 females). They rely  
heavily on the tropical evergreen forests  
of GNI for their food, especially pandanus  
(screw pines), their staple diet, which is sup-  
plemented by animal-based foods such as  
sea fish, lobsters, prawns, mussels, and wild  
boar.

The study published in the Journal of  
Anthropological Survey of India (2017)  
revealed significant heterogeneity among  
different groups and sub-groups of the  
Shompens, who do not all live together.

While the tribe has adapted to cultivating  
bananas, tapioca, yams, coconuts, coloca-  
sia, and green chillies, besides screw pines,  
their primary concern is the loss of forest  
land, which grows their tapioca gardens.  
The project threatens their marital  
land practices, which are integral to their  
marriage, kinship, land, and water man-  
agement systems.

The Shompens are highly vulnerable to  
diseases and prone to being a degenerat-  
ing race. A 1990 study, following the 1981  
census, noted their population plummeted  
from 214 to 134 due to an epidemic out-  
break of gastroenteritis.

The Shompens do not allow outsiders to  
enter their main camps in the forests and  
resist any contact with their children and  
women or provide outside foods to avoid  
transmission of infections and diseases  
from the outsiders, as per the findings of  
research in the Journal of Anthropological  
Survey of India (2020). The Great Nicobar  
Project risks exacerbating such fears and  
health vulnerabilities.

Additionally, outsider influence has al-  
tered their traditional clothing patterns, in-  
creasing their susceptibility to respiratory  
ailments as noted in the 2020 study.

The rationality of doing out ratios to the  
community had increased post the  
2004 Tsunami disaster. The need for this  
'goodwill gesture' has even been enquired  
of in the study 'The Southern Nicobar Is-  
lands as Imaginative Geographies' (2016).  
Rather, the consumption of non-traditional  
food such as dal (lentils), rice, cooking oil,  
and biscuits poses health risks to the indig-  
enous community.

The fear of history repeating itself is not  
unfounded. The Tribal Reserve Territory  
created in 1956 to prevent exploitation of  
the Jarawas and their forests was rendered  
futile when the Andaman Trunk Road bis-  
ected their forest in 1978, leading to dis-  
ease outbreaks and exploitation.

Claims of 'empty spaces' for the Great  
Holistic Project are also in conflict with the  
2015 Shompens Policy, which clearly puts  
the welfare of the tribe right at the top.

Without a clear plan of action to safeguard  
the Shompens, these claims might prove  
to be a sham.

Way forward

**Minimal intervention in healthcare:**  
While the routine medical facilities must  
be introduced in a phased manner, inter-  
vention must remain minimal. The Indian  
Journal of Medical Research Survey (2024)  
reported good progress in detecting anaemia  
prevalence, fungal infection of the skin,  
acute respiratory infection, and abdominal  
pain among the Shompens. Further, devel-  
opments on better equipping the sub-med-  
ical centre in the New Chingam village,  
Campbell Bay tehsil, should be ensured,  
since visiting the two primary healthcare  
centres in non-tribal areas of Campbell Bay  
might not always be conventionally possible  
for the tribes.

**Culturally sensitive education:** Schools  
and welfare programmes initiated by  
ANTRI should be in consonance with the  
Shompens' cultural norms. Anti-schooling

feelings must be prevented through patient  
and inclusive implementation.

**Forest preservation:** Uphill forests, vital  
to the Shompens' survival, should remain  
untouched. Their preferences, as outlined  
in the 2020 video report, must guide con-  
servation efforts.

**Emic-based approaches:** Research meth-  
odologies must focus on the description and  
understanding of the culture as perceived  
by the community members to understand  
their needs and promote measures for their  
survival. For instance, a 2020 ethnohistori-  
cal study conducted among the Shompens  
revealed interesting information about 43  
plants and artefacts used in shelter, trans-  
portation, hunting, fishing, food gathering,  
ornamentation, cooking vessels, fire drills,  
and dressing purposes.

**Respect for autonomy:** Viewing the  
Shompens as merely 'shy' is reductive.  
Respecting their autonomy and cultural  
practices is crucial for their survival.  
(The writer is a student at the National  
Law University, Delhi)

## Isolating US companies from cartel activities could be impossible given that the criminal groups operate in sectors like agriculture and tourism, leaving some businesses vulnerable to sanctions

MARIA ABI-HABIB AND SIMON ROMERO

President Donald Trump's execu-  
tive order designating Mexi-  
can cartels and other criminal  
organisations as foreign  
terrorists could force some  
American companies to for-  
go doing business in Mexico rather than  
risk US sanctions, according to former  
government officials and analysts — an  
outcome that could have a major effect on  
both countries given their deep economic  
interdependence.

The executive order, which Trump  
signed on January 20, is intended to apply  
maximum pressure on Mexico to rein in  
its dangerous drug trade. The designa-  
tion, more generally, also gives his admin-  
istration more power to impose econom-  
ic penalties and travel restrictions, and  
potentially even to take military action in  
foreign countries. Yet, disentangling car-  
tel operations from US interests in Mexico  
could be immensely complicated. Mexico  
is the United States' largest trade partner  
of goods, and many American companies  
have manufacturing operations there.

Even more complicated, these criminal  
networks have extended their operations  
far beyond drug trafficking and human  
smuggling. They are now embedded in a  
wide swath of the legal economy, from avo-  
cado farming to the country's billion-dollar  
tourism industry, making it hard to be  
absolutely sure that American companies  
are isolated from cartel activities.

"This has come up in previous admin-  
istrations across the political spectrum  
and from members of Congress who have  
wanted to do it," said Samantha Sultoon,  
a senior adviser on sanctions policy and  
treasury finance in the Trump and Biden  
administrations.

"But no one has done it because they  
have looked at what the implications  
would be on trade, economic and finan-  
cial relationships between Mexico and  
the US," she added. "They have all come  
away thinking that such a designation  
would actually be super shortsighted and  
ill-considered, though prior admin-  
istrations viewed the US-Mexico relationship  
far differently than the incoming Trump  
administration appears to."

The foreign terrorist designation could  
lead to severe penalties — including sub-  
stantial fines, asset seizures and criminal  
charges — on companies and individuals  
found to be paying ransom or extortion  
payments. US companies could also be  
ensnared by standard payments made to  
Mexican companies that a cartel controls  
without the American companies' knowl-  
edge. Some extortion payments, even if  
made under duress, could be considered  
"material support" to cartels, said Pablo  
Zarate, senior managing director at  
FTI Consulting, an American firm that  
released a report laying out some of the  
risks of the terrorist designation.

Former US officials and analysts point-  
ed out that it would be nearly impossible  
to identify which business may employ  
or be affiliated with cartel members  
given the tens of thousands of people in-  
volved and operating in various indus-  
tries, including the hotel and agriculture  
sectors. Cartels use the legal economy  
to launder money, which could mean  
that unwitting employees working at a  
resort or an avocado packing com-

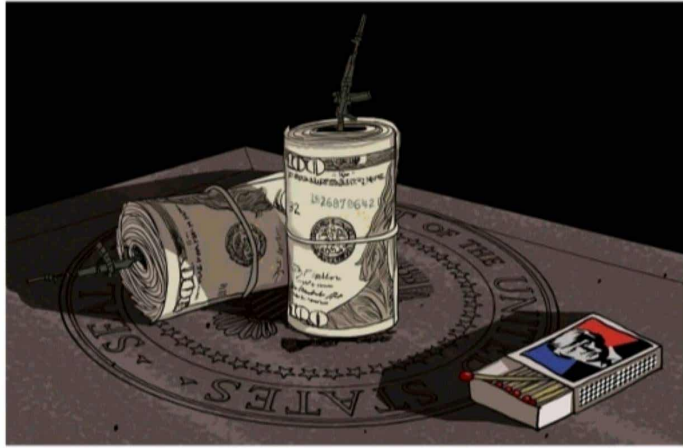


ILLUSTRATION: DEEPAK HARICHANDAN

## Labelling cartels 'terrorists' could hurt US economy

pany could technically be on the cartel  
payroll but not know it.

As a result, companies in the risk-averse  
American financial sector may simply re-  
fuse to wire money to a Mexican factory,  
for example, to facilitate cross-border  
production and trade, or to wire money  
between personal accounts.

"Banks may turn away customers, be-  
cause they may not think they are worth  
the risk if they have links to Mexico," said  
Eric Jacobstein, a former State Depart-  
ment official in the Biden administration.  
Banks could ultimately decide to avoid  
entire sectors perceived as high risk, said  
Fabian Teichmann, a Swiss lawyer and ex-  
pert on terrorist financing. Teichmann  
singled out Mexico's avocado trade, where  
cartels have drastically expanded their  
operations, as one area that could come  
under greater scrutiny. "Banks might say,  
'We don't want to be anywhere close to  
those who are considered to be terrorists,  
so we want to avoid that risk,'" Teichmann  
said. "From a banking perspective, that  
will be a very reasonable decision."

Other types of financial institutions  
that facilitate payments between the US  
and Mexico could also be affected, such  
as Venmo or PayPal, which Trump's close  
confidant Elon Musk helped found.  
The terrorist label could also push big  
parts of Mexico's economy further into  
the shadows, where cash is used instead  
of electronically traceable transactions,  
making it harder for investigators to ex-  
amine the cartels' financial structures,  
Teichmann said.

"If people can't bank legitimately, they

escape to so-called underground banking  
systems," Teichmann said.

In 2024, the American Chamber of  
Commerce in Mexico surveyed 218 com-  
panies and found that 12% of respondents  
said that "organised crime has taken par-  
tial control of the sales, distribution and  
or pricing of their goods."

Multinational banana producer Chi-  
quita Brands was found liable in 2024 for  
killings by a Colombian right-wing para-  
military group that was designated as a  
terrorist organisation. Chiquita Brands  
said that it had been extorted by the  
paramilitary group and forced to make  
payments to protect its Colombian em-  
ployees. Plaintiffs, however, argued that  
the company had paid the paramilitary  
group to run out residents to buy land at  
depressed values.

The terrorist designation would also  
hurt American companies that are firm-  
ly north of the border but rely on Mexican  
labour. The designation is so broad and  
vague that ranches in Texas or farms in  
California could be swept up by the pen-  
alties if their employees send remittances  
to family members in Mexico who are in-  
volved in organised crime.

If money transfer companies like West-  
Union also stop transactions to Mexi-  
co over worries about properly vetting  
Mexican clients, it could affect the remit-  
tances the country relies on. That would  
be devastating for the Mexican economy,  
which received \$63.3 billion in remittances  
in 2023, nearly 5% of the country's gross  
domestic product.

The foreign terrorist designation could

also pave the way for the US to deploy  
forces inside Mexico against criminal or-  
ganisations without the Mexican govern-  
ment's consent, as it did in Afghanistan  
and Syria.

But Afghanistan was occupied by the  
US, and Syria's government lost control  
over much of its territory in recent years.  
That gave Washington some cover under  
international law for the US military to  
deploy troops and launch special-forces  
operations to kill or capture terrorist lead-  
ers in those countries.

Mexico, however, has built up coopera-  
tion with the US for more than 30 years to  
counter the cartels. Mexico could threaten  
to halt cooperation if the US is seen to be  
violating Mexico's sovereignty. It was the  
US federal prosecutor's office arrested  
Mexico's former defence secretary during  
Trump's first administration, the Mexi-  
can government halted all cooperation  
with the US Drug Enforcement Admin-  
istration. "Unilateral action would be  
catastrophic," said Craig Deare, a former  
US military attaché at the US Embassy in  
Mexico in the 1990s. "It would dismantle  
any collaboration and decades of Republi-  
can and Democratic efforts to build a de-  
fence relationship with Mexico," he said,  
adding, "If you don't limit cooperation now,  
wait until Mexico cuts all ties."

On Jan 21, President Claudia Shein-  
baum of Mexico issued a stern warning to  
Trump during her daily news conference.  
"We will always defend our sovereignty,"  
she said. "We all want to fight the drug  
cartels. We have to coordinate efforts; we  
have to collaborate," she said. **NYT**

## HMPV scare: Lessons for future

OLINDA TIMMS

The Covid-19 pandem-  
ic, coupled with the  
World Health Organi-  
sation's warnings about pos-  
sible viral outbreaks, has un-  
derstandably left the general  
population uneasy about what  
lies ahead. From time to time,  
reports of the monkeypox vi-  
rus, Zika, Nipah, MEKRS, and  
SARS surface and linger in the  
public consciousness for weeks.  
Most recently, the HMPV virus  
grabbed local headlines, though  
it has been known for decades as  
a cause of common cold sym-  
ptoms, particularly in winter.

The sudden attention on  
HMPV brought back pandemic  
fears, consuming social media,  
until health authorities provid-  
ed reassurances and informa-  
tion. This may be the right time  
to revisit the lessons from the  
Covid-19 pandemic and address  
unresolved bioethical concerns.  
The WHO noted the out-  
break of HMPV in China but  
has not classified it as a virus  
outbreak of global concern.  
It lists HMPV among viruses  
that can cause influenza-like  
illness (ILI) and severe acute  
respiratory infections (SARI)  
in winter. Renowned virolog-  
ists, such as Dr Gagandeep  
Kang, have downplayed appre-  
hensions, emphasising India's  
robust surveillance systems  
and reassuring that current  
data does not warrant panic.  
Many viruses affect human be-  
ings, and most are effectively  
handled by the immune system  
with minimal harm.

The first thing to question is  
the media's tendency to create  
headlines out of every reported  
outbreak of influenza. Such re-  
porting fosters fear, paranoia,  
and unnecessary testing, often  
overwhelming healthcare sys-  
tems. Media professionals must  
exercise restraint and work  
with health authorities to pro-  
vide a balanced picture that is  
informative and helpful. Sensa-  
tionalism can provoke negative  
reactions against healthcare  
personnel, hospitals, and pa-  
tients. The recent news report  
about HMPV, for instance, iden-  
tified the hospital where testing  
occurred and described the in-  
fected paediatric patients. This  
breaches confidentiality and  
risks perpetuating stigma,  
as seen during the Covid-19 pa-  
ndemic. It is essential to exercise  
discretion in reporting patient  
and hospital details, given the  
rapid spread of unverified infor-  
mation on social media. Health  
authorities must take proactive  
measures to counter misinfor-  
mation and provide authori-  
tative, clear guidance about  
official assessments, online

websites, and protocols of care.

Social cohesion plays a  
crucial role in times of crisis.  
Communities, irrespective of  
diverse narratives, must show  
solidarity and provide care.  
Building bridges during nor-  
mality strengthens resilience  
during emergencies. At the core  
of any crisis is a human being in  
distress, which should awaken  
compassion in all of us.

Equally important is the  
readiness of the healthcare sys-  
tem. Pandemic protocols that  
were recommended at the end  
of the Covid-19 pandemic must  
be implemented to strengthen  
public healthcare infrastruc-  
ture to treat the huge number  
of patients that cannot access  
private hospitals. Cadres of  
health workers need to be made  
pandemic-ready for triage,  
treatment, and reassurance of  
patients as required, without  
placing a strain on hospitals.  
Advances in PCR testing now  
enable virus screening for sick  
patients and targeted care.  
These testing kits must be  
made widely available but used  
with discretion to avoid waste-  
age or shortage. The memory  
of migrants making their way  
home in desolation still haunts  
the collective memory, and  
the next time around, nobody  
should be excluded from care  
or sustenance, with a clear and  
viable public health plan acces-  
sible to all. In low-resource en-  
vironments, logistics, education,  
and financial help remain the  
greatest challenges.

The capacity to manufacture  
vaccines was another critical  
factor that helped us emerge  
from Covid-19, and invest-  
ment in this sector would be  
both prudent and life-saving.  
A plan is needed to prevent  
vaccine misinformation and  
allow patients to comply with  
public health efforts. Regular  
budget allocations at state  
levels in the intervening years  
can boost healthcare capacity  
required in emergencies. An-  
other step would be to ensure  
that every citizen is covered by  
health schemes or health out-  
reach programmes, bridging  
the inequality and healthcare  
gap that became so painfully  
obvious during Covid-19. Such  
efforts could build citizen trust  
in health systems that they will  
be inclusive and deliver on the  
care required in a crisis.

In this time of reprieve, as  
we face an uncertain future, it  
may be prudent to reflect on the  
bioethical concerns of ineq-  
uality, harms, and confidentiality,  
revisiting our recent experi-  
ences of Covid-19 and evaluating  
our preparedness once more.  
(The writer is a doctor and  
author of Bioethical Ethics)

### OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

50 YEARS AGO: JANUARY 1975

Mystery disease cripples  
66 in Sagar Taluk

Bangalore, Jan 24  
A strange case of about 66 persons,  
all Harijans, being afflicted by an  
unidentified disease causing paralysis  
of limbs from the waist down, has been  
reported from Sagar Taluk of Shimoga  
District. Of the 66 affected, 38 had  
been admitted to the Sagar Hospital.  
There was no medical conclusion about  
the nature of the disease yet. Mr. C. B.  
D'Mello, Health Commissioner to the  
State Government, told pressmen to-  
day. He said the first case was reported  
to the Government last week.

25 YEARS AGO: JANUARY 2000

Bangalore, Hyderabad  
vie for IRDA office

New Delhi, Jan 23  
The Union government is understood  
to have decided Hyderabad and  
Bangalore to set up the headquarters  
of the Insurance Regulatory and De-  
velopment Authority (IRDA). The two  
Houses of Parliament passed the IRDA  
Bill in the winter session and the new  
piece of legislation recently secured  
the President's assent. Now, the Centre  
will have to constitute the authority and  
create infrastructure for it in function.  
The BJP-led government will decide on  
the location on its office by mid-March.

### OASIS | JAMUNA RAO

## Does life live on?

Death saw through this. Realising that  
they had been spotted, the Gods exited  
the Vedas. Then they entered *Stanza*,  
the Vedas. They took refuge in  
the syllable OM, the sound  
from which the cosmos had  
emerged. It is the *pranava* which reverberates.  
It is immortal. By entering the  
*pranava* the Gods became  
immortal and fearless. In the  
mortal orbit, this reverberation  
became the *adhyatma*. It  
became that with which the priests  
invoked the deities and sang the desires  
of the patron into being. The Chandogya  
laid down the rules for such chanting

in rituals. The ancients believed it was  
only by the use of the correct intonation  
and metre that the desired came into  
being. The priest became powerful.  
The restraint on his power was  
his belief that if the chanting  
was faulty, his head would  
roll, literally. Outsourcing  
the fulfilment of desires was  
a luxury that only the rich  
patrons could afford. Desires,  
however, cut across all mortals.  
It is perhaps in recognition of this,  
that the first book or *adhyatma* of the  
Chandogya ends with a strange anec-  
dote: Galva Maitreyi, a student intent  
on mastering chanting on behalf of a

patron and to understand the concept  
of immortality for himself, set out to  
meditate. A white dog appeared to him.  
Other dogs approached the white one  
and said "Blessed one, sing into being  
food for us. We are hungry."

The white dog made them form a  
circle holding each other's tail. He led  
the chanting and they followed. OM, let  
us eat, OM let us drink, the chant reverberated.  
The food and drink appeared.  
The dogs ate. It was perhaps the first  
lesson for Galva. For the mortal world  
food was supreme. It sustained life.  
The desire for life was earnest and went  
beyond all techniques. The quest for  
immortality was but a concept.



## Decrees from the bully pulpit

The blitz of executive orders signed by Donald Trump, the 47th President of the United States, is a dramatic forerunner of the Trumpian vision of American triumphalism, about the radical and subversive contours of which there is little doubt. The orders included the ones entailing the nation's withdrawal from the World Health Organisation, declaring drug cartels as 'foreign terrorist organisations', requiring federal workers return to the office full-time, revoking birthright citizenship, and pulling the United States out of the Paris climate agreement. American presidents have used executive orders to legislate in ways that overhang far beyond administrative activity – that is, they have used these tools to achieve policy goals – especially those they know they are unlikely to accomplish with the help of Congress. The list of impactful executive orders – from George Washington's 'Neutrality Proclamation' to the executive orders issued by Woodrow Wilson in World War I to Dwight D. Eisenhower's numerous national security directives to John F. Kennedy's order to control racial violence in Alabama to Harry Truman's desegregation of the armed forces to Ronald Reagan's seizures of regulatory control – is long.

President Trump has begun his pledge to give America a MAGA makeover and now, a wary world awaits his vision unfolds. Trump took aim at the Biden administration's federal procurement targets for clean power, electric vehicles and other energy goals, and revoked a 2021 Biden executive order that set a goal for 50% of US vehicles to be electric by 2030. Attorneys general from 22 states filed a lawsuit to block Trump's executive order ending birthright citizenship, a century-old practice granting citizenship to US-born children regardless of their parents' status which they viewed as violative of the 14th Amendment. But if Trump has his way in revoking the automatic citizenship granted to children born to parents who are on temporary work visas (like H-1B) or those awaiting green cards, it would surely impact nations of countries with high levels of immigration to the US, including India and China.

That the President signed pardons for 1,500 of his supporters who were part of the January 6, 2021 attack on the US Capitol trying to overturn the 2020 election might be a clue to the depth of polarisation of American politics. His decision to repeal various executive orders promoting diversity programmes and LGBTQ equality – the diktat to the US government is to only recognise "two genders, male and female" – also has the incendiary potential to unleash a new gender war.

## Familiar package of poll-season sops

The election campaign in Delhi has become a soap war between parties that are competitively offering goodies in cash, kind and services to the voters. Election manifestos are promissory notes now, not statements of future plans and policies. After a bunch of promises are made, supplementary offers follow, taking into consideration the offers made by the other parties. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) which started the trend in its present form with the promise of free power and water, a decade ago, has progressively refined its package. This time, it includes a monthly payment of Rs 2,100 to unemployed women, Rs 18,000 a month to Hindu and Sikh priests, financing foreign education of students and other benefits. It has also announced an additional package. The BJP's promises include monthly payments of Rs 2,500 to poor women, Rs 21,000 to pregnant women, a monthly pension for the elderly and other benefits. The Congress has also made competitive offers.

Promises of pressure cookers, coupons and other goodies have been part of election campaigns in the past. There has also been a tradition of distributing money the day before the election. But the present system is more sophisticated; the distribution of benefits is now legal and more systematic. The victory of the BJP in Haryana and Maharashtra and of the Congress in Karnataka and Telangana had much to do with the sops and schemes the parties offered. The ruling party gets an advantage over the Opposition because it is in a position to start distributing the sops even before the election. Maharashtra is the latest example. The sops are now presented as welfare schemes. Schemes that put money in the hands of people, especially those from the weaker sections of society, have a social and economic value. But when they become competitive handouts without the necessary checks, they test the limits of fair practices, violate electoral ethics and damage democracy.

The money and benefits provided to individuals or groups before and after the elections are from the public exchequer. Here, the exchequer, owned and built by the public with taxes and other contributions, is used by parties for their political gains. They also brand the sops as their gifts to the people with the seal of Prime Ministers or Chief Ministers on them, personalising the entire process. When the largesse is extended to some sections on a big scale, it depletes the funds available to build infrastructure, create public goods and services and implement programmes that benefit all citizens. No party tells the people how these sops are funded. Many states are facing financial crunch because of the election-driven schemes the governments are offering, and that should serve as a lesson for others who are pitching sops as part of poll strategy.

**Welfare schemes, packaged as handouts without necessary checks, violate electoral ethics**

China's hydropower project necessitates a greater understanding of implications on security and ecology

PRASENJIT CHOWDHURY

China's plan to build a \$137-billion mega dam in Tibet on the lower reaches of the Yarlung Tsangpo – the Brahmaputra in India – and located at a huge gorge in the Himalayan reaches where the mighty river makes a huge U-turn to flow into Arunachal Pradesh and then to Bangladesh has raised legitimate concerns in India and Bangladesh. The project, according to reports, would dwarf any other single infrastructure project on the planet, including China's own Three Gorges Dam, regarded as the world's largest hydropower station.

India is naturally sceptical, first because the dam on the Tibetan plateau has wider implications for the security and ecology of the states in India and Bangladesh. The Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna basin is one of the richest basins in the world in terms of natural resources (hydropower, fisheries, forestry, irrigated agriculture, navigation, environmental amenities, tourism, minerals, etc.) and despite brave attempts of rebranding itself, India, along with Nepal and Bangladesh, continues to be in the league of some of the poorest in the world. It is also a densely populated region, the greater Hindu Kush Himalaya being home to nearly half of the world's population; approximately 630 million people in an area of 1.7 million sq km.

China's lack of transparency raises concerns about flash floods or water scarcity downstream besides the more alarming factor of the dam being able to give China leverage in a state of armed conflict. It is not known whether there were any consultations between the two countries over the proposed dam. Consultation between countries on the construction of dams on rivers that flow through them is part of the standard protocols of hydro-diplomacy because the flow of water, ecology, and other factors are involved. Even though Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi and Indian National Security Adviser Ajit Doval met on December 18 and talked about "data sharing on trans-border rivers," among other things, the know-

edge if this included any conversations about the Yarlung Tsangpo dam is not forthcoming. China must be aware that arbitrary and unilateral actions go against the spirit of bilateral relations.

The battle of attrition over water resources is a major fallout of the 'hydro-hegemony' of India and China. Arunachal Chief Minister Pema Khandu has said that the Siang Upper Multipurpose Project (SUMP), estimated to cost Rs 1.13 lakh crore, was being planned to mitigate risks of flooding if China released excess water. The proposed hydroelectric dam on the Siang River in Arunachal Pradesh is one of the world's largest hydroelectric projects, with a potential capacity of 11,000



MW. In the context of India-China relations, New Delhi perceives the Siang dam to be a countermeasure to China's upstream projects. It is touted to be a project that signals India's ability to respond to Beijing's activities and secure its downstream interests. But does it? The Chinese dam will produce electricity equivalent to the Three Gorges Dam in China – some 60,000 MW of hydropower – and due to its enormity alone can have serious geological impacts in the earthquake-prone Himalayan belt.

### Disstress and displacement

The problem is that the Siang dam project is facing protests from the local population deeply apprehensive over the severe ecological impact due to the construction of the dam despite the advocacy of the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC) justifying the project on the grounds of national security and the adverse impact of the Chinese dam. While the flow in the Siang/Dihang Valley between Tuting

and Pasighat may well be reduced/affected due to any Chinese dam in the immediate upstream area in Tibet, a dam in the upper reaches of the river in India may ensure that there is adequate and regulated water flow in Siang.

The Siang project is likely to require the displacement of thousands of indigenous people in Arunachal Pradesh, causing significant social unrest. The Three Gorges Dam displaced 1.4 million inhabitants (critics insisted the figure was 1.9 million) upstream in more than 1,500 cities, towns, and villages along the river, not to speak of the destruction of magnificent scenery and countless rare architectural and archaeological sites.

China, as has been seen, does not do a thing without adequate thought, planning, and resolve, sometimes running into decades. The idea for the Three Gorges Dam was first discussed in the 1920s by Chinese Nationalist Party leaders and was given a new impetus when Mao Zedong ordered feasibility studies of many sites in 1953. Though detailed planning for the project began in 1955, it dragged on till 1992 when Premier Li Peng, who had himself trained as an engineer, was finally able to persuade the National People's Congress to ratify the decision to build the dam. What is instructive is that the Three Gorges Dam began officially operating as late as in 2016.

The pros and cons of large dam-building have been discussed ad nauseam while the jury is still out on whether we need to rely heavily on dam-irrigated agriculture, or should apply water-saving technologies and use drought-resistant crops to avoid global food crises or whether hydropower is a renewable and clean alternative for fossil fuels, or whether energy from dammed rivers has higher environmental and social costs. While the anti-dam movement is increasing in developed countries, it is not only that China has built more large dams than any other country but it is aggressively developing hydropower as part of its long-term national plan. A comprehensive study must be conducted on how the Chinese dam construction across the Brahmaputra is going to influence ecology, seismic activity, and water flow in northeast India and Bangladesh, especially during the dry season, given the fact that China is deliberately weaponising water.

*(The writer is a Kolkata-based commentator on geopolitics, development, and culture)*

### RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

## Coiled in the loft

An ugly side to the unwelcome guest was that the mice vanished

PRAGATI NAYAK

Our cat, Garfield, recently developed a fascination with the garden shed. This repository of odds and ends is filled with gardening equipment, including pipes, spades, brooms, rakes, and watering cans. He stood at the entrance, transfixed by something at the back of the shed. My daughter Lily followed his gaze and promptly retreated with a gasp, hurrying into the house.

I had been watching from the window and accused her as she entered. "What's wrong?" I asked. "Why the excitement?" "It's a cobra!" she whispered. I queried her whisper, and she replied, "It might be a cobra."

Lily insisted she had seen the distinctive design on the back of its head. I fetched my phone to capture evidence, careful not to use the flash and startle the reptile, which was slithering about, perhaps trying to find a snack. After some effort, I managed to take a side-view photo. As I clicked, the snake turned and seemed to gaze directly at me. I clicked again and then waited for it to open its hood to prove that it was the venomous creature we suspected it to be. It did not oblige and disappeared into the gardening paraphernalia.

Our local snake catcher requires a photograph before attending to a call. His experience had taught him not to trust panicked callers who think all snakes are the venomous kind. Need-

less to say, he had been misled by false alarms in the past. Since we couldn't obtain a clear picture, we chose not to summon him, hoping the snake would wander off as mysteriously as it appeared.

Later in the day, Lily went to the attic to fetch something. She heard a rustling noise and to her horror, she saw that it was our friend, the cobra, nestling in a stack of palm fronds. She turned and ran down the stairs, remembering to close the attic door as she went.

We gave the snake a couple of days to vacate the premises and then cautiously ascended to the attic. There was no sign of it in the huge junk-filled room. It could be anywhere among the things stored there for decades.

It has been over a month now. We haven't seen the snake leave. It could still be up there. One bright side is that we no longer hear the mice scurrying about in the attic.

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## India will do well to tread cautiously

Apropos 'Bracing for Trump impact' (Jan 23), the article provides a thorough and thoughtful analysis of the anticipated turbulence in the wake of Trump's America First policy. This assumes special significance, given Trump's unconventional approach to diplomacy and trade. While he has been instrumental in brokering a truce between Israel and Hamas, his stance on trade tariffs and diplomatic norms raises concerns about potential economic surprises. India must be cautious and prepared to face challenges, particularly 'Chinese dumping,' which

already affects many Indian industries. The Commerce Ministry's efforts to analyse the impact of these developments are welcome. The world is worried about the implications of Trump's presidency. In the meantime, left-leaning world leaders must introspect and reassess their strategies to bridge the growing gap between their promises and actual accomplishments, which has contributed to the rise of right-wing ideologies in the global political landscape.

Jose Abraham, Kottayam

### Visa advantage?

Apropos 'Need competent people, says Trump amid H-1B visa row' (Jan 23), President Donald Trump's reforms to the H-1B visa programme aim to prioritise highly skilled professionals and streamline the visa process. The new salary-based model will benefit Indian professionals in the US, who can now renew their visas domestically. Students on F-1 visas can also transition to H-1B visas more efficiently. Research-oriented institutions are exempt from the annual visa cap, promoting innovation. These changes demonstrate a commitment to merit-based policies and will strengthen US-India economic ties.

N Sathasiva Reddy, Bengaluru

### Democracy at home

Apropos 'Dhankhar questions need for parties to issue whip to their lawmakers' (Jan 23), Vice-President Jagdeep Dhankhar's comments on the need for parties to issue whips to lawmakers are timely and thought-provoking. Dhankhar argues that whips curtail freedom of expression and subject representatives to servility. He cites the US Senate's practice of persuasion over whip, highlighting the importance of democratic norms. However, Dhankhar's own party affiliation raises questions about his ability to preside over Rajya Sabha meetings impartially. To truly serve democracy, he must put aside party interests and prioritise the principles of

democracy. Like charity, democracy too must begin at home.

M Basavaraj, Davangere

### Unacceptable conduct

The BJP's internal conflicts are escalating, with the recent core committee meeting sparking another round of strife. The state in-charge Radha Mohandas Agarwal's conduct towards former minister B Srimamulu was humiliating and unacceptable.

Manikanta Pa Hiremath, Bagalkot

Our readers are welcome to email letters to [letters@deccanherald.com](mailto:letters@deccanherald.com) in only letters emailed – not handwritten – will be accepted. All letters must carry the sender's postal address and phone number.

### SPEAK OUT

I strongly protest the claim that Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose died on August 18, 1945, as stated in social media posts by Rahul Gandhi! I also demand that Rahul Gandhi apologise within the next 24 hours for showing disrespect to Netaji, who was the first Prime Minister of India.



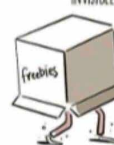
Sukanta Majumdar, Union Minister and BJP leader

Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not to his own facts.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan

### TO BE PRECISE

THE ONLY WAY TO MAKE POLLUTION AND MISGOVERNANCE INVISIBLE TO THEM!



### IN PERSPECTIVE

## Between gunshots: What next for Gaza?

When history is fraught, when truce is temporary, can hope be justified?

ADVA MADHAVAN

After 15 months of fighting, Israel and Hamas have reached a ceasefire agreement which came into effect on January 19. Yet, the fact that it is not the first ceasefire between the two – and probably won't be the last – is a sobering thought. The question 'what solution will end the conflict permanently?' remains unanswered, and with the slurry remain unresolved. Most pressing of all are the disputes over Palestinian sovereignty. Both Israel and Palestine claim Jerusalem as the capital, an issue that is deeply contentious since it is rooted in religious sentiments. Moreover, Israeli settlements in the West Bank, which the International Court of Justice has termed 'illegal', will continue to add to the existing tensions. The many cycles of violence that have been initiated by both sides since the Balfour Declaration in 1917 now serve as baggage that must be shed if efforts towards peace have to move forward.

Furthermore, broader regional frictions, such as between Iran and Israel and Israel and Yemen, will continue to impact the conflict. These dynamics can result in other players undermining peace efforts to serve their own interests. What now, then? Although history makes it seem unenviable, the way forward seems to be the recognition of Palestine on Israel's part as an independent state. Both parties need to agree on their borders and honour the agreement settlements on either side beyond the boundaries also need to be addressed. The question whether Jerusalem is a shared or dual-capital city needs to be resolved as well.

Additionally, sharing resources, especially water, needs to be fairly negotiated, given that both rely on the mountain aquifer, the coastal aquifer and the Jordan River basin. Finally, both sides need to make security assurances. Palestine needs to know there will be no more occupation or military incursions, and Israel needs to be assured that there will be no more terrorist attacks. While this may seem like unrealistic hope for the region, perhaps the time has come for a leap of faith.

*(The writer is a junior research analyst at the Takhshila Institution)*

## Withdrawal symptoms

US is ceding global leadership where it matters most

Two executive orders signed by United States President Donald Trump soon after taking office offer potent examples of the sole superpower's repudiation of leadership in critical global challenges: Climate change and health. The first is withdrawal from the 2015 Paris agreement under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. The second is to leave the World Health Organization (WHO). Both decisions represent expressions of Mr Trump's "America First" agenda. It is an open question whether these withdrawals would benefit the US; they will certainly impact the rest of the world, especially the developing world, which accounts for 83 per cent of the global population.

Consider the withdrawal from the Paris agreement. The last time Mr Trump did so as 45th President, and the action was unsuccessful because the agreement at that time required a four-year timeframe from the time a country invoked the withdrawal mechanism. By then, Joe Biden was elected to office and rejoined the accord. Also, 30 states of the US and several municipal governments continued to implement programmes to reduce greenhouse-gas emission and had committed themselves to upholding the agreement. This time, however, the withdrawal mechanism allows a one-year timeframe. The "Putting America First in International Environmental Agreements" executive order adds bite to this move by limiting the US' contribution towards other countries' mitigation and adaptation agreements. Mr Trump also scrapped the US International Climate Finance Plan, established under Mr Biden to channel funds through multilateral and bilateral institutions to help developing countries' climate challenges.

The pre-emptive withdrawal of marquee investment banks from similar green funds ahead of Mr Trump's inauguration suggested these funds, grossly inadequate to meet developing-country needs in any case, would dry up soon. The Unleashing American Energy, which disbands all research on the impact of greenhouse-gas emission, and the 47th President's decision to refocus on fossil fuels put a question mark on the US' target of reducing greenhouse-gas emissions to 61-66 per cent below 2005 levels by 2035. With global temperatures hitting record highs, the negation of climate-change action by the world's second-largest emitter with a deep historical responsibility for the greenhouse-gas stick in the atmosphere sends a profoundly negative signal on the gravity of the crisis.

The damaging impact of the withdrawal from the WHO will be felt sooner, with the Trump administration signalling that the US will suspend paying its member's dues, which it considered onerous and unfair. The US was the WHO's largest funder, so this decision immediately puts at risk funding for a host of critical global research programmes for diseases and vaccine development, including smallpox, Covid, flu and emerging diseases of pandemic proportions. Via the WHO, the US also supports programmes for clean water, food, and vaccines to children in poor nations. The withdrawal could also impact the US as well by excluding it from global information databases on diseases, including new influenza strains. Though criticism that the WHO requires reform is valid, withdrawal is not the answer. It is possible that China will step into the breach again, as it did with a \$30 million pledge when Mr Trump stopped funding the WHO during the pandemic. It is an open question whether the world's most powerful democracy ceding moral leadership to the world's most powerful authoritarian regime is in the world's best interests.

## No grey areas

Regulated trading before listing will increase transparency

The Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) is considering asking exchanges to enable a "when listed" section on their platforms where initial public offerings (IPOs) may be traded in the period of three working days between allotment and listing. This is to regularise grey market trading in such shares. The current situation leads to rampant "off-the-books" speculation during that period of hiatus. Sebi Chairperson Madhabi Puri Buch said that a "when listed" section, which allows allotments (rather than the shares themselves) to be traded in organised fashion, would allow a primary investor who received an allotment in an IPO to cash out immediately by selling it in a transparent transaction, without waiting for formal listing and trading of the shares. Such trades of allotments could then be regularised by changing the names of the shareholders as appropriate once the share is listed on the secondary market.

This would be an improvement in some respects on the current situation. Transaction prices on the grey market are opaque and impossible to verify. This concept would, therefore, enable better price discovery for investors and analysts, assuming the bid/offer prices and volume data in the "when listed" section are visible, as is the case in secondary-market trading. Also this would probably mitigate the situation where shares are suddenly listed at huge premiums due to the lack of a mechanism to track grey-market price movements. Price appreciation in the "when-listed" section would be reflected as they occur, rather than being captured in one shot on listing day. Such a mechanism would also clarify the tax payable in instances where IPO allottees instantly cash out for capital gains. However, such a measure would not necessarily curb speculation but, in conjunction with other measures to regulate the primary market, especially the lightly regulated segment of small and medium enterprises, it would enable investors and authorities to monitor the market better. Besides, if Sebi reduces the time window between allotment and listing, this could also impose another constraint upon grey market speculators in that they would get less time to carry out their operations.

Given the improvement and adoption of technology, which has helped reduce the time for settlement in the Indian stock market, the regulator must look for ways to reduce the time between allotment and listing, preferably to one day. Overall, the IPO market has seen very high and increasing activity over the past 18 months, with IPOs on both the mainboard and SME (small and medium enterprises) segment attracting strong investor interest. In 2024, 91 companies raised a staggering ₹16.6 trillion (\$18.5 billion). Multiple issues have seen 100 times subscription, which means that an allotment was like winning a lottery. As a result, many stocks have listed at huge premiums to the issue price. In turn, bumper profits for allottees have led to even more interest being generated, and this has led to a surge in activity in the grey market where an allotment can be traded even before listing. That rationale for the new proposed segment is simple enough: If investors wish to trade within this window, they should be allowed to do so on a regulated space. It is a pragmatic approach.

# Trump's disruptive agenda

Amid a barrage of policy measures, a potential US-China rapprochement could pose the most consequential risk for India

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



Anyone believed that much of Donald Trump's presidential campaign agenda was mere rhetoric, who should have been comprehensively disabused of such notions. Both in his inaugural speech and later during a free-wheeling interaction with the media while he signed several ordinances at the Oval Office, Mr Trump hit the ground running. As a "lame-duck" President he will operate under no political or electoral constraints.

An unprecedented political situation prevails in the US today. A key feature of the US political structure has been the constitutionally-in-built system of checks and balances, with a separation of powers among the executive, the legislature and the judiciary, each with well-defined and relatively autonomous authority. This time round, the president is unlikely to be restrained by Congress, as both houses are dominated by Republican majorities, and more importantly, by legislators beholden to Mr Trump's support or hesitant to oppose him for fear of retribution.

The Supreme Court, packed with right-wing appointees during Mr Trump's first term, has already pronounced that the President would be immune from prosecution for any actions he takes while in office. The federal nature of the US state may offer some constraint, especially from Democratic Party ruled states. But overall, Mr Trump is unlikely to face any meaningful opposition to implementing his radical policy measures. Even the vibrant US civil society and liberal media, which could provide some semblance of resistance, are likely to be swamped by the social media controlled by his corporate acolytes, including Elon Musk with "X" and recent converts

like the CEOs of Meta, Google and Amazon.

Mr Trump has sought to give a reprieve to the Chinese-owned TikTok, the popular video-sharing app, which had been banned from the US, a ban upheld by the Supreme Court. In his press interaction, Mr Trump said that he had changed his mind about TikTok when he realised how much it had helped him to reach out to the young voters in the country. He was prepared to let it continue to operate if it became a 50:50 joint venture with a US company. If, as many expect, TikTok is bought by Elon Musk, then Mr Trump would have the most powerful instruments of influencing and shaping public opinion, leaving traditional media far behind. Expect a very different narrative emanating from the US—more polemical, more populist and aggressive. There will be fewer pretensions of upholding values and moral rectitude. American foreign relations will be more influenced by domestic rather than external factors.

Mr Trump has once again walked out of the Paris Climate Agreement, as he did at the beginning of his first term. In his inauguration speech, he reiterated his campaign slogan, "Drill, baby, drill," removing regulatory constraints on fossil fuel companies. This includes opening up pristine wilderness areas in Alaska for oil exploration, approving pipeline construction, and permitting additional terminals for LNG exports to external markets. Additional terminals were not being licensed under President Biden to prevent a large increase in LNG exports, which would have led to increased gas prices in the US. Mr Trump has declared an "energy emergency" in the US even though the US is already self-sufficient in fossil fuel production and consumption. What we

may now witness is a significant ramp-up in oil and gas exploration and exports. Say farewell to the much-couted "energy transition" that the world committed to at COP 28 in the UAE in 2023. In the short-term, India may benefit from lower energy prices. It may be able to fend off US pressures on the trade front by agreeing to buy larger quantities of US oil and gas. Longer-term, the serious setback to climate action would have more enduring adverse impacts.

Mr Trump demonstrated the seriousness of his anti-immigration agenda by signing an ordinance declaring a national emergency on the US southern border with Mexico. The construction of the border wall along the entire frontier will be resumed and the documenting and extradition of illegal immigrants will be taken up in earnest. The use of the US military in this operation will be authorised since it is a declared national emergency. There may be an unprecedented humanitarian crisis as a result and even civic unrest. Undocumented Indian immigrants—some 19,000—will be affected and their repatriation to India is more than likely. However, Mr Trump said he was open to foreign talent useful to the US being allowed entry. This suggests the continuance of the H-1B visa issuance, which has become so important to India's IT sector.

Though tariffs are the centrepiece of Mr Trump's agenda, he refrained from announcing any specific measures except for threatening 25 per cent tariffs against Mexico and Canada if they did not accept US demands on the export of fentanyl and the prevention of illegal immigration into the US. The threat to impose tariffs will serve as a bargaining lever to extract trade and other concessions from trading partners. He did, however, announce the setting up of a new External Revenue Service, which would presumably assess, impose, and collect tariff revenues in a separate account. This would enable him to showcase how much the US is earning from import tariffs.

For India, there may be pressures on the trade front, similar to those experienced during Mr Trump's first term. Transnational workarounds, such as buying more US oil and gas or increasing defence hardware imports, may be employed. Notably, there was no sharp rhetoric against China in either his inaugural speech or his press interaction. While he claimed that China was controlling the Panama Canal (which is not true), he also spoke approvingly of his recent telephone conversation with Chinese President Xi Jinping. This could indicate the possibility of the two countries reaching some level of tactical accommodation, which would not be good news for India. If there is one real risk to watch for, this is the most consequential. But, the meeting of the Quad foreign ministers in Washington following the Trump inauguration and the issuance of a brief statement reaffirming the Quad's importance, including a reference to India hosting the next summit, offers some reassurance.

The author is a former foreign secretary

## Budget should solidify growth path

The Union Budget will be presented at a time when domestic economic growth is moderating, there is increased volatility in the financial markets with a sharp depletion of our forex reserves, and heightened global policy uncertainties with a new government in the US. In these uncertain times, the upcoming Budget should focus on accelerating growth while charting a path towards the vision of Viksit Bharat by 2047.

Listed below are five suggested areas the Budget should focus on: **Consumption boost:** The government post-Covid has focussed on a capex-led recovery and that has boded well so far. While the focus on capex should continue, there is a need to supplement this with some consumption-boosting measures. A wide-based and sustained pick-up in consumption will also help bring in private investment. The Budget should consider a cut in personal income tax liability by around 5 per cent across tax slabs. While this will incur a revenue loss amounting to 0.2 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP), it will provide a strong boost to consumer sentiment and spending.

Factors like weaker job creation and low real wage growth have dented consumer sentiment. According to the Reserve Bank of India's Household survey, consumer sentiment (for current period) has remained in the pessimistic zone since the pandemic.

**Gradual move towards fiscal consolidation:** The government should slow down its fiscal consolidation efforts while focusing on growth-boosting measures. It had set a target of achieving a fiscal deficit-to-GDP ratio lower than 4.5 per cent by FY26. Even if the Centre achieves the fiscal deficit target of 4.7 per cent of GDP in FY26 and reaches 4.5 per cent of GDP only by FY28, the general government debt-to-GDP ratio is likely to be on a downward trajectory. With eco-

nomie growth moderating, fiscal consolidation should proceed more gradually, while ensuring that the debt trajectory remains on a downward slope.

**Focus on agri sector:** A large part of India's population is dependent on the agriculture sector. India cannot achieve its aspirations of being a developed country without further progress in this sector. Agriculture employs 45 per cent of India's workforce but contributes only 18 per cent to its gross value added (GVA). The Budget should focus on increasing productivity in the sector through intensifying technology adoption and focusing on research and innovation in the sector. Agri startups with high adoption of technology should be encouraged through the agri-gate accelerator.

There is a need to provide further push to agri-related sectors like livestock, horticulture, and fisheries, as this will help increase labour productivity and rural incomes. A greater push to the agri-processing industry and agri-exports should be a critical priority. Also crucial is the development of adequate infrastructure for food transportation and storage, alongside strengthening agri-industry linkages.

**Industrial clusters:** The government should identify a few sectors with high potential for export and employment generation, such as electronics, pharmaceuticals, auto and auto-ancillary, textiles, and footwear, and create an ecosystem to attract investment in these sectors. This could involve growing existing industrial clusters and creating new competitive clusters with complete infrastructure and backward and forward linkages, as also emphasised in the last Union Budget. The government should focus on facilitating all other aspects, such as improving supply chain movement for these sectors, by reducing import tariffs for input materials when necessary. Companies should be incentivised to set

up skilling facilities or work closely with skilling institutes established in these clusters to enable customised skilling and subsequent absorption within the clusters.

A push to manufacturing through these clusters will help us capitalise on the China-plus-one opportunity presented globally. It will also help create jobs and facilitate the movement of excess workers from agriculture to the manufacturing sector, which currently employs only 11 per cent of the workforce. Moreover, 40 per cent of factory employment is concentrated in Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, and Maharashtra. This underscores the need to develop such clusters in other regions as well, in close collaboration with states.

**The need for skilling:** India has the advantage of a growing working-age population, unlike most global economies that are grappling with ageing demographics. However, to tap into this opportunity, we must ensure that workers are adequately equipped to be productively employed. Only around 4.4 per cent of India's workforce is formally skilled, compared to 24 per cent in China and significantly higher percentages in developed countries. The government in the last few Budgets has been focusing on skilling programmes and upgrading Industrial Training Institutes. This focus needs to be accelerated sharply to enable us to tap into our demographic dividend.

Equally important is accelerating the growth momentum, while ensuring that it remains sustainable and inclusive. Continued focus on capex, supplemented with measures to boost consumption, should help the country improve its growth momentum. For its long-term sustainability, the most critical aspect will be employing our large labour force productively by creating sufficient jobs and ensuring the workforce is adequately skilled, especially in the face of challenges posed by artificial intelligence.

The author is chief economist, CareEdge Ratings

## Other forces that shaped Hinduism



BOOK REVIEW  
AMRITESH MUKHERJEE

The second chapter of Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching speaks of the interplay of opposites: "For being and nonbeing arise together; hard and easy complete each other; long and short space each other; high and low depend on each other; note and voice make the music together; before and after follow each other." So it is, and has been, that to define is to exclude; to unite is also to separate.

Manu Pillai's *Gods, Guns and Missionaries* rests on this truth: Identity is born through the act of othering. How did the Hindu culture originate? How did this tradition leave rivers, climb mountains, and cross deserts to spread its roots? What

stories did this culture tell itself as it stood against sectarian waves and alien faiths? And, lastly, how did these historical threads, from colonialism to the threat of Christianity, knot themselves into the militant, exclusionary Hinduism of today? These questions form the heartbeat of Mr Pillai's study through centuries of history. Like the subject, the answers, too, are plural, complex and consisting of many, many stories.

Unlike the neat narratives sold today, the roots of Hinduism were dynamic, adapting, and endlessly malleable. Turning over the stones of history, Mr Pillai exposes a faith shaped by centuries of myths, rituals, and sacred spaces stretching across the subcontinent. What we see is a faith that shifts and flows, shaped by external forces but grounded in its cultural heart. Mr Pillai brings this history alive through a cast of characters embodying the clashes and compromises of their time and geography.

Take, for example, the fascinating figure of de Nobili, a committed Catholic missionary who rewrote the rules, scandalising many Jesuits in the

process. He adopted the cultural markers of Tamil Brahmins to advance his evangelical mission—publishing the Bible as a Veda, wearing the sacred thread (with a cross tied to it), and even discriminating against Christians of "lower caste"—essentially repackaging Christianity as something native. His extreme approach discloses the fluidity and, at times, the contradictions within religious adaptation. Mr Pillai's narrative brings out the unending tug-of-war and redrawing of boundaries of these times, where faith and identity collide, adapt, and emerge altered, never settling into a permanent form.

In another amusing incident, Jesuits invited to the court of Akbar "were surprised they got away with potentially life-threatening declarations (from calling Akbar's wives courtesans to deriding the Quran as stuffed with fables and frivolity)." Will these Muslims never martyrised? cried Acquaviva, yearning for a glorious Christian end.

However, this fluidity—a tradition built on absorption and adaptation—also made Hinduism vulnerable to external

critiques, particularly under colonial scrutiny, where every tradition was labelled primitive or devilish. Mr Pillai illustrates how this encounter with European missionaries and imperialists over centuries reshaped the tradition into a more defined, more codified, often rigid construct—one that could respond to the challenges of Western religious frameworks.

So, the popular imagination of Krishna (from the Puranas), one of a playful, naughty god who stole butter and flirted with the village girls, under evangelical scrutiny and criticism, morphs into one from the Gita: "The omniscient, all-knowing, all-supreme God. It reflected a conscious effort to present Hinduism as a religion of 'monotheistic' philosophical depth, capable of standing toe-to-toe with Christianity in their playground."

At the same time, Europe's intellectuals were falling for India's ancient texts. Orientalists such as William Jones and Max Müller lavished praise on the Vedas, extolling their poetic and philosophical depths. Voltaire, the everthe provocateur, declared the Vedas humanity's earliest wisdom despite working off fragmented translations and imagined texts. Fact and fiction blurred as India became Europe's spiritual muse.

Similarly, while the Brahmins would initially defend polytheism, decades of evangelical teaching and argumentation would pave the way for reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Swami Dayanand Saraswati, who harked back to the glories of their religion. Turning to the Vedas, they sought to construct a "pure" and unblemished Hinduism, abandoning the rich, lived practices of the Puranas and deeming them corrupt. This tension between philosophical abstraction and ritualistic practices runs like a thread through the book, weaving together past and present debates on what Hinduism truly is.

No story of Hindu reform is complete without Bal Gangadhar Tilak, from his

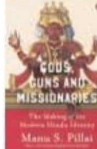
revival of Ganesh Chaturthi to reclaiming the Bhagavad Gita as a call to action. Bringing religion and nationalism together in mainstream consciousness, he set the stage for the ideological father of Hindutva, VD Savarkar, whose revisionist writings would shape modern Hinduism, using the (often imagined) past as a tool for identity creation. Or, in the words of Mr Pillai, "History here was about rearranging events to address present-day contingencies."

In an age of fleeting attention spans and oversimplified narratives, *Gods, Guns and Missionaries* is a dauntless, refusing to create linear, convenient bite-size facts for the reader to consume and regurgitate. Exhaustively researched, with notes

revisiting the main text in length, the book delicately and deliberately crosses that bridge between academic rigour and accessible storytelling. Offering its readers new trails to the present through the prism of the past, the book deserves the work it demands. It is a debate, a conversation, and a question for the future. It is a dialogue waiting to happen, as timeless as its subject.

The reviewer is a journalist, writer, and editor fascinated by the stories that shape our world. Instagram: @aromofest

**GODS, GUNS AND MISSIONARIES: The Making of the Modern Hindu Identity**  
Author: Manu S Pillai  
Publisher: Penguin India  
Pages: 664  
Price: ₹999



## Ad hoc judges in HC: When and how can they be appointed?

AJAY SINHA KARPURAM  
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 23

ON TUESDAY, the Supreme Court suggested temporarily appointing retired judges on an ad hoc (as required) basis to address the growing backlog of pending criminal cases before several High Courts.

Article 224A of the Constitution allows the Chief Justice of a High Court to request retired HC judges to perform the duties of a judge again, with the permission of the President of India. Although it has rarely been invoked, there is a detailed procedure for such appointments, with the SC previously weighing in on the practice.

The SC on Tuesday also suggested modifying the top court's 2021 decision, which held that ad hoc judge appointments could

only be made in certain situations.

### Provision for appointments

Article 224A, titled "Appointment of retired judges at sittings of High Courts", states: "The Chief Justice of a High Court for any State may at any time with the previous consent of the President, request any person who has held the office of a judge of that Court or of any other High Court to sit and act as a judge of the High Court for that State".

Such appointees are entitled to allowances as determined by the President's order and have the jurisdiction, powers and privileges of a judge of that High Court. Both the retired judge and the President of India are required to consent to the appointment.

The detailed procedure can be found in the 1998 Memorandum of Procedure (MOP) for the appointment of High Court judges, which

was prepared after the creation of the collegium system for appointing judges. It states that after the retired judge has consented to the appointment, the Chief Justice must forward her name and appointment details to the Chief Minister. The CM will pass this recommendation to the Union Law Minister, who will consult the Chief Justice of India before forwarding the recommendation and the CJ's advice to the Prime Minister of India. The PM will advise the President on whether to give her approval.

However, in the case of *Lok Prabhu Through Its General Secretary S.N. Shukla IAS (Retd.) v. Union of India* (2021), the Supreme Court held that this recommendation "has to be routed through the collegium of the Supreme Court". This collegium includes the CJ and the two senior-most judges of the

Supreme Court. The court also provided guidelines for such appointments.

### Criteria to prevent overuse

In *Lok Prabhu*, the SC was considering measures to address pending cases before the courts and the vacancies in posts of HC judges, having noted that the "number of vacancies arising every year are barely filled in by fresh appointments". At the time, there were almost 40% vacancies across all High Courts. The court also took note of some earlier reports of the Law Commission suggesting that temporarily appointing retired judges who have decades of experience is a viable solution to tackle the mounting backlog.

However, the court expressed concern that Article 224A would encourage "inaction

in making recommendations" for regular appointments. Thus, it gave directions on when the process could be initiated. Most importantly, the court held that ad hoc judges can only be appointed when recommendations have not been made for less than 20% of the vacancies, after considering both the number of active judges and pending proposals for appointments. This is so that Article 224A can be "resorted to only on the process having been initiated for filling up of the regular vacancies and awaiting their appointments".

The court also held that there has to be a "Trigger Point" for appointing judges under Article 224A, such as if the HC has vacancies of more than 20% of the sanctioned strength (excluding any proposals for appointment) and if more than 10% of the backlog of pending cases is over five years. It further recommended that ad hoc judges should generally

be appointed for 2-3 years, with two to five ad hoc judges in a court.

### Rarely invoked provision

In 2021, the SC noted that there have only been three recorded instances of ad hoc judges being appointed under Article 224A, and called it a "dormant provision". These were:

- The appointment of Justice Suraj Bhan to the Madhya Pradesh HC in 1972 for one year to hear election petitions;
- The appointment of Justice P Venugopal to the Madras HC in 1982. His term was renewed for another year in August 1983;
- The appointment of Justice O P Srivastava to the Allahabad HC in 2007 to hear the Ayodhya title suits.

There are no recorded instances of ad hoc judges being appointed since the 2021 decision of the top court.

## THIS WORD MEANS

### CBP ONE APP

A mobile app that allowed US-bound asylum-seekers to schedule appointments with immigration authorities

ANAGHA JAYAKUMAR  
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 23

IN ONE of his first moves after becoming the US President, Donald Trump shut down the mobile app designed to help schedule appointments for people seeking asylum in the US.

The CBP One entry program was instituted by Trump's predecessor Joe Biden, and has enabled nearly one million people to enter into the US since January 2023, the Associated Press reported.

In a press release on Monday, the US Customs and Border Protection said that it had initiated "removal of the scheduling functionality" for the app and "existing appointments have been cancelled".

### How CBP One worked

The CBP One app worked as a lottery system that awarded 1,450 people with appointments at eight border crossings daily. It allowed migrants to plan interviews with immigration authorities to seek immigration parole before reaching the US border.

Before the app was introduced, asylum-seekers waited in large camps in Mexico while they hoped to secure exemptions to Title 42, a pandemic-era public health order used by the US government to turn away migrants. Others tried to cross the border illegally.

Since January 2023, CBP One has served as the sole route for asylum-seeking amidst a larger crackdown by the Biden administration on illegal border crossings. However, the app's implementation has not been easy. Migrants have often complained of technical glitches and long waiting times.

### Why CBP One was crucial

CBP One allowed asylum seekers to seek immigration parole without securing formal admission into the US. According to the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), this enables an individual "who may be inadmissible or otherwise ineligible for admission into the United States, to be paroled into the United States for a temporary period."

Parole may be granted for urgent humanitarian reasons or "significant public benefits", according to USCIS's discretion.



The office of the National Institute of Migration at Piedras Negras, on the US-Mexico border. Reuters

Once approved, migrants were allowed to stay in the US for up to two years, be shielded from deportation, and get a work permit.

The CBP One program has long been touted by Homeland Security staff as having driven down unlawful migrant crossings at the Mexico border.

### Trump & immigration

Throughout his presidential campaign, Trump maintained that Biden allowed an influx of undocumented migrants, and promised to launch a massive deportation program after coming to power. "All illegal entry will immediately be halted, and we will begin the process of returning millions and millions of criminal aliens back to the places from which they came," Trump reiterated during his inaugural address.

Removing the app comes amidst a series of sweeping presidential executive orders on curtailing immigration, including declaring a national emergency at the US southern border, and launching the process to end birthright citizenship. However, this action may prove to be counterproductive. The closure of the CBP One app will likely trigger a spate of undocumented crossings in the United States' southern border, experts say.

The American Civil Liberties Union on Monday challenged the order in the US District Court in Washington DC.



UDIT MISRA

UNITED STATES President Donald Trump has said he is considering putting a 10% tariff on Chinese imports because "they're sending fentanyl to Mexico and Canada", and 25% on goods from those two countries "because they're allowing vast numbers of people and fentanyl to come" into the US.

During the election campaign, Trump had threatened 60% tariffs on Chinese goods. Last month he said he would put 100% tariffs on BRICS countries if they tried to undermine the US dollar — a threat that he appeared to repeat while answering a reporter's question hours after becoming President.

"Tariff", Trump has said many times, "is the most beautiful word in the dictionary", and his "favourite" word.

### What exactly are trade tariffs, and how do they work?

A tariff is a tax that a government imposes on goods imported into the country in question (the US, in this case). Consider the following simple scenario.

Product X — say, a car — manufactured in the US, is sold at the country for \$120, and a similar car imported from China is sold for \$100. Over time, as more American customers buy the cheaper car, imports from China rise. In consequence:

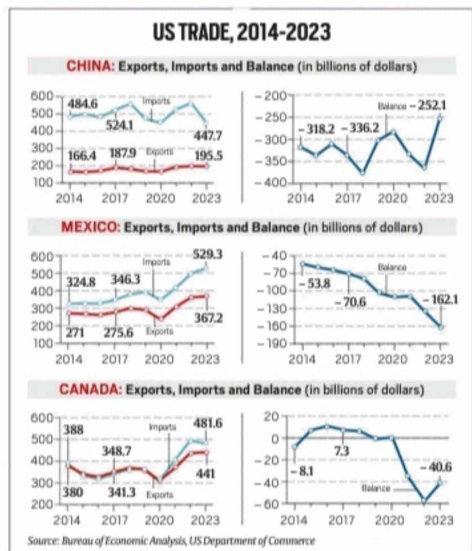
- As sales of the American carmaker decline, the wages of its workers do not rise enough, and some start to get laid off. The company stops hiring, and also stops expanding, so no new jobs are created.
- The US trade deficit — the difference between the value of imports and exports — increases. This essentially means more money flows out of the country.
- American consumers continue to get cheaper cars.

The US government then imposes a "protectionist" tariff of 50% on all car imports from China.

### Why would the US government want to impose tariffs?

Due to one or more of these reasons: **Protect the domestic car industry:** Chinese cars will now cost \$150 (instead of \$100) and demand will arguably shift to the cheaper (\$120) US-made cars. The whole industry will be better off financially.

**Raise tax revenues:** Taxing a product that



Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis, US Department of Commerce

is selling well brings the government revenue. If the sole purpose is to raise more revenue, the tariff rate may not be 50%, but only, say, 5% or 10%, so that the sales of Chinese cars don't completely dry up.

**Force Chinese companies to build their cars in the US:** This is called Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), and it is a good way to ensure that American consumers get better or cheaper cars and American workers don't lose their jobs either.

**How might a country that is targeted by tariffs respond?** There are several options.

**Dumping:** The Chinese carmakers, if they have the resources, can choose to simply absorb the tariff and continue to sell for \$100. The calculation would be to drive American carmakers out of the market over time and, once they have a monopoly, raise prices and recover previous losses.

**Pass the tariff cost to the consumer:** The Chinese firms can add the 50% tariff (\$50 in this case) to the price of the car, so it is the American buyer who ends up paying the tariff.

**Trade rerouting:** China may reroute their cars through countries such as Mexico and Canada that enjoy a free-trade agreement (FTA) with the US. So, China exports an almost fully built car to Mexico, where it is repackaged and sold as a Mexican export to the US.

**Trade war:** China may retaliate by counter-tariffs on goods that it imports from the US, say corn or aircraft. Or, it can devalue its currency in such a way that the net effect of the US tariffs is zero. The exchange rate of the Chinese renminbi (as also the Indian rupee) is not fully determined by market forces.

The response of any country to tariffs is usually a mix of these strategies. But it is important to note that tariffs, while attempting to favour domestic producers and government finances, almost always hurt domestic consumers.

Large-scale disruption of trade can raise prices and inflation, and may fail to achieve the original goals of protecting domestic industry. Even when domestic industry is protected, the cost — in terms of being saddled with sub-standard and costlier cars as Indians were before the economic reforms of 1991 — is borne by the domestic consumer.

**Did the tariffs imposed by Trump against China in his first term (2017-21) work?** It depends on the parameter one looks at. If just the US-China direct trade is considered, Trump's tariffs worked very well.

Between 2017 — the year before the first Trump administration put 25% tariffs on many Chinese goods — and 2023, imports from China fell, and the overall trade "balance" — in this case deficit, represented by a minus sign — reduced.

But the picture on US trade with Mexico and Canada is different. In both cases, both US imports and trade deficits ballooned.

**What is the takeaway for India?** Ajay Srivastava, founder of the research organisation Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) and a former member of the Indian Trade Service, has pointed out that while US imports from China declined by \$81.56 billion between 2017 and 2023, the overall US trade deficit (across all trading partners) widened as imports shifted to non-Chinese sources, bypassing tariffs through FTAs.

"China showcased remarkable resilience, increasing its global exports by \$1.1 trillion and cementing its role as a critical player in global supply chains for electronics, pharmaceuticals, and renewable energy," Srivastava wrote in a recent report.

Contrast that to the US trade deficit, which increased from \$516 billion in 2017 to \$784 billion in 2023.

According to Srivastava's study, the key beneficiaries of the trade war between the US and China were Mexico, Canada, and the ASEAN nations, which together accounted for 57% of the growth in US imports.

The question for India: Are Indian exporters ready and capable of using the opportunity if a new trade war begins — or could India become a market that passes through Chinese goods to the US, without much value-addition at the domestic level?

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## Donald launches \$TRUMP: Why do memecoins divide even crypto investors?

KARAN MAHADIK  
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 23

AFTER EMERGING as a vocal crypto advocate during his presidential campaign, Donald Trump launched his very own crypto memecoin \$TRUMP on January 18, two days before his inauguration.

Trump pitched the coin to his supporters as a way "to celebrate everything we stand for: WINNING". The official website of the coin, however, carries a disclaimer stating that \$TRUMP is not "an investment opportunity" nor "a security", and that these memecoins "are intended to function as an expression of support for, and engagement with, the ideals and beliefs embodied by the symbol \$TRUMP".

First Lady Melania Trump followed suit, releasing her own memecoin \$MELANIA on January 20.

### What is a memecoin?

Memecoins are cryptocurrencies that are often inspired by Internet memes or trends. Although their value is based purely on hype and public perception, memecoins can attract heavy investment and build large followings. Unlike traditional cryptocurrencies, anyone can create a new memecoin for free by using launchpad platforms such as

Pump.fun that are hosted on blockchain networks like Solana or Ethereum. In November last year, a 13-year-old boy launched his own

memecoin called Quant, which went viral and netted him \$30,000.

Dogecoin is perhaps the best known memecoin out there. Initially released as a joke in 2013, it took off after being championed by tech billionaire Elon Musk on X. Today, Dogecoin is among the few crypto assets to have kept up with Bitcoin over several market cycles.

Other viral memecoins include Shiba Inu (named after a Japanese dog breed) and Pepe (inspired by the viral cartoon frog meme). Over 13 million new memecoins were created in 2024, with a combined market value of \$100 billion, according to a report by blockchain consultancy firm BDC.

### What causes the market cap of memecoins to skyrocket overnight?

The market cap of any cryptocurrency is decided based on the price of each coin, and the number of coins available. Creators give memecoins liquidity by pairing them with popular cryptocurrencies such as Ether, but platforms such as Pump.fun set



Initial prices using their own formula.

However, since memecoins are not tied to any underlying assets, they do not have any intrinsic value. Creators of memecoins focus on brand building to drive up values. For instance, \$TRUMP features the US President pumping his fist — a gesture he made moments after he was shot at by a potential assassin last year.

The value of memecoins can also be pumped up through influencer marketing, or by exploiting the hype around viral content. For instance, in 2021, a memecoin inspired by the popular Netflix series *Squid Game* soared to popularity.

### Why are many investors concerned about memecoins?

Memecoins stand out as the riskiest gamble in the crypto market, which is anyway considered to be speculative by many traditional investors.

Due to their high volatility, memecoins have also become notorious as hotbeds of fraud. Over 40% of memecoins are "pump-and-dump" scams, according to the BDC report. "Pump-and-dump" refers to a form of fraud in which the price of an owned stock is artificially inflated (pumped) through false and misleading positive statements, before being sold (dumped) at the higher price, following which the stock's price falls and investors lose money.

Memecoins are also used for "rug pull" scams, where creators simply withdraw the funds and walk — like the 13-year-old behind the Quant memecoin — leaving investors with a worthless token. "Liquidity pull" scams are also common. Here fraud-

sters create a new memecoin backed by a liquidity pool of some well-known cryptocurrency, and then drain the pool, causing the value of the memecoin to become worthless in minutes. This tactic was used by the creators of the Squid Game coin.

After the launch of \$TRUMP, US Congresswoman Maxine Waters said that memecoins "represent the worst of crypto and shows why many regulators, advocates, and policymakers have long been worried".

"These actions by President Trump will also further taint the crypto industry, which has long fought for legitimacy," she said.

Others have also pointed to ethical concerns surrounding a President-elect deciding to launch an unregulated memecoin days before his inauguration, and capitalising on his position to bolster his personal wealth.

\$TRUMP on Thursday evening boasted a market cap of more than \$7.5 billion, according to CoinMarketCap.com, with each memecoin going for roughly \$38.



## The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY  
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

## THE NEW TRADE

India must be ready to seize the opportunities thrown up  
by a rapidly changing global environment

IN THE WEEKS leading up to Donald Trump's inauguration, there was considerable anxiety across the world over what the US president-elect would do on tariffs. Trump has repeatedly spoken about imposing tariffs on countries such as Mexico, Canada and China. He has attacked India's tariff structure, pointing specifically at the 100 per cent rate levied on some products. However, so far, days after the inauguration, there has been no policy action. While Trump is now reported to have said that tariffs on some countries will be imposed on February 1, there is uncertainty over how this will play out.

For India, the US is an important trade partner — in 2023-24, bilateral trade between the two countries was around \$120 billion. Despite the current rhetoric in Washington, there is a clear consensus on maintaining and strengthening India-US relations. Only in October, the US and India signed an MoU to expand and diversify the critical minerals supply chain. The threat of levying tariffs may well only be a negotiating tool but the Indian government is mindful of possible changes in the contours of US policy. As per a report in this paper, the commerce ministry has begun holding inter-ministerial talks to prepare for likely changes in US trade policy that could involve tariffs. The Trump administration will, however, also offer opportunities. The America First trade policy memorandum talks about bilateral trade agreements. It says that the US trade representative "shall identify countries with which the US can negotiate agreements on a bilateral or sector-specific basis to obtain market access". As per reports, during Trump's first term as president, India and the US had discussed a trade deal.

India's approach to trade agreements has been mixed. In recent years, while it has entered into pacts with countries like the UAE and Australia, it has also shied away from agreements such as the RCEP, and has not joined the trade pillar of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework. While a bilateral agreement with the US should be explored, there are areas of concern. Trade deals may be linked to labour mobility, which is a complex issue and requires deft handling. There may also be concerns around intellectual property, labour markets, government procurement and data localisation, among others. Any such deal will necessarily involve reducing tariffs. India should take the lead here. It must undertake a broader and more comprehensive examination of its tariff structure and resist protectionism. Alongside, it must push through the EU and UK trade agreements, negotiations over which have been going on for some time now. It must also push through much-needed reforms to take advantage of the opportunities that a rapidly changing global environment may offer. The upcoming Union budget is an opportune moment for the government to take the first steps towards this end.

## A WEAKER SHIELD

There is no health agency with WHO's reach and legitimacy.  
Trump's decision to withdraw from global body is myopic

LIKE HIS EXECUTIVE order to pull the US out of the Paris Climate Pact, Donald Trump's decision to sever his country's links with the WHO was unexpected. In his first stint at the White House, Trump had taken steps to quit the premier global health agency, accusing it of failing to incriminate China for the Covid pandemic. Hours after the inauguration of his second presidency, Trump repeated the accusations. The US president has directed his country's agencies to "pause the transfer of any US government funds or resources to WHO", and, "identify credible... partners to assume necessary activities previously undertaken by WHO". His executive order is myopic regarding the UN body's role in containing health emergencies across the world. There is no other organisation with the WHO's reach and legitimacy that can deal with infectious diseases and devise protocols for containing cross-border outbreaks. The WHO's expertise is also indispensable in reducing the incidence of serious non-communicable diseases such as cancer.

The US is one of the WHO's founding members. It has historically been the largest financial contributor to the UN agency. It would, however, be reductive to see the engagement between the world's largest economy and its premier health agency through a purely economic lens. The US is a party to two WHO treaties: The agency's constitution and the International Health Regulations, the governing framework for epidemic preparedness and response. At the height of the Cold War, the WHO became the main portal for US-Soviet collaboration in healthcare which went on to play a seminal role in the eradication of smallpox. The organisation stewards a vast network of public health agencies, laboratories, and international scientists that constantly track novel outbreaks. US institutes like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) depend on this network for information. So does the US pharmaceutical industry. More than 20 WHO collaborating centres at the CDC and National Institutes of Health focus on US priorities, including cancer prevention and global health security. Trump's executive order directs the US secretary of state to "cease negotiations" on the WHO Pandemic Agreement, an international treaty to prepare the world for future outbreaks. This is as great a threat to the global health security architecture as the withdrawal of US financial support.

The WHO needs reform. But deficiencies in its governance and funding structures highlighted by the Covid pandemic need to be addressed by engaging the agency, not remaining outside it. The pandemic showed that no country is immune to the caprices of pathogens. Clipping the WHO's wings could hurt the resilience of not just poor and middle-income countries. It could also compromise the US's preparedness against a health emergency.

## SNOOZE, DON'T LOSE

Sleep may not primarily be a productivity hack,  
but it could well be the best one

RECENT NEWS FROM around the world would suggest that sleep, if not actively in danger, is at the very least a vestigial habit that productivity-conscious humans can be trained to manipulate or resist. A businessman from Japan has made headlines for claiming to sleep for only 30 minutes a night for 12 years in the interest of "high efficiency". Not too long ago, the California-based company REMSpace sought to harness the power of dreams to enhance productivity. High-achievers, especially, love talking about how much sleep they're getting, or not getting — like when Apple CEO Tim Cook famously tweeted, "Got some extra rest for today's event. Slept in 'til 4:30". Where does this leave the ordinary person who just wants to give her body the rest it needs?

The example of actor Ashay Kumar may be one to emulate. In an interview, his colleague Vivek Oberoi has commended Kumar's discipline in the matter of hitting the hay, saying that he sticks to his early-to-bed habits even when he has dinner guests. Kumar has brushed off his colleague's observation — the conventions of hosting remain unaffected, he said. But perhaps he need not be so defensive. It is a well-documented fact that good, deep sleep for the recommended average of seven hours a night is the surest way to ensure that one's body and brain are performing at their best, at work and at play. And if hosting duties interfere with slumber's siren call, they are best given short shrift.

In a time when there are constant exhortations to work ever longer hours in the interests of — pick your poison — career advancement, company bottom line or national progress, examples like Kumar's serve as a corrective. And those who insist on looking for "workflow optimisation" in even the most basic of biological functions should remember: Sleep may not primarily be a productivity hack, but it could well be the best one.



SURJIT S BHALLA

IT IS BUDGET time again, and I am still hoping that one of these days, we will dispense with this closed-door *turnma* of policymaking. The practice is still the same as that in colonial times and this near 200-year longevity should hint at how outdated the system is. The practice is in the interests of TV and the IAS babus who make policy.

Our GDP growth has surprisingly and inexplicably slowed down. World growth is expanding, even the IMF says so, so why is the global star slowing down? This should be the first bit of accountability that is required from our monetary and fiscal policymakers. In various articles over the years, and recently, I have pointed out that our monetary policy (high real policy rates) was dangerously close to the policy errors and the ensuing slowdown in 2018-19 (before the shock of Covid). In this article, I want to point to the inexplicable policy of high rates of personal income and overall taxation — a policy I believe is responsible for the slowdown along with our Deep State-inspired policy of high tariffs on manufactured goods and the same source-inspired policy on the closing of foreign direct investment (FDI).

I want to expand on my comment about a deep state. First, who makes policy? Major industrialists, senior IAS babus, and their friendly influencers in the media. In all the justified criticism of government policy on FDI and high tariffs on manufactured goods (and the uncalculated decision to remove the most-favoured nation status for Switzerland — who are Nestlé's competitors in India? Should we ask CII?), I have yet to find mention of the true authors of such policies. Notice that the list does not include policy experts outside the government, a common and universal practice in mature democracies. Both PMs — Manmohan Singh (MMS) and Narendra Modi — explicitly argued for more lateral entry, and failed. What is revealing is that MMS as finance minister succeeded in seeking and implementing the advice of non-IAS experts — but failed as PM when ostensibly he had more freedom to make good policy. Deep State at work.

I will now present evidence of how

Behind the economic slowdown, also to blame:  
The babu raj and their friendly commentariat

Don't think that this excessive taxation is costless. Matter of fact, very costly. It leads to excessive and wasteful government spending (freebies as articulated by PM Modi.) It also leads to discomfort among the middle classes who pay most of the taxes — this discomfort is a likely explanation for the surprising decline in popularity of the BJP and Modi in the national election seven months ago. What did the Deep State think would happen?

messed up our fiscal policy (taxation) has been. First, why this obsession (koiavert?) with bringing down the fiscal deficit, not via growth, but via increased taxation? On several counts, this obsession needs to be questioned. Will it bring down inflation caused by food inflation? That would be a laughable goal, if not tragic. Maybe it will bring about enhanced growth. Doubtfully laughable.

Now the evidence. First I will present international evidence on the ratio of personal income taxes to GDP (X-PIT) and then evidence on the ratio of all taxes to GDP (X-TAX). I know many Indians think they are unique, that the same red blood does not flow through them as that of 6.5 billion others in the world. Let us accept that the most comparable countries in the world are the non-advanced countries — we want to get there, but we are not there yet, and unless we make policy corrections, we won't be there even in 2047.

Regarding personal income taxation, the Indian government's own data and projections suggest that X-PIT will reach 3.9 per cent of GDP in FY2025. How exceptional is this "performance"? Very. Outside of the advanced countries, there is no regional average that even comes close — Eastern Europe is the highest, at 3.4 per cent in 2019, the last full year before the pandemic. Post-2019 data are available for very few countries. The experts on growth just love to compare our growth performance with China or Vietnam. Bangladesh has fallen off the map after its crisis — the last IMF information for Bangladesh is available for 2016 when X-PIT was 0.85 per cent. No type there. Growth stalwarts China and Vietnam are also much lower than India — X-PIT of 1.1 and 1.8 per cent respectively. Korea is somewhat higher than India at 4.8 per cent, but likely lower in the post-2019 period. Brazil and Mexico are at 3 and 3.4 per cent of GDP respectively.

One objection to the above analysis on personal income taxes is that countries find other taxes to make up for their revenue needs. A fair objection, which is why we will now look at the ratio of all taxes to GDP.

The situation is no better if one looks at

X-TAX; maybe even worse. The latest FY 2025 ratio for India is likely to reach upwards of 19 per cent of GDP. The advanced country average was 25 per cent of GDP in 2019, likely lower today. East Asia is at 13.5 per cent, with China and Vietnam at 15.9 and 14.7 per cent respectively. Both Korea and the USA had direct tax collection much higher than India. For the overall tax ratio, the two economies are nearly identical to India — Korea at 20 and USA at 19 per cent. The average per capita income in these two countries is more than eight times that of "poor" India. Obviously, not much "compensation" by other countries for PIT collection. In India, it is up and away for all tax collection.

Don't think that this excessive taxation is costless. It leads to excessive and wasteful government spending (freebies as articulated by PM Modi.) It also leads to discomfort among the middle classes who pay most of the taxes — this discomfort is a likely explanation for the surprising decline in popularity of the BJP and Modi in the national election seven months ago. It is also responsible for the decline in GDP growth — high taxes, no foreign investment, and high real interest rates. What did the Deep State think would happen?

The role of the IMF and World Bank, and other international experts, needs to be examined in some detail. Who provided this tax advice, and why? There has been a discussion about the lopsided recommendations of the GST Council, advice that at least generated some humour with regard to sugar and popcorn. The income tax collection records, however, are no laughing matter. For close to 20 years the governments have talked about direct tax reform. Talked, and badly acted. The time for remedial action is now, tomorrow, or latest by February 1.

In my next few articles, I will document how much is right in India, about job growth and gender equality. And how much is wrong with policies enacted not by people, but by the Deep State.

The writer is former executive director, IMF. Views are personal.



AVIJIT PATHAK

A KOLKATA COURT sentenced Sanjay Roy to life imprisonment after he was convicted of the rape and murder of a 31-year-old doctor at the state-run R G Kar Medical College and Hospital. The entire country — particularly, West Bengal — witnessed massive public outrage after this ghastly incident in August 2024. It will not be wrong to say that almost everybody — from Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee to all those young doctors, students, activists and celebrities demanding "justice" on the streets of Kolkata — was expecting nothing less than capital punishment for Roy. A "milder" punishment like life imprisonment seems to have disappointed them. From noisy debates on Bengali news channels to the addas in local tea shops, you hear a passionate plea for the death penalty. We are told the West Bengal government will approach the Kolkata High Court soon, and seek capital punishment for Roy.

Amid this mass support for the death penalty, it is not easy to articulate even the slightest ambiguity towards it. With deep empathy, I try to make sense of the mental state of the bereaved parents of the doctor, and even those who experience the violence, be it physical or psychological, of brute masculinity at home, work or in public. I understand that it is not easy for them to think of any other punishment apart from the death penalty. Yet, I cannot bring myself to approve of the death penalty, even

## A MORAL FAILURE

Clamour for death penalty for R G Kar convict is self-defeating

## IN GOOD FAITH

While death penalty satisfies those who demand instant justice, it diverts our attention from the real task at hand — resisting the normalisation of a culture that promotes brute and toxic masculinity and the objectification of a woman. In a society where on average there are 86 incidents of rape every day, we need to go beyond the instant fulfillment for 'justice' through capital punishment, and instead, work rigorously in the domain of culture, socialisation and education.

if Roy's crime falls in the category of the "rarest of rare".

There are the reasons I oppose the very idea of the death penalty. My first argument is moral and existential. Capital punishment is an act of violence, even if it is legitimised by the state and its law and order machinery. And one form of violence can by no means be a solution to other forms of violence. I agree with Amnesty International when it unambiguously states that capital punishment is the most "inhumane and degrading punishment" — almost like committing the same violence the state otherwise condemns. Moreover, every act of capital punishment reveals our collective failure — our inability to work with the rapist or the murderer or the terrorist, understand his inner turmoil, heal his wounded self through a mix of isolation, careful observation, education, counselling, and life-affirming labour. In fact, like rape and murder, every act of capital punishment reveals the moral failure of our civilisation.

My second argument is factual. As many studies have shown, the death penalty does not deter crimes any more effectively than other punishments. In fact, crime figures in countries like Denmark, Norway and the Netherlands, which have abolished the death penalty, have not risen. However, in India, as the Annual Statistics Report 2023 indicates, "at the end of 2023, 561 prisoners were liv-

ing under a sentence of death". But there are more than 31,000 reported rape cases every year in India.

Moreover, the death penalty is disproportionately applied to people who are poor and marginalised. As AP Shah, a former chief justice of the Delhi High Court, said in an interview with Amnesty, "the poor and the down-trodden get the death penalty, and one hardly finds a rich or affluent person going to the gallows".

And finally, my third argument is that while it satisfies those who demand instant justice, it diverts our attention from the real task at hand — resisting the normalisation of a culture that promotes brute and toxic masculinity and the objectification of a woman. In a society where on average there are 86 incidents of rape every day, we need to go beyond the instant fulfillment for "justice" through capital punishment, and instead, work rigorously in the domain of culture, socialisation and education. Only then will it be possible for us to create a society in which young boys refuse to dance to repetitive "pop" songs like *Main hoon baatkar* on the streets, acquire the moral courage to boycott a misogynistic film like *Animal* (2023), and realise the redemptive power of dignity and symmetry in a relationship between a woman and a man.

The writer taught at JNU



## JANUARY 24, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

## MARUTI'S BLACK MONEY

THE MARUTI CAR has turned out to be the greatest generator of black money and the investigation wing of the income tax department is considering ways to curb this menace. According to a preliminary survey by the department, the sale of the car had resulted in an exchange of about Rs 20 crore in black money in less than six months.

## ADVANI'S DEMAND

THE BJP GENERAL secretary, L K Advani, MP, asked the Home Minister to resign and own his moral responsibility as minister in-

charge of security in the latest espionage case. "It is not enough to send our government employees, small and not so small, for all this spying," Advani said. He reminded the Home Minister of similar circumstances in Germany, when German Chancellor Willy Brandt's secretary was found to be a foreign agent, he himself had to resign.

## PM CRITICISES STATES

THE PRIME MINISTER, Rajiv Gandhi, criticised state governments for tampering with administrations in the name of regionalism and independent identity, and said that

India needs strong institutions, including a strong judiciary that did not answer to political needs. The Prime Minister vowed to restore good administration in the country.

## INDIA-SRI LANKA TALKS

SRI LANKA AND India are negotiating the release of vessels seized by each side in the waters separating the two countries, a chief cabinet official in Colombo said. Anandattsa De Alwis told reporters that diplomatic contacts were under way for the release of the Indian fisherman held in Colombo and of the Sri Lankan vessel and crew held in Tamil Nadu.

# THE IDEAS PAGE

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

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



C.R. Sankumar

Trump 2.0 has reignited conversations on H-1B visa within the US and abroad. Will changes to the US immigration system benefit or hurt workers and economies?

## H-1B is designed to exploit workers

It enables corporate America to take advantage of migrants and snub American workers



TANUL THAKUR

I WAS ONCE an H-1B worker — neither the “best” nor the “brightest”. I had failed the entrance exam for the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) consultant. Hired by a mom-and-pop IT “body shop”, Vishal had embellished his resume with six years of experience. Every day at lunch, he described his deceptions. How he deflected yet another task, how he convinced yet another excuse, how he survived yet another day. It felt like talking to a corporate spy — or watching a real-life web series. Every lunchtime, a new episode. Once, Vishal had to interview two IT professionals in India. How did he know what to ask? “Simple,” a Google search. “What about selecting the right applicant?” “I flipped a coin.”

His manager in the US, an Indian man, once asked him, “Do you have the experience listed on your resume?” Vishal froze. The US has thousands of IT body shops — owned by Indians, luring Indians — that force their employees to fake resumes, arrange “proxy” interviews, photostrip immigration documents, pay visa fees, sign coercive contracts, and much more. Besides relinquishing their identities, such H-1Bs languish in squalid “guesthouses”, battle

The Musk-MAGA dash has revealed two contentious issues: That the US suffers from a “STEM crisis” and that racial bias drives all H-1B critics. Both notions are false. The endemic problem of fake resumes itself negates many H-1Bs’ best and brightest tags.

deportation debts, face threats, and earn nothing when they don’t have clients. In fact, they pay their employers’ taxes to meet the rules of the H-1B programme. The 18th century has returned: Indians have been enslaved by a company — this time by fellow Indians in a foreign land.

Vishal struggled and survived and flourished; my American colleagues lost their jobs in a series of lay-offs. Corporate America’s cruelty made me restless. Even though my employer treated me well, unlike Vishal’s, the H-1B programme had shackled me, too. If I got fired, I’d only get a few weeks to find work to maintain my immigration status. When my firm applied for a green card, it deterred me from taking a new job, as it would reset the

decades-long waiting period. I wasn’t myself in the US — I wasn’t allowed to be. My quest for dignity had made me a pawn.

So, after dreading and planning for a year, I quit my job, flew to Mumbai, and darted like a madman — a free man — to my latent romance: Film writing. Three dreamy years later, in 2016, I began working on a nonfiction book. The idea had come to me in a blink: The abuse of the H-1B programme.

I realised that corporate America has concealed the real H-1B scam with great ingenuity, diverting our attention to a “scam within a scam”. Professor Norman Matloff, who has researched the guest worker programme for over three decades and testified before Congress, calls it the “Intelco Good, Infosys Bad” myth — or “racial scapegoating”. The visa abuse also implicates American firms. Their record of suppressing wages — and favouring H-1Bs over Americans — is well documented in news articles, research papers, and court cases. What’s worse? It’s legal.

So Elon Musk is flat-out wrong when he says the H-1B programme is “broken”. It is functioning as intended: Permitting corporations to underpay foreign workers, snub American professionals, and mint money. The H-1B Visa Reform Act of 2004, for instance, restructured the salary slabs — inserting two wage levels, at the 34th and 50th percentiles of the total salaries surveyed for an occupation in an area, below the highest (the 67th percentile) — embedding underpayment in the law itself. The Department of Labor even allows firms to set the prevailing wage levels. Loaded with loopholes, they enable companies to steal wages while complying with the law.

The Musk-MAGA clash has revealed two contentious issues: That the US suffers from a “STEM crisis” and that racial bias drives all H-1B critics. Both notions are false. The endemic problem of fake resumes itself negates many H-1Bs’ best and brightest tags.

Carolyn Veneri posited that the computer science field, ejecting countless programmers, made the unemployment rate meaningless. So a “former engineer, now a sales clerk at Radio Shack,” summarised Matloff, counted as an “employed sales person, not an unemployed engineer”.

In the late 1980s, the National Science Foundation produced a flawed study on an imminent “STEM crisis” that sparked a Congressional probe and influenced the Excellence in Mathematics, Science, and Engineering Education Act of 1990.

Why did the Act matter? It created the H-1B programme.

The writer’s forthcoming book, *Wild Wild East*, is about the systemic abuse of the H-1B programme



RITAM CHAUREY, KANIKA MAHAJAN AND SHEKHAR TOMAR

OVER THE LAST decade, debates on immigration policy have become a central feature of politics in advanced economies, including the US, the UK and Germany. Historically, such debates focused on low-skilled workers. As US President Donald Trump assumes office, the spotlight has moved to high-skilled workers, or particularly the H-1B visa programme.

The US H-1B programme is a temporary non-immigrant visa programme that allows employers in the country to hire foreign workers in specialised fields such as technology, engineering, finance etc. Due to high demand and a cap of 65,000 per year, a computerised lottery selects applicants. Existing evidence shows that such immigration can benefit both the sending and the host country.

For instance, the IT boom in the US led to an increase in the acquisition of computer science skills among Indian students according to research by Gaurav Khanna and Nicolas Morales. The resultant “brain gain”, coupled with the return of STEM migrants (33 per cent according to a study by Stefano Breschi, Francesco Lissoni and Ernest Miguelez) from the US due to circulation, provided critical human capital to boost the Indian IT industry.

Not surprisingly, several CEOs of India’s successful startups have spent significant time in the US, honing their business and technological expertise before bringing their knowledge and skills back to India.

For the US, as the CEOs of top tech firms are emphasising, the need for the H-1B programme arises to attract skilled workers and address skill shortages in the country. However, some Trump supporters are suggesting a clampdown and reform of the programme, claiming that foreign workers displace American employees at lower wages.

Similar discussions on “H-1B visa abuse” constituted a part of Trump’s rhetoric in 2016. Despite no changes to visa quotas or regulations, uncertainty around immigration policy soared right before the 2016 US elections. According to the Economic Policy Uncertainty Index, migration-related uncertainty tripled following Trump’s primary victory compared to 2015. The consequences of this rise in uncertainty rippled across global labour markets, particularly in India, which supplies 70 per cent of H-1B workers annually.

Economic theory suggests that uncertainty makes firms more cautious, often leading to delays in investment. Since the H-1B visa process involves significant upfront costs, including legal fees, administrative work, and relocation expenses, it is expected that firms would delay hiring the H-1B workers until the uncertainty is resolved. Under such circumstances, firms are likely to explore alternative strategies, including relocating jobs overseas to mitigate these risks.

Our research (Ritam Chaurey, Kanika Mahajan and Shekhar Tomar) looks at the impact of this rise in immigration policy uncertainty in 2016 on firm-level demand for workers using data from a leading job platform in India. It offers critical lessons for the current period.

India, as the largest source of H-1B workers, was uniquely impacted by this shift. Our analysis reveals that job postings for US-based positions dropped by 15 per cent almost immediately after Trump’s primary win. Simultaneously, it led to a significant rise in India-based job postings by firms most affected by the uncertainty. We find that firms with a 10-percentage point higher reliance on H-1B workers increased India-based postings by 11 per cent. For an average firm posting ads for US-based positions, this translated to 16 additional India-based positions and four fewer US-based ones. This highlights how immigration policy uncertainty can quickly reshape global hiring patterns.

We also find that this increase in India-based postings was not on account of firms creating new roles in India but rather relocating positions originally based in the US, jobs most vulnerable to offshoring, such as IT and software, saw the largest increase in India. India’s service exports rose significantly for more H-1B reliant firms during this period, suggesting that these offshorable jobs were moved to India. India-headquartered firms were twice as likely as US-headquartered counterparts to relocate positions back to India.

One of the most striking aspects of our study is the role of uncertainty in changing firm hiring decisions. Despite no changes to the H-1B visa programme during the initial period, firms preemptively adjusted their hiring strategies. When the Trump administration made the H-1B process more strenuous in March 2017, we find that the effect of uncertainty in 2016 was almost two-thirds as large as the impact of these actual policy changes.

While policies aimed at restricting immigration are often designed to protect domestic jobs, they may not be effective. Faced with uncertainty, firms are quick to shift hiring to other countries. In this case, US immigration policy uncertainty inadvertently fuelled job creation in India.

More importantly, the debate itself, regardless of whether it leads to actual policy changes, can shape firm decisions. This highlights the need for policymakers to recognise the economic ripple effects of public discussions around immigration policy. Beyond economics, the human costs associated with families dealing with such uncertainty is immense and underscores the need for a stable and predictable immigration policy.

Chaurey is assistant professor, Johns Hopkins University, SAIS; Mahajan is associate professor, Ashoka University and Tomar is assistant professor, Indian School of Business

## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

“Bleak as the outlook undoubtedly is, the West must not abandon the battered and bruised pro-democracy movement in Belarus to its fate.” —THE GUARDIAN

## Netaji’s last journey

My father, Subhas Chandra Bose, was willing to risk everything for India’s freedom. He must be allowed to return to his country, posthumously



ANITA BOSE PFAFF

ON AUGUST 18, 1945, three days after the end of World War II in the eastern theatre of war, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose died following a plane crash in Taipei (then occupied by Japan). His remains were cremated there and taken to Tokyo. The community of Indian exiles who had made their home there arranged for the urn to be kept (hidden from the US occupation forces) at Renkoji Temple temporarily — maybe a few months or a few years, at the most. Today, almost 80 years later, and more than 77 years after India became independent, Netaji’s remains are still honoured at Renkoji Temple. Rev Mochizuki, the third-generation head priest, exercises this function.

At the time of Netaji’s death and shortly thereafter, a large part of the world was in total upheaval. Communication was archaic compared to today’s standards. There were several parties interested in ascertaining what truly happened to Netaji: Did he really die? Or did he manage an adventurous escape once again, as twice before (from India in disguise in 1941 and from Germany by submarine in 1943)? But the investigations carried out shortly after the accident were kept classified for many decades. Not surprisingly, various speculations about what might have happened to him on and after August 18, 1945, made the rounds.

Over time, the results of the earlier investigations were declassified and further inquiry commissions were set up, three alone — in 1956, 1979 and 1999 — by the Indian government. Ten reports concluded that Netaji died during the night of August 18, following a plane crash in Taipei. Only the last Indian inquiry by the Justice Mukherjee Commission arrived at inconclusive results. But this report, for strange reasons, contains many mistakes, inconsistencies and incorrect statements. When asked about the errors in a personal conversation with members of Netaji’s family, Justice Mukherjee admitted the fact but was not willing to talk about it. We must, therefore, accept the fact of Netaji’s death, despite a variety of fantastic speculations of what “might or could have happened”.

While for some these speculations may be motivated by genuine affection for an iconic leader, let us not forget that an author can also make a lot of money by publishing stories of mysterious occurrences.

And mysteries may offer more entertaining reading than dry reports or academic treatises on the subject.

Many Japanese governments and Japanese admirers of Netaji wanted the Indian government and his family to take custody of Netaji’s remains in his motherland, India. In the 1980s, Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao and his foreign minister, later rakshapati, Pranab Mukherjee, with the support of Netaji’s widow and his daughter, initiated a return of the leader’s remains. However, before this could be achieved, their government fell, and the following government abandoned the idea and acceded to the request of other followers and family members to set up the Justice Mukherjee Commission of Inquiry in 1999 to look into the circumstances of Netaji’s death once again. The Mukherjee Commission worked for about six years till the new government finally demanded the submission of the report. The government did not accept this report.

This short sketch of what happened should show that members of most governments felt that a decisive step — like having Netaji’s remains handed over by the Japanese government — could not be to their advantage. They would have had to be prepared for a controversy between followers and family members who were convinced of Netaji’s death in 1945 and those who were not. After all, one cannot blame politicians, dependent on the support of voters, for not willingly placing themselves in the middle of an unnecessary controversy (The fact that Netaji’s brother Suresh Chandra Bose, as a member of the first Indian investigation into his brother’s death, had initiated the draft report concluding Netaji’s death in 1945, but then submitted a dissenting report, led to additional controversies in his family and the public).

Meanwhile, after all or almost all relevant documents about Netaji’s death have been made available to the public, the evidence in support of the fact and the date of his death is overwhelming. When the first government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi declassified the last Indian documents pertaining to Netaji and his family and Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee did the same in Bengal, persons in doubt, who had hoped that something might be found in those documents, had to accept that no conspiracy had been hushed up.

Netaji was deeply devoted to his motherland and his compatriots. He was willing to sacrifice everything to see India free. Since this was not achieved during his lifetime, he deserves to be allowed to return to his country, at least posthumously.

The writer is an economist and the daughter of Subhas Chandra Bose

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### TRUMP AND CHINA

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, “Walls of America” (IE, January 23). Raising the walls could come back to haunt Trump. China has been setting up manufacturing plants in Mexico on a massive scale. Mexico can look to the employment potential therein and in the process, upgrade its economy. By the same token, the US could lose the cheap Mexican labour that hitherto kept domestic wages low, driving up inflation, which would be exacerbated by the dearth of cheap Chinese goods. Canada could follow suit. Trump could be inviting Chinese influence to expand right across the US’s borders, north and south.

R Narayanan, New Mumbai

### DESPERATE MIGRANTS

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, “Walls of America” (IE, January 23). The desperation to migrate reflects the economic and social disparities many face in India, where the pursuit of the “American Dream” often feels like the only viable escape. India must push for more robust diplomatic and policy solutions that address the root causes of migration. This includes increasing opportunities for education, employment, and upward mobility at home, while also advocating for more accessible and humane pathways for migration.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

### DENYING HISTORY

THIS REFERS TO the article, “In between two Indian states” (IE, Jan 23). The much-praised normative Indian state was created not by denying history but also by believing that the unification of the continent was a peaceful, non-religious political event. It delegitimised the majority’s search for a sense of self. By denying

ing the majority its right to identify historical injustices while bending over backwards to accommodate minorities, the normative state was declaring the nature of its constitutional morality. This duplicity in thought and approach makes the author conjure up the grand idea of two states.

H N Bhagwat, Chiplun

### CLIMATE ROADBLOCKS

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, “A pact in peril” (IE, January 22). Trump’s decision to withdraw the US from the Paris pact will adversely impact emission targets. However, UNFCCC is already saddled with a lack of consensus regarding resources transfer for climate change. Most developed countries in particular seem to ignore the ominous warnings in the latest report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. The developed nations’ intransigence mocks at the three ultimate goals of sustainable development that have been emphasised since the 1992 Rio Earth Summit: economic development, universal social wellbeing, and a healthy environment for present and future generations.

L R Marmu, New Delhi

### DAM’S DANGERS

THIS REFERS TO the article, “Powering green India” (IE, January 23). China justifies the huge Yarlung Zangbo hydropower project by arguing that it would support carbon neutrality goals, boost industry and generate employment in the Tibetan region. However, there are numerous concerns surrounding this project, including engineering and ecological challenges. India should monitor developments across its borders carefully and take mitigating steps to avoid injustice.

Vaibhav Goyal, Chandigarh

## Address Vit D deficiency

The Budget can boost fortification programmes

Arpita Mukherjee  
Aashish Chaudhry  
Trishali Khanna

With one in five Indians being Vitamin D deficient, leading to multiple diseases, it is time to launch a new scheme on "Vitamin D Kuposham Mukt Bharat", aligned with the objective of Ayushman Bharat. Targeted healthcare budget will help in enhancing productivity, as found by a PM-EAC study, which noted that every ₹1 invested in micronutrient interventions can yield more than ₹15 in economic returns.

India has seen the success of programmes like the Anaemia Mukt Bharat.

### COSTS OF INACTION

In a forthcoming report by ICRIER, the economic impact of healthcare expenditure and workforce productivity has been assessed in relation to the costs of inaction versus the benefits of intervention. The economic costs of inaction in healthcare expenditure are striking. For example, treatment for conditions such as hip fractures — often linked to Vitamin D deficiency — can impose a substantial financial burden. The cost of treating a single hip fracture is estimated at ₹50,000 in public hospitals and up to ₹2.5 lakh in private facilities.

With annual hip fracture cases projected to surpass one million by 2050, the cumulative costs could overwhelm the healthcare system. In contrast, the benefits of preventive interventions are equally significant. Targeted Vitamin D supplementation programmes have the potential to reduce the prevalence of deficiency-related conditions. Notably, the implementation costs of such interventions can be fully offset within three years due to the resulting savings in healthcare expenses.

The workforce productivity impact of inaction is equally concerning. Vitamin D deficiency contributes to fatigue, musculoskeletal pain, and weakened immunity, leading to increased absenteeism and reduced efficiency. These issues not only hinder individual productivity but also have a broader economic impact.

Productivity losses linked to Vitamin D deficiency disproportionately affect GDP. Improved workplace health leads to fewer sick days, higher energy levels, and better overall



**NUTRIENTS.** Deficiency leads to productivity losses

productivity. Micronutrient deficiency, including adequate Vitamin D levels, could contribute an estimated ₹27,720 crore annually to India's GDP through enhanced workforce performance and reduced healthcare costs.

In India, there is a need for targeted initiatives/schemes for the Centre and States to work together. The forthcoming Budget may launch 'Vitamin D Kuposham Mukt Bharat', where the Centre and the States can partner focusing on strengthening existing government programmes. This ranges from using the existing programmes to lower the cost of testing and treatment to leveraging the ongoing ICMR-NIN's 'Diet and Biomarkers Survey (DABS-I)' to gather data on the deficiency and then have targeted interventions.

Across the world, governments have targeted programmes, engaging multiple stakeholders, to address the deficiency. For example, Jordan's 'National Wheat Flour Fortification' programme mandates the inclusion of Vitamin D fortification for wheat. International organisation, GAIN, has partnered with the Ethiopian government to supply premixes containing Vitamin D to children. In India, Kuposham Mukt Bharat can integrate free Vitamin D check-ups for underprivileged populations and multi-stakeholders' partnerships can be developed for fortification and supplements for low-income population.

Funds may be allocated for awareness campaigns using both traditional and social media.

The Budget may also allocate funds to develop advanced fortification technologies, bio-fortified crops, fortified beverages, plant-based Vitamin D supplements, upgraded traditional medicines, and low-cost testing kits.

Mukherjee is Professor, ICRIER, Chaudhry is Managing Director, Aakash Healthcare Pvt. Ltd, Khanna is Research Assistant, ICRIER

SADIKESAVAN

The more things are changed, the more they remain the same. This holds true for recent attempts at agricultural reforms in India with even the three well-intentioned farm laws being rescinded in 2021 following widespread farmer protests. However, the challenges faced by small and marginal farmers, who make up nearly 85 per cent of the community, cannot be addressed without sustained reforms. The sector is of such critical importance that progressive changes must be continually pursued. Budget 2025 presents a timely opportunity to stay focused on reform-tweaks, especially in creating conditions that support the "ease of doing business" for farmers.

Below are nine suggestions that could be considered by both the Government and the RBI working in tandem, as many powers overlap. Several of these recommendations were already outlined in 2021 by a committee led by CS Setty, the current SBI Chairman.

**Interest subvention for term loans** for small and marginal farmers: Currently, interest subvention is available only for Kisan Credit Cards (KCCs), but it should be extended to agricultural term loans as well. This includes loans for the purchase of equipment (e.g., tractors), land development, rainwater harvesting, and farm pond construction, provided the total subvention per farmer does not exceed ₹3 lakh. For instance, if a farmer has already availed of a KCC of ₹1.5 lakh, he would receive interest subvention for an additional ₹1.5 lakh term loan (even if the total loan amount is higher). This benefit should apply to standard term loan accounts, incentivising small and marginal farmers to invest in agricultural improvements, particularly for smaller investment credits where no current incentives exist.

**Omnibus credit guarantee scheme** for agricultural loans: Currently, separate credit guarantee schemes exist for different agricultural sectors (such as NABARD's schemes for Agriculture Infrastructure Fund and FPO financing, and Small Farmers' Agribusiness Consortium's scheme, or SFAC, for Farmer Producer Company loans). However, unlike the MSME sector, there is no single guarantee scheme for agricultural and allied loans. An omnibus scheme under NABARD could integrate these existing programmes and expand coverage to include all agricultural loans up to ₹2 crore. The Government could contribute an additional corpus, supplemented by premium payments



## Budget and 'ease of doing farm business'

**REFORM MEASURES.** Integration of credit schemes, modification of KCC norms and value chain financing could help small farmers and FPOs

from participating lending institutions, similar to the CGTSM scheme, with exemptions for the North-East and hilly regions. To facilitate the growth of FPOs, the eligibility threshold for bank funding and guarantee coverage should be lowered to a minimum of 100 members. This would accelerate the spread of the FPO model and encourage more farmers to participate.

**Simplifying the KCC process** for farmers: KCCs have proven to be an effective tool in supporting farmers at the start of the agricultural value chain. To ensure the continued success of KCCs, regulatory changes should allow that, for renewal, interest servicing alone be sufficient, rather than requiring full repayment. This change may be made applicable at least for loans up to ₹3 lakh, which are typically taken by small farmers, who transact in cash. Simplifying the renewal process would encourage wider availing of KCCs by farmers.

**Leveraging digitised land records** for collateral-free loans: In States where land records are digitised and banks can record loan interest on these digital portals, the RBI should mandate that banks provide collateral-free loans of up to ₹3 lakh for any agricultural activity within the value chain. This would simplify access to credit and boost agricultural financing. Currently, the RBI mandates collateral-free loans up to ₹2 lakh, but digitising land records could make higher amounts feasible.

**One Nation, One Scale of Finance** for MSP commodities: Given that the Minimum Support Price (MSP) is

uniform across the country, there is a strong case for adopting a 'One Nation, One Scale of Finance' policy for the 23 commodities covered under MSP. This reform would simplify financing for crop cultivation by aligning input costs across States with a leeway of 10-20 per cent for individual banks. It would reduce complexity and improve the ease of doing business for farmers availing KCCs.

**Sourcing linked incentives for corporates** engaging with farm collectives: The Government could introduce a 'sourcing-linked incentive' scheme to incentivise corporates in the food and agro-processing sectors to source directly from farmer collectives. This would encourage corporates to bypass intermediaries, such as individual aggregators or commission agents, in favour of more direct relationships with farmers' collectives. The incentives could be offered in the form of tax breaks or other financial mechanisms.

**Increase in regulatory limit for warehouse receipt financing:** The current regulatory limit for warehouse receipt financing in agriculture is ₹75 lakh. This should be raised to ₹5 crore for farmer interest groups, FPOs, and similar farmer collectives. The increased limit would better meet the financial requirements of larger farmer groups engaged in agricultural value chains.

These changes will strengthen our agricultural sector, making it more productive, inclusive and responsive to the needs of farmers.

The writer is a commentator on banking and finance

## thehindubusinessline.

### TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

January 24, 2005

#### New autonomy package for PSU banks on cards

A fresh autonomy package for public sector banks is in the works, this time around seeking to provide a high degree of freedom to the board of directors on operational matters. The corporate governance-linked package could include greater freedom to the boards in opening of branches, restructuring of operations including closure of loss-making businesses.

#### Pharmacists may stop stocking psychotropic medicines

Chemists across the country have threatened to stop purchasing psychotropic drugs, that come under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985. The complaint is that pharma retailers are getting the rough end of the stick used by the Government to plug the abuse of psychotropic medicines.

#### FMCG firms find novel ways to cut costs, maintain prices

The fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector is gearing up for price corrections once again. But, instead of a direct price increase, it has adopted novel ways to pass the spiralling input cost to the consumer. Some companies have decided to do away with promotions and freebies, while others have chosen to retain the price point but reduce the net weight of the product.

## Teaching boys (and girls) to cook

Sathya Saran

You are probably the type who comes home from work, a bit tired, a bit irate or pleased with the day, and shrugging off work clothes, sinks into a chair waiting for a cup of tea/coffee or a drink. Which in due course of the evening will be followed by dinner, piping hot and served at the family table by house help or wife, regardless of whether she is a home-maker or working woman.

I take my guess, that chances are that while a daughter, if you have one or more, sometimes enters the kitchen (so needless, in these Swiggy-happy times), your son/s may need a roadmap to find where the food placed on the table is cooked.

If this is indeed the case then I have a word of advice. That may sound unnecessary/ feminist/ crazy (depending on where you stand in taking advice from an unknown, self-professed, woke woman) but believe me, some day, you will thank me

for it. It's simple; my advice is get your sons into the kitchen. Teach them to cook, just basic stuff at least. Boiling an egg, flipping an omelette, making dough and rolling out a chapatti that passes for a *chapatti* and boiling rice and *dal/rasam/hadi* or *rajma* to go with it. If you can throw in some simple stir fry recipes and instructions, all the better. See? Not earth-shaking stuff. Simply homely advice.

Okay, for those families whose men/boys know how to do some of the above, I say, take a bow. Boys who know how to cook grow up to be independent men; who do not need the whimsical ministrations of cooks, *maharajis* or depend on their better halves to ensure they get the two square meals they need to continue pushing their way up the job ladder.

Boys who learn to cook are also empowered to shake off the mind-numbing ease of cooking with the thumb, and getting the food delivery man ringing the doorbell, bring in his package along with the food



**COOKING.** Can be a distresser

an unprecisely portion of heart disease or stomach and gastric ailments. As you might have discovered, cooking, if you are not forced to do it through the day, is a great relaxing tool. Nothing like concentrating on getting in perfect proportions of spice and salt, water and rice and other culinary challenges, to take the mind off balance-sheets and office politics.

So, if you are a dad, who sees his son's entry into the kitchen as his macho, or a distraction from his journey to top honcho, think

again. And dear mothers-of sons, put your boys (and girls) to work, cooking. Start them young, with helping out at shelling peas, cutting onions (will teach them that boys can cry) then promote them to bigger tasks like stirring, making rice, breakfast.

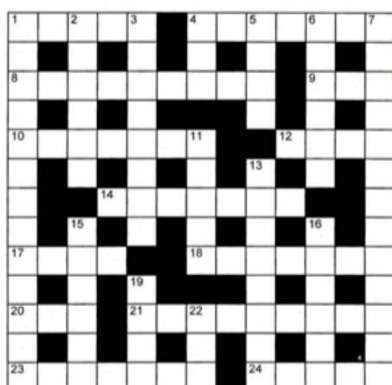
Make it fun, and they will join in happily. And if your family graduates to the point where you are eating a praise-worthy meal cooked by junior, that's a win-win all round.

And, here's a tip. Watching how your son reacts to his exposure to mustard exploding in hot oil is a good way to show him that cooking needs courage besides instinct and inventiveness.

There's an obvious bonus for you in it, of course. But for that apple of your eye, it's an extra-curricular activity he will benefit immensely from. And when it's time, and your d-i-d enters your lives, there is a certainty she will love you for it!

The writer is a Consulting Editor with Penguin India

## BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2617



### EASY

#### ACROSS

- Get into a flap (5)
- Destroys paper, contract etc (5,2)
- Battle, struggle (8)
- Also (3)
- Helps (4)
- Unexpected, without warning (6)
- Early form of bicycle (5-8)
- First light (3-2)
- Hemp, hashish (8)
- Judge's private chamber (6)
- Bank clerk (6)
- S-curve in architecture (4)
- Narrow beam (3)

#### DOWN

- Baby carriages (13)
- Person of no account (6)
- Struggle, fight (8)
- Also (3)
- Helps (4)
- Unexpected, without warning (6)
- Early form of bicycle (5-8)
- First light (3-2)
- Hemp, hashish (8)
- Judge's private chamber (6)
- Bank clerk (6)
- S-curve in architecture (4)
- Narrow beam (3)

### NOT SO EASY

#### ACROSS

- Fear of father going to prison endlessly (5)
- Puts ear to use as one destroys contract (5,2)
- Legendary hero took bird on bonnet of American car (5,4)
- Mouse-coloured in the raw, doesn't quite make a comeback (6)
- Confuses one with odd loss of head when in slippers (7)
- Declare it's not true one half made it to the Big Apple (4)
- A breath of it may be exhaled by its monger (7)
- A method of being played on the opponents' ground (4)
- Acrid as taste of first gooseberry in punnet perhaps (7)
- Seaweed to be found in the pocket of a Scandinavian (3)
- Biscuit made with lard - a big one, it turns out (9)
- It's hard work, Ravel's variations on Debussy finale (7)
- Grips a form of ornamental spray (5)

#### DOWN

- Our marbles, apt to be got rolling in bassinets (13)
- What model of head and shoulders has for one of no account (6)
- Be at odds with C-in-C, loft conversion (8)
- Almost accepted that as well (3)
- Helpful things, said to be adaptable (4)
- Nudes sporting round top of dunes without warning (6)
- Only half of a twopenny-ha'penny conveyance from the past (5-8)
- Early in the day gent leaves 18 to us to sort out (3-2)
- Is able to pinch it and is narcotic (8)
- It can take America one left in a state of confusion (6)
- He may inform one he counts, in banking circles (6)
- Take egotistical turn revealing double-curve (4)
- Really appreciate yummy starters of fish (3)

### SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2616

**ACROSS** 2. Khaki 5. Tact 7. Mead 8. Offering 9. Ascended 11. Boys 12. Campanologist 15. Cool 17. Adhesive 19. Decision 21. Bone 22. Envy 23. Greed

**DOWN** 1. Chesses 2. Kid 3. Avoid 4. Infield 5. Tar 6. Candy 10. Expel 11. Bogus 13. Nearing 14. Savants 16. Ocean 18. Hence 20. Jay 21. Bed

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FRIDAY • JANUARY 24, 2025

## Nuclear muddle

Existing terms pitted against private reactor developers

**T**he Government of India-owned Nuclear Power Corporation of India Ltd came out on the last day of 2024 with a Request for Proposal (or tenders) for building two Bharat Small Reactors (BSRs) of 220 MW each — taking the first material step towards ushering in a small modular reactor era in the country.



NPCIL has rich experience in building and operating 220 MW Pressurised Heavy Water Reactors (PHWRs), whose design is to be tweaked to introduce features of passive safety and accident tolerance in order that the plants can be located without requiring a vast exclusion zone. NPCIL has since postponed the deadline for receiving queries from interested entities twice — to January 31 and then to February 2. This suggests that the response to the notice for RFP has not been exciting. This is hardly surprising, given the conditions imposed on the prospective BSR developers (defined in the document as 'User'). The User is to build the BSR under the supervision and control of NPCIL and transfer it to NPCIL for a consideration of one rupee; the ownership of the asset shall then vest with NPCIL. NPCIL shall operate the plant for which the User shall pay an "expertise fee" of 60 paise per kWh of electricity generated, which shall increase by one paise every year after 2030-31.

The User shall bear all costs of (NPCIL's) operation of the BSR, including fuel, heavy water, maintenance that involves biennial shut down for 40 days, disposal of spent fuel, taxes and insurance, without any say in the operations. NPCIL will transfer the net electricity generated (total generation minus the plant's own consumption); the User shall make its own arrangements to sell the electricity, but at tariffs determined by the Department of Atomic Energy. It is hard to see why any business would be interested. Even if it were, it is a moot point as to why a financial institution would come forward to finance it. The borrower must spend his own money to build the plant, that too in a way that NPCIL dictates and then hand it over to NPCIL, only to wait for electricity to be delivered and sell it at tariffs over which he has no control.

If the government intends to "open up" the nuclear sector to private players, then the RFP document does practically nothing in that direction. Private sector companies, such as L&T, have always been involved in the building of nuclear reactors, even if not the whole reactor — so there is nothing novel about the RFP. It is not clear why NPCIL would get involved in the supervision of the manufacturing of the reactor, when there is an Atomic Energy Regulatory Board. The government could also have left it to the User to choose the operator — after all, the operator would be subject to the regulator's supervision. The RFP document appears to be designed to elicit a response only from power sector PSUs such as NTPC; for these units, the generation from the BSR would be a small part of its total electricity production. That hardly amounts to opening up.

## POCKET

BAVANKANTH



"Every coin has two sides.  
Heads and Headaches."



PANKAJ VASHISHT

**T**he global demand for minerals is experiencing phenomenal growth. The rapid digitisation of economies, coupled with the global quest for energy transition, has heightened the need for bulk raw materials like copper and nickel as well as niche minerals such as lithium, cobalt, neodymium, tellurium, and rare earth elements (REEs). These minerals are indispensable for the production of clean energy systems, including wind turbines, solar panels, and electric vehicles, as well as high-tech digital products.

While the global reserves of these minerals are adequate, their distribution is highly uneven. Furthermore, technological advancements over the past three decades have led to highly concentrated supply chains, with China exerting significant control over mining as well as processing of several critical minerals. This dominance has been achieved through strategic investments in processing technologies, domestic production, and overseas acquisitions, particularly in Africa and South America. Although China's proliferation in the mineral sector has benefited global industries, the Covid-19 pandemic and ongoing geopolitical tensions have exposed the vulnerabilities of this concentrated supply chain.

Consequently, mineral security has emerged as a vital policy objective worldwide. Industrialised nations have responded by identifying critical minerals and formulating strategies to mitigate supply chain disruptions. These measures include incentivising domestic production, promoting R&D for recycling and substitution along with exploring international partnerships.

India, too, faces significant vulnerabilities due to its dependence on imports for critical minerals. While the country is self-reliant in resources like iron, aluminium, and bauxite, it imports 60 per cent of its manganese and remains fully dependent on imports for certain non-metallic minerals such as fluorapatite and magnesite. Additionally, India is also fully dependent on imports for minerals like germanium, heavy rare earth elements, beryllium, rhenium, tantalum, niobium, cobalt, lithium and strontium, etc., many of which are indispensable for high-tech and clean energy applications. Securing stable supply of these minerals is vital for achieving India's vision of becoming a 'Viksit Bharat'.

Fortunately, Indian policymakers



## Securing supply of niche minerals crucial

**METALS WITH METTLE.** They are indispensable for clean energy and hi-tech digital products. Creating KABIL, to secure minerals abroad, must be backed by further measures

have recognised the importance of mineral supply and have begun formulating a mineral security strategy. The establishment of Khanij Bhidesh India Ltd (KABIL) in 2019 marked a pivotal step in these efforts. This joint venture, comprising National Aluminium Company Ltd (NALCO), Hindustan Copper Ltd (HCL) and Mineral Exploration Company Ltd. (MECL), was created to secure critical mineral assets abroad. KABIL, since then, has been exploring partnerships with countries like Argentina, Chile, Bolivia and Australia to acquire essential minerals such as lithium and cobalt.

In 2023, the Ministry of Mines further strengthened this approach by identifying a comprehensive list of 30 critical minerals essential for sectors like defence, electronics, renewable energy, and transportation. Building on this momentum, the government launched the 'Critical Mineral Mission' in July 2024, with a ₹1,500 crore budget to prioritise research and establishing national stockpiles.

**CREATE DEDICATED FUND**  
Though India's mineral security strategy has gained traction, significant gaps remain, with access to capital being one of the most pressing issues. Given the limited domestic reserves of several minerals like cobalt and lithium, acquiring mines of these minerals

overseas is indispensable for long run mineral security. While KABIL has begun this process, it currently lacks the financial capacity to assume the risks associated with overseas acquisitions. To address this, the government should consider creating a dedicated fund to support such ventures, ensuring sufficient capital for mine acquisitions and the infrastructure needed to transport mineral ore from mines to India. Leveraging India's development assistance channel could also support KABIL and other Indian firms in their global endeavours, similar to China's strategy for securing critical minerals abroad.

In addition to financial limitations, gaps in domestic value chains for cobalt, lithium and REEs present another significant challenge for India. The value chain for these minerals is divided in the extraction, refining, processing and downstream manufacturing stages. For cobalt and lithium, India remains fully dependent on imports, with no significant domestic mining or refining infrastructure. In the case of REEs, although India has some capacity in

**Without domestic refining and processing capabilities, mine acquisitions abroad will yield limited benefits**

mining and ore processing, refining and separation capabilities remain absent.

Furthermore, India lacks the capacity to produce advanced derivatives of cobalt, lithium, and rare earths, such as battery cathode materials, high-performance alloys, and permanent magnets. Without domestic refining and processing capabilities, mine acquisitions abroad will yield limited benefits. Therefore, India must urgently invest in developing refining and processing technologies while promoting the domestic manufacturing of advanced derivatives.

This requires two crucial steps: first, substantial investments in acquiring or developing advanced processing technologies for refining and processing, and second, offering incentives to encourage domestic production of critical materials such as battery cathode materials, high-performance alloys, and permanent magnets. Expanding the scope of schemes like the Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) could be a strategic move in this direction. Strengthening downstream manufacturing will not only reduce reliance on imports but also ensure the offtake of minerals that KABIL intends to procure in the coming years.

The writer is Associate Professor, Research and Information System for Developing Countries, Ministry of External Affairs. Views are personal

## GIFT IFSC as hub for outbound investments

Thanks to convenience, cost-efficiency and tax benefits several fund managers and FIs have already registered their presence

Vivak Sharma  
Mudit Burad

**G**ujarat International Finance Tec-City IFSC (GIFT IFSC) is a global financial and technology hub that offers streamlined and cost-effective regulatory environment for HNIs (high net-worth individuals) and fund managers competing with global financial hubs like Singapore and Mauritius. The IFSC Fund Management Regulations, 2022, as notified by the IFSC Authority, contemplate setting up of funds which may invest in India as well as in other permitted foreign jurisdictions, thus having ability to cater to HNIs seeking to add foreign currency-denominated securities to their portfolio.

Comparing the data published by the RBI in December 2023 and December 2024, a significant rise is seen in outward remittance for investments in equity/debt under LRS (Liberalised Remittance Scheme) on a yearly basis despite the recently imposed 20 per cent TCS (tax collected at source) on the outward remittances exceeding ₹7 lakh under Section 206C(1G) of the Income-Tax Act, 1961. This underscores the unwavering determination of Indian HNIs to capitalise on global opportunities despite the tax challenges. It also suggests that Indian HNIs are now shifting from purely India-centric



**HOLDS PROMISE.** GIFT IFSC is poised to drive India's outbound investment

investments to global diversification; this departure from past strategy is fuelled by the following factors:

The first factor is the turbulent and choppy performance of the Indian stock market in the last calendar year. Specifically, key market indexes like Nifty gave negative returns of around 8 per cent in Q3 FY25 indicating a slowdown and stagnation.

Secondly, overseas investments also help in hedging against currency depreciation risk. For example, the value of the dollar in rupee terms has appreciated by 21 per cent, and the Singapore dollar by 19.3 per cent, in the past five years. For investors, this means the overseas portfolios deliver not just returns, but also currency gains.

In addition, the Indian start-up ecosystem is witnessing a funding winter. There has been a significant

slowdown in venture capital investments since their peak in 2021, limiting the investment opportunities in domestic venture capital markets.

**WHY GIFT IFSC STANDS OUT**  
The answer lies in convenience, cost-efficiency, and tax benefits. A recent RBI circular has allowed each individual to remit up to \$250,000 a year to invest into GIFT IFSC-based LRS Bank accounts to make investments and reinvestments into GIFT IFSC based funds.

The ten-year tax holiday (for Category I and II funds) and GST exemption provided to the fund managers based in GIFT IFSC improved the profitability of the managers which enhances overall efficiency and returns.

This is added to the streamlined process of transferring of funds and making investments that has been perfected by domestic banks for the purposes of making GIFT IFSC investments with domestic money.

Several Indian fund managers and multiple financial institutions already have registered their presence as fund management entities in GIFT IFSC and are in the process of launching several outbound AIFs catering to this surge in demand for outbound funds by HNIs and institutional investors. IFSC and SEZ authorities have been pivotal by providing supportive regulatory oversight and transparent approvals,

further easing the process of launching and operating AIFs in GIFT IFSC. GIFT IFSC currently hosts more than 130 registered fund management entities and more than 170 registered AIFs aiming to rival Singapore and Mauritius as a financial hub.

Several funds are exploring using IFSC platform for raising capital for making global investments by pooling Indian capital alongside, NRIs and offshore capital. For instance, IFSCA introduced the much-awaited framework for Family Investment Funds (FIIFs) regime under the FM Regulations in April 2022 which allowed HNIs to set up a self-managed family office. However, this framework turned out to be too ahead of its time, as the RBI did not allow transfer of money from India to IFSC for this purpose above the LRS limit to the FIIF, creating a bottleneck. Therefore, the success of the IFSC route will also depend on the consistency between the macroeconomic policies developed by these regulators.

As the rupee continues to face depreciation pressure against the dollar, all eyes will be on the RBI and IFSC Authority in enabling global opportunities funds. However, with its strategic and practical advantages GIFT IFSC is poised to drive India's outbound investment story to new heights.

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✉ **LETTERS TO EDITOR** Send your letters by email to [blettor@thehindu.co.in](mailto:blettor@thehindu.co.in) or by post to 'Letters to the Editor', The Hindu Business Line, Kasturji Buildings, 859-860, Anna Salai, Chennai 600002.

## Universal citizenship

This refers to US citizenship grant rate for Indians declining (January 24). Citizens from developing nations migrate to developed countries, mostly in search of better job opportunities. The people of host nations, at least some of them, treat the guests as unwelcome parasites eating into the domestic opportunities and resources. The mutual benefit angle is forgotten. This has become more glaring by certain utterances from the highest level in the US. Time is opportune for some internal body similar to the United Nations to come into being to organise and manage migration issues faced by professionals moving

from country to country across the world in pursuit of better job opportunities.

**MG Warrier**  
Barwadi, UP

## Utilising wastewater

Union Minister Nitin Gadkari is turning the dream of generating ₹300 crore in annual revenue through the reuse of wastewater from toilets into reality. This idea not only sparks an economic revolution but also marks a significant step toward environmental conservation. By utilising toilet water in agriculture and industries, the pressure on rivers can be reduced. This 'Waste to Wealth' initiative will promote water

conservation, create employment, and strengthen self-reliance.

**RK Jain Arjeet**  
Barwadi, UP

## Addressing mental health

This is with reference to 'Caring for mental health' (January 23). Mental health of citizens should be part and parcel of the healthcare system. The government should appoint counsellors in all educational institutes. Also, it should take the help of psychiatrists/NGOs to help students overcome problems relating to stress, depression and anxiety. Even in companies, there are hardly any provisions for mental care of employees. Scant attention is paid

to the well-being of our logistics workforce such as pilots, motormen and bus/driver drivers. Many lives are dependent on their physical and mental health.

The government should ensure counselling for these service providers whenever they face turmoil in their personal/professional lives.

**Veena Shenoy**  
Thane

## IT sector must step up

This refers to the editorial, 'Moment of reckoning' (January 23). Indian IT majors have all the potential in terms of funds as well as skilled manpower. But the way artificial intelligence is

moving into various spheres, the IT industry needs to keep pace with the change in trends and increasing needs.

**AG Rajmohan**  
Anantapur, AP

## Foreign universities

Appropos 'Foreign universities: What will make them tick?' (January 23), the first priority is to facilitate setting up of foreign university campuses with full autonomy for retaining their brand value, standards of education, fee structure and faculty positions. Let our universities compete with them in delivering quality education.

**Vinod Jhari**  
Dahi



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

— Ramnath Goenka

## CLEAN THE MESS IN KERALA CONG, UNIFY TO SAVE CO-OP BANKS

SOMETHING is rotten within the Congress in Priyanka Gandhi's constituency Wayanad. N M Vijayan, who was treasurer of the district Congress committee when both Priyanka and her brother got elected from there, has died by suicide after killing his differently-abled son last month. Before his death, Vijayan had written six letters—one addressing his other son and the rest to various Congress leaders and the police. In the letters, Vijayan, who had been a fulltime party worker for half a century, indicated that he was compelled to take his life because of corruption in the party. He claimed that some Congress leaders in Wayanad had been taking bribes through Vijayan for giving jobs in cooperative banks linked to the party. When the party failed to give jobs to some who had shelled out lakhs, Vijayan took it upon himself to pay back as other leaders refused to help. He even mortgaged his property as he felt he was answerable. In his last note, Vijayan made it clear that the Kerala Congress leadership was aware of all this.

The deaths triggered a controversy even though the state Congress leadership initially feigned ignorance. The family had kept quiet as Vijayan had requested them to give the party 10 days to settle the issue. But as the leadership continued to show apathy, his son went public. That's when the state leadership sprang into action and offered support, though the damage was done. Cases have been registered against the leaders named in Vijayan's letters. Though the district Congress president and MLA managed to get anti-party bail, they are being questioned by the police.

The incident should push the Congress high command to take affairs of their Kerala unit more seriously if they are to retain a grip over the state, one of its last bastions. If the party gets mired in corruption even when it is out of power, how will it be able to evoke public trust? The incident also highlights what is ailing with the state's cooperative banks, as every political party is using them as a fiefdom to milk for benefits. All parties must come together if they are to save the sector. They must also ensure that such tragedies are not repeated.

## HALT COW VIGILANTISM AND CATTLE TARGETING

TWO incidents of maiming, stealing and butchering cows in Karnataka have emerged as a threat to communal harmony even as cow vigilantism continues to be a major menace in different parts of the country. The recent tragic incidents, which occurred on consecutive Sundays of January, involved slashing cows' udders in Bengaluru's Cottonpet area, and stealing and butchering a pregnant cow in Salkod gram panchayat of Honnavar taluk in Uttara Kannada district.

Such incidents, which provide fodder for those trying to disrupt communal peace, invariably get entangled with politics. Soon after the second incident, Kuma-Honnavar's BJP MLA Dinakar Shetty visited Salkod and lashed out at Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and Home Minister G Parameshwara for the repeated attacks on cows. Leader of the Opposition in the assembly, R Ashoka, alleged the incident was made possible by the Congress's "appeasement-driven governance" in Karnataka, and blamed the government for cows being repeatedly targeted to taunt the majority community.

It needs to be noted that neither violent, extra-judicial cow vigilantism—which has already cost several innocent lives—nor the harming of cows help with communal harmony. Such actions, which can trigger explosive communal conflicts, are not allowed under Indian law. Ultimately as such conflicts linger, they impede with the smooth running of the economy and people's welfare. So, such acts need to be recognised as anti-national, not merely anti-social—because they can disrupt the nation's unity and people's well being across state boundaries.

Political statements over such incidents usually do more to incite rather than pacify. Sanity needs to prevail—not just among members of the ruling and opposition parties, but among the general public, too—for the larger good. On its part, the Congress-ruled government needs to adopt a mature approach towards this goal, which would also help it shed the opposition-cast blemish of indulging in "appeasement politics". The opposition needs to come together with the ruling disposition to halt cow vigilantism and cattle targeting. After all, both sides should work towards sustaining harmony rather than tearing apart the social fabric.

### QUICK TAKE

#### CROSSING PATHOLOGIES

MAHARASHTRA Food and Drugs Administration's directive allowing homeopathic practitioners who have completed a certificate course in modern pharmacology to prescribe allopathic medicines is dangerous. A similar move made in 2017 was stayed by the Bombay High Court when the Indian Medical Association challenged it. The Supreme Court had highlighted the trouble with 'cross-path' in 1996's Poonam Verma case. The desperation to press more doctors into practice is understandable—there is a massive shortage in all states. In 2020, there were only seven physicians per 10,000 people in India, compared to 24 in China. But doing it this way would be like going to an orthopaedic to treat a mental health issue.

THE NEW US secretary of state Marco Rubio has said Ukraine would be a "top priority" for President Donald Trump and that efforts to reach a ceasefire would begin straight away. Some of the groundwork has "already been laid", Rubio claimed, and insisted that both Ukraine and Russia would have to concede "something" as part of any deal.

However, Trump upstaged Rubio in real time to assume a threatening stance when he told a news conference he would be talking to Putin "very soon" and it "sounds likely" that he would apply more sanctions if the latter did not come to the table.

Trump followed through on the threat in a Truth Social post: "I'm going to do Russia, whose economy is failing, and President Putin, a very big favour. Settle now, and stop this ridiculous war! It's only going to get worse. If we don't make a deal, and soon, I have no other choice but to put high levels of taxes, tariffs, and sanctions on anything being sold by Russia to the US, and various other participating countries. Let's get this war, which never would have started if I were president, over with! We can do it the easy way, or the hard way—and the easy way is always better. It's time to make a deal."

Trump is falling into the same trap that Team Biden did—predicating the war on the deeply flawed assumption that the Russian economy is the weak link in Moscow's strategy, or worse still, Russia's war economy is a house of cards and time is not on Putin's side. Quintessentially, it's a carry-over from the Soviet era—performative and intended to undermine confidence in its political intent. It won't unsettle Putin.

Just recall how aggressively the power apparatus dealt with the shock of the 2008 financial crisis. The new US president wants to go down in history as a peacemaker and unifier. But he, also sees Ukraine, a resource-rich country as remaining militarily strong and closely associated with the West. Therefore, neither Ukraine's capitulation to Russia nor a strategic defeat of NATO fits into his paradigm.

Therein lies Trump's predicament. Fundamentally, he has no intention to jettison the US's claims to global hegemony even as he distances from the so-called liberal-globalist agenda of wasteful expeditionary wars. At a speech during the commander in chief's inaugural ball, Trump said the US would

Given the postures Trump and Putin struck this week, a thaw in US-Russia relations is unlikely anytime soon. Trump is not intent on jettisoning US claims to global hegemony

## THE EAGLE STAYS IN STARING CONTEST WITH THE BEAR

M K BHADRAKUMAR

Former diplomat



ILLUSTRATION BY

achieve "peace through strength", an expression often attributed to Ronald Reagan. Twice in the past week, Trump has called for enhancement of NATO countries' defence spending from the existing 2 percent of GDP to 5 percent.

Russians have a long memory. Just hours before Trump's inauguration, the veteran foreign minister Sergey Lavrov told a briefing session with Russia's Security Council chaired by President Putin that "everyone is trying to guess what official approaches the Trump administration will promote... let me repeat that all of these are preliminary statements, more like tests". Lavrov said even the US's Western allies are in a waiting mode, leave alone others who have experienced

Washington's record to "maintain conflict potential in the hope of benefiting from the ongoing crises".

Moscow is deeply sceptical about Trump's "peacemaking" in Ukraine. Putin remarked that Moscow welcomes Trump's remarks on the necessity of doing everything possible to avert a third world war. He noted, "We have never declined dialogue and have always been prepared to sustain amicable and cooperative relations with any American administration... [But] we operate under the premise that the dialogue will be established on an equal and mutually respectful foundation, acknowledging the significant roles our nations play on several vital global issues, including the enhancement of

## WHY COMMON LAW IS SCEPTICAL OF PHILOSOPHY

LAST November's F A Mann Lecture, Justice Philip Sales of the UK Supreme Court offered a compelling philosophical framework for understanding how purpose shapes the creation and interpretation of law. Drawing on the works of American jurist Lon Fuller and philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, Sales illuminated why purposive analysis remains indispensable across the legal landscape.

Sales's thesis rests on two philosophical pillars. The first is Fuller's conception of law as "the enterprise of subjecting human conduct to the governance of rules". This frames purpose not merely as an interpretive tool, but as constitutive of law itself. The second is Wittgenstein's analysis of language as inherently purpose-driven, with meaning emerging from use rather than from fixed referents.

Despite going on about the nature of language as propounded by philosophers, Sales acknowledged that common law is averse to philosophy, prioritising practical experience in real-world cases over abstract ideas. This, to me, presents an intriguing paradox that warrants deeper scrutiny. Although judges and practitioners typically claim they value real-world experience over theoretical frameworks, this stance exposes an important—and usually overlooked—intellectual commitment that demands careful consideration.

Common law, Justice Edward Coke wrote, represented "an artificial perfection of reason, gotten by long study, observation, and experience". To him, perfection is the expertise attained by lawyers down the ages—"an infinite series of grave and learned men".

King James I's assertion of the right to decide issues where the law was unclear later became known as the *Case of Prohibitions* (1607). Coke observed, "The king said he thought the law was founded upon reason, and that he and others had reason as well as the judges... But he was not learned in the laws of his realm of England, and causes which concern the life, inheritance, goods or fortunes of his subjects are not to be decided by natural, but by the artificial reason and judgement of law". As we will see, this remains the foundational principle of practical law.

Justice Markandey Katju, in *Sham-*

SAAI SUDHARSA  
SATHIYAMOORTHY

Advocate, Madras High Court

bhu Dayal (2002), remarked that even the maxims of the executive "will not be able to dispense justice... properly not being possessed of a trained judicial mind nor conversant with intricate applicable legal principles and judicial manner of thinking. They are likely to have an inbuilt pro-executive bias, having worked for long years in the executive and hence will not inspire the confidence of the public".



Legalese can be analysed through Ludwig Wittgenstein's idea that meaning emerges from the use of language, not fixed referents. Common law prioritises reaching workable conclusions than outlining abstract ideas. Yet, philosophy has influenced it down the ages

This is because legal reasoning is understood to be that which aligns closely with the prevailing consensus within the legal community. Common law and legal reasoning fundamentally rely on inductive and analogical reasoning derived from the specifics of individual cases. Judges in common law regimes, such as the UK and India, view their role as incrementally advancing the law through the resolution of specific cases, guided more by precedent than by a thorough theoretical foundation.

One may even argue that there is nothing natural about the common law, as it is supposed to be shared among a fraternity of lawyers. It is also not brought out by the discovery of practi-

cal principles through abstract reasoning, but through sustained participation in the practice of law. As such, philosopher, economist and theologians, who are prone to deductive reasoning from abstract principles, find common law wanting.

However, this explains the general unwillingness of judges to resort to any kind of top-down, deductive reasoning from abstract principle. It is indeed true that the concept of reason as 'artificial' implies an understanding that legal reasoning is always a constructed endeavour—an attempt to gain a degree of coherence in the chaotic elements of social existence. Therefore, the true question is not whether legal reason is artificial, but what form of artifice it embodies and for what purposes.

Legal concepts evolve through accumulated court rulings. Each case is impacted by and at the same time can modify an established doctrine. This focus on case-specific, fact-intensive analysis fosters a pragmatic, almost anti-intellectual, approach in common law reasoning. Broad generalisations are seen with suspicion as unwarranted intrusions. The common law judge places more importance on reaching a just and workable conclusion to a conflict than on outlining general philosophical ideas, especially if doing so means distinguishing or limiting relevant precedents.

Of course, common law's hostility to abstract thought has not isolated it from philosophical influence. From the natural law ideas of Thomas Aquinas and William Blackstone to the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, and the legal positivism of H L A Hart and Joseph Raz, many systems have shaped common law theory. As Sales illustrated in his speech, ideas from philosophers may help in better highlighting the basic aspects of legal language and practice. The strength of the common law is its readiness to give top priority to what works above what looks good on paper.

(Views are personal)

### MAIL BAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

#### Netaji's followers

Ref: Honouring Netaji's legacy (Jan 24). It's aptly written that Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose rose to the skies and illuminated India's horizon with his personality. It's also true that there are hundreds of people who silently follow the principles laid down by Netaji. Chellam Sankaran, email

#### Rarest cases

Ref: *Cause for detestation over reform* (Jan 22). The editorial unambiguously explained how to determine 'rarest of rare' cases. In cases of extreme brutality, 'detestation should be preferred to reform'. It said, 'Culprits who don't express remorse expect only a short stay in prison. Capital punishment, if awarded, should be confirmed and executed swiftly. Otherwise it will send wrong message.' Sallik Kumar V, Kochi

#### Immigration debate

Ref: *In first meet, US flags irregular migration* (Jan 24). Illegal immigration has been a pressing issue for India too. But the concern is not limited to India—it's a huge topic now in global discourse. Several countries are adopting stricter regulations to tackle the challenge, citing its socio-economic and security implications. Saurabh Thakur, Mumbai

#### Train tragedy

Ref: *12 jump off train after false alarm, run over by another* (Jan 23). The case is shocking. It's reported that some Pushpak Express passengers jumped off after the driver applied brakes. The brake applied at high speed led to some sparks, which led to the smoke that entered the cabin and caused panic. Given such an odd chain of events, one wonders whether it was sabotage. K S Aswathanarayana, Bengaluru

#### RTO agents

Ref: *Delay in supply of licenses/RC smart cards* (Jan 23). The regional transport office can be fast if you go through an agent. If you go without one, they will raise objections to delay the work so that you go to an agent. The authorities should complete the tender process for issuing smart cards as soon as possible and RTOs should be streamlined to make them user-friendly. G K Chandrasekhar, Tumkur

#### Waqf vote

The bold step by UDF MP Francis George to extend support for the Waqf (Amendment) Bill is to be acclaimed. His bold stand should be an eye-opener for others. It will bring solace to the Mumamb families who have been protesting some waqf property rules for months. M T Thomas, Peruva