

Envisioning India as a global skill supplier

In an address in August, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had said that he was hopeful that India's skilled workforce will play a prominent role in the global job market.

Global mega trends, such as demographic transitions, globalisation, technological advancements, and climate change, are significantly altering the demand for, and the supply of, international migrant workers. Among the various facets of such changes, the skills of these workers are assuming centrality in public policy discourse.

Reviews of immigration policies of the traditional and major migrant destinations (the U.S., the U.K., Canada, and Gulf Cooperation Council countries) and of the new destinations (Germany, South Korea, Japan, etc.) reveal the increased prioritising of skill-selective and skill-intensive immigration. Most of the destination countries recognise that their ability to respond to certain developments, such as an ageing society, digitalisation, declining fertility rates, and the need for economic diversification strategies to tackle the challenging global economic environment, can be met only by welcoming international migrant workers with the relevant skills.

Can India rise to the occasion and bridge the global skills gap? Responding effectively to the skill needs of different destination countries is a complex task. Robust and evidence-based policy interventions are essential to facilitate skill-centred international labour migration outflows from India.

Fragmented policy structure However, India still lacks a comprehensive policy architecture for international labour mobility. The policy interventions are fragmented and are often not based on evidence. The only data source for annual migrant labour outflows from India is the data on emigration clearances, which covers only those with an



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educational attainment below matriculation and low skilled workers migrating to 18 select countries. Such data inadequacy stands as a major obstacle in formulating constructive policies.

India's efforts have mostly revolved around bilateral agreements on international labour mobility with different countries covering aspects such as social security, skills, protection, and welfare. These are primarily one-off exercises, not situated within a composite policy framework. Further, there are hardly any evaluations available on the outcomes of these pacts and the learnings from them.

India must design and operationalise a comprehensive national policy on international labour migration, with skill-centred migration anchored as one of the fundamental pillars. Such a policy should clearly set the road map for the different processes involved in transitioning India as the global skill capital.

The way forward

The critical step in this direction is to identify and anticipate the ever-changing skills in demand in select destination countries and the emergent skill gaps across their key sectors and occupations. Organisations such as the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training are actively involved in skill forecasting for European countries using rigorous methodologies. Data and insights obtained from regional and national skill forecasting exercises, especially for the U.S., the U.K., and Canada, that mostly cover the medium term (2-5 years), can help India respond to skill needs. This should be supplemented by big data analytics of real-time online job vacancies in destination countries for which India seeks to become the lead supplier of skills.

Once this is done, India's capacity to provide the requisite skills must be assessed. This will entail systematic mapping of the country's skill development efforts

related to skill mobility and follow-up actions: introducing identified skills and competencies as a part of the curriculum in specific institutions; reorienting skill programmes of India's International Skill Centres to meet the global skill gaps; creating customised short-term skill training geared towards destination countries; and so on. The priority must be to raise the quality of skill development to international standards. This calls for the convergence of the skill qualification systems of India and the destination countries. India also needs a review of the National Skills Qualification Framework to assess its effectiveness in aligning our qualifications with those of the major destination countries.

Considering that contemporary immigration policies encourage temporisation, return migration is gaining prominence in international skilled migration flows. This is another area where India falls short: the optimum utilisation of return migrants' skills is one of the most neglected aspects of the country's migration policies. The best way to effectively reintegrate return migrants is to ensure that the skills and competencies they acquire in the destination countries are accredited by specialised skill certification institutions in those countries so that migrants can transition back effectively to the Indian labour market when they return.

Another pressing need is a skill-centred international labour migration information system, encompassing quantitative and qualitative indicators. Such a platform should regularly collate, generate, analyse, and report information and data on key indicators of skills and migration to enable evidence-based interventions. This will be pivotal in fostering skill partnerships between India and the principal destination countries, boosting skill-centred mobility, and improving migration and developmental outcomes.

All eyes on Kurnool

The Naidu government has charted out ambitious plans to develop the district

STATE OF PLAY
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The Andhra Pradesh government has made several development plans for Kurnool, known as a backward district and the gateway to Rayalaseema. It has proposed a drone hub, enhanced industrial activity with the development of the Orvakal industrial node, greater flight connectivity, and the establishment of a High Court Bench.

Kurnool was the capital of Andhra Pradesh from October 1, 1953 to October 31, 1956. On November 1, 1956, the Telugu-speaking areas of the erstwhile Hyderabad province were merged with Andhra Pradesh. During the merger, the Sri-Bagh Pact, an agreement between the political leaders of Coastal Andhra Pradesh and Rayalaseema regions, promised that a High Court would be set up in Kurnool. However, this did not happen.

The idea was proposed again not too long ago. As part of its decentralised development plan or the 'three capitals' proposal, the previous Jagan Mohan Reddy government said it would develop Kurnool as the judicial capital. A few judicial bodies and commissions were shifted to Kurnool and the district was notified as the headquarters of the State Human Rights Commission in 2023. However, the High Court remained in Amaravati. The 'three capitals' proposal ran into hurdles.

This year, Chandrababu Naidu returned as Chief Minister. In November 2024, the Andhra Pradesh Assembly passed a resolution for a High Court Bench in Kurnool. In

part of the government's ambitious plans to turn the State into a drone capital. The Andhra Pradesh government is also planning to draft a drone policy. Drones are especially useful in the healthcare and agriculture sectors, and during calamities, as the government found out during the recent floods in Vijayawada.

The government believes that attracting investors to set up units at the Orvakal node will reap dividends. Orvakal is located near the Kurnool airport, which began commercial operations from March 2021. Air connectivity to Orvakal is also likely to increase as the government is trying to persuade flight operators to run services to Vijayawada.

Telugu Desam Party (TDP) MPs recently submitted a representation to the Centre seeking a railway line that will connect Kurnool to Amaravati, which will further propel growth in the district.

Historically, Kurnool was a stronghold of the TDP. However, this changed when Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy became Chief Minister. Later, Mr. Jagan Mohan Reddy's YSR Congress Party dominated the undivided district of Kurnool in the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha elections. In the 2024 elections, however, the National Democratic Alliance managed to flip Rayalaseema's long-standing political dynamics. Of the 14 seats in undivided Kurnool, the TDP secured 12.

Given the TDP's dominance and as Mr. Naidu has proved his capability in transforming grand visions into reality in the past, there is hope that Kurnool may finally see a brighter future. The TDP government is also at an advantage compared to the YSRCP government as the Bharatiya Janata Party is also part of the government in the State.

Indian visa denials linked to fraud, not housing crisis, in Australia

While students were blamed for the housing crisis, visa grant rates for Chinese students remain unaffected

DATA POINT

Sambavi Parthasarathy
Vignesh Radhakrishnan
Amitha Reij George

Affordable homes are becoming increasingly scarce in Australia. The government attributed last year's sharp rise in immigration as a key factor that is contributing to the crisis. In response, it has implemented measures to restrict the inflow of students whose numbers skyrocketed last year, significantly outpacing the numbers of skilled migrants and other categories.

An Australian government department's analysis shows that 60% of international students live in apartments, 26% in detached houses, and the remainder in hostels or university housing. These numbers, read along with the unprecedented surge in international students in 2023, shed light on the acute housing crisis, particularly in Sydney and Melbourne, which attract most of these students.

Chart 1 illustrates the Rental Affordability Index in the greater capital areas of Sydney and Melbourne, where a higher index indicates better affordability. Rent affordability has plummeted in both regions, with the decline being much steeper in Sydney than Melbourne. This coincides with the sharp increase in student arrivals.

While the housing crisis, exacerbated by a surge in student numbers, provided a rationale for limiting student intake, a closer look reveals disparities in how these restrictions were applied. Students from certain countries, particularly India, were impacted disproportionately, while students from other countries, notably China, grew in number this year despite the restrictions.

Chart 2 depicts the visa grant rates for students from India, China, and all countries who applied for higher education and vocational education and training courses in Australia.

In Australia, China and India are shown separately because they form the top two shares of international students by a significant margin. The overall visa grant rate has dropped significantly from more than 90% before the pandemic to below 80% after, in line with the new tightening. The grant rate for Indian students dropped from nearly 90% to 65%. But for Chinese students, it has remained close to 95% even in recent years.

Is this disparity because Indian students are more concentrated in regions with acute housing crises, while Chinese students are not? **Chart 3** shows that Chinese students outnumber Indian students in Sydney (New South Wales), where the housing crisis is more severe, whereas Indian students outnumber Chinese students in Melbourne (Victoria), where it is comparatively better. If the housing crisis was the primary factor for increased visa denials, Chinese students should have faced more rejections given their higher concentration in Sydney. So, what explains the higher denial rates for Indian students?

The answer might lie in another problem — mounting visa fraud. The Australian government's Department of Education says there is a higher proportion of "high-risk" student visa applications from India, Nepal, and Pakistan.

Chart 4 shows the visa processing time in days for Chinese and Indian students between April and July this year and last year. The processing time is separately denoted for three types of student visa applications: straightforward (satisfies most necessities), typical, and complex (lacks many requirements). Although the processing time has increased for Chinese and Indian students, Indian student visas are processed for a much longer time, which is attributed to their classification as "high-risk". Thus the higher rejection rate for Indian students is better explained by an increase in visa fraud rather than the housing crisis.

Stricter down under

The data for the charts were sourced from the Australian Government's Department of Home Affairs, the Department of Education, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's Housing Dashboard, SGS Economics and Planning's 2024 Rental Affordability Index, and the National Housing Supply and Affordability Council's State of the Housing System 2024 report

In the charts China and India are shown separately because they are the top two sources of international students. In all the charts, data is as of October 31, 2024

Chart 1: The chart illustrates the Rental Affordability Index in the greater capital areas of Sydney and Melbourne, where a higher index indicates better affordability

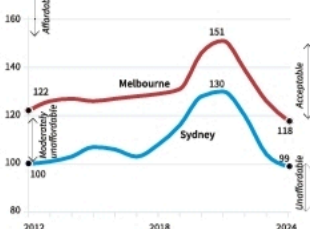


Chart 2: Number of students from India and China who began courses in New South Wales and Victoria over the years, K=1,000

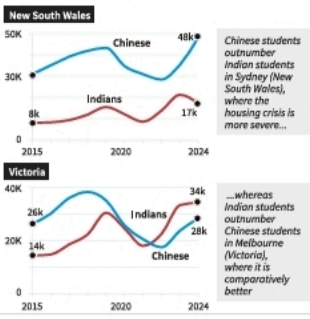


Chart 3: Visa grant rates for students from India, China, and all countries who applied for higher education and vocational education and training courses in Australia

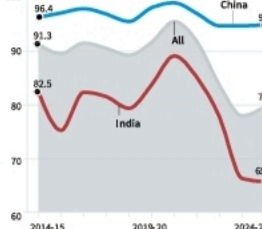
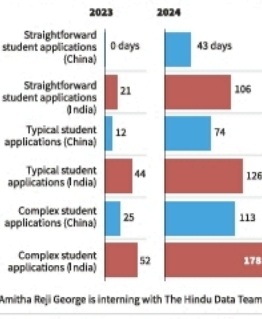


Chart 4: Visa processing time in days for Chinese and Indian students between April and July in 2023 and 2024



Amitha Reij George is interning with The Hindu Data Team

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO DECEMBER 24, 1974

An old Kerala musical instrument

Madras, Dec. 23: At the meeting of the Experts Committee held to-day in connection with the 48th conference of the Music Academy, Sri Chummar Chondal presented a paper on Nanthun, an old musical instrument of Kerala in vogue among Mannars (Vannar in Tamil) — the washerman community. It was used as a tala and sruti accompaniment for the recital of songs on Bhagavati. The instrument is 4.5 feet hollow wooden body, with two fibre strings and played with a plectrum made of horn. Although it has five frets only the middle and lower are pressed. The fibre strings produce two or three notes and the sruti provided is approximately one katta. Nanthun seems to be a corruption for Nandhuni meaning "good sound". It is in vogue chiefly in Central and North Kerala among Mannar Velaan and Perumannan communities during Bhagavati worship and other rituals. There were references to this instrument in Malayalam works of the end of 14th century. Oomanattu Sankunni, 76, gave a demonstration on the instrument.

Sri Tite Krishna Iyengar, speaking on the contribution to music of the Maharajas of Mysore, said the first Maharaja of Mysore who started the Navaratri festival for which Mysore became famous, was Raja Wodeyar (1673-1704). Chikka Devaraja Wodeyar (1673-1704) played the Kalavati Veena and composed the musical poem Gita Gopala in the style of Gita Govinda. Krishnaraja Wodeyar (1895-1940) encouraged many distinguished musicians. Sri Jayachamaraja Wodeyar was a scholar and composer who continued the patronage extended by Mysore Court.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO DECEMBER 24, 1924

Bolshevism in China

Paris, Dec. 23: The anxiety regarding the forthcoming events in the Far East was voiced by M. Outrey, Deputy for Indo-China, in the course of the debate on colonial estimates in the chamber. M. Outrey said he apprehended one organisation of a Bolshevik Government in China. He knew that Japan had protected herself against the movement by an understanding with Mr. Changsoin, and Japan and Korea would certainly be saved from the wave of Bolshevism. But it was also certain that the wave would spread beyond China, and soon reach Indo-China, Burma, and India.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Manipur police recruits passing out from Assam Academy

2,000 Nearly 2,000 recruits of the Manipur police passed out from the Lachit Borphukan Police Academy on Monday, strengthening the force in the violence-hit northeastern State, an official said. PTI

Casualties suffered by North Korea in Russia-Ukraine war

1,100 More than 1,000 North Korean soldiers have been killed or wounded in Russia's war with Ukraine, South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) said on Monday. The new figure follows a report by Seoul's spy agency to MPs last week. AP

Police personnel to be deployed in Prayagraj for Maha Kumbh Mela

50,000 The 2025 Maha Kumbh Mela will see a strong force of 50,000 police personnel fanning out across Prayagraj to respond to potential terror threats, cyber attacks, rogue drones and human trafficking. PTI

India's oil imports from West Asia in November

2.28 In billion barrels per day (bpd), India's November crude imports showed West Asian oil at a nine-month high while Russia accounted for its smallest share in three quarters. Refiners in India have been gorging on cheaper Russian oil. REUTERS

Highest-ever monthly traffic recorded in Lucknow Airport

6.29 In lakh. The Chaudhary Charan Singh International Airport has managed an all-time monthly high of passenger movement in November. Dubai, Muscat and Dammam were the top three international destinations. PTI
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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India's reliance on China for critical minerals

Does China have unparalleled dominance in the critical minerals sector? How was it able to do so? What are the minerals for which India is heavily dependent on China? Why has India not been able to excavate the lithium reserves found in Jammu and Kashmir?

EXPLAINER

Rakshit Shetty

The story so far:

The Ministry of Mines in 2023 identified 30 critical minerals deemed essential for the nation's economic development and national security. While the report highlighted India's complete import dependency for 10 critical minerals, it did not fully address a more pressing concern – the extent and nature of dependency on China.

Is China a dominant player?

China's unparalleled dominance in critical minerals stems from its vast resource base and strategic investments across the value chain. As the world's largest mining nation, China has discovered 173 types of minerals, including 13 energy minerals, 59 metallic minerals, and 95 non-metallic minerals. Reserves of nearly 40% of these minerals, particularly copper, lead, zinc, nickel, cobalt, lithium, gallium, germanium, and crystalline graphite, increased significantly last year, supported by an exploration investment of \$19.4 billion. This led to the discovery of 132 new mineral deposits, including 34 large ones. China's dominance extends beyond reserves to include processing and refining, with control over 87% of rare earth processing, 58% of lithium refining, and 68% of silicon processing. Furthermore, China has strategically invested in overseas mining projects and built unparalleled midstream refining capabilities, raising supply chain vulnerabilities for countries including India, the U.S., and EU nations.

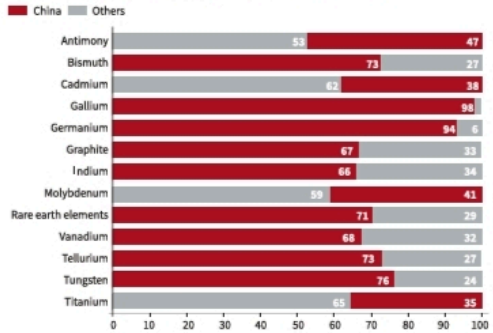
What about China's export controls?

When it comes to China's approach to weaponising critical mineral exports, it is strategic and calculated. Beijing primarily targets minerals deemed critical by Western nations and their allies, especially those essential for

China, a leading player in critical minerals

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China's global market share (in percentage) across various minerals as of 2022



semiconductors, batteries, and high-tech manufacturing. However, China carefully balances these decisions against two constraining factors: it avoids controlling minerals which heavily depend on Western raw material imports, and it refrains from actions that could disrupt its domestic industrial enterprises or export-dependent sectors. This strategic calculus was evident in China's 2010 rare earth embargo against Japan, its recent restrictions on antimony, gallium, and germanium exports, and its December 2023 ban on rare earth extraction and processing technologies.

Is India dependent on China?

An in-depth examination of import data of 30 critical minerals spanning 2019 to 2024 reveals India's acute vulnerability to Chinese supplies, particularly for six critical minerals where dependency

exceeds 40%: bismuth (85.6%), lithium (82%), silicon (76%), titanium (50.6%), tellurium (48.8%), and graphite (42.4%). Bismuth, primarily used in pharmaceuticals and chemicals, has few alternative sources, with China maintaining an estimated 80% of global refinery production. Lithium, crucial for EV batteries and energy storage, faces processing bottlenecks, despite alternative raw material sources, as China controls 58% of global refining. Silicon, vital for semiconductors and solar panels, requires sophisticated processing technology that few countries possess. Titanium, essential for aerospace and defence applications, has diversified sources but involves high switching costs. Tellurium, important for solar power and thermoelectric devices, is dominated by China's 60% global production share and finally graphite, indispensable for EV

batteries and steel production, faces supply constraints as China controls 67.2% of global output, including battery-grade material.

Why does India rely on imports?

Despite being endowed with significant mineral resources, India's heavy reliance on imports stem from several structural challenges in its mining and processing ecosystem. Many critical minerals are deep-seated, requiring high-risk investments in exploration and mining technologies – a factor that has deterred private sector participation in the absence of adequate incentives and policy support. The country's processing capabilities are also limited. This is particularly evident in the case of the recently discovered lithium deposits in Jammu and Kashmir, where despite the presence of 5.9 million tonnes of resources in clay deposits, India lacks the technological capability to extract lithium from such geological formations.

What is the way forward?

India has initiated a multi-pronged approach to reduce its dependency on China. The government has established KABIL, a joint venture of three State-owned companies, to secure overseas mineral assets. India has also joined strategic initiatives like the Minerals Security Partnership and the Critical Raw Materials Club to diversify its supply sources and strengthen partnerships. The country is also investing in research through institutions like the Geological Survey of India and the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research while promoting recycling and circular economy practices to reduce virgin mineral dependency. Production-linked incentives for extracting critical minerals through recycling also seem promising. However, transitioning away from China will require sustained investment and long-term commitment to these various initiatives.

The writer is a research analyst at The Takshashila Institution.

THE GIST

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Why has the MHA reimposed restrictions in three NE States?

What is the protected area regime? What did the Foreigners (Protected Areas) Order, 1958 stipulate? Did the ethnic violence in Manipur lead to imposing restrictions on movement and mobility?

Vijlata Singh

The story so far:

On December 17, the Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) reimposed the Protected Area Regime (PAR) in the States of Manipur, Nagaland, and Mizoram to restrict and monitor the movement of foreigners. From now on, foreigners visiting the three States would have to seek prior permission and Protected Area Permits (PAP) from the government. The circular stated that the relaxation provided to the three States under the Foreigners (Protected Areas) Order, 1958 was being withdrawn with immediate effect.

What does the 1958 Order entail?

The Order stated that no foreigner shall enter into or remain in any protected area except under and in accordance with a

permit issued by the Central government or any office authorised by the Central government. The permit shall include the following details – place of entry, place of residence and period of stay. The areas falling between the inner line and the international border of the following States and Union Territories were declared as Protected Areas – parts of Himachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh, Rajasthan and Uttarakhand and the whole of Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Sikkim (partly as protected areas and partly as restricted areas). Another Order in 1963 declared entire Andaman & Nicobar Islands and parts of Sikkim as "restricted area."

When was the Order first relaxed?

The PAR was relaxed for the whole of Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland on December 30, 2010 in wake of an improved security scenario, and to

promote tourism. The relaxation was initially for a period of one year. It was subsequently extended for a duration of 1-2 years till 2022 when it was further relaxed for another five years till December 31, 2027. On December 17, the relaxation was withdrawn for the States.

Why was it withdrawn?

A copy of the circular accessed by The Hindu said that the matter was examined by the Ministry in "the backdrop of growing security concerns in border areas of these States." Manipur, bordering Myanmar has been affected by ethnic violence between the tribal Kuki-Zo and the Meitei people since May 3, 2023. Chief Minister N. Biren Singh has attributed the ongoing violence in the State to "outsiders and foreign hands."

After a military coup in Myanmar in February 2021, there was an influx of undocumented migrants – over 40,000

refugees took shelter in Mizoram and around 4,000 refugees are said to have entered Manipur. The migrants belonging to the Kuki-Chin-Zo ethnic group share ethnic ties with the communities in Mizoram and Manipur. India shares a 1,643 km long border with Myanmar which passes through the States of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram. The Free Movement Regime (FMR) between the two countries, allowing movement of people living within 16 kms of the international border, was suspended by the MHA in January.

How does one obtain a PAP?

The permits can be secured from Indian missions, the MHA, district magistrates, resident commissioners of a State, Home Commissioners or Foreigners Regional Registration Office (FRRO) among others.

Like earlier, citizens of Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and foreign nationals having their origin in the three countries would continue to require prior approval from the MHA. All foreigners visiting these States will mandatorily register themselves with the Foreigners Registration Officer of the State or the District they visit within 24 hours of their arrival. Myanmar nationals visiting the three States, who till now were excluded from the requirement of obtaining a PAP if they had an e-tourist visa or any other visa, should compulsorily register with the FRRO within 24 hours of their arrival.

THE GIST

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CACHE

How does Google's GenCast AI, which predicts the weather, work?

Like ChatGPT can identify what the next word in an unfinished sentence could be, GenCast can guess what the future weather will be given the weather until some point

Vasudevan Mukunth

The story so far:
On December 4, Google DeepMind unveiled GenCast, an Artificial Intelligence (AI) model the company said could forecast the weather better than most existing tools as well as more days in advance. Details of the model were published in a peer-reviewed paper in the journal *Nature*.

How do we forecast weather?
"Weather predictions ... are produced by running multiple numerical simulations of the atmosphere," Vassili Kitsios, senior research scientist at the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation of Australia, wrote earlier this month. "Each simulation starts from a slightly different estimate of the current weather. This is because we don't know exactly what the weather is at this instant everywhere in the world. ... By solving equations describing the fundamental physical laws of nature, the simulations predict what will happen in the atmosphere."

This process is called Numerical Weather Prediction (NWP). The best NWP forecasts require the use of powerful supercomputers as well as high-quality data about the weather at a particular location. Even then NWPs can predict the weather only a week or so in advance.

Ensemble forecasts entered the picture in the 1990s. Here, scientists use an NWP model to produce multiple forecasts at a certain location in time, with different starting conditions. This collection of forecasts is called an ensemble and indicates the range of meteorological possibilities.

How does GenCast perform?
Google's GenCast uses ensemble forecasting too but the options in the ensemble come from an AI model rather than an NWP. Engineers at Google trained this AI model on 40 years of reanalysis data, from 1979 to 2019. According to the European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts (ECMWF), "Reanalysis data provide the most complete picture currently possible of past weather and climate. They are a blend of observations with past short-range weather forecasts rerun with modern weather forecasting models."

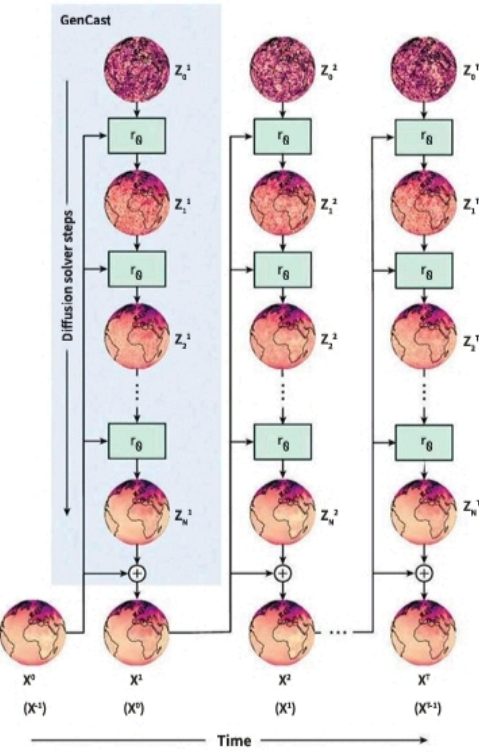
GenCast was trained in two steps: step I in 3.5 days and step II in 1.5 days, both with 32 TPU v5 instances. "TPU" is short for "tensor processing unit", an integrated circuit Google developed to run machine-learning models, sold via Google Cloud. In December 2023, Google Cloud launched a TPU called v5p: it contains 8,960 chips interconnected with a bandwidth of 4,800 Gbps/chip, and costs \$4.2 per chip-hour on demand.

Just like ChatGPT is good at identifying what the next word in an unfinished sentence could be, GenCast is good at guessing what the weather will be in the next moment given the weather until some point. According to the *Nature* paper, GenCast had "greater skill than ENS on 97.2% of 1,320 targets we evaluated and better predicts extreme weather, tropical cyclone tracks and wind power production." ENS refers to the ensemble forecasts generated by ECMWF, considered one of the best in NWP.

Google also said GenCast was more

The workings of an AI weather model

The AI model described in the paper in *Nature* had a neural network with 41,162 nodes and 2.4 lakh edges. Each node is a point in the network where some input data is accepted, manipulated, and an output is generated as the input for another node.



Schematic diagram showing how GenCast generates a forecast. PRICE, L. SANCHEZ-GONZALEZ, A., ALET, F. ET AL. PROBABILISTIC WEATHER FORECASTING WITH MACHINE LEARNING, *NATURE* (2024)

accurate than ENS on 99.8% of the 1,320 targets when asked to predict the weather more than 36 hours in advance.

How does GenCast work?

The AI model described in the paper had a neural network with 41,162 nodes and 2.4 lakh edges. Each node is a point in the network where some input data is accepted, manipulated, and an output is generated as the input for another node. An edge is a connection between nodes. For how this setup processes data, see the diagram above. The globes at the bottom show a weather prediction at four points of time, one after the other. Each prediction is generated by combining existing weather data with a noisy input. GenCast's challenge is to extract from the noisy input – the globes on the top – a weather prediction for the next moment in time. To do this, the model runs the combination through a refinement (green box), produces a less noisy prediction, then combines this again with the input

data, runs a second refinement, then combines the new output with the input data, runs a third refinement, and so on until it finishes 30 refinements. The final de-noised output, called X_1 , is the final weather prediction for the next moment in time. To predict the weather for the moment after, the model begins by accepting X_1 as the input and starts afresh with a noisy input. The green boxes have the neural networks.

The ability to de-noise a noisy input is a common feature of a diffusion-type AI model, which GenCast is. Other famous apps that use diffusion models include OpenAI's text-to-video model Sora and Stability AI's text-to-image model Stable Diffusion, both of which are also examples of generative AI.

GenCast produces at least 50 forecasts at a time for the ensemble, and Google has said each forecast can be produced in parallel. In all, the ensemble contains forecasts for 15 days at a time, with a spatial resolution of $0.25^\circ \times 0.25^\circ$

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(latitude-longitude) and temporal resolution of 12 hours. The researchers found this entire process took GenCast running on one TPU v5 unit eight minutes, much shorter than the several hours required by supercomputers for NWP.

Will GenCast replace NWP?

GenCast's forecasts are probabilistic rather than deterministic, that is, "there will be 25% chance of rain in Chennai on December 25" rather than "there will be 5 mm of rain in Chennai on December 25". Current NWP models and their ensembles are deterministic. Experts have said probabilistic weather forecasts are better at revealing the possibility of extreme weather events.

"We should make more use of these probabilistic forecasts for extreme events instead of relying on quantitative predictions. Probabilistic forecasts provide more lead time, which can be used for better preparation," former secretary to the Indian government Madhavan Rajeevan wrote in *The Hindu* in December 2023.

This said, while GenCast's performance suggests AI weather models will soon surpass the abilities of NWP models, both NWP and GenCast are founded on more fundamental weather data still acquired using the laws of physics.

Experts have said understanding the weather using these laws remains important because the weather is changing rapidly in many parts of the world, in ways in which historical weather conditions can't prepare us for.

GenCast itself requires more reanalysis data to train itself. As Google said in a public statement: "We deeply value our partnerships with weather agencies, and will continue working with them to develop AI-based methods that enhance their forecasting."

Meanwhile, traditional models remain essential for this work. For one thing, they supply the training data and initial weather conditions required by models such as GenCast." The code to run GenCast is available on GitHub.

DeepMind has also been working on a model called GraphCast to develop "deterministic medium-range forecasts". Google Research has been developing a model called NeuralGCM that combines AI and NWP models to generate deterministic forecasts, and at least two other models to predict extreme floods and to quantify forecasting uncertainties. Elsewhere, Huawei's Pangu-Weather model can predict the weather one week at a time with accuracy comparable to NWP but much faster. Nvidia's FourCastNet model can already outperform a state-of-the-art NWP facility at ECMWF at predicting extreme rainfall, in less than two seconds.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian
S. Upendran

"Why is writing difficult?"
"Real language is spoken language. Almost everybody acquires his/her mother tongue and speaks it satisfactorily. We speak much of the time. But very few write. Writing is a skill you develop with more and more writing. Writing came into being after invention of the alphabet. We reduce into writing what we want to say, what we feel. So many thoughts crowd into our mind. They don't come to us one by one. Normally, when we write, we choose one thought at a time and give it a linear form. There is a spontaneity in speech, it is not there in writing. Before we write, we sit down and think of what we should write. It is a mental activity. I am not talking about inspired poets and others who say that they don't think and write but words flow through them and they write them down. We are not talking about such people. We are talking about those who want to write letters, articles, etc. When we are asked to say orally what we want to, we do it reasonably well. When we are asked to put it down in writing, we find some difficulty. We worry or must worry about clarity, simplicity and the appropriate vocabulary. We look at the ceiling, scratch our head hoping for the right word to fall from heaven! We write, rewrite, chop and change. Writing is a wrestle with words. Every sensitive writer feels what Eliot says in 'East Coker': So here I am in the middle way, having had twenty years..."

Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
With shabby equipment always deteriorating
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling.
Undisciplined squads of emotion."
"So each venture is a new beginning, raid on the inarticulate. But this is true only of great writing, isn't it?"
"It is true of all writing. The moment you start writing, you realise how true it is. You write and rewrite because you are dissatisfied. You feel you have not conveyed adequately what is in your mind."
"O.K. So the first rule says that I should use familiar words and not pompous, far-fetched words."
"Yes."
"What does the second rule say?"
"We'll take it up next week."
Published in *The Hindu* on November 1, 1994.

THE DAILY QUIZ

A quiz on the occasion of the birth centenary of the legendary singer Mohammed Rafi

V.V. Ramanan

QUESTION 1
Rafi's first public performance was at the age of 13, when he was allowed to sing at a concert featuring which famous singing star of the era?

QUESTION 2
His vocal talents were discovered when he entertained customers while indulging in what profession?

QUESTION 3
Name the song composed by Husnlal Bhagatram that he rendered immediately after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi that touched a chord with PM Nehru?

QUESTION 4
Rafi recorded around 7,405 songs in

all genres during his wonderful career and won many awards. For which song did he get his only national award in 1977?

QUESTION 5
Why is the number 'Tasveer Teri Dil Mein' from Mayo infamously in Rafi's career?

QUESTION 6
Which Rafi number was used in the soundtrack of the Hollywood flick *Ghost World*?

QUESTION 7
What is the significance of these lines: 'Tere aany ki aas hai dost, Shaam phir kyun udaas hai dost, Mehki mehki fiza yeh kehti hai, To kahnin aas hai dost' from a song in *Aas Paas*?



Visual question: This screenshot shows the first on-screen appearance of Rafi in the song "Tera Jalwa Jisne Dekha". Name the film.

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. This person said that *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was "the greatest revelation in the Spanish language since 'Don Quixote'". **Ans: Pablo Neruda**
2. García Márquez began giving his manuscripts to this person before submitting them. **Ans: Fidel Castro**
3. García Márquez considered this his "true profession". **Ans: Journalism**
4. García Márquez considered this as an exceptional piece of work in journalism. **Ans: 'Hiroshima' by John Hersey**
5. García Márquez wanted this novel to be destroyed, but his sons published it a decade after his death. **Ans: Until August**
6. García Márquez considered this his most important book from a literary viewpoint. **Ans: The Autumn of the Patriarch**
Visual: The location of this statue. **Ans: Aracataca**
Early Birds: Sonali Das| Tito Shiladitya| Tamal Biswas| Piyali Tulji| Sumana Dutta

Word of the day

Require:
make repayment for or return something
Synonym: repay
Usage: She did not require his love.
Pronunciation: newsth.live/requirepro
International Phonetic Alphabet: /rɪˈkwaɪr/

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



FIRST COLUMN

SUCCESS THROUGH WORKPLACE INTELLIGENCE

It is the ability to adapt to the work environment through emotional and cognitive intelligence



SAKSHI SETHI

In today's dynamic work environment, workplace intelligence has become a cornerstone for achieving personal growth, team cohesion, and organisational excellence. Workplace intelligence refers to the ability of individuals and organisations to navigate, adapt, and thrive in the professional environment through effective understanding, communication and decision-making. It encompasses emotional intelligence, social intelligence, and cognitive intelligence blended together with technological advancements thereby creating a comprehensive approach towards addressing the root causes of toxicity and fostering a positive workplace culture. There is no denying that such intelligence not only plays a pivotal role in creating a healthy, harmonious and productive professional environment but also equips individuals and organisations with the tools to identify, mitigate and prevent toxic behaviours that can undermine morale, collaboration and overall success.

It is often believed that employees with high workplace intelligence can manage their tasks efficiently and adapt to new challenges with minimal disruption. By leveraging cognitive and emotional intelligence, they can prioritize effectively and maintain focus, leading to improved productivity. Also, social and emotional intelligence enables them to work harmoniously with others, promoting effective communication and minimizing conflicts. Strong teamwork followed by leaders with workplace intelligence inspires trust, and motivation and navigate through complex challenges with clarity and empathy. It even enhances creativity, innovation and the achievement of their collective goals and even reduces stress, boosts morale, and contributes to overall job satisfaction. In an era of rapid technological advancements and shifting market dynam-



ics, workplace intelligence equips employees and organisations with the resilience and adaptability needed to stay competitive. By fostering emotional and social intelligence, workplace intelligence helps identify and mitigate toxic behaviours, thereby ensuring a positive and respectful work environment.

By promoting training and development, organisations can invest in training programmes that focus on emotional intelligence, communication skills and technological proficiency. Open and constructive feedback mechanisms help the employee grow and refine their workplace intelligence over time. Emphasising diversity and inclusion helps individuals develop social intelligence by interacting with people from different backgrounds and perspectives. Encouraging continuous learning and adaptability ensures that employees remain agile and open to new ideas and methods. Remember, a workforce with high workplace intelligence is more likely to generate creative solutions and drive innovation. Employees are more likely to stay in organisations where they feel valued, supported, and empowered. Today, companies such as Heineken, Cooley, Cruise Automation, Urban Company, Amazon, Chipotle and many more are known for fostering workplace intelligence to attract top talent and build trust with stakeholders.

By investing in the development of workplace intelligence, organisations can create environments that promote collaboration, innovation, and sustainable success, ensuring they remain agile and competitive in an ever-evolving world. As organisations continue to navigate the complexities of globalisation and digital transformation, the importance of workplace intelligence will only grow. Artificial intelligence, remote work and diverse teams are shaping new paradigms that demand a more nuanced understanding of interpersonal and technological dynamics but organisations that invest in fostering workplace intelligence will gain a competitive edge, as their employees will be better equipped to adapt, innovate, and lead in an ever-changing world.

(The writer is an educator; views are personal)

A roadmap for financial sustainability of India Post



SUBHASH CHANDRA AGARWAL

India Post is at a crossroads. As private courier services continue to expand their market share with speed and convenience, it must adapt to stay competitive



India Post, a vital lifeline in connecting citizens across the country, needs to undergo a comprehensive review of its services. This reform should focus on introducing innovation, ensuring greater revenue generation for the Department of Posts (DoP), and maintaining affordability for the public. As private courier services continue to gain traction due to their convenience and efficiency, India Post must adapt to remain competitive and relevant in a rapidly changing environment.

Rationalising Postal Tariffs and Eliminating GST on Select Services
The current structure of postal services includes highly subsidised offerings, such as postcards priced as low as 50 paise. While such subsidies aim to make communication accessible, they are often exploited. For instance, during Lok Sabha elections in 2019, political parties used postcards extensively, resulting in significant costs to the public exchequer. Similarly, postcards are frequently misused for commercial purposes, such as reminders by chit-fund companies. These subsidised services, rarely used by the common man, burden taxpayers without corresponding benefits.

To address this, printed or rubber-stamped postcards should be discontinued unless they are sponsored. The introduction of sponsored Meghdoot postcards priced at Re1 and printed postcards priced at Rs10 could ensure a sustainable revenue model. Similarly, the tariff for registered newspapers could be rationalised to Rs1, reflecting the increased cost of inputs for small newspaper production.

Additionally, while normal postal services are exempt from GST, applying GST on premium services like Speed Post is counterproductive. It results in a redundant transfer of funds between government departments. Rationalising tariffs for Speed Post to Rs 20 or Rs 30 per 50-gram weight slabs and aligning other domestic and international postal tariffs in multiples of Rs 10 would streamline the system and reduce inefficiencies. International postal rates could follow a consistent structure, with uniform tariff increases per weight slab for air and sur-



face mail.
Generating Revenue Through Sponsored Postal Stamps
To boost revenue, the DoP should introduce sponsored postal stamps. These stamps, carrying advertisements or approved messages, could be issued in bulk to sponsors at a fixed charge per printed stamp. This initiative could attract businesses, encouraging them to utilise postal services over private courier companies. Additionally, a new series of definitive postal stamps and stationery could be launched annually on the first day of the financial year. These stamps should maintain consistent color schemes for specific denominations while showcasing new designs based on a selected theme. Commemorative stamps, previously issued in arbitrary denominations like Rs 12 and Rs 41, should be standardised to denominations in multiples of Rs 10. Furthermore, the practice of printing stamps of different denominations on the same sheet, except for miniature sheets, should be discontinued as it complicates usage. Miniature sheets, being collectible items, should be priced higher than the face value of the stamps they contain. Such measures could not only enhance revenue through philately but also rekindle public interest in postal services.

Replacing "My-Stamp" with Sponsored Stamps
The "My-Stamp" initiative, which allows individuals to print personal images on postage stamps, has been misused. Reports indicate instances of notorious individuals obtaining stamps with their photos, tarnishing the program's credibility. Since no robust mechanism exists to screen applicants' backgrounds, the programme is susceptible to abuse. Discontinuing the "My-Stamp" concept in favor of sponsored stamps could address this issue. Sponsored stamps would

not only ensure better regulation but also offer a significant revenue stream.

Enhancing Convenience with Sticker Receipts
Currently, receipts issued by the Postal Department include a sticker only on the portion retained by the Department, leaving the consumer without one. Adding stickers to consumer receipts would eliminate the need for gum to paste them onto dispatch registers or documents. This small change could save public resources and improve the user experience, especially for organisations that rely heavily on postal services.

Introducing RTI Stamps and Rationalising Postal Orders
Postal orders in low denominations such as Rs 1, Rs 2, Rs 5, and Rs 7 were discontinued due to high handling costs. For example, the handling cost of a postal order in 2011-12 was Rs 37.45, far exceeding its value. To minimise losses, higher denominations like Rs 100, Rs 200, and Rs 500 could be introduced. Furthermore, RTI-specific stamps in denominations of Rs 2, Rs 10, and Rs 50 could replace postal orders for fees under the RTI Act, streamlining the payment process. This approach aligns with recommendations from the Central Information Commission and addresses the issue of unfeasible copying charges below Rs10 due to the absence of lower-denomination postal orders.

Managing Inoperative and Matted Accounts
Unclaimed deposits in post office accounts often remain unnoticed due to deceased account holders failing to inform legal heirs. This creates a risk of fraud, as unscrupulous individuals may attempt to claim such funds in collusion with postal employees. To mitigate this risk, the Postal Department should send registered letters to account holders who have not operated

their accounts or claimed matured deposits for over three years. If no response is received within three months, the funds should be frozen in fixed accounts and made accessible only after rigorous verification. Publishing details of such accounts could help legal heirs claim their rightful amounts, subject to stringent scrutiny. The introduction of successive nominations, as practiced by LIC of India, would further safeguard deposits, and simplify inheritance processes.

Expanding Postal Services Through Bank Counters
The closure of post offices in key commercial areas, such as Chandni Chowk in Old Delhi, has caused inconvenience for businesses that rely on Registered and Speed Post services. With banks increasingly adopting government saving schemes, their branches could be utilised for booking postal services. Offering banks a nominal commission for hosting these services would not only enhance accessibility but also integrate postal and banking ecosystems more effectively.

Revamping the Postal Ecosystem for Sustainability
India Post's transformation should emphasise efficiency, innovation, and customer-centricity. Rationalising tariffs, eliminating wasteful subsidies, and leveraging sponsored services are crucial steps toward financial sustainability. Additionally, addressing operational inefficiencies and improving service delivery will help India Post reclaim its position as a trusted and competitive communication medium.

By embracing these changes, India Post can not only secure its financial future but also continue serving as a cornerstone of India's communication network.

(The writer is a Guinness World Record holder and RTI Consultant; views are personal)

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(The writer is a Guinness World Record holder and RTI Consultant; views are personal)

India's math geniuses shine bright in international math competition 2024

India, a nation with a rich legacy of mathematical brilliance, added another feather to its cap by triumphing at the UCMAS International Competition 2024

India has long been a land of great mathematicians, from Aryabhata to Ramanujan to Bhaskara, each leaving an indelible mark on the world with their mathematical ingenuity. Today, India continues to excel in the field, as evidenced by its stellar performance at the Universal Concept of Mental Arithmetic System (UCMAS) International Competition 2024 in New Delhi, where the country bagged both the highest individual and team trophies.

The competition, the world's largest event for Abacus and Mental Arithmetic, brought together over 6,000 students from nearly 30 countries. Participants faced the challenge of solving 200 arithmetic questions in just eight min-



SARIKA JHA

utes, relying solely on the Abacus or mental math techniques—a feat that truly felt like magic. For the second time, the World's Largest Abacus & Mental Arithmetic Event—UCMAS International Competition 2024 was held in India at the Delhi University Multipurpose Hall. Students from across the world competed with each other showcasing their men-

tal prowess in solving a very large number of mathematics problems in the quickest possible time to win the awards. This landmark event reaffirms its global significance in nurturing young minds in mathematics.

The competition aimed at promoting brain development, enhancing cognitive skills, and demonstrating the incredible abilities students can achieve through Abacus and Mental Arithmetic. Presenting the trophies to top performers, former Union Minister Meenakshi Lekhi rightly said, "Smart brain produces smart solutions for every problem and prosperity is moving forward only when we have smart brains." Commending the efforts of the young participants, Lekhi emphasised

the importance of such initiatives and said, "UCMAS is enhancing cognitive skills and academic excellence." The blend of the ancient tool of the Abacus with modern teaching methodologies creates a unique educational experience.

Over 3 million children across the world have benefited from the Abacus and Mental Arithmetic curriculum, which encourages creativity, visualisation, and focus while developing strong arithmetic abilities.

In today's competitive academic environment, maintaining mental wellbeing has become an uphill battle for many children. The relentless pressure to excel often leads to stress, anxiety, and even depression. In some heartbreaking cases,



it drives students to take extreme steps, as seen in recent reports from Rajasthan's Kota district—a hub for competitive exam preparations. However, innovative educational programmes like the Abacus and Mental Arithmetic course are emerging as a ray of hope, helping children manage stress while fostering mental stability and

self-confidence.

According to Dr Snehal Karia, CEO of UCMAS India, the course is designed to enhance children's mental stability by boosting their concentration, focus, and memory. It equips them with the confidence to understand and embrace their individuality, effectively reducing anxiety and depression. The Abacus & Mental Arithmetic program's key lies in its structured approach to building self-assurance through innovative teaching methods.

The encouragement and skills imparted during the training play a pivotal role in shaping a child's bright future. The program comprises eight levels, each lasting three to four months. Children attend weekly classes guided by

trained instructors, working through specially designed books and activities. Unlike conventional education, the course serves as a supplementary learning system to enhance cognitive abilities. There is an urgent need to complement the school's curriculum by focusing on brain development. The course improves memory, sharpness, and alertness. As a result, students perform better academically and approach challenges with greater confidence. In a world where competition often overshadows creativity and self-worth, programs like Abacus & Mental Arithmetic provide children with the tools they need to thrive—mentally, emotionally, and academically. Alexan Wong, CEO of

UCMAS International Corporation, said, "The competition not only tests their skills but also serves as a platform to demonstrate their creativity, visual memory, and focus—all of which will shape their future success." The competition itself is a testament to the transformative power of such programs, where students not only test their math skills but also demonstrate the broader cognitive benefits that shape their academic and personal growth.

Ultimately, the world needs such initiatives to nurture well-rounded individuals who are prepared to face the challenges of the future with confidence and creativity. (The author is a senior journalist. The views expressed are personal)

Difficult choices

Slow growth complicates Budget mathematics

Last week, the Union Ministry of Finance released its "Mid-Year Review of Trends in Government Receipts and Expenditure". On the surface, this document made for unremarkable reading. The Ministry pointed out that revenue receipts in the first half of the year, at almost 52 per cent of Budget Estimates, were above the five-year rolling average; and the fiscal deficit, as a percentage of gross domestic product or GDP, was below the norm for the first half of the year. This might give the sense that India's macroeconomic position is quite comfortable as the season for preparing the Union Budget gets underway. Indeed, the document recommends the government to the glide path of fiscal consolidation and does not express any particular concerns.

It would not be entirely true to get a sense of comfort from the Mid-Year Review, however. Counterintuitively, this document reveals areas of considerable weakness, which will worry North Block. Most of these areas are connected to the unexpected underperformance in growth exhibited by the Indian economy last quarter. Together with low spending, partly because of the elections in the first quarter this financial year, this has meant that real growth has come in at only 6 per cent in the first half. Given that nominal growth, as provided for in the Union Budget, was supposed to be 10.5 per cent and instead has come in more than a percentage point lower at 8.9 per cent in the first half, the Budget mathematics for next year has developed complications.

This is revealed in the data in the Mid-Year Report. The fact that revenue receipts were above the five-year rolling average does not reveal everything, given that the past five years include the extraordinary years of the pandemic. The government's capital expenditure, which supports growth, has been lower in the first half than in comparable years. This may flatter the overall deficit numbers — but it also reveals the dilemma facing the government. If it is to push growth up, it can take the risk of spending more. But the lower numbers for the fiscal deficit in the first half of the year, based on the Budget Estimates for the current year, might not fully reflect the actual nominal GDP against which the final fiscal deficit for the year is calculated. Thus, there is a real risk that even returning to earlier predicted paths for spending will, in fact, wind up causing the government to burn through the deficit targets.

There are thus no easy choices facing the government. There will be a very real temptation to try and develop optimistic assumptions about growth in the last quarter of the year in order to make the Budget mathematics a bit easier. But that would be a mistake. The current administration has made a point of using only rational and defensible extrapolations for growth and revenue, and has been rewarded by the markets for this restraint. The macroeconomic stability provided by this hard-earned reputation must not be put at risk for overoptimistic projections. In the end, the government will have to choose between accepting slightly lower growth (and revenue and spending) and delaying fiscal targets. If, in the end, the year surprises on the upside in terms of growth, that will be all to the good. But, based on the data so far, the government will have to make some hard choices in the Budget.

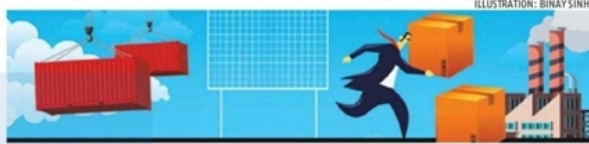
Missing the trees

ISFR disguises gaps in forest cover

The big picture in the biennial India State of Forest Report (ISFR), released a year late, suggests that the country's forest cover is in good shape. According to the report, India's forest and tree cover has reached 25 per cent of the country's geographical landmass. The report also shows an increase in forest cover by 156 square km in the country over 2021. Union Minister for Environment Bhupendra Patel Yadav emphasises that India has augmented its carbon sink to 2.29 billion tonnes over 2005 levels. This is well ahead of India's Paris Agreement commitments of creating an additional carbon sink of 2.5 billion tonnes by 2030. A more granular look at the report suggests that there are multiple problems that should dim some of the optimism here.

First, though 25 per cent forest cover sounds impressive, the fact is that this still falls short of what was prescribed by the National Forest Policy of 1988 — 33 per cent for optimum ecological stability. But the authenticity of this coverage remains open to doubt because of the flexible definition of "forest", an age-old issue that environmentalists have raised time and again. The Forest Survey of India defines forest as land covering at least one hectare and with a tree cover density of 10 per cent. This enables the ISFR, which started in 1987, to include plantations — orchards, bamboo, and so on — in the definition of forest cover. There are two problems associated with such inclusions. One, conservationists point out that plantations lack the deadwood and underground biomass development (leaf mulch and so on) that are also key sources of carbon sequestration. Two, plantations are a hindrance to sustaining biodiversity, which also plays a critical role in arresting climate change. Including plantations, therefore, is an inefficient way of measuring forest cover and it also acts as an alibi for the massive deforestation. In Arunachal Pradesh, for instance, large swathes of pristine forests are being cut down under the radar to accommodate palm plantations as part of the government's quest to achieve self-sufficiency in palm oil. Ironically, the ISFR records Arunachal Pradesh as the state with the second-largest green cover, Madhya Pradesh being first. Again, as environmentalist Ravi Chopra has pointed out, much of the increase in tree cover has taken place outside designated forest areas. This apart, being a netted-out figure, the overall expansion of forests and tree cover also disguises the fact that significant losses have been recorded in the Northeast (323.7 square km lost), and the Western Ghats and eastern states (58.22 square km), all regions rich in biodiversity.

A less specious definition of forest would offer policymakers and ecologists a more authentic picture of India's forest cover. This is becoming increasingly critical following amendments last year to the Forest Conservation Act, 1980. Among those excluded from the purview of the Act are lands within 100 km of India's border for national-security projects, small roadside amenities, and public roads leading to a habitation and, bizarrely, zoos, eco-tourism facilities, and reconnaissance surveys. This immediately threatens the fragile ecologies of India's north and Northeast. Set against India's growing reliance on coal as an engine of economic growth, a more realistic assessment of the country's carbon sink is an urgent necessity.



Boosting growth, balancing stability

In 2025, macro policies will need to support domestic demand, but without compromising on macrofinancial stability risks

The year 2024 can be characterised as a "strong start, weaker finish" for India's economy. It started with Goldilocks-like settings, with real gross domestic product (GDP) growth closer to 8 per cent and gradually easing inflation. In the last few months, however, policy tradeoffs have worsened, due to a sharper-than-expected slump in GDP growth, higher food inflation, and currency depreciation pressures. As we turn the page, what does 2025 hold in store?

The global backdrop appears challenging Uncertainty remains high due to Trump 2.0 policies. We expect President-elect Donald Trump to strike fast and hard on imposing tariffs, leading to a pickup in US inflation and just one Fed cut, in March, followed by a pause for the remainder of 2025. China is likely to announce more fiscal stimulus, but this is unlikely to drive a sustainable recovery, given the economy is not in a normal downcycle. These factors could slow global GDP growth to 2.9 per cent year-on-year in 2025, down from 3.2 per cent in 2024. For India, this implies reduced dependence on exports as a growth engine and increased reliance on domestic demand.

Cycling down on growth: Many believe the surprise slump in GDP growth to 5.4 per cent in Q2 FY25 was a one-off, and the economy will bounce back to 6.5-7.0 per cent over coming quarters, supported by higher government spending and a rural recovery. This looks difficult.

India's strong post-pandemic rebound was driven by a mix of pent-up demand, a surge in retail credit, an aggressive focus on public capital expenditure, and strong exports performance. However, several of these factors are now reversing.

Urban consumption is likely to moderate as post-pandemic pent-up demand fades, monetary policy remains tight, and nominal income growth slows. The Reserve Bank of India's (RBI's) macroprudential tightening has sharply contracted credit growth, and loan

defaults have risen for credit card and personal loans. As delinquencies tick up, banks are likely to become more risk averse, moderating demand for credit-driven small-ticket consumer goods. In the case of microfinance, this clampdown means borrowers will no longer be able to roll over multiple loans. Overall, credit conditions are tight, and the household credit cycle is likely to weigh on consumption demand in 2025.

India also faces a threat from China's overcapacity. In response to Western tariffs, China will likely redirect exports into newer markets, including India. Already, India's economic challenges from imports from China spans low-tech (low-priced consumer goods, metals and chemicals), intermediate and high-tech (specifically green-tech) products. This is having several economic implications, including worsening trade imbalance, pressure on firms' profit margins and lower domestic production. An uncertain global environment, softer domestic demand, higher credit costs and rising imports from China are likely to weigh on private capex.

There are some positive offsets. Rural demand is expected to benefit from robust monsoons, the government is likely to fast-track capital expenditure plans, services exports are increasing, and India could also gain from trade diversion. Overall, however, we believe India's economy has entered a cyclical growth slowdown. We expect GDP growth to decelerate to 5.8 per cent y-o-y in 2025, down from 6.5 per cent in 2024, with sub-6 per cent readings likely in the coming quarters.

Inflation is less of a challenge: The global and domestic backdrop means less demand-side or commodity-driven inflation. Food price inflation should moderate, due to bumper crop output, while a negative output gap and moderating wage growth should ensure benign core inflation. The main risks to inflation stem from currency depreciation and unforeseen weather-related food price spikes. The RBI estimates that every



SONAL VARMA

Being human in the age of AI

Artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly becoming independent of human direction, moving from independence in search of information to independence in decision-making. ChatGPT, which emerged only two years ago, is a chat platform easy to use, capable of carrying on conversations and assisting with queries, superseding the search capabilities of Google. More powerful "AI agents" are emerging in various fields — medicine, finance, and warfare — agents that do not need to interact with human beings. They sense their environment through various inputs (eg. text, images, sensors), analyse the information, and make decisions based on their objectives. Such developments raise ethical questions. How do these AI agents — these virtual human beings — choose their goals? What do they care about? What will be like for real human beings when virtual humans govern their lives? The world may be run more efficiently but will it be a more just and more compassionate world?

Artificial citizens, business corporations: This is not the first time in history when humans have created artificial agents who govern their lives. The capitalist business corporation, which was given legal form in the 17th century, is an artificial citizen of society, given the same rights as human citizens to own property, exercise free speech, and sue other citizens (humans and other corporations). Moreover, the limited-liability corporation is a selfish definition — 70 per cent perspiration and 30 per cent inspiration. The profits from natural and human resources efficiently for profit with limited liability for the consequences. Corporations complain that environmental and labour regulations harm their ease of doing business and profits. Their concept of "minimum government, maximum governance" is privatisation of everything, corporations and individual citizens competing, and the "invisible hand of the market" governing everything.

Chief executive officers (CEOs) and board members of corporations may be compassionate humans individually. Collectively, they have a fiduciary responsibility under corporate law to serve the interests of investors in the corporation. A corporation

does not have the conscience of a human being. Therefore, "conscious capitalism" evangelists struggle to make an adequate impact on corporate behaviour, even in companies led by compassionate CEOs.

Without human feelings and consciousness, AI, like any technology, is an ethics-free enterprise. Allowing selfish business corporations to own and propagate powerful technologies like AI, whose potential impacts are not fully grasped, is not a good idea. Techno-enthusiasts dismiss residents of new technologies as "anti-progress" Luddites. Ultimately, new technologies have always turned out beneficial, they say. They ignore the decades it takes societies and economies to adapt.

Impacts of transitions: Economists' theories of free trade strip out social realities, say Nobel laureates Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo, authors of *Good Economics for Hard Times*. They explain the stickiness of socio-economic systems. While deregulation of economies, for example, may increase gross domestic product in the long run, it produces many winners and losers during transitions, which can take a generation or longer. Scientists' models of climate change and scientific solutions for rapid decarbonisation of the economy exclude disruptions of livelihoods during transitions, which will take decades. Technological transitions on top of liberal economic reforms minimise the role of governments are disrupting the livelihoods of billions of people in poorer countries.

Powerful technologies are invariably dual-use. Usable for good and harm. Products of the defence, finance, and digital technology industries can be used for the public good; they can also cause widespread social disruption and destroy lives. Institutional capacity for their regulation has not kept up with their development. Potential misuse of nuclear technology was prevented unfairly by those in power, who were the first to misuse it, and they now control its use by others. The potential of AI to do good as well as harm is much more than all technologies invented so far, according to its inventors. Further development and proliferation of defence, finance, synthetic biology,



ARUN MAIRA

5 per cent depreciation of the rupee adds 0.35 percentage points to headline consumer price index (CPI) inflation. However, with inflation expectations anchored, second-round effects are unlikely.

Currency depreciation remains a risk Merchandise exports are likely to face headwinds from a slowing global economy, but a strong services trade surplus, healthy remittances, and stable oil prices should keep the current account deficit manageable at around 1.5 per cent of GDP. However, a hawkish Fed and global policy uncertainty are likely to keep foreign capital flows under pressure.

What does this macro backdrop mean for policy? First, below-trend growth argues for activating countercyclical policies to stabilise domestic demand, but macrofinancial stability warrants that we adopt the appropriate policy mix.

Second, a credible path towards fiscal consolidation will send a reassuring signal to investors. With plans aimed to move from deficit- to debt-targeting starting from FY27, policymakers should communicate that this will still mean sticking to fiscal discipline. At the same time, with private capital expenditure unlikely to increase in the near term, public capex must be maintained while addressing state capacity constraints to enable faster execution.

Third, the RBI should fine-tune its currency policy. So far, the RBI has heavily intervened to cap rupee depreciation. However, this is tightening banking liquidity and is counterproductive when the trade deficit is widening. We believe the RBI should allow the rupee to weaken somewhat, as this can act as an automatic stabiliser to cool imports. While this could lead to some imported inflation, the alternative is even weaker growth.

Fourth, many believe rate cuts will exacerbate currency weakness. However, India largely attracts growth capital, and without signs of growth stability, pressure on the external sector can continue. The balanced response to the tradeoff between sub-trend growth and macrofinancial risks is lowering policy rates from their current restrictive zone towards more neutral settings. Also, the RBI should be more proactive on liquidity injection. With the banking system in a liquidity deficit, policy transmission would be impaired otherwise.

Fifth, the implementation of new regulatory guidelines, such as the draft liquidity coverage ratio norms, should be more gradual. With credit growth moderating, macroprudential policies should not be procyclical.

Sixth, from a medium-term perspective, supply chain relocation will continue under Trump 2.0, and if the US decides to clamp down on trade diversion via third countries, such as Vietnam and Mexico, this could be another opportunity for India. At the same time, India needs to gradually lower its dependence on imported intermediate goods and increase its domestic value addition by developing a local supply chain ecosystem.

The road ahead may be turbulent, but smooth seas never made skilled sailors.

The author is chief economist (India and Asia ex-Japan) at Nomura

and AI technologies must be regulated effectively before it is too late, with action along three tracks. 1. Sincere cooperation with regulation. CEOs and investors in large business corporations — in defence, finance, technology, health care, and other industries — which have large societal impacts, pretend they care for the public good. In practice, they promote the narrow interests of their shareholders, which is their self-serving, fiduciary responsibility. They bring money power to their lawyers and experts they pay. Into negotiations where they overpower the voices of civil society. They must learn to listen to other points of view and to cooperate and develop regulations for the good of all citizens.

2. Institutional innovation. Humanity has progressed over millennia with both technological and institutional innovations. Electoral democracy is an innovation with a short history so far. Laws to protect the rights of all citizens equally — rich and poor, men and women — are yet evolving. A business corporation listed on the stock market is also an institutional innovation. The selfish virtual citizen of society created with enforceable laws. The time has come to evolve a genuine social enterprise that is legally accountable to all stakeholders; moreover, primarily to society, not its financial supporters.

3. Promote corporate statesmanship. The stock market is not an appropriate evaluator of the fundamentals of an economy or a company. Many young people want to shape a better world. They don't know how. They need better role models. The world needs corporate leaders who demonstrate conviction and courage to consistently apply human and ethical values in preference over the financial valuations of their businesses. Management schools and the business media should showcase their stories as role models, rather than stories of self-aggrandising unicorns and billionaires. When I ask my friends in management education and business media why they do not do this, they say they too are running businesses. They must give the market what it wants. They too have become mere followers of popular demand, bobbing along like corks on the surface, rather than shapers of waves of change for a better future for all.

The author is chairman, HelpAge International

Indians that make America great



BOOK REVIEW

SHYAM SARAN

The story of Indians in America is, by any measure, one of outstanding success. Indians take vicarious pride in celebrating a Sundar Pichai heading Google or a Satya Nadella taking Microsoft into an AI-driven future. But Meenakshi Ahamed, herself an Indian American and an acclaimed author of a definitive book on India-US relations — *A Matter of Trust* has now produced a pioneering study of the emergence of this remarkable cohort at the pinnacle of American industry, academia, politics and government. Her intimate profiles of some of the most successful Indian Americans, based on personal interviews

and drawing upon her unmatched network in her adopted country, makes this book a must-read for anyone interested in the Indian diaspora. The introduction has useful information about the Indian-American community and this is followed by chapters divided into three sections, each profiling outstanding individuals in the "Techie", the "Healers" and the "Influencers" categories, respectively. The concluding chapter seeks to identify some of the attributes these individuals share and explore whether they contributed to their outstanding achievements. Finally, explore how America provided them with the opportunity to excel away from their home country.

The title of the book, *Indian Genius*, may be somewhat misleading because the stories are more about the grit and determination with which these successful Indian Americans overcame the odds they encountered in a distant and unfamiliar country, the passion with which they pursued their chosen calling, and the strength they drew from their families and

friends and the larger community. Their genius was more reflective of its old definition — 70 per cent perspiration and 30 per cent inspiration. The profiles reflect the particularity of experiences and differences in attitudes that the subjects of the interviews convey in their own words. It is their individual experiences that are more engaging. They draw upon their experience of a highly plural Indian society, its innate cosmopolitanism, the proficiency in the English language, and the traditional value placed on education. But they also acknowledge that their adopted country gave them opportunities unavailable in India, that it rewarded hard work and merit. Their success is a tribute to the US and its ability to attract the best talent and skills from across the world. Indian Americans have made the most of this open door. The door is not open to the lesser skilled migrants. Ms Ahamed tells the story of a cab driver from Punjab in New York City who had waited 20 years for his green card. Their plight is illuminated by the impressive figures for the diaspora

as a whole. The average annual per capita income of an Indian American is \$135,000 while for the rest of the country it is about \$66,000. 73 per cent of Indian Americans are college graduates, while the figure for the rest of the country is 30 per cent.

It is no surprise that there are numerous among the diaspora the author profiles belong to the techie category. During the 1960s and 70s, the Indian Institutes of Technology in India, provided high-quality technical education to middle-class Indians at nominal cost. The graduates did not find enough opportunities in India to earn a decent salary and, more importantly, to advance their skills in their respective fields. For several years, nearly 40 per cent of all IIT graduates headed to the US, and some of the most successful Indian Americans are IIT alumni. Sundar Pichai, Shantanu Narayen (CEO of Adobe) and Nishan Arora (CEO of Palo Alto Networks) belong to this category. But the "brain drain" from the top engineering

institutions continues to this day. One of the most intriguing individuals profiled is Chandra R. Tandon (née Krishnamurthy), who overcame family opposition, gender prejudice, and societal pressures to build a successful career in the consultancy business. She managed high-profile mergers and acquisitions before establishing her own firm with a loyal clientele. And then she called it quits to pursue her passion for music. She passed the way for her younger sister, Indra Nooyi, who won acclaim as the first female CEO of the multinational Pepsi.

Indian Americans in the medical profession come out as among the best. This includes Siddhartha Mukherjee, who is an oncologist and has written a bestseller on cancer, *The Emperor of Maladies*. Another acclaimed medical practitioner is Atul Gawande, also an bestselling author. His book, *Checklist Manifesto*, significantly reduced common lapses in complex surgeries by introducing a checklist to be used while performing procedures. The drill has applications in

several other fields. Dr Gawande's later book, *Being Mortal*, is a very sensitive portrayal of the challenge of preparing terminally ill patients to accept the inevitability of death. Both physicians stand out for their empathy and human sensitivity.

The last section on the Influencers includes profiles of politicians Nikki Haley and Ro Khanna and journalist and author Fareed Zakaria. They are among the less interesting Indian Americans. A profile of presidential hopeful Kamala Harris may have been worthwhile, but the author excluded her because she identifies herself as black. But I think Ms Harris does not reject her Indian identity.

One week has not provided a clear distinction between quotes and the author's own commentary, and there could have been more careful editing. But this is an immensely readable book, and the conversations the author has with her subjects draw out their distinctive personalities and the different things that drive them to become high achievers. There are lessons beyond their experiences.

The reviewer is a former federal secretary

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PAPER WITH PASSION

Attack and aftermath

Christmas market attack in Germany reigniting polarising debates about immigration and national security

A recent attack on a Christmas market in Magdeburg, Germany, has reignited contentious debates about immigration and national security, with far-right groups seizing the moment to push for mass deportation of immigrants. The tragedy, which claimed the lives of five individuals and left dozens injured, has sent shockwaves across Germany, leading to both solemn remembrances and polarising political rhetoric. On the evening of December 20, a car driven by Taleb al-Abdulmohsen, a 50-year-old psychiatrist originally from Saudi Arabia, careened into a crowded Christmas market. The attack lasted three harrowing minutes, during which over 200 people were struck, leaving 40 with critical injuries. Authorities arrested al-Abdulmohsen at the scene, and he now faces multiple charges of murder, attempted murder, and grievous bodily harm. Despite living in Germany for nearly two decades, the suspect's motives remain unclear. Investigators have yet to establish any ideological or political motivations.



In the wake of the tragedy, far-right groups have amplified their calls for stricter immigration controls and mass deportations. On December 21, approximately 2,100 demonstrators gathered in Magdeburg to voice their outrage. Protesters, some wearing black balaclavas, carried banners with slogans like "Reimmigration Now" and "migration kills." The term "reimmigration" has become a rallying cry for far-right factions advocating the forced removal of immigrants and individuals deemed non-ethnically German. Chants such as "Anyone who doesn't love Germany should leave" and "We must take back our cities, our villages, and our homeland" echoed through the streets. The incident has deepened divisions within Germany over immigration and integration policies. Critics argue that far-right groups are exploiting the tragedy to stoke xenophobia and advance their anti-immigrant agenda. Meanwhile, local communities have sought to counter the rhetoric of hate with acts of solidarity. A silent vigil was held at Magdeburg's Cathedral Square on the same evening as the protest, with participants lighting candles in memory of the victims. German authorities have called for calm and emphasised the need for a thorough investigation. Chancellor Olaf Scholz expressed condolences to the victims' families and condemned both the attack and the use of such tragedies to spread divisive ideologies. The attack has reignited debates over Germany's approach to immigration and the balance between openness and security. While far-right voices call for stringent measures, advocates for multiculturalism warn against the dangers of collective punishment. This incident underscores the fragility of Europe's social cohesion in times of crisis. As Germany mourns, the challenge lies in addressing security concerns without succumbing to fear-driven policies that erode the values of inclusivity and tolerance that underpin the nation's democratic fabric.

our villages, and our homeland" echoed through the streets. The incident has deepened divisions within Germany over immigration and integration policies. Critics argue that far-right groups are exploiting the tragedy to stoke xenophobia and advance their anti-immigrant agenda. Meanwhile, local communities have sought to counter the rhetoric of hate with acts of solidarity. A silent vigil was held at Magdeburg's Cathedral Square on the same evening as the protest, with participants lighting candles in memory of the victims. German authorities have called for calm and emphasised the need for a thorough investigation. Chancellor Olaf Scholz expressed condolences to the victims' families and condemned both the attack and the use of such tragedies to spread divisive ideologies. The attack has reignited debates over Germany's approach to immigration and the balance between openness and security. While far-right voices call for stringent measures, advocates for multiculturalism warn against the dangers of collective punishment. This incident underscores the fragility of Europe's social cohesion in times of crisis. As Germany mourns, the challenge lies in addressing security concerns without succumbing to fear-driven policies that erode the values of inclusivity and tolerance that underpin the nation's democratic fabric.

PICTALK



People dressed as Santa Claus during Christmas celebration, in China

Macau: The glittering gem in Xi Jinping's China

For the Chinese Communist Party, Macau is a beacon of controlled capitalism, showcasing the potential of the "One Country, Two Systems" framework

When Chinese President Xi Jinping landed in Macau, the world's gambling capital, the air was thick with anticipation. Macau, often dubbed the "Las Vegas of the East," is much more than a beacon of wealth and opulence. For Xi and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), it is a sparkling gem in the palm of China's vast and complex economic system—a model of the "One Country, Two Systems" framework that allows capitalist practices to thrive under the watchful eye of a socialist regime. Xi's visit underscored the stark contrasts between theory and practice in the CCP's governance and the lessons it offers not only for China's neighbours but for the world at large.

Macau's significance lies in its unique identity. A former Portuguese colony, it returned to Chinese sovereignty in 1999 under the promise of autonomy. Today, its glitzy casinos, luxury hotels, and sprawling Special Economic Zone (SEZ) generate billions annually, contributing substantially to China's GDP. But while the dice roll and fortunes are made on Macau's gaming tables, the CCP's control remains unyielding. The irony is palpable. The CCP, a party built on anti-capitalist ideology, oversees the largest SEZ in the world in Shanghai, nurtures capitalism in Hong Kong, and allows gambling—once condemned as a moral vice—to flourish in Macau. This duality reflects the pragmatic philosophy first espoused by Deng Xiaoping: "It doesn't matter if a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice." This approach has been pivotal in transforming China into the world's second-largest economy. Yet it also lays bare the contradictions at the heart of CCP rule.

Xi Jinping's Macau visit was not merely ceremonial. It was a reaffirmation of the CCP's ability to adapt and wield capitalist tools while maintaining a tight grip on power. In Macau, Xi emphasised stability and loyalty to the central government. This aligns with his broader strategy of tightening control over regions that might



veer toward autonomy or dissent, as evidenced in Hong Kong. The "One Country, Two Systems" model—once lauded as a masterstroke of governance—has increasingly become a tool for consolidating Beijing's authority. Hong Kong's story is a cautionary tale.

A vibrant hub of multinational corporations (MNCs) and transnational corporations (TNCs), it has been at the forefront of economic globalisation. However, its recent struggles with political dissent and Beijing's heavy-handed responses reveal the limits of the "Two Systems" promise. The CCP's crackdown on pro-democracy movements in Hong Kong has sent a clear message: economic freedom does not translate to political autonomy. Macau, in contrast, has largely avoided such conflicts, partly due to its economic dependence on Beijing and the absence of a robust pro-democracy movement. Yet, this does not make Macau immune to the inherent tensions of "One Country, Two Systems."

As Xi extolled Macau's success, he also warned against complacency. He stressed the need for "long-term stability," a euphemism for unwavering allegiance to the CCP. For the CCP, Macau and Hong Kong are not just economic engines; they are experiments in controlled capitalism. The success of these regions bolsters the

MACAU'S SIGNIFICANCE LIES IN ITS UNIQUE IDENTITY. A FORMER PORTUGUESE COLONY, IT RETURNED TO CHINESE SOVEREIGNTY IN 1999 UNDER THE PROMISE OF AUTONOMY

party's narrative that socialism with Chinese characteristics can coexist with, and even benefit from, capitalist mechanisms.

The underlying contradictions are hard to ignore. The CCP's insistence on ideological purity clashes with its pragmatic embrace of market-driven policies. This duality is reflected in Xi's leadership, which combines Maoist centralisation with Dengist pragmatism.

For Maoists, Naxalites, and urban Naxals in India, as well as other ideologues clinging to rigid dogmas, Macau stands as a testament to the power of adaptation. The CCP's ability to evolve, to reconcile its Marxist-Leninist roots with the demands of a modern, globalised economy, has been the cornerstone of China's rise. This is a far cry from the ideological purism that often paralyzes leftist movements elsewhere.

India, too, can draw inspiration from Macau. As the world's largest democracy grapples with its development challenges, it must consider the role of SEZs, MNC headquarters, and even industries like gambling in driving economic growth. While gambling remains taboo in much of India, the success of Macau shows how regulated gaming can become a major revenue source.

Similarly, expanding SEZs and creating hubs for MNCs can

transform India into a global economic powerhouse. At the heart of this debate is the question of whether ideology should dictate policy. The CCP's approach—that opinion is not an iron rod—offers a compelling case for pragmatism. Yet, the party's intolerance for dissent, as seen in its suppression of Mao's "Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom" campaign, highlights the dangers of unchecked authority. The CCP's success in economic management is undeniable, but its human rights record and stifling of democratic aspirations serve as stark reminders of the cost of its iron-fisted rule.

As Xi Jinping departed Macau, the world was left pondering the paradoxes of modern China. Under his leadership, the CCP has doubled down on centralisation, curbing dissent while championing economic liberalisation. Macau's glittering casinos and towering skyscrapers are symbols of this duality, where capitalism thrives under the shadow of socialism. For Xi, Macau is more than a gem in China's palm; it is a symbol of the CCP's ability to adapt and endure. Whether in the neon-lit streets of Macau or the corridors of power in Beijing, the CCP's experiment in controlled capitalism continues to shape the future of China—and the world.

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

CONTROVERSY OVER AMBEDKAR

Madam—The row over the insult to Dr Bhim Rao Ambedkar is neither factual nor logical since the home minister never insulted Dr Ambedkar in his speech by words or intention; rather, the fact is that no leader from the BJP has ever insulted Dr BR Ambedkar publicly or in Parliament or state assemblies, whereas Congress has a documented history of opposition to Ambedkar. It is no secret that the first PM, J.L. Nehru, was never on good terms with Dr Ambedkar, and MK Gandhi too had an uncomfortable equation with Ambedkar, while it may be argued that the twin Congress leaders (Gandhi and Nehru) were right when it comes to national interest and the movement of Indian independence to oppose Dr Ambedkar. Unfortunately, the national politics has reached the spot where Dr BR Ambedkar has been established as a godly figure, though he never participated in any struggle for Indian independence for which the Congress claims sole credit and abuses Bharatiya JanaSangh and BJP for their nonparticipation, never mentioning Ambedkar for his nonparticipation because that would be politically incorrect. Neither making Ambedkar the god nor considering the Constitution a heavenly document would be democratically or even constitutionally correct.

Jai Prakash Gupta | Ambala Cantt

APATHY AT ITS WORSE

Madam—This is our modern India. When a Jaipur gas tanker explosion left motor mechanic Radheyshyam Choudhary with 85 per cent burns. He bravely walked 600 meters while engulfed in flames, even calling his brother before succumbing to his injuries at SMS Hospital. Shockingly, by mid-morning, videos of the aftermath of the gas tanker explosion on the national highway were circulating online, with more than one showing a burning man struggling to stay on his feet as he scammed for help amid

Indian diaspora remits \$129 billion



In 2024, Indian expatriates achieved a historic milestone by sending \$129 billion in remittances. This amount not only surpasses India's vast defence budget and foreign direct investment but also exceeds the combined budgets of Pakistan and Bangladesh. This flow of funds symbolises not just economic support but also the hard work, dedication, and unwavering

love of Indians for their homeland. Remittances have unlocked new avenues for development in rural and urban areas, fostering investment in education, healthcare, and infrastructure. It has provided stability to rural economies while empowering small and medium enterprises. Indians living abroad establish their identity on foreign soil through resilience and courage. By dedicating a significant portion of their income to the development of their families and nation, they exemplify cultural values and familial commitment. This inflow strengthens India's foreign exchange reserves and energises local businesses. With strong policy measures, the government can further enhance this success. Remittances are not merely economic contributions; they represent the collective effort and national pride of Indians across the globe.

RK Jain | Barwani

ACTION AGAINST MINING MAFIA

Madam—The operation of the mining mafia is a well-known fact for a long time to both the governments of Rajasthan and Haryana, including the efforts put forth by the general public in complaining against such acts with no stoppage of the bringing down of the Aravalli hills. However, a common man hesitates to lodge an FIR, as he is aware of the consequences he will face with negligible police protection for a limited time and the creation of animosity with the mafia, resulting in a threat to his life and discouraging him from fighting with such a large force. Sending inspecting teams to the blasted site from both the government is purely an eye wash in the eyes of the public until concrete action is taken at a national level involving the NIA. A strategic policy with amendments to the existing mining rules is required to be pondered upon to make it pragmatic and not theoretical to be effective.

R S Narula | Patiala

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Navigating the intersection of technology, law and human rights

In a world increasingly shaped by digital technologies, the concept of 'digital arrest' has emerged as a controversial tool in cyberspace



SHAINY SHARMA

The term 'Digital Arrest' often referred to as the restriction, monitoring, or apprehension of individuals through online mechanisms extends beyond the confines of traditional legal systems to encompass actions in cyberspace, such as freezing digital assets, blocking online accounts, or limiting access to certain platforms or limiting individual freedom in a virtual or online environment.



As technology permeates every aspect of life, the implications of digital arrest have grown even more significantly, offering both opportunities and challenges in governance, security, and individual rights in dismantling operations such as ransomware groups, hacking collectives, and online marketplaces for illegal activities. For instance, international efforts have led to the closure of dark web platforms such as Silk Road and the apprehension of their operators. Also, Cryptocurrencies and digital financial assets have brought about new forms of digital arrest, where govern-

ments or agencies freeze digital wallets associated with criminal activities thereby preventing the illicit flow of funds and supporting global financial regulations. While the concept is still evolving, digital arrest encompasses aspects of cybersecurity, legal frameworks, and the social consequences of living in a highly digitised world. At its core, this kind of arrest involves leveraging technology to enforce restrictions or punish actions taken in the digital sphere. Various government agencies, corporations, and even individual users can

participate in acts akin to digital arrest, raising questions about authority, power dynamics, and accountability in cyberspace. To balance security and individual rights in the digital era, taking measures such as establishing transparent and enforceable regulations that define the scope of digital arrest; overseeing the use of digital arrest mechanisms to ensure accountability and prevent misuse; developing universal guidelines for promoting fairness and consistency across jurisdictions; and most importantly raising public awareness about digital rights and responsibility.

ties can equip individuals with the knowledge and tools needed to engage effectively and securely in the digital world. As the digital world continues to evolve, so too will the methods of enforcement and resistance. New technologies, such as artificial intelligence and blockchain, may influence how digital arrests are carried out and challenged. Transparency in enforcement, the right to appeal, and global cooperation on ethical standards are essential steps in creating a just digital society. There is no denying that digital arrest represents the intersection of technology, law, and human rights in the digital age. While it offers tools for enforcing order and combatting crime, it also poses risks to freedom of digital privacy. As society becomes increasingly reliant on digital infrastructure, the concept of digital arrest will likely continue to evolve, demanding thoughtful and ethical approaches to its implementation.

(The writer is an educator; views are personal)

the cacophony unleashed by the accident, but bystanders just filmed his suffering rather than offering aid. Pathetic. People believe in publicity rather than providing succour and relief. No wonder, actually; these days people do anything for a short time of fame. They will upload such videos to garner views and likes, maybe monetise. They keep refreshing their page to see like and comment status anxiously.

It's more horrible than in the quest for social media, people have forgotten to be human! Shame on us. People want to know that this is the reality of our Sankars. We have read many cases like these where precious lives could have been saved by the onlookers instead of taking useless videos. It's high time that YouTube and Instagram stop paying people for videos. Moreover, big vehicles like tankers and buses should be given a separate lane. It's there in all developed countries. It's important to react with improvements so that such foolish mishaps don't happen. Bidsyud Kumar Chatterjee | Faridabad



Selective indecision

The latest GST Council meetings outcomes signal a capricious approach

Well into the eighth year of India's revamped indirect tax regime, the apex body governing the system met last Saturday and unveiled a flurry of decisions – including some rate changes and clarifications – that were punctuated by some broader issues it chose to kick down the road. That the Goods and Services Tax (GST) Council, with the Centre and States on board, had to wait for its 55th gathering to figure out that it needed to clarify that pepper and raisins supplied by farmers, gift vouchers and penalties levied on borrowers by banks and non-banking finance companies, are not taxable, is instructive. Similarly, the switch to a three-tiered levy for something as banal as popcorn – despite the rationale of taxing sweetened varieties more in the name of health – after all these years, is worrying. Such moves neither reflect well on the Centre's claims around its hurried July 2017 rollout that the GST is a 'Good and Simple Tax', nor does it bode well for a meaningful overhaul of its multiple and complex rates' structure through a long-delayed rationalisation exercise.

That the Council also did not bother to consider initial recommendations of a ministerial panel tasked with rejigging the GST rates, nor take up a panel's suggestions to review life and health insurance policies' taxation despite a commitment to expedite this rethink, only diminishes expectations from the panel going forward. That the panel's head left the meeting early, stating it will hold further deliberations on insurance policies' levies soon, is not comforting, if not entirely casual – especially as the government has been promising action on this front since the Budget session. The dithering, for whatever reason, is beginning to hurt the industry too. In November, new life insurance business tanked for the first time this year as consumers held off on buying a cover in anticipation of a GST cut. The longer this indecision, and the feet-dragging on the broader rate rationalisation plan, launched over three years ago, persists, the worse will be the implications on consumption that has already turned tentative, and private investment plans that hinge on consumption as well as tax certainty. The Council's decision to reverse an October verdict of the Supreme Court letting realty players claim input tax credits on costs of construction for commercial structures intended for renting or leasing purposes, will also have ramifications on India's investment climate. With legal changes to take retrospective effect from July 2017, this is a blast from the past for investors spooked by similar taxation misadventures over the past decade.

Canary in the canopy

Economic growth cannot be allowed to bypass environment laws

Through history, forests for humans have been sites of shelter, food, livelihoods, protection, and strength of spirit. According to the new *India State of Forest Report 2023*, 25% of India's land is covered by forests or trees, on its face a healthy figure and a step closer to the National Forest Policy's prescriptions. But big numbers always hide problems. Post-Independence, India's forest governance has been typified by attempts to break free from European colonialists' insular view of forests as sources of timber, codified in laws the country inherited. Two significant achievements in this regard were the Forest (Conservation) Act 1980 and the Forest (Rights) Act 2006. The countervailing forces of industrial development and the pressures of climate change on the state have however troubled the implementation of both Acts and the government has, sadly, chosen the easy way out.

Courts and conservationists have demanded that the state follow the dictionary definition of forests whereas the administration has been muddying it to exclude "community" forests, among others, while including plantations and orchards. Even if the administration's impetus is murky, it is allowing India to claim it is growing its carbon sink towards its climate commitments while allowing developmental activities to continue unimpeded. Thus, the 25% figure hides forest cover loss in the biodiverse Western Ghats, the Nilgiris and the northeast, the shrinking of mangroves in the Kutch and the Andamans, and of "moderately dense" forests and the ongoing endangerment of open natural ecosystems. The report also lacks details about whether its estimates of the carbon sequestration potential of degraded land account for the specific uses to which they are currently being subjected. Forest loss in biodiverse areas cannot be adjusted with new plantations elsewhere, the consequences of which are exacerbated by the decision to include even commercial plantations, which have lower sequestration and ecological value, and the continued use of the Compensatory Afforestation Fund Act. Indeed, the growing gap between the rhetorical and actual forests also extends to finances. In several northern districts, the extent of forest cover that suffered fire losses has increased by an order of magnitude in two years. Ground reports by *The Hindu* have documented a paucity of human resources, skill, and equipment to control fires. Economic growth is essential and trees will be lost, but this is precisely why the friction that laws impose on the growth impulse is essential too. Yet, the government has been weakening environmental safeguards – more recently, the Forest (Conservation) Amendment Act 2023 further contracted the 1980 Act's purview – and distorting its official inventory of forests. It is hard to imagine anyone winning in the end.

India's governance challenges demand urgent reforms to modernise its bureaucracy. The country's economic story, which is marked by significant strides in growth and innovation, is juxtaposed with enduring issues of income inequality, underinvestment in critical sectors, and bureaucratic inefficiency. Central to this narrative is the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), which has for long held sway over the nation's governance. However, persistent challenges within the IAS and the wider bureaucracy have highlighted the urgent need for administrative reforms to unlock India's true economic potential.

The legacy and challenges of the IAS

The IAS, often called India's "steel frame", traces its origins to the colonial Indian Civil Service (ICS). Post-Independence, it became the backbone of India's administrative machinery, with officers occupying pivotal roles in governance. Yet, this legacy has not been without its cracks. Political interference, lack of specialisation, and outdated personnel practices have gradually eroded its effectiveness.

One of the pressing issues is the politicisation of the IAS. Frequent transfers, suspensions, and promotions influenced by political loyalty rather than merit, have undermined morale and professionalism. Officers often struggle to develop domain expertise due to frequent rotations across departments, preventing them from becoming effective policy specialists in an increasingly complex governance landscape.

Corruption and inefficiency plague the bureaucracy further. According to the World Bank's measure of government effectiveness, India ranks only moderately, reflecting the poor quality of policy implementation and administrative independence. Without reform, these systemic inefficiencies threaten to stymie India's economic growth and governance objectives.

Executive-led governance in India, characterised by centralised decision-making, has yielded mixed results. While it has facilitated rapid economic reforms and infrastructure development, it has also led to bottlenecks in policy implementation and a lack of accountability. The centralised power structure often sidelines bureaucrats' insights and expertise, reducing their ability to act as effective policy executors.

Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership, the government has attempted to address some of these shortcomings by curbing politicised transfers and introducing measures to



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Persistent challenges within the Indian Administrative Service and the wider bureaucracy have highlighted the urgent need for administrative reforms

enhance bureaucratic accountability. However, critics argue that centralising power in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) risks undermining the autonomy of senior bureaucrats, leading to further disempowerment of the IAS.

The need for administrative reforms in India is not new. Since Independence, over 50 commissions and committees have been tasked with reimagining the country's administrative apparatus. The First Administrative Reforms Commission (ARC) in 1966 and subsequent commissions, have consistently emphasised the need for specialisation, accountability, and merit-based promotions within the bureaucracy.

The Second ARC, set up in 2005, laid out a blueprint for administrative reforms. It included recommendations for lowering the permissible age of entry into the civil services, introducing performance-based promotions and lateral entry, and establishing safeguards against arbitrary transfers. However, many of these recommendations remain unimplemented, stalled by bureaucratic inertia and political resistance.

Government's push for reform

Recognising the limitations of the IAS-centric administrative model, the Modi government has sought to diversify governance by introducing lateral entry into senior bureaucratic positions. This move is aimed at bringing domain experts from the private sector and other government services into key policymaking roles, infusing fresh perspectives and specialised knowledge.

Since 2018, the central government has pursued lateral recruitment to bring individuals with specialised knowledge and domain expertise into specific assignments. By 2023, this initiative saw the appointment of 57 officers, many of whom were drawn from the private sector, reflecting a deliberate effort to infuse fresh talent and perspectives into governance. The Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) recently advertised 45 posts for lateral entry, including positions for Joint Secretaries and Directors across various ministries. This shift has disrupted the IAS's traditional dominance, with only 33% of Joint Secretaries at the Centre now belonging to the IAS, compared to near-total dominance a decade ago.

However, the lateral entry initiative has faced resistance. Critics, including retired civil servants, argue that it could undermine incumbent morale and distort promotion incentives. Opposition parties have also voiced concern about the lack of reservation provisions for marginalised groups in these appointments. The Modi government's recent U-turn on lateral entry appointments,

reportedly due to political pressure from political allies, underscores the contentious nature of this reform.

The U.S.'s proposed Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), under U.S. President-elect Donald Trump, offers an intriguing model for reforming India's administrative apparatus. DOGE aims to streamline government operations, reduce inefficiency, and eliminate redundant agencies, all while leveraging the expertise of leaders such as Elon Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy.

DOGE's focus on cutting wasteful expenditures and introducing accountability mechanisms resonates with the challenges faced by the Indian bureaucracy. A similar advisory body in India could help identify inefficiencies within the civil service, promote data-driven decision-making, and develop metrics to assess bureaucratic performance. A time-bound commission, such as the DOGE's expiration date tied to the U.S. semi-centennial, could also ensure that reform initiatives remain focused and actionable.

Challenges to reform

Reforming India's bureaucracy is no small task. Despite its flaws, the IAS remains deeply entrenched in the country's governance structure. Proposals for lateral entry, performance-based promotions, and specialised training often face resistance from within the service, where seniority-based progression and generalist approaches are deeply institutionalised. Political interference further complicates reform efforts. Proposals such as the Civil Services Standards, Performance, and Accountability Bill (2010), which sought to protect bureaucrats from arbitrary transfers, have languished in legislative limbo. Even judicial interventions, such as the Supreme Court of India's directive to establish civil services boards in 2013, have had limited impact due to lack of enforcement.

A multifaceted approach to administrative reform is vital to address the challenges of India's bureaucracy. Recruitment must prioritise merit and domain expertise, with promotions tied to measurable performance rather than seniority. Protecting bureaucrats from politically motivated transfers and fostering specialisation in policymaking roles would enhance accountability and efficiency. Further, the government should invest in a robust data infrastructure to track bureaucratic performance, enabling informed decisions on placements, promotions, and policy implementation. Reform is essential for India's economic aspirations and ensuring governance effectively serves its people.

The GATT-ification of the World Trade Organization

The Geneva-based World Trade Organization (WTO), which serves as a multilateral trade referee, is set to miss yet another crucial target of revitalising "a full and well-functioning dispute settlement system" by the end of 2024. It has been five years since the Appellate Body (AB), the second tier of the WTO's two-tier dispute settlement system, has been non-operational due to the persistent blocking, by the United States, of the appointment of the Appellate Body members.

This obstruction began during Barack Obama's administration, escalated under Donald Trump's first presidency, and has continued under President Joe Biden, reflecting a bipartisan political consensus in the U.S. The U.S.'s hostile stance towards the Appellate Body will intensify further under what is anticipated to be a highly protectionist Trump 2.0 administration. While the WTO panels, the first stage of dispute settlement, continue to operate and render decisions resolving trade disputes between WTO member countries, this is of little significance because the losing country uses its legal prerogative to appeal to a non-operational AB, and thus stall the adjudicatory process. However, it is a fool's errand to put the Appellate Body back on track because the real issue is the WTO's existential crisis and its quest to be a relevant player in global trade. The larger game is not about killing the Appellate Body but, rather, making the WTO dysfunctional.

The promise

To understand the future, it is important to first reflect on the past. The establishment of the WTO in 1995 marked a milestone in international law. The rise of neoliberal ideology in the 1990s played a critical role in this development. The WTO established a comprehensive system of



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The legal revolution of international trade multilateralism is being reversed

rules governing trade in goods, services, and intellectual property, along with a binding two-tier dispute settlement system featuring an appellate function, compulsory jurisdiction, and effective retaliation for non-compliance. The WTO's promise of international rule of law was so compelling that it could not be matched even by the International Court of Justice. Scholars in international law began to regard the WTO as a constitutionalism project that would ensure the triumph of international law over international politics.

As the international trading community witnessed the transition from the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) era that held sway from 1948 to 1994 to the WTO, it marked a shift from diplomacy-based trade multilateralism to a rule-based system. Celso Lafer, a former Chairman of the WTO's dispute settlement body, described the creation of the WTO as the "thickening of legality" in international trade relations. Put differently, countries were willing to accept several restrictions on their state conduct and subject themselves to the binding jurisdiction of the WTO's dispute settlement system including the Appellate Body.

The unravelling

However, things began to unravel as the global landscape changed due to China's significant rise over the last two decades. The U.S. facilitated China's accession to the WTO in 2001, hoping this would lead Beijing to dismantle its state-led industrial policies which were detrimental to international trade, and adopt free-market principles. However, this expectation did not materialise. There is a widespread belief in the U.S. that China exploited the WTO system to its advantage. The WTO and its institutional controls

hinder the U.S. from dealing decisively with China. As a result, the U.S. aims, in the words of international lawyer Daniel C.K. Chow, to "wreck" the WTO system, including the Appellate Body, which would provide it with a free hand to address the perceived Chinese threat. The U.S. can now employ trade remedial measures and develop industrial policies to counter the Chinese challenge, even if these actions violate WTO law, as there is no one to call it out. A classic example of this is the Trump administration's decision in 2018 to impose a 25% tariff on Chinese products across various sectors. Mr. Trump's promise to impose further tariffs during his second term, which could trigger another round of trade war, indicates that international politics, rather than international law, will dictate international trade.

Regime change

This has led international lawyers such as Gerald Vidal to argue that there is no longer a crisis in the WTO but a regime change. As against the thickening of the legality of international trade relations that we saw from a period of 1995 to 2019, we are witnessing its thinning. In other words, while there is no complete de-legislation of international trade relations, countries are reclaiming significant control that was previously ceded to the WTO in managing their state conduct. The legal revolution of international trade multilateralism that began in 1995 has not only been paused but is being reversed, moving us back to the era of GATT diplomacy. Understanding this "GATTification" of the WTO, as Prof. Vidal puts it, is crucial for grasping the current state of the international trading order. No amount of technical negotiations in Geneva can obscure this fact.

The views expressed are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Centralisation push

A single election diminishes the role and priorities of the States and can only marginalise them. The drive towards 'one nation, one election' (ONOE) is to have India as a unitary, undimensional, single-language nation, which it certainly is not. We are one because we are different. ONOE is essentially to dislodge regional parties as they appear to have stymied the Bharatiya Janata Party's expansion moves. This push from the government leads to needless structural

imbalance and a disruption of the concept of cooperative federalism. 'One nation, one election' is another step towards the centralisation of many aspects of administration and schemes. The 'cost' angle is unclear, as to date, the savings from simultaneous polls have not been quantified. **H.N. Ramakrishna**, Bengaluru

Rural employment scheme
The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme is meant to eliminate seasonal

unemployment in the agrarian sector. Put differently, the services of farmers/agricultural labourers during the lean season are utilised in the said scheme to create infrastructural assets in rural areas. It is disheartening that corruption plagues the scheme in West Bengal (Page 1, December 23). India is a federal country, and it is imperative that the Union government and States work in unison to ameliorate the economic condition of the poor in rural and urban areas.

Politics, red-tapism and corruption are least expected in labour-intensive and socio-economic welfare programmes. **S. Ramakrishnasayee**, Chennai

Music season, safety

This time of the year Chennai is busy with its annual *Maraghi* music season. City residents and non-resident Indians alike through the numerous *sabhas*, enjoying music and the other performing arts apart from tasting exotic food items despite their being exorbitantly priced.

But what is not so great about the situation is that many of the *sabhas* are not implementing the required statutory fire safety regulations, putting lives at risk. Statutory fire safety regulations such as smoke detection systems and alarms, unimpeded passage ways, fire evacuation plans and strategies, and, importantly, trained employees to handle a possible fire outbreak, are conspicuously absent in many of the *sabhas*. It is a common sight that when popular artists perform, people are allowed

to sit on staircases. More chairs are brought in to seat more people, blocking all escape routes. The live kitchen adjoining the auditorium in many places is another potential fire hazard! The authorities concerned should, in the interest of public safety, inspect the various performing centres and have the required fire safety protocols implemented immediately. **B. Swaminathan**, Chennai

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

Octopuses and their kin are a new animal welfare frontier

It appears that cephalopods as a group may be similar in intelligence to vertebrates as a group. Since many societies have animal welfare standards for mice, rats, chickens, and other vertebrates, logic would suggest that there's a case for regulations enforcing humane treatment of cephalopods

Rachel Blaser

We named him Squirt – not because he was the smallest of the 16 cuttlefish in the pool, but because anyone with the audacity to scoop him into a separate tank to study him was likely to get soaked. Squirt had notoriously accurate aim.

As a comparative psychologist, I'm used to assaults from my experimental subjects. I've been stung by bees, pinched by crayfish, and battered by indignant pigeons. But, somehow, with Squirt it felt different. As he eyed us with his W-shaped pupils, he seemed clearly to be plotting against us.

Of course, I'm being anthropomorphic. Science does not yet have the tools to confirm whether cuttlefish have emotional states or whether they are capable of conscious experience, much less sinister plots. But there's undeniably something special about cephalopods – the class of ocean-dwelling invertebrates that includes cuttlefish, squid, and octopus.

As researchers learn more about cephalopods' cognitive skills, there are calls to treat them in ways better aligned with their level of intelligence. California and Washington state both approved bans on octopus farming in 2024. Hawaii is considering similar action, and a ban on farming octopus or importing farmed octopus meat has been introduced in Congress. A planned octopus farm in Spain's Canary Islands is attracting opposition from scientists and animal welfare advocates.

Critics offer many arguments against raising octopuses for food, including possible releases of waste, antibiotics, or pathogens from aquaculture facilities. But as a psychologist, I see intelligence as the most intriguing part of the equation. Just how smart are cephalopods, really? After all, it's legal to farm chickens and cows. Is an octopus smarter than, say, a turkey?

A big, diverse group

Cephalopods are a broad class of molluscs that includes the coleoids – cuttlefish, octopus, and squid – as well as the chambered nautilus. Coleoids range in size from adult squid only a few millimetres long (*Idiosepius*) to the largest living invertebrates, the giant squid (*Architeuthis*) and colossal squid (*Mesonychoteuthis*), which can grow to over 40 feet in length and weigh over 450 kg.

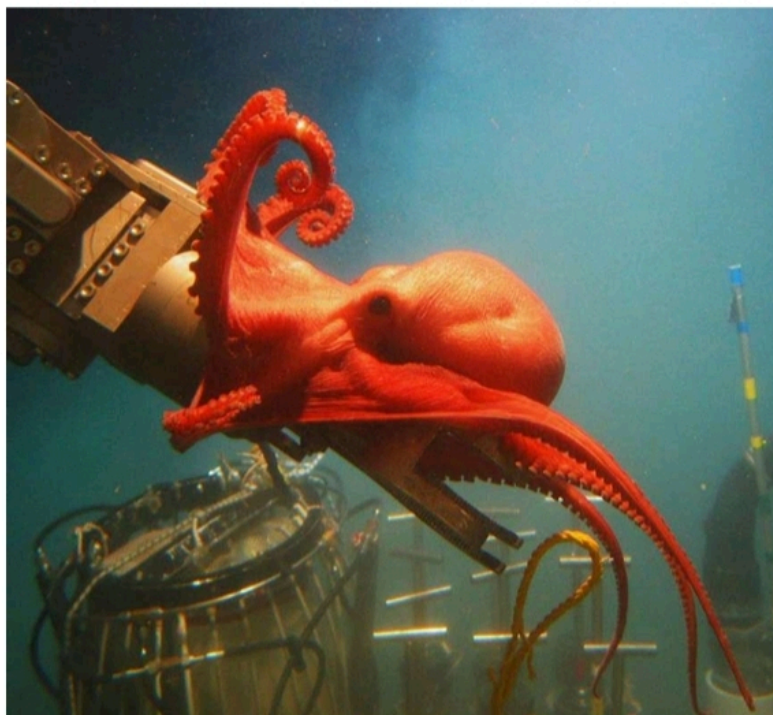
Some of these species live alone in the nearly featureless darkness of the deep ocean; others live socially on active, sunny coral reefs. Many are skilled hunters, but some feed passively on floating debris. Because of this enormous diversity, the size and complexity of cephalopod brains and behaviours also vary tremendously.

Almost everything that's known about cephalopod cognition comes from intensive study of just a few species. When considering the welfare of a designated species of captive octopus, it's important to be careful about using data collected from a distant evolutionary relative.

Can we measure alien intelligence?

Intelligence is fiendishly hard to define and measure, even in humans. The challenge grows exponentially in studying animals with sensory, motivational, and problem-solving skills that differ profoundly from ours.

Historically, researchers have tended to focus on whether animals think like humans, ignoring the abilities that animals may have that humans lack. To avoid this problem, scientists have tried to find more objective measures of cognitive abilities.



A deep-water octopus investigates the port manipulator arm of the ALVIN submersible research vessel. US NOAA

One option is a relative measure of brain to body size. The best-studied species of octopus, *Octopus vulgaris*, has about 500 million neurons; that's relatively large for its small body size and similar to a starling, rabbit, or turkey.

More accurate measures may include the size, neurone count, or surface area of specific brain structures thought to be important for learning. While this is useful in mammals, the nervous system of an octopus is built completely differently. Over half of the neurones in *Octopus vulgaris*, about 300 million, are not in the brain at all but distributed in "mini-brains," or ganglia, in the arms. Within the central brain, most of the remaining neurones are dedicated to visual processing, leaving less than a quarter of its neurones for other processes such as learning and memory.

In other species of octopus, the general structure is similar, but complexity varies. Wrinkles and folds in the brain increase its surface area and may enhance neural connections and communication. Some species of octopus, notably those living in reef habitats, have more wrinkled brains than those living in the deep sea, suggesting that these species may possess a higher degree of intelligence.

Holding out for a better snack

Because brain structure is not a foolproof measure of intelligence, behavioural tests may provide better evidence. One of the highly complex behaviours that many cephalopods show is visual camouflage. They can open and close tiny sacs just below their skin that contain coloured pigments and reflectors, revealing specific colours. *Octopus vulgaris* has up to 1,500,000 chromatophores, or pigment sacs, in a single square inch of skin.

Like many cephalopods, the common cuttlefish (*Sepia officinalis*) is thought to be colour-blind. But it can use its excellent vision to produce a dizzying

array of patterns across its body as camouflage. The Australian giant cuttlefish, *Sepia apama*, uses its chromatophores to communicate, creating patterns that attract mates and warn off aggressors. This ability can also come in handy for hunting; many cephalopods are ambush predators that blend into the background or even lure their prey.

The hallmark of intelligent behaviour, however, is learning and memory, and there is plenty of evidence that some octopuses and cuttlefish learn in a way that is comparable to learning in vertebrates. The common cuttlefish (*Sepia officinalis*), as well as the common octopus (*Octopus vulgaris*) and the day octopus (*Octopus cyanea*), can all form simple associations, such as learning which image on a screen predicts that food will appear.

Some cephalopods may be capable of more complicated forms of learning, such as reversal learning – learning to flexibly adjust behaviour when different stimuli signal reward. They may also be able to inhibit impulsive responses. In a 2021 study that gave common cuttlefish a choice between a less desirable but immediate snack of crab and a preferred treat of live shrimp after a delay, many of the cuttlefish chose to wait for the shrimp.

A new frontier for animal welfare

Considering what's known about their brain structures, sensory systems, and learning capacity, it appears that cephalopods as a group may be similar in intelligence to vertebrates as a group. Since many societies have animal welfare standards for mice, rats, chickens, and other vertebrates, logic would suggest that there's an equal case for regulations enforcing humane treatment of cephalopods.

Such rules generally specify that when a species is held in captivity, its housing

Cephalopods are capable of visual camouflage. They use tiny sacs just below their skin that contain coloured pigments and reflectors, revealing specific colours. *Octopus vulgaris* has up to 1,500,000 chromatophores in a single square inch of skin

conditions should support the animal's welfare and natural behaviour. This view has led some U.S. states to outlaw confined cages for egg-laying hens and crates too narrow for pregnant sows to turn around.

Animal welfare regulations say little about invertebrates, but guidelines for the care and use of captive cephalopods have started to appear over the past decade. In 2010, the European Union required considering ethical issues when using cephalopods for research. And in 2015, AAALAC International, an international accreditation organisation for ethical animal research, and the Federation of European Laboratory Animal Science Associations promoted guidelines for the care and use of cephalopods in research. The U.S. National Institutes of Health is currently considering similar guidelines.

The "alien" minds of octopuses and their relatives are fascinating, not the least because they provide a mirror through which we can reflect on more familiar forms of intelligence. Deciding which species deserve moral consideration requires selecting criteria, such as neurone count or learning capacity, to inform those choices. Once these criteria are set, it may be well to also consider how they apply to the rodents, birds, and fish that occupy more familiar roles in our lives.

(Rachel Blaser is professor of neuroscience, cognition, and behaviour at the University of San Diego. This article is republished from The Conversation.)



A common cuttlefish (*Sepia officinalis*) in Portugal's Arrábida Natural Park. DIEGO DELSO (CC BY-SA)



A common octopus. ALBERT KOK (CC BY-SA)



A Kashmiri boatman breaks the frozen surface to make his way through Dal Lake, Srinagar AP

Kashmiris forced to burn wood for heat as weather turns frigid

Press Trust of India

Residents of Kashmir are going back to traditional ways of coping with intense cold wave conditions as frequent and unscheduled power cuts have rendered modern heating gadgets useless.

Kashmir is dealing with Chillai Kalan, a 40-day winter period notorious for being the harshest part of the season. On Saturday, Srinagar city witnessed the coldest night in 33 years after the minimum temperature dipped to a bone-chilling -8.5 degrees C. Other places in the valley also experienced extreme sub-zero temperatures, which caused water pipes in many areas to freeze.

Over the past couple of decades, residents of urban Kashmir had done away with traditional heating arrangements, including wood-based hamams, bukharis, and wicker-claypot kangris, as the supply of electricity improved year after year.

But with the region experiencing one of its toughest winters in recent memory, power supply in most parts of Kashmir has been erratic at best, rendering electric heating redundant.

"Over the past few years, we had become accustomed to using electric gadgets to keep ourselves warm. With 12-hour cuts every day, we have now gone back to kangris," Yasir Ahmad, a resident

Over the past decades, urban Kashmiris had done away with wood-based hamams, bukharis, and wicker-claypot kangris, as the supply of electricity improved year after year

of the posh Gulbahar colony in Srinagar, said.

Ahmad said his investment in an air conditioner had "gone to waste." Abdul Ahad Wani, who lives in the old city's Rainawari area, said he recently converted his wood-fuelled hamam to an electricity-powered one. "I felt the wood hamam was cumbersome, and an electric hamam would be available at the push of a switch," Mr. Wani said.

"But people in power have a habit of proving us wrong."

With limited LPG and kerosene in the open market, power cuts have fuelled business for wood and charcoal vendors. "All I can say is the demand for wood has been good this winter. People have to keep themselves warm, and there is nothing better than wood in these times," Mohammad Abbas Zargar, a firewood dealer, said.

An official of the Kashmir Power Development Corporation (KPDCL) said that while there had been load-shedding due to the sharp rise in demand, claims of 16-hour cuts may be exaggerated.

"We are trying our best to follow the load-shedding schedule that has been announced already. However, due to overloading of the circuit, distribution transformers and other allied infrastructure sometimes get damaged, leading to longer power cuts," he said.

The official added that although the KPDCL has maintained a transformer bank to keep disruptions to a minimum, the bank also suffers more damage during winter. "Our staff is doing its job. We request people to use electricity judiciously and as per their load agreement," he added.

Meanwhile, traffic authorities have asked motorists to drive carefully as roads in many places are covered by a layer of ice at dawn, rendering them slippery.

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



The biggest danger of AI is that we attribute these godlike characteristics to it and therefore let ourselves off the hook

Christopher Nolan

newindianexpress.com

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

—Rammath Goenka

FORMULATE PLANS TO ARREST RAPID FOREST DEGRADATION

THE latest India State of Forest report says a quarter of the country's geographical area now is under forest cover—a spread of over 8.27 lakh sq km, which is a 1,445.8-sq-km increase over the previous survey done in 2021. To be precise, this area is a combination of forests as well as tree cover outside of them. The Forest Survey of India defines forest cover as areas of one hectare or more—notwithstanding their ownership, legal status or use—with a tree canopy density of at least 10 percent. This was measured at 7.15 lakh sq km last year. Over the assessment years two years apart, the forest cover alone has expanded by 156.4 sq km. There are other positives in the report, including an improvement in the mangrove cover, which acts as a bio-shield against natural calamities for India's numerous coastal communities.

However, a look beyond the headline numbers reveals worrying realities. The country's recorded forest area has improved by just 7.28 sq km between 2021 and 2023. Now couple it with the unsettling level of forest degradation—measured at a staggering 92,989 sq km in just the decade between 2011 and 2021. The 2023 survey says that recorded forest areas stand at 5.20 lakh sq km, including 91,000 sq km of very dense forests, 2.43 lakh sq km of moderately dense forests, and 1.85 lakh sq km open forests. The report also says that over 40,709 sq km of very dense and moderately dense forests have been degraded into open forests over the decade. Similarly, 5,573 sq km of forest canopies have been reduced to scrub. The scarier part is that the canopy density of another 46,707 sq km has degraded to non-forest land—which means large parts of forests are being cleaned up every year. This rapid degradation is as alarming as deforestation. The threat it poses to biodiversity, pollution control and the essential work of forests as carbon sinks is enormous. This comes after a March 2023 report from a UK-based agency that analysed deforestation trends in 98 countries over 30 years to show that India ranked second only after Brazil—home to the world's greatest rainforest, Amazon—in the worrying trend. We must formulate strategies to arrest and reverse this worrying trend as climate change looms larger.

FILLING ASHWIN'S SHOES WILL BE A BIG CHALLENGE

RAVICHANDRAN Ashwin's retirement announcement came out of the blue. Not that it was unusually surprising for a cricketer aged 38. But the venom has not yet left his bowling, especially in home conditions. As we have come to expect from Ashwin, he did not want to be part of a tour as a tourist. So, aptly enough, a senior player who played cricket on his own terms also decided to retire on his own terms. His illustrious career ended with 537 wickets in 106 Tests—the second highest lifetime haul for an Indian bowler. Six Test tons are also etched against his name. All these made him one of the chief architects of India's home Test record between 2012 and 2024.

Yet, the way he announced his retirement did create a stir. Ashwin's mid-series announcement and return to India sparked a debate on whether he did it the right way, or should he have been given a 'farewell Test'. The latter seemed a bit superfluous given that the last cricketer who got a proper farewell Test was Sachin Tendulkar in 2013. Even if there was to be one at home for Ashwin, it would have been at least nine months away. With a packed international calendar till then and the IPL in between, it would have been difficult to organise one.

There are other pressing matters right now for the team. First, they have to find an able successor to Ashwin, who transformed the craft of spin-bowling into an art. Washington Sundar is there in the squad; but purely in terms of skills, filling in Ashwin's shoes will not be easy. Finding an off-spinner—a breed slowly becoming a rarity—will not be easy. There are not many in the domestic circuit who could come close to the veteran. Jala Saxena is 38, Jayant Yadav is 34 and the majority of the wicket-taking spinners in Ranji Trophy are left-armers. One young spinner who can be slowly moulded is Tanush Kotian of Mumbai—at 26, he is poised to replace Ashwin for the remainder of the series. Whosoever comes next, he will be compared with the likes of Harbhajan Singh and Ashwin. To succeed, the bowler has to have exceptional qualities and the even rarer trait—temperament.

QUICK TAKE

DON'T DROP BOOK POST

A thoughtful scheme crafted to promote reading around the country was quietly discontinued last week. Book Post, which allowed quicker and cheaper delivery of printed books and periodicals, will now be rolled into the registered post service. The move was part of a series of rate increases and scheme revamps by India Post. The Book Post was hardly among the main reasons for the department's gargantuan losses, which increased from ₹5,309 crore in 2012-13 to ₹20,538 crore in 2022-23. The government often sets a standard in services and rates by intervening in a market otherwise served by profit-minded private players. The Book Post was one such essential intervention.

FOR the last 97 years, *Time* magazine has been anointing a 'person of the year' every year-end. As a child who grew up on a staple of *Time* and *Newsweek*, I would eagerly look forward to the year's last editions simply to see if I could guess who it would be. I succeeded only half the time. Nevertheless, thinking of all the persons I could list as possibilities and then weeding most of them out was a fun exercise. It gave me a kick.

It wasn't always called person of the year. In a less gender-sensitised era, it was called man of the year, and, in some cases, woman of the year. It became the person of the year in the noughties. What started in 1927 with the coveted space given to aviator Charles Lindbergh, was given to Donald Trump for 2024. *Time* features a person, group, idea or object that, "for better or worse", has done the most to influence the events of the year.

I go back to the ways of my school days. I sit down and list my own person of the year for 2024. And it is not Donald Trump. It is not human at all. For me, it is the algorithm. Call it a he, she, them or it, the algorithm is the one biggest influencer of 2024. The algorithm has shaped the lives of billions, and continues to influence the future of everything.

Let me introduce you to this being. It is a lifeless form with a life all its own. The algorithm to me is a recipe. It is not a dish. It is a clever recipe that results in a good and tasty dish. It has many ingredients. It has many steps as well. It has a flow. It has both consistency and inconsistency loaded into it. It is what makes the world run today. All of life and living is governed by the algorithm.

A cleverly structured algorithm makes for all convenient outputs we are so used to in life. The clever point is that we live in an algorithm-led world, with very few of us understanding what it does. The algorithm is here, and at the same time, it isn't. It is in hiding. The algorithm in more ways than one is *Maya*. It is not physical. Instead, it is a bigger meta-physicality that runs our lives, our economy, our buying decisions, our consuming decisions and our very being. It's scary, but it is amidst us. None of us can escape it, however much we try.

Let me tell you why I choose Ms Algorithm as the super-influencer of the year and equally the years ahead. Every passing day, each of us has progressively adopted the digital way of life. Anyone with a smartphone understands he is hooked to WhatsApp. If

Algorithms affect most parts of our lives today. With quantum computing set to be unleashed, the future looks loaded in favour of the abilities of instructions coded in machines

INFLUENCER OF THE YEAR: ALGORITHM

HARISH BIJOOR

Brand Guru and Founder, Harish Bijoor Consults



SOURAV ROY

you are compromised to the ways of the digital and equally the ways of how an algorithm works its way into your lives, you will not resist the thought that the horse has bolted.

The algorithm is a computation aid. It helps you solve a common consumer or user problem by setting together a procedure that takes one baby step at a time. It simplifies to complicate. The end goal is to ensure the consumer's life is made richer and easier.

The algorithm is, however, an animal. In the beginning, it is a simple recipe. And then it assumes a life of its own. It becomes a thinking recipe. It learns. It feeds itself, and by the end of the day you might as well expect it to be a sentient animal. In the beginning you make it

happen. You teach it. It learns. It then teaches you back. It tells you who you are, what you like, what you want to do. In the case of the rogue algorithm it tells you what you can and must do as well.

The algorithm has many approaches, many lives, many ways and will eventually have many moods as well. And in the end, with its cousin learning and teaching mechanisms of machine learning and autonomous learning mechanisms that developers are working on to unleash in a more speedy manner, expect algorithm mayhem.

If I am to add an example, let me take the case of my smart refrigerator. It is 7 feet tall and 4 feet wide. Physically apart, it is a mean machine. It is a multi-sensor equipped animal. I will stop calling it a

RELIGION IN THE TIME OF UNCERTAINTIES

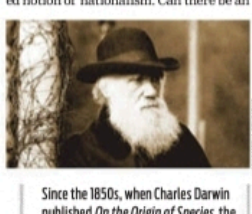
CP SURENDRAN

Poet, novelist, and screenplay writer. His latest novel is *One Love and the Many Lives of Osho B*

ty, people often gravitate towards these constructs to find meaning and stability.

From our own experience, we know that nationalism can foster a sense of community and shared purpose. Caste and class divisions did not much affect the unifying, grand narrative of the freedom struggle.

This is not to blindly defend god or race. I am a disbeliever. But in many cases, both factors play a part in the generally accepted notion of nationalism. Can there be an



mum income for the underprivileged, then really all you need to do is directly transfer sufficient affirmative doles to their accounts. In the space of a generation, they are likely to find themselves more proportionately represented in society.

Rapid technological and economic changes too can lead societies to gravitate toward 'strong' leadership. The extension of identity politics, cancel culture, and virtue supremacy may eventually fragment societies into tribes of competing grievances, making their return to broader, unifying narratives more appealing.

Indeed, this is possibly why the world is shifting to strong leaders. Strength is seductive. The strong offer the one thing we are constantly in short supply of: hope. In the war between believers (the right) and non-believers (the left), believers tend to win. Why? Because believers tend to fight more for their convictions.

In *Submission* (2015), a controversial novel by Michel Houellebecq, François, a middle-aged literature professor at the Sorbonne François is represented as a decadent and liberal. He is disillusioned with his life; marked by failed relationships, academic stagnation, and a sense of existential ennui. He likes good wine, good food, and women. He believes in nothing. He is a critic of Western secular values.

Against this backdrop, in the presidential elections, the Islamic Brotherhood, led by Abbes, emerges as a strong, peaceful, centrist force capable of uniting disparate factions. To block the far-right National Front, the mainstream political parties form an alliance with the Brotherhood, enabling Abbes to become the president.

In the world of the novel, the liberals play into the hands of a strong third party that believes. François does not much care as his career is looking up under the new dispensation. Houellebecq's point is that in a given situation, believers tend to win. This is a problematic point. But we will need to address it sooner or later to see why India—and the rest of the world—is going where it is.

(Views are personal) (cpsurendran@gmail.com)

MAIL BAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Simplify GST

Ref: GST's popcorn moment leaves everyone with bitter aftertaste (Dec 23). The increasing complexities in GST structure are disturbing. But the government alone cannot be blamed for this state of affairs. All the state finance ministers are represented in the GST Council and they should recommend a simplified model for implementation.

Rajaro Kumar, Bengaluru

Taxing opulence

It is true that GST is becoming ever more complex with every passing GST Council meeting. One fails to understand why the council does not consider snacks items served in star hotels and lavish dinners of rich people to generate tax instead of targeting the poor man's popcorn enjoyed by all. If this complex nature of GST continues, it is an affront state governments may boycott future council meetings as a protest.

Jayaprakash Reddy, Nalgonda

Cover borewells

Ref: Get tougher laws to stop borewell deaths (Dec 23). Deaths due to children falling into borewells is quite sad. Borewell owners can council does not consider snacks items served in star hotels and lavish dinners of rich people to generate tax instead of targeting the poor man's popcorn enjoyed by all. If this complex nature of GST continues, it is an affront state governments may boycott future council meetings as a protest.

S Chockalingam, Kottaram

Secure borders

Ref: Bangladesh stirring trouble to hide crisis (Dec 23). It is a matter of concern that Bangladesh is going the Pakistan way in radicalism and fundamentalism. The nexus between the two countries is a worrisome development to India. It has become necessary for India to secure its borders with security forces so that infiltration and terror attacks are averted.

R Sriharan, Chennai

Common celebrations

Ref: When festivals hap over religious lines (Dec 23). It was a heartening read as the author identified the values that Christianity and Hinduism commonly celebrate. At a time when people are being divided so much, such an article is more than welcome.

V Suresh, Chittoor

Festive cheer

The author has rightly pointed out the commonalities of different religions. It is true that most Hindus share the happiness of celebrating Christmas. Christians also have Indianised their approach to worship. The festive mood catches many Hindus as true love has no religion.

P Prema, Thanjavur

comment

THOUGHT
FOR THE DAY

There is eternal simplicity to a solution once it has been discovered — Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Russian author

BMC's solutions should not spawn more problems

The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) has covered stormwater drain covers with tar, according to report in this paper. Motorists travelling on Dattaji Salvi Road, from the Andheri RTO signal to the Veera Desai Road signal, are expressing dissatisfaction over the bumpy ride, as the tarred sections are above the road level.

At least 37 stormwater drains have been covered with tar poured in rectangular shapes over them. These tar-covered surfaces are not level

with the cement concrete road.

Thousands of vehicles use this important arterial road to travel from Veera Desai to the New Link Road signal near the RTO and back toward Veera Desai. Uneven bumps are dangerous for all vehicles.

A local has claimed two-wheeler riders have repeatedly skidded and fallen, because of a drain cover and a motorist, too, said the same. The civic body stated this is a temporary solution.

Our solutions must always address the problem. They must be

visionary and well-thought-out. To resolve one issue, we cannot be creating some other kinds of problems. Here, to address the noise pollution complaints pouring in, as vehicles went over metal covers, tar was poured over the lids. This has created uneven surfaces which are hugely problematic for many, especially the many two-wheelers on the stretch.

One hopes that a long-lasting solution is found and implemented before any disaster takes place.

The authorities must realise that this bumpy ride may mean that two-wheeler or pillion riders may fall off and a tragedy could occur. If the measure is temporary, then, the tar should be removed quickly and a permanent solution implemented.

Let us always take a holistic view of the traffic situation and make our roads as easy as possible for vehicles to ply. With all the other challenges, we cannot afford any solution, which makes driving or riding tougher.

LETTERS

BEST is responsible for Kurla bus tragedy

This refers to 'Wasn't given adequate training by authorities'. The callous attitude of the BEST authorities who employed an undertrained driver has cost lives. A thorough investigation should be conducted into the matter.

IBRAHIM A LATIF KHAN

48-hr rest must for pilots to reduce human error

This refers to '48-hr rest time for pilots will take time: AI, IndiGo' (Dec 22). A 48-hour rest period may cause a pilot shortage, but it improves passenger safety by reducing pilot fatigue, enhancing alertness, and minimising human error on long routes.

IQBAL GILANI MANSURI

Talented Ashwin should have played for longer

Apropos 'Ash's zero regrets' (Dec 20), Ashwin, the hero of the last series against Australia played just one Test in this series. He deserved better and should have been the first player selected for the genius he possesses.

JAYANTHI CK MANIAN

Don't cricketers deserve respectful send-offs?

Apropos 'Ashwin looked unhappy, deserved a fitting farewell: Kapil' (Dec 20), Ravichandran Ashwin, who has had an illustrious career, announced his unexpected retirement, ending his journey abruptly and sparking discussions on deserving farewells for legends.

C K SUBRAMANIAM

Nightmare on the Virar Fast

I.M.H.O

C Y Gopinath



The fair, I was warned.

A fellow at the station had said, "Better not take the Virar Fast." But he mumbled it, like a mild afterthought, so I took it as a suggestion rather than a dire warning.

It was evening rush hour at Churchgate station, a key terminus on the world's most daunting suburban train network, carrying the equivalent of Switzerland's population daily. I was trying to decide the best train to get to Andheri, but the three-language announcements were turned to gibberish by the rally-level reverberation added to them. No one was listening anyway; they were focused on the baffling code on each platform's LED signage.

The bright white sign above my head read —

BO06:47S03

The first one or two characters (someone kind explained) represented the destination, in this case BO for Borivli. The next four characters, all numeric, showed the scheduled arrival time. The next character, always F or S, signified a Fast or Slow train. The last two positions, also numeric, told you the minutes left for the train's arrival.

Should I board a slow train and endure a 45-minute ride to Andheri or get there in 25 minutes on the next fast train? While I pondered this, the Borivli Slow filled up and left. The platform sign changed to **VR06:53F01**. My eyes fastened only on the letter F.

Here it was, my Fast train home. But as it pulled in, the station turned into a war zone.

At its worst moments, Churchgate is like a landmine: harmless until it explodes. Everything looks deceptively mundane, but everyone is a coiled spring, taut and alert. They know that any moment, without warning, a cataclysm will shatter the peace

Six persons per square metre is the norm. Mumbai's locals carry 16 at rush hour. I learnt what this means when I boarded the Virar Fast



Mumbai's suburban trains squeeze 14 to 16 commuters per square metre at peak hour, a number so wild that they had to coin a special term for it: Super Dense Crush Load. ILLUSTRATION BY C Y GOPINATH USING AI

when the next train enters. Their lives will depend on moving like lightning and with the brutal force of a sledgehammer.

The sound starts even before the train stops, the thundering hooves of hordes of humans barreling into the train, like panicked wildebeests crossing the Mara River while crocodiles try to eat them. They hurtle into compartments like missiles, looking left and right with wild eyes for empty seats.

I got swept in on this tsunami of bodies, a piece of Western Railway flotsam. There was no question of finding a seat; everything had been taken in the first five seconds flat. I stood wedged at the back of the coach between eight human beings of varying sizes, weights and aromatics.

I wish someone had told me this was the Virar Fast. And that I was about to meet the Super Dense Crush Load.

In transport economics, a crush load describes how many commuters can stand in a square metre without undue discomfort

A crush is the result of a vehicle carrying more commuters than it was designed for, forcing commuters to stand too close to—or "crushed" against—each other. In transport economics, a crush load describes how many commuters can stand in a square metre without undue discomfort.

On a sliding scale of comfort, a crush load of 5 is considered optimal, with enough standing room and personal space for commuters. At a crush load of 7-8, commuters would still be able to play video games on their smartphones but at 11, they'd have to hold the device above head level. At crush load 12, all notion of personal space disappears; it becomes bodies without borders.

Mumbai's suburban trains squeeze 14 to 16 commuters per square metre at peak hour, a number so wild that they had to coin a special term for it: Super Dense Crush Load. At this level, the crowd begins to display fluid characteristics, moving like a single viscous body of flesh. As far as entering and exiting the train goes, it's each one for themselves.

The train stopped at Mumbai Central, Dadar and Bandra and it dawned on me that no one was getting off.

Everyone on this train was going to Virar.

Andheri was up next and I could see no way of reaching the exit. I began tapping shoulders to ask if anyone could somehow, against all odds, let me past. More shoulders were tapped as the word went around the coach; everyone looked kind but helpless. We were all frozen in rictus.

Then someone remarked, "Senior citizen! Getting off at Andheri!"

That went viral. Some began to say, "Make way for Senior Citizen!" Some craned their necks to see Senior Citizen.

Senior Citizen, meanwhile, stood where he had been compressed, packed and cling-wrapped, devoid of ambition, initiative and hope, completely resigned to being disengorged at Virar.

Then something entirely unexpected began. Biologists call it peristalsis, referring to the rhythmic cycles by which intestines squeeze out their contents each morning.

A large fleshy man somehow slid past me, pushing me into the space he had occupied. Another human mass slipped behind me, thrusting me a tad closer to the exit. Senior Citizen stayed limp and unresisting, squeezed forward thus like toothpaste from a tube, till somehow, amazingly, he found himself at the exit, night air blowing at his face.

The train reached Andheri. The coach cheered. Everyone exhorted Senior Citizen to be without fear and jump.

While I weighed the pros and cons, someone gave me one last push and, exactly like yesterday's breakfast, I was deposited on the platform, hot and steaming.

But alive.

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Send your feedback to mailbag@mid-day.com

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Farmers plead for justice as govts betray them

MANY an important issue missed the much-needed attention of Parliamentarians due to the chaos that reigned in the just concluded winter session. One among the pressing concerns of the nation that went unnoticed quite sadly was a parliamentary committee report submitted on December 17 on the mini-mum support price (MSP) for farm produce. The committee also made a slew of measures to improve the farmers' welfare.

Such a report, coming as it did amidst the raging protests of farmers on the issue, should have been deliberated by all the parties, which could have paved a way for providing the much-needed succour to the country's Indian farming community. The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Food Processing, chaired by former Punjab Chief Minister Charanjit Singh Channi, strongly pointed for raising budgetary allocations, paying suitable compensation for staple disposal and rolling out a debt waiver among a slew of measures.

The report comes against the backdrop of protests by farmers' organisations since February at Punjab and Haryana border, spearheaded by Samyukt Kisan Morcha (non-political) and Kisan Mazdoor Morcha (KMM), for a legal guarantee of MSP on all crops. Vexed by vagaries of nature, insufficient credit, market volatilities and fleeing by various layers of middle men and officialdom, a large number of farm-ers have been demanding a legal guarantee for MSP to their produce. The committee

which went over the plight of farmers rightly recommended that a legally binding MSP would assure financial stability for farmers, reduce the severity of farm distress driving suicides by farmers across the country. It also suggested certain measures that help mitigate market volatility and alleviate the sufferings of debt-ridden farmers.

One shall also take into account mental ill-health of farmers' whose bodies are withering away in hot sun or cold winter. The Narendra Modi government should take note that the share of agriculture in India's GDP declined to 15% in FY2022-23. What does it mean? During the financial year, 39 per cent of the rural GDP was from the agriculture sector across India. According to the National Sample Survey Office's (NSSO)

Periodic Labour Force Survey (2018-19), the agricultural sector's contribution to employment declined from 81 per cent in 1983 to 58 per cent in 2018. The rot had set in a long ago. But successive budgets paid no attention to the issue. For instance, the percentage share of agriculture in the total GDP declined from 15.3% in 2020-21 to 2.54% in 2024-25.

Unless agriculture prospers, the distress will persist and worsen, with serious implications for the overall rural prosperity. It has been said by a number of experts and committees that a considerable portion of farmers' income is lost to usurious money lenders, transport, middlemen, wholesalers and retailers. "Implementing a legally binding MSP in India is essential not only for safeguard-

ing farmers' livelihoods, but also for promoting rural economic growth and enhancing national food security," the committee report drives home the message. Legally guaranteeing MSP would also help ensure long-term food security for the nation by stabilising the production of foodgrains. Cannot we ensure a consistent income for farmers? Team wailing up in their eyes, they are throwing away their hard-cultivated produce right in their fields due to market fluctuations. Other measures such as strengthening cooperative farming on the lines of Amul model are also begging attention for years.

As the MPs had no time or concern about their plight, farm leader Jagjit Singh Dhillon, who has been on a fast-unto-death for 26 days and several unions have knocked on the doors of Supreme Court to direct the Centre to implement the parliamentary standing committee's recommendations. Will they get justice?

LETTERS

2024 is a year of bullet & ballot

As the year 2024 ends, it can be described as a year marked by elections in most countries worldwide. Nations such as India, Pakistan, the United States, Germany, Britain, France, and others conducted elections. Politically speaking, people across the globe prioritised national interest, economic stability, and protectionism as the key issues while casting their votes. In addition, 2024 has also earned a reputation as a year marked by the madness of war. This includes the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the Israel-Palestine war, Syria's civil war, political upheaval in Bangladesh, and the imposition of martial law in South Korea. Thus, it can be said that 2024 has been a year defined by both the "bullet" and the "ballot".

Dr Jitesh Mori, Kutch, Gujarat

Law should take its own course

YOUR editorial that "Celebs and politicians fail to act fairly" is an apt editorial. Actor Alia Arjun's arrest was no less dramatic than a blockbuster and has all the twists and turns of a high octane thriller. Many people died in political rallies but till now no political leader was arrested or fixed. In Alia Arjun's case, all government, event managers and actor itself are responsible for the stampede. The death of a woman is unfortunate. Let the law take its own course. Only we can ensure that such incidents never happen again. The government should not allow massive crowds for premier of any new film.

Zakir Hussain, Kazipet

WHILE Arjun expressed emotional attachment to Sandhya Theater, his arrival in an open-top SUV amidst fans caused chaos. An apology from the actor could have resolved the issue swiftly, avoiding unnecessary debate in the assembly and ensuring smoother crowd management. I wonder in place of Alia Arjun, if a bunch of Alia fans created such a scene, would they have not been taken into custody? Even then will BJP and other parties have attacked the government? Of course, the state government could have acted without much noise to prove that they don't discriminate.

N Nagarajan, Hyderabad

CREATING anything out of nothing is the sole technique of politicians and masters. The editorial "Pushpa-2: How Celebs & politicians fail to act fairly" (December 23) is exactly true to its real sense. Death of Revathi and serious injuries caused to her son Srijet in the stampede are really unfortunate. More ghastly accidents resulting in heavy casualties on account of failure of law and order were never viewed so seriously unlike in the case of Pushpa tragedy in which its hero Alia Arjun is made a scapegoat for no fault. Police are very enthusiastic to establish the case with more vigour by exhibiting reels repeatedly in media.

N Ramakrishna, Secunderabad

ABSOLUTELY, both celebrities and politicians refuse to see the reality. They think that it is their birth right to command respect and do what they want, disregarding etiquette and behaviour in the public domain. I think the successive governments both at the Centre and in the States are largely responsible for this, in addition to the people who "worship" them as next only to God, if not God himself. Alia Arjun should have checked with the police before venturing out on that fateful day. Ever since that stampede occurred, Arjun has been on the wrong foot and hence invited the wrath of the administration! He should have made amends by visiting the house of the bereaved family instead of backing out just because the husband of the deceased woman had preferred a complaint. He also did not visit the hospital where the boy is under treatment. Managing the system is not anybody's play, only the seasoned people like CBN could achieve that level.

Govardhana Myneedu, Vijayawada

After Pushpa-2 tragedy and Ambedkar's name repetition by Amit Shah, political parties are separated into two groups. While CM of Telangana Revanth Reddy took up the tragic incident seriously casting aspersions on Alia Arjun and film personalities for not personally consoling the victim's family so far. Tol-lywood, though not touching the name of CM, stood in solidarity with the hero of the movie. The court has to decide who are all responsible for the tragedy. Arjun committed to render all financial assistance to the injured Srijet but so far not paid his promised amount of Rs 25 lakh which is most minimum. He can pay one crore, a burdensome sum to a hero who charges Rs 100 crore per film.

N S K Prasad, Hyderabad

thehansreader@gmail.com

BENGALURU ONLINE

Bengaluru adds 60,000 new vehicles to its roads every month

BENGALURU: Bengaluru is witnessing a significant rise in vehicle numbers, with 60,000 new vehicles added to the roads every month. This rapid growth in vehicular population contributes to severe traffic congestion, air pollution, and strain on infrastructure. The city's road network, public transport, and traffic management systems are under increasing pressure as a result of this trend. While the growing economy and urbanization are driving demand for personal vehicles, it also emphasises the need for enhanced urban planning, better public transportation options, and environment-friendly policies to tackle the challenges of such rapid motorization. Traffic jams are a big problem in Bengaluru. On the other hand, parking their vehicles is a big headache for vehicle owners. In such a situation, the number of vehicle registrations in the city is increasing day by day. According to the information given by the Transport Minister, about 60,000 new vehicles are being registered in the city every month. Transport Minister Ramalinga Reddy has replied to a question asked by Legislative Council member KS Naveen. In Bengaluru, a tax of Rs 8,72.56 crore has been collected in 2023-24 due to the registration of new vehicles. However, a case of tax fraud has also been reported at the Bengaluru Regional Transport Office during the new registration of commercial vehicles, and about Rs 15 crore has been found to be illegal.

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

Israel orders 'impossible' evacuation

OLIVIA ROSANE

THE Israel Defense Forces have ordered one of the last partly operating hospitals in northern Gaza to shutter and evacuate, even as hospital staff, even as there are not enough ambulances to do so safely and persistent firing on the facility makes people afraid to leave.

Israel launched bomb, artillery, and sniper attacks on the Kamal Adwan Hospital in Beit Lahia beginning Saturday, as the Wala news agency reported. The attacks killed three people in the area and wounded several, according to Wala. On Sunday, an Israeli drone strike on the hospital's fuel tanks and power generator shut off its electricity, the Anadolu Agency reported.

"We currently have nearly 400 civilians inside the hospital, including babies in the neonatal unit, whose lives depend on oxygen and incubators," hospital director Dr Husam Abu Safiya said in a statement on Sunday. "We cannot evacuate these patients safely without assistance, equipment, and time." "Every bomb that slams into Kamal Adwan Hospital, every nurse forced to watch a child slip away, every life lost from denied treatment indicts us all," Abu Safiya described the onset of what he called an "unprecedented" attack in a message Saturday evening local time.

The Israeli military has targeted the Kamal Adwan Hospital with different types of weapons without prior warning. "We are being indirectly attacked, the ICU unit, along with the maternity and nursing departments, are coming under fire. The bombing is being conducted with tank fire and

Even as its forces are attacking one of North Gaza's last hospitals



If Kamal Adwan Hospital is decommissioned, there will be no way of preserving conditions of life to the remaining 75,000+ civilians in north Gaza. We call on the world to witness these crimes of extermination and act now, says hospital director Dr Husam Abu Safiya. The Israeli military has ordered evacuations from the hospital, but they have also created an intimidating environment that makes people feel it's unsafe to leave

quadrants, directly targeting us while we are present inside the hospital departments. We don't know why we are being targeted at this hour. What we are seeing now is a deliberate attack on the health facility," Al Jazeera's Hani Mahmoud reported from Deir el-Balah. "The Israeli military has ordered evacuations from the hospital, but they have also created an intimidating environment that makes people feel unsafe to leave. Mahmoud said he lost contact with the hospital Saturday night.

Responding to reports from the hospital on Saturday, World Health Organization (WHO) director Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus called for a cease-fire around the hospital and for the protection of patients and staff. "Tonight's reports of bombardment near Kamal Adwan Hospital and order to evacuate the hospital are deeply worrisome," Ghebreyesus wrote on social media. "The hospital has been in the midst of fighting for too long, and the lives of patients are at risk."

Also on Saturday, the Palestine Mental Health Networks and Doctors Against Genocide issued a statement in support of Abu Safiya and Kamal Adwan, demanding that the international community act to open a humanitarian corridor in Gaza, protect health-care facilities and staff, and end the blockade on the besieged enclave.

Arguing that the "relentless assaults on Kamal Adwan Hospital—a sanctuary meant to save lives in northern Gaza—are part of

a deliberate genocidal campaign," they wrote: "Humanity cannot pretend not to see. Neutrality in the face of genocide is complicity. Every bomb that slams into Kamal Adwan Hospital, every nurse forced to watch a child slip away, every life lost from denied treatment indicts us all. The world is watching. Will it once again stand idly by as another hospital crumbles, another child's breath is silenced, another fragile hope is extinguished? Or will it finally rise to restore the sanctity of life and the universal right to health?"

In a video message shared by Drop Site News early Sunday morning Gaza time,

Abu Safiya said that he had been ordered to evacuate patients to the Indonesian Hospital, but that this would be "impossible" since the hospital needs ambulances to transport the wounded and would need to move supplies as well. He said a successful evacuation would take days.

In a second message on Sunday, he linked the IDF's attacks on Kamal Adwan to hospital attacks on hospitals throughout Gaza. In October, a report from the United Nations' Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory concluded that "Israel has per-

petrated a concerted policy to destroy Gaza's health-care system," carrying out nearly 500 attacks on health-care facilities between October 7, 2023 and July 30, 2024.

Abu Safiya said that the IDF did not provide hospitals with the support they needed when it ordered evacuations, such as equipment and safe passage. "We call on the world to witness this pattern once again. We have repeatedly requested assistance and have openly invited the occupation to see for themselves the internal workings of our hospitals so that we may continue to serve our population without fear of attack and death. These calls were rejected. We also call on the world to witness, that if Kamal Adwan Hospital is decommissioned, there will be no way of preserving conditions of life to the remaining 75,000+ civilians in north Gaza. We call on the world to witness these crimes of extermination and act now."

Safiya also said the IDF was targeting the hospital's fuel tanks, which would explode if hit, causing "mass casualties." Gaza's Government Media Office urged the WHO to visit the hospital on Sunday, saying the attack was part of a concerted attempt to destroy Gaza's health-care system. "These attacks are ongoing and have not stopped for nearly 80 days since the ground aggression on the northern Gaza Strip Governorate began, which has claimed the lives of thousands of martyrs, left many missing, wounded, or de-tained," the statement said. In response to the reports from the hos-

pital, the IDF told The Washington Post that it had not targeted Kamal Adwan on Saturday to its knowledge. It also said separately that it was operating in Beit Lahia. Israel has intensified military operations in northern Gaza over the past three months, according to Reuters. The IDF further told Reuters on Friday that it had helped to evacuate more than 100 patients from Kamal Adwan and provided fuel and food to the hospital. It did not respond to a request for comment about Saturday's attacks.

Also on Sunday, the Gaza Health Ministry reported that Israeli attacks had killed 32 people and wounded 54 in the last 24 hours. At least eight people, including children, were killed in a strike on a school-turned-shelter in Gaza City. "We came out to see the scale of destruction, with dead bodies, blood, and body parts all over the place. Israeli warplanes fired three missiles on this school. The explosion was huge and frightening to us and to our children," witness Um Aref Ahel, who has been displaced by the war, told Al Jazeera. "We appeal to the whole world to bring this war to an end." The official Gaza Health Ministry death toll from Israeli war on Gaza, which began October 7, 2023 in response to a deadly Hamas attack on Southern Israel, stands at over 45,000, though many remain unaccounted for beneath the rubble. This month, both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch issued reports labelling Israel's assault a genocide.

(www.commondreams.org)

'WASTE TO WORTH'

BE EXCRETA WISE

The country needs to turn wastewater into water and not pollution

EVERY society must understand how the excreta it produces is managed. It teaches us many things about water, about waste, about technologies. It also teaches us about economics and politics: who in our societies is subsidised to defecate.

Every society must connect the dots between the excreta it produces, the pollution it causes and the opportunity to reuse and recycle the waste so that it becomes a resource. This is what the Centre for Science and Environment's (CSE) report, "Waste to Worth", is all about—it puts together the best practices to turn wastewater into water and not pollution. Today, the discharge of effluent is adding to the water crisis by degrading available water through pollution. It is also adding to our health crises as so-called "waste" water is being consumed. In most cities, this connection from the flush to the STP does not exist. According to Census 2011, the flush water of some 30 per cent of urban India is connected to a piped sewer. But our survey found

leagues have studied the excreta sums of different cities. The city "shit-flow" diagram shows that the situation is grim as all cities either do not treat or safely dispose of the bulk of the human excreta. This is because we often confuse toilets with sanitation. But the fact is that toilets are mere receptacles to receive waste; when we flush or pour water, the waste flows into a piped drain, which is not connected to a sewerage treatment plant (STP). This STP could be working, or not. In this case, the faecal sludge—human excreta—could be conveyed, but not safely disposed of as it would be discharged into the nearest river, lake or a drain. All this will pollute. In most cities, this connection from the flush to the STP does not exist.

According to Census 2011, the flush water of some 30 per cent of urban India is connected to a piped sewer. But our survey found



in water. Instead, we can return the human excreta to land, use it as fertiliser and reverse the sanitation cycle. The treated water can be given to industry or cities for reuse. Farmers can use the treated sludge for soil enrichment. But this also means that we need new standards to be set for reuse of treated wastewater, so that basic nutrients needed for land are not lost in the treatment

that in most cases, these underground drains have either lost their connections—they need repair—or are not connected to the sewage plants.

There is another route for excreta to flow. The household flush or pour latrine could be connected to a septic tank, which, if constructed well, will retain the sludge and discharge the liquid through a soak pit. The faecal sludge would still need to be emptied and conveyed for treatment. But in most cases, our survey found that the septic tank

The fact is, this treated water and sludge is rich in nutrients. Today, the global nitrogen cycle is being destroyed because we take nutrient-rich human excreta and dispose of it. Instead, we can return the human excreta to land, use it as fertiliser and reverse the sanitation cycle. The treated water can be given to industry or cities for reuse. Farmers can use the treated sludge for soil enrichment. But this also means that we need new standards to be set for reuse of treated wastewater, so that basic nutrients needed for land are not lost in the treatment

is not built to any specifications—it is a "box" to contain excreta—and that it is either connected to a drain or emptied out. This is where the drama of faecal sludge begins. Who collects it? How is it transported? And most importantly, where does it go? Nobody knows.

That is why the focus is now shifting towards intercepting the sewage—not through capital-intensive underground pipes but through tankers to transport for this treatment. Septic tanks are decentralised

waste collection systems. Instead of thinking of building an underground sewerage network, which is never built or never completed—it would be best to think of these systems as the future of urban sanitation. After all, we have gone to mobile telephony, without the landline. Individual septic tanks could be the way to achieve full sanitation solutions.

For this, the government has made changes in policy and now practice—it has recognised that these systems exist and that they need to be incorporated in sanitation plans. It is providing regulation for the collection and transportation of faecal sludge so that waste is taken for treatment, and not dumped somewhere. And most critically, city governments are working on a treatment system for faecal sludge, which in turn will reduce the pollution in rivers and lakes. But now the challenge is to reuse this treated water. This is where the real op-

portunity lies. The fact is, this treated water and sludge is rich in nutrients. Today, the global nitrogen cycle is being destroyed because we take nutrient-rich human excreta and dispose of it in water. Instead, we can return the human excreta to land, use it as fertiliser and reverse the sanitation cycle. The treated water can be given to industry or cities for reuse. Farmers can use the treated sludge for soil enrichment. But this also means that we need new standards to be set for reuse of treated wastewater, so that basic nutrients needed for land are not lost in the treatment. This approach makes the users of this treated water the agents to ensure compliance with standards. Just imagine if you were to be a consumer of this treated water for your horticulture needs—you will be vigilant of its quality and the fact that it does not contaminate your land. So, we can be water-secure, because we are water-wise.

(Writer is Director General of CSE and editor of Down To Earth, an environmentalist who pushes for changes in policies, practices and mindsets. Courtesy: <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/>)

Some positives, some concerns

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman says the slowing of Q2 growth is a "temporary blip". But RBI has downgraded its GDP growth forecast for 2024-25 to 6.6% from 7.2% earlier. There are some upsides to the big picture — including a possible MSME recovery going forward — but private investment and credit growth are still struggling. Whether 6%-plus growth would be enough to generate 8 million jobs that India needs annually until 2030 is the big question



A PRONOUNCED DIP in economic output in the first three quarters of 2024 notwithstanding, India's long-term growth story is believed to be intact. A growth rate of 6.5% is projected over the next half decade, which would help the country remain the fastest-growing big economy in the world.

However, China, Japan, and South Korea grew at well over 8% on a sustained basis during their rapid-growth phases. Whether 6%-plus growth would be enough for a country that needs to generate upwards of 8 million jobs every year until 2030 is the big question — and whether this growth rate would be enough to bridge expanding wealth disparities and offer scope for generational mobility.

There is a view that the decline in growth rate simply brings it back to trend after data aberrations triggered by the pandemic and the subsequent buoyancy on an abnormally low statistical base. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has said the lower-than-expected GDP growth of 5.4% in the second quarter of FY25 was only a "temporary blip".

Economist Neelkanth Mishra and his team at Axis Bank have described the loss in momentum for the Indian economy in the first half of the current fiscal as "cyclical", due to "unintended fiscal and monetary tightening". In October, Japanese brokerage Nomura had said the Indian economy was in a phase of "cyclical growth slowdown", and described the Reserve Bank of India's estimate of 7.2% GDP expansion as "overly optimistic". Weeks later, RBI was forced to pare its forecast by more than half a percentage point.

THE POSITIVES

There are some clear upsides to the current picture of the economy.

Government spending

Fiscal spending is already seen as rising after the dust of the elections has settled. The recent cut in the cash reserve ratio (CRR) has freed up money lent by banks with the RBI. The capex cycle seems to have restarted in some sectors, boosting capital formation, says Mishra, adding that this growth will be investment-led. Also, monetary easing is expected to support growth in the coming financial year. But the government will likely have to continue to do the heavy lifting.

Economists also say the GDP shock of Q2 FY25 — another set of dismal numbers in Q3 — merely signals a progressive normalisation of the growth trajectory after the waning of the base effect of the pandemic, when the economy shrank abnormally. That could partly explain the steady slide in growth from 8.6% to 7.8% to 6.7% to 5.4% in 2024.

"It is not that we think that the second quarter slowdown is purely a data artefact and as more data comes in, it will automatically be upgraded. The numbers will be revised higher or it could be a simple, seasonal factor... Or it could be something more fundamental as the ability of the state to spend what is budgeted...

JAY MAZOOMDAR
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 23

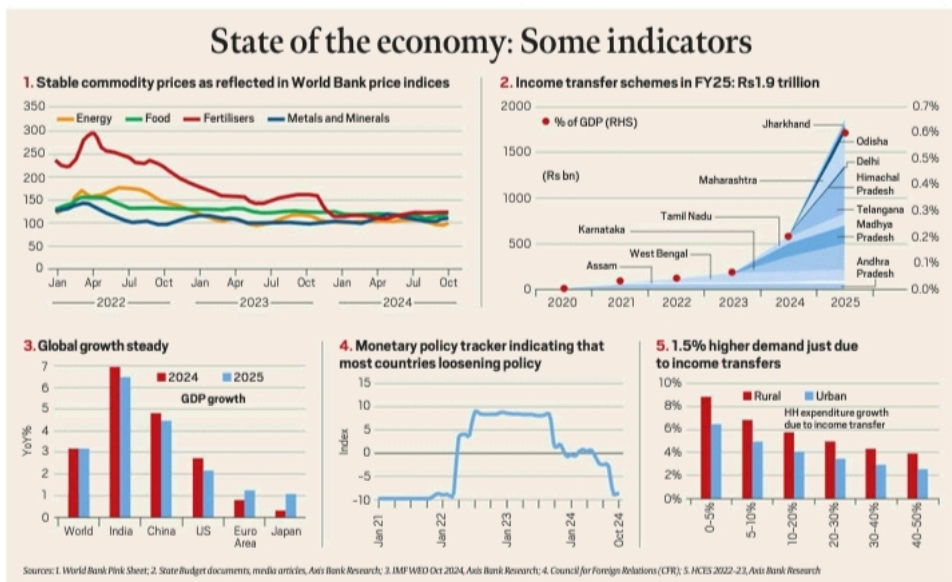
THE 18TH biennial State of Forest Report (SFR-2023) by the Forest Survey of India (FSI) found a marginal gain of 156 sq km in forest cover, and a sizeable increase of 1,289 sq km in tree cover since 2021.

For the first time, India's green cover has exceeded the 25% threshold with 8,27,357 sq km (25.17%) of the country's cover under forest (21.76%) and tree (3.41%) cover. But this is not all good news.

Trees and forests

Tree patches smaller than 1 hectare do not count as forests, and have been measured separately by FSI as tree cover since 2001. The latest biennial cycle registered the sharpest growth in tree cover — a 0.5 percentage point jump in two years. Previously, tree cover had fallen from 3.04% in 2003 to 2.76% in 2011 before rising to 2.91% in 2021.

In comparison, India's forest cover has increased by only 0.05 percentage points since 2021. This is consistent with the trend of diminishing growth since India's forest cover crossed the 20% threshold at the turn of the millennium. Between 2003 and 2013, forest



Sources: 1. World Bank Price Sheet; 2. State Budget documents, media articles, Axis Bank Research; 3. IMF WEO Oct 2024, Axis Bank Research; 4. Council for Foreign Relations (CFR); 5. HCES 2022-23, Axis Bank Research

We will be on track to achieve... between 6.5-7% per cent for the whole financial year. But... the focus is on how to make sure that we grow at a sustainable rate in a world that is going to be extraordinarily difficult," Chief Economic Adviser V Anantha Nageswaran said at a CII event on December 12.

After a couple of quarters of likely sub-optimal economic output, GDP growth is projected to settle around 6.5%, which could mark the real rate of growth going back to trend. The question that RBI's overestimation — and subsequent correction — poses is this: did the central bank keep interest rates high for longer than needed because it had projected an excessively rosy picture of GDP growth? However, inflation remains at the upper end of the permissible band, and food prices are at near double digits in terms of inflation — that somewhat strengthens the argument for sticking with high rates, and compounds RBI's problems going forward.

Lower investment growth was largely due to public investments coming down; this could change in the second half of the fiscal and later. One indication is the surge in order backlog for capital goods companies that suggests investment activity is likely to grow going forward. For instance, a pivot from renewables back to thermal power, which accounted for the bulk of the capex between 2010 and 2015, could give impetus to industrial activity, given that virtually no thermal capacity has been added over the past 6-7 years.

According to Mishra, a relatively empty election calendar in the states in 2025, provides a window for reforms. But the appetite — even for restarting pending reforms such as the Labour Codes — appears diminished.

Possible MSME recovery

In two other dismal trends, analysts see a possible silver lining.

Corporate growth is slowing, partly due to sliding consumption growth, but there could be an upside. Former Chief Statistician Prabab

The last mile of disinflation is turning out to be prolonged, with increasing dissonance in the growth and inflation trajectories. A good rabi season is key to softening of food inflation pressures.

Sen said Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), which have been hit repeatedly by shocks such as demonetisation, implementation of GST, and the Covid-19 lockdown, are perhaps getting back in business, and competing with the corporate sector.

While more data are needed on this, two other signals suggest this possibility: one, there is consumption recovery in rural areas even as urban growth is flagging; two, Periodic Labour Force Survey numbers show an improvement in salaried employment, which could be partly due to increasing non-casual jobs with MSMEs. An MSME rebound could mean the two branches of the K-shaped recovery could narrow.

The labour data show another positive: female participation in the labour force is increasing, particularly in rural areas. Around 39.6% of women with education level of post-graduate and above were reported as working in FY24, compared to 34.5% in FY18. For women with higher secondary education level, these numbers were 23.9% and 11.4%.

Growth in services

India's services surplus as a share of GDP

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Prayagraj	30 January	6 February	13 February	20 February	27 February

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hit a new high in October 2024 — a key positive. On the structural drivers of India's share gains in global services exports, Mishra and his team say the disaggregation of global services value-chains, rapid increase in global cross-border telecom bandwidth, and the surge in remote-working are adding to the demographic trends supporting the growth in India's services exports to developed markets.

In November, India's services trade exports surpassed goods exports as IT exports continued to register strong growth amid weak goods demand in the West, and higher shipping costs due to disruption in the Red Sea, according to official data released by the Commerce Ministry. Going forward, however, India's IT exports, on a compositional basis, appear vulnerable to new technologies such as AI.

THE NEGATIVES

Sluggish investments

Performance is tapering off for many corporates, and investments are struggling. Executives at Tata Consumer Products Ltd have flagged concerns over "softness" in urban demand; those at Nestle India have said big cities are pressure points and blamed the "muted demand" partly on high food inflation. Car makers are pointing to worries on demand, blaming it on heavy rain and the election-induced slowdown. All of this could have repercussions for growth and job creation.

But why are private investments struggling, despite pre-Covid corporate tax cuts and exhortations by the government to invest? To unleash the so-called animal spirits, companies must feel optimistic about the future, and not have to look behind their backs. The single biggest hurdle to fostering a conducive investment environment is India's tax laws and its administration, Arvind P Datar, Senior Advocate, said at the National Convention of All India Federation of Tax Practitioners on December 16.

While these transfers have helped lower-income families by giving them more money to spend, especially on food such as pulses, onions, and tomatoes, the supply of these items has not increased enough, which has caused food prices to rise, the report said.

Axis Bank's India Outlook report said that by 2025, 14 states would have some version of "handout" schemes aimed at about 134 million women, which is almost 20% of all women in India. These programmes cost the government almost Rs 19 lakh crore every year, or about 0.6% of the country's GDP.

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EXPLAINED ENVIRONMENT

Why the growth of India's overall green cover is not all good news

cover increased by 0.61 percentage points to 21.23% from 20.62%. In the next 10 years, it grew by only 0.53 percentage points to 21.76%.

Forests within forest

Irrespective of land use or ownership, tree patches 1 hectare or larger with a minimum canopy cover of 10% are counted as forests in India. Areas with a canopy density of 40% or more are considered dense forests (410,175 sq km at present), and those with canopy density of 10-40% are open forests (OF). Since 2003, areas with at least 70% canopy density have been classified as very dense forests (VDF).

Depending on factors such as climate and biotic pressure, a forest can improve or degrade to the next density category — a VDF patch may thin to become a moderately dense forest (MDF) or an OF may get upgraded as an MDF — during a two-year ISFR cycle. When a previously forested area is recorded as non-forest (NF) or shrub (below 10% canopy), it implies complete loss of that forest.

Plain aggregated data on the quantum of different forest types do not represent this dynamic process where natural forests transform, disappear, and are replaced by plantations that typically grow much faster. Since 2003, ISFRs have made available data on this "change matrix" which, stitched together, in-

CHANGE IN DENSE FOREST COVER 2003-2023									
LOST	2021-23	2003-13	2013-23	2003-23	GAINED	2021-23	2003-13	2013-23	2003-23
VDF to NF	295	288	1,277	1,565	NF to VDF	56	43	483	526
MDF to NF	3,362	6,714	15,086	21,800	NF to MDF	839	3,631	7,554	11,185
VDF to scrub	24	5	65	70	Scrub to VDF	1	0	54	54
MDF to scrub	313	144	1,153	1,297	Scrub to MDF	102	105	1,043	1,148
Disappeared	3,994	7,151	17,581	24,732	OF to VDF	496	124	2,567	2,691
VDF to OF	228	134	1,128	1,262	Plantations	1,494	3,903	11,701	15,604
MDF to OF	5,166	6,414	22,249	28,663	OF to MDF	8,610	6,122	34,301	40,423
TOTAL LOSS	9,388	13,699	40,958	54,657	TOTAL GAIN	10,104	10,025	46,002	56,027
NET CHANGE 2021-23: 716 2003-13: -3,674 2013-23: 5,044 2003-23: 1,370									
Source: ISFR (2023)									

VDF: Very Dense Forest (canopy over 70%); MDF: Moderate Dense Forest (canopy 40-70%); OF: Open Forest (canopy 10-40%); Scrub (canopy under 10%); NF: Non-Forest (no canopy)

diates the broad trends over two decades.

Forest balance sheet

ISFR-2023 shows that 3,913 sq km of dense forests — an area larger than Goa — disappeared in India between 2021 and 2023. (See chart). This is consistent with the trend over the past two decades: 17,500 sq km of dense forests were lost in 2013-2023, while 7,151 sq km disappeared in 2003-2013.

Overall, India has witnessed the complete destruction of 24,651 sq km — more than 6.3% or nearly half the size of Punjab — of its dense forests since 2003.

The bulk of this loss has been offset by the rapid transformation of 15,530 sq km of non-forested or scantily forested land to dense or even very dense forests in successive two-year windows during 2003-2023. These are plantations, say experts, because natural

forests do not grow this fast.

ISFR-2023 accounts for 1,420 sq km of plantations becoming dense forests since 2021, reflecting a prevailing trend: areas under plantations-as-dense-forests are expanding as the disappearance of dense forests becomes routine. (See chart).

Plantations are helping keep the extent of India's dense forest cover stable: the "change matrix" shows an increase of 1,370 sq km over

Companies are also scaling down salary outlays. Real salary and wage expenditure growth of listed non-financial corporates — a proxy for real urban wages — has moderated to 0.8% in Q2 FY25 from 1.2% in Q1 FY25, and is down from 2.5% in FY24 and 10.8% in FY23, Nomura said.

Savings-investment gap

The decline in the household financial savings rate could present another challenge. The RBI's latest Financial Stability Report shows net financial savings of households fell to 5.3% of GDP in FY23 from 7.3% in FY22, sharply below the 8% average of the previous decade. Household net savings are the total money and investments of families, including deposits, stocks and bonds, minus any money they owe, such as loans and other debt.

Over the same period, household debt has jumped sharply. Annual borrowings are at 5.8% of GDP; the second-highest level since the 1970s. A large part of savings is also entering financial markets bypassing the banking industry, which is another worry.

Sliding credit growth

Growth in credit has been falling — households, which mostly borrow to finance home purchases, have not been doing so since 2021. For a while, industry had offset this, but this has tapered off since the beginning of 2023. Excess capacity and lack of appetite for new projects is seen as limiting industry's capacity to absorb new credit.

In such a scenario, bond-financed government spending is the only meaningful way to generate new credit in the economy, according to Mishra, but much of this new debt issued is being used to clean up old "hidden debt" at the local level.

Unless there is a fundamental shift in the use of fiscal force to stimulate the economy, high growth is unlikely. Bank lending to MSMEs could be something to watch for, especially if personal credit slows and corporates are unwilling to borrow.

While bad loans have been coming down, there are new concerns over a significant rise in NPA in the personal loan and credit card segments. Both these types of credit are unsecured and carry high interest rates. In November 2024, the RBI had increased its weight on the exposure of banks towards consumer credit, credit card receivables, and non-banking financial companies.

Fiscal prudence

At the Centre, fiscal consolidation has been a consistent theme. A projected decline in fiscal deficit from 6.4% to 5.9% of GDP in FY24 will stabilise public debt at around 83% of GDP — a promising indicator of sustainability, given India's growth outlook, according to the IMF. But competitive loosening of purse strings by states poses a fiscal problem. The RBI has flagged concerns over a sharp increase in expenditure by states on various subsidies, including farm loan waivers and cash transfers.

Axis Bank's India Outlook report said that by 2025, 14 states would have some version of "handout" schemes aimed at about 134 million women, which is almost 20% of all women in India. These programmes cost the government almost Rs 19 lakh crore every year, or about 0.6% of the country's GDP.

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Anil Sasi is Business Editor, The Indian Express

NEXT: CLIMATE



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BRIDGING A GULF

PM's visit to Kuwait is part of India's diplomatic success story in West Asia. Delhi must now ensure it delivers on the promise

IT TAKES FOUR hours to reach Kuwait from India but it took four decades for the Prime Minister [of India] PM Narendra Modi's comment during his visit to Kuwait — the last Indian PM to visit the country was Indira Gandhi — underscores the diplomatic and strategic neglect of a region that should have been of vital importance to New Delhi. For decades after Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990, the latter was justifiably upset at India's ambivalence on the violation of its sovereignty. There may have been good reasons for Delhi's position: The geopolitics of the time, India's relative closeness to the erstwhile Soviet Union, and its sympathy for Ba'athist governments like Hussein's. The problem was that in subsequent years, few attempts were made to bridge the divide even though Kuwait re-opened its doors to Indian workers, across sectors and skill levels. India's engagement with West Asia and the Persian Gulf, particularly the moderate Arab states, has recovered and deepened considerably over the last decade. The challenge for Delhi now is to ensure that the warmth is translated into concrete national gains.

PM Modi held several meetings, including with Kuwait's Amir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and Crown Prince Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah and Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Abdullah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah. Both countries agreed to elevate the relationship to a strategic partnership. They signed agreements that institutionalised defence cooperation, as well as on other areas such as renewables. For India, Kuwait is also a key source of investment — singly as well as the current president of the GCC Cooperation Council (GCC). Approximately 89 per cent of the total FDI from the GCC has been received in the last decade and bilateral trade between India and Kuwait in the last fiscal year was over \$10 billion. Indians also form the largest expatriate group in the country.

One of India's great diplomatic successes of the last decade or so has been with moderate Arab states. PM Modi has visited the region several times and India had a role and has a stake in the success of the Abraham Accords. The current violence in Israel-Palestine and the instability post the fall of the Assad regime in Syria augur a strategic reorganisation in the Gulf. In this context, shorting up ties with GCC countries like Kuwait is essential. India must now operationalise the security agreements — they have moved far too slowly in the past. It is also important to create a business-friendly environment that invites and secures investments from various players in the region, not least the Sovereign Funds of the GCC countries. For long, Delhi viewed the Gulf through the prism of its ties with Pakistan. That is no longer a salient factor, with most regional players keen on deeper bilateral ties. It is also important for India to recognise how Kuwait has facilitated interactions with the diaspora and respected New Delhi's sensitivities on cultural and religious matters. Indians, in government and outside it, should endeavour to do the same.

AN UNCERTAIN TAX

GST council leaves several issues unaddressed. These need to be resolved quickly

INITIATES 55TH meeting, the GST council deferred taking a decision on several pressing issues. These included the demand for lowering the tax on health and life insurance and on the food delivery charges of platform aggregators. Alongside, the Group of Ministers (GoM) looking into the contentious issue of rate rationalisation sought more time, while another looking into the matter of the compensation cess was also given an extension. While there were other recommendations by the council on penal charges levied by financial institutions, fortified rice kernels and the sale of used cars, some of the clarifications that it did provide only served to highlight the oddities of the multiple rate structure under the Goods and Services Tax.

The council clarified that popcorn with salt and spices would be taxed at 5 per cent GST. If it is pre-packaged and labelled the tax would be levied at 12 per cent. And if it is mixed with sugar then at 18 per cent. This oddity, however, is not a one-off. Under this indirect tax framework, there are numerous examples of classification and categorisation of goods and services where different tax rates are imposed. For instance, a few months ago, D Srinivasan, Managing Director of Coimbatore's Annapurna Hotels, had raised the issue of the difference rates at which buns and cream buns were taxed. In the past, a distinction has also been drawn between packed/frozen parathas and rotis. India stands out as one of the few countries with such a complex indirect tax structure. Of 115 countries, only five — Ghana, India, Italy, Luxembourg and Pakistan — have four or more GST slabs as per the World Bank's India Development Update 2018. Twenty-eight had two rates, while 49 levied a single rate. A multiple-level rate structure only raises the compliance burden, increases the space for bureaucratic discretion, and goes against the desire to improve the ease of doing business in the country.

The need for undertaking rate rationalisation — to possibly include examining not only the classification of items but also reduce the number of tax slabs and the issue of revenue neutrality — was discussed in the GST council in its 45th meeting in September 2021. The GoM on GST was constituted in its 54th meeting in September — the levy of the cess has been extended till March 2026 to pay off the loans taken during the pandemic. These issues should be resolved quickly. The council, which has already taken several steps to plug the gaps in the system, must soon arrive at a consensus on these issues.

THE COLOUR YELLOW

Kolkata's iconic yellow taxi is set to fade into nostalgia in 2025. With it will disappear a sliver of the city's storied past

MOST PEOPLE, NAVYASERS included, would agree that if there is one thing that Kolkata thrives on it is its umbilical link to nostalgia. Ramshackle lanes with cheek-by-jowl houses speak of former glory in the city's older, northern part. In the south, tram tracks remind one of a 151-year-old relic that has only recently lumbered into extinction from the city's traffic loop. Now, another distinctive token of the city's chaotic streets is set to fade into the sunset of nostalgia: The yellow Ambassador cabs. The cessation of production as well as the 2009 order of the Supreme Court's green bench disallowing vehicles older than 15 years from plying has meant that by March 2025, around 9,000 Ambassador cabs — 80 per cent of the city's fleet — will go off road. By 2027, almost all of these cabs are expected to be phased out.

The production of the Ambassador began in Hindimor in the city's outskirts in 1958. By 1962, its durability had become a legend, leading to its incorporation in the city's public transport system, leaving behind competitors such as the Fiat Padmini. The death knell was sounded earlier though by the arrival of app-based cabs and then the pandemic. But before that, for most residents, the yellow tax, distinct in its ample girth and bright yellow paint, had been more than just a mode of transport. In a city where time stretches and folds to its own unique rhythm, the Ambassador meant the joy of a family evening out and the irritation of rush-hour commute where the litany of complaints about the traffic or the condition of roads bound the driver and commuter in kinship.

It is, of course, true that not everything old needs a new lease of life. In terms of safety and environmental hazard, the trundling Ambassadors have been out of joint for a while. Why not, then, use a spot of ingenuity for the best of both worlds? Use the colour yellow for a sleeker, safer fleet of cabs?



GIRISH KUBER

"SOMETHING IS ROTTEN in the state of Denmark" laments Marcellus in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Many a Maharashtra will echo the sentiment. The inordinate and inexplicable delay at every step of government formation is not the only sign of administrative and political decay the state has been witnessing over the years. True that it took almost a month for chief minister Devendra Fadnis to allocate portfolios even after the landslide victory in state assembly elections held on November 20. It is also true that the Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena and Aji Pawar's NCP, even though fairly acquainted with the BJP's style of functioning, found it difficult to come to terms with the changed political reality in the BJP has acquired the status of Big Brother and as such laid claim over a bigger pie of the power. This political slug-fest, however, hardly paints a complete picture.

The real issue that Maharashtra has been facing for a while is its crumbling finances and dissipated industrial atmosphere. Chief minister Fadnis wasted no time in admitting the stress on Maharashtra's finances and announced a committee to guide the state on finding "newer ways" to mop up more revenue. He knows the real challenge before Maharashtra is to maintain its lead over other states and to bring the richest state back in the game which, of late, has been in close competition with southern states. It is easier said than done — Fadnis is aware that it is much easier to fix the lacklustre administration than to cement the state's fragmented polity, the BJP's own handiwork. The BJP in Maharashtra unleashed its full force in splitting the state's two dominant political parties, Sharad Pawar-led Nationalist Congress Party and Shiv Sena, headed by Uddhav Thackeray. It is pointless to reiterate how successful it was in this endeavour. However, it was not without its after-effects. By splitting two pan-Maharashtra parties, the BJP created four sub-regional outfits. Earlier,

Maharashtra CM Devendra Fadnis needs to overcome crumbling finances and a fractured polity

No one would dare say this for obvious reasons, but the corruption in the corridors of Mantralaya is the most discussed topic in industrialist cocktail circuits. The reality that investors need to grease many palms at every level from sanctioning projects to getting them to take off has undoubtedly marred the state's investment climate. Pitted against aggressive states such as Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and even smaller ones such as Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra slowly but surely started losing the game. First, it was the perception, which eventually and unfortunately became the reality. There are hardly any big-ticket industrial investments worth showcasing that have come to the state in the last five years.

The state had two regional satraps. Now there are four: Aji Pawar and Eknath Shinde. Add to this melee, Raj Thackeray's Maharashtra Navnirman Sena that BJP groomed as its reserve force only to be used in Marathi-speaking regions to weaken Uddhav Thackeray-led Shiv Sena's dominance. For the uninitiated, it may appear to be a mere game of power politics. However, it is not. Those who understand how political parties function in India and how they generate "resources" will quickly realise the financial implications, though inadvertent, of these power games.

As a direct fallout of this, the cost of industrial investment in Maharashtra rose manifold. The number of sub-regional and sub-sub regional political satraps to be "pacified" before investment fruitless shot up to such an extent that industrial investment became less and less attractive. No one would dare say this for obvious reasons, but corruption in the corridors of Mantralaya is the most discussed topic in industrialist cocktail circuits. The reality that investors need to grease many palms at every level from sanctioning projects to getting them to take off has undoubtedly marred the state's investment climate. Pitted against aggressive states such as Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and even smaller ones such as Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra slowly but surely started losing the game. First, it was the perception, which eventually and unfortunately became the reality. There are hardly any big-ticket industrial investments worth showcasing that have come to the state in the last five years.

Protagonists of the ruling combine may counter this by citing "big" infra projects that are often touted as development. There are two responses to this development narrative. First, by making it clear that it was never all hunky-dory before these political machinations began post-2019 election results. The rot in the investment climate began when the first Shiv Sena-BJP government in 1995 "drowned" the Enron project only to be re-

vived later at a much higher cost. It was under the same regime that Hyundai opted for Tamil Nadu over Maharashtra when the South Korean giant found J Jayalitha, the then chief minister of Tamil Nadu, to be more welcoming than her Maharashtra counterpart, Shiv Sena's Manohar Joshi. The Sena again was at the forefront in delaying, if not denying out, mega investments in the Natar refinery project, a joint venture between India's Fortune 500 Global Oil majors — IOCL, BPCL and HPCL — and Saudi Aramco.

"Contractor-centric" infrastructure projects can hardly be an antidote to missing industrial investments. This is the second point. It is especially true when these infra-projects see cost escalations as high as three-four times the anticipated valuations. Besides, the way some of the projects were conceived and contracts awarded make the talk of "larger public good" sound hollow. It won't take much effort to demolish this infra-talk and will not be unfair to dismiss them as "please contractors" exercise.

This makes the task before Fadnis neatly cut out. His first and foremost challenge will be to bring Maharashtra back in the reckoning. He will have to revive his "Magnetic Maharashtra" initiative which he had conceived in his first term as chief minister to attract investment. It stopped because of Covid and the political mess afterwards. Fadnis, as chief minister, will have to ensure a smooth ride for industrialists and investors even if this means disarming some of his recently acquired colleagues and allies. To his credit, one must admit that after the initial hiccups and teething troubles, Fadnis has started showing flashes of administrative and political acumen by denying "important" portfolios to political allies. By doing this, he has shown the resolve to cleanse the system. One hopes that he succeeds for there is certainly something rotten in the state of Maharashtra.

The writer is editor, LokSatta

THE ARTISTE AND THE MUSIC

Zakir Hussain found ways to draw in the audience, and they, in turn loved him



SUANSHU KHURANA

"KHAMMA GHANI, KAISI hain aap? Is everything well with the family? *Mirchi vada khaap?*" Ustad Zakir Hussain said over the phone on a cold December evening as he navigated the dusty lanes of a village near Kumbalgarh during a holiday. He was visiting India for a series of concerts. His fabulous Indo-jazz outfit, Shakti, with John McLaughlin, his friend of 50 years, was about to complete half a century.

This is how Hussain's friendships were. Long, steady and fun because he always made an effort.

He was calling from his Napean Sea Road home in Mumbai, where his parents had moved in 1970. Whenever Hussain returned to India from San Francisco, he stayed on the first floor of Simla House Cooperative Society — his home of memories and music with the ocean as witness; a home where his mother Bavi Begum would get *kam masale-wali biryani* made for her eldest son whose now American palette couldn't handle spicy food, where his Abbaji, Ustad Allah Rakha, would sometimes stand near the living-room window with him, and do tabla *bol riyaz* (the moment from the iconic Raghu Rai photograph), and where he'd be drenched in sweat due to hours of practice.

I was touched by the fact that he'd made an effort to find out where I was travelling. Thus, the Rajasthan salutation and conversation about the traditional snack. In the self-obsessed world of music, it showed deep respect for another person. This is also probably why Hussain never took his audience for granted. He found ways to draw them in and they, in return, loved him back.

During a performance in Delhi for Kathak exponent Pandit Birju Maharaj's 75th birthday, he said, 'Maharaj ji danced on my fourth birthday... Now that Maharaj ji has turned four, I should also pay him a tribute.' Just when the laughter was settling in, Hussain began playing diverse rhythm structures. This wasn't a complicated world of beats that meant nothing to untrained ears in the audience. Instead, there was the sound of rain and thunder and Krishna being scolded by Radha, even the sound of the train.

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Among so many artists that I meet, most of whom want to tell me how great they are, there are only a handful who find ways to gaze inward, polishing their skill so that it sounds better the next time. In Zakirji's case, the beats were always carried out with precision and passion but they were also kept in check by an assiduous process of self-reflection. That's what I found in him and the humble tabla to the realm of the extraordinary.

We didn't speak after this interview due to a disagreement over publishing a statement he later decided should be off the record. I, of course, kept attending his concerts. No disagreement was going to deter me from listen-

ing to his music. I avoided going backstage though, for a quick greeting, like I used to.

Whenever I did so earlier, he'd remember and laugh heartily about the first time I did almost 15 years ago. Amid a mob at Delhi's Kamani Auditorium, there I was trying to get an exclusive. It was February 14 and I had not wanted to be alone at my tiny apartment. A day of music was what I planned instead. I introduced myself as the crowd milled around and asked him if we could speak for a moment. 'Yes, we can. But first of all darling, Happy Valentine's Day,' said Hussain with a huge smile. I couldn't stop my sheepish grin.

Last month, when I found out that he'd be in India in January, I asked his media company to set up a conversation with him; a part of me wanted to clear the air. His sudden death, at the pinnacle of his career, has been utterly heartbreaking.

No one teaches you how to grieve for an artist. One can desperately try to hold on to the music's brilliance, the rigour or the many memories — the Taj Mahal ad; his vulnerability when he was the pallbearer for Shiv Kumar Sharma's hearse, holding on to the national flag that wrapped him; the fun he had with the brass band that was trying to impress him with a *jugalbandi* during his daughter's engagement; There is so much to be grateful for as Hussain departs. Yet, still, we needed more of him and his music. He would have laughed and said, 'This is music's appeal, not mine,' as he told the BBC in 2016. The pleasure was always ours.

suanshu.khurana@expressindia.com

DECEMBER 24, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

LS POLLS START

THE BASIC SHAPE of the eighth Lok Sabha will be cast when voters in 79 constituencies accounting for more than 70 per cent of the seats exercise their franchise. The political fortunes of 28 central ministers led by PM Rajiv Gandhi, as well as 16 prominent Opposition leaders will be decided in the first round of polling. Sixteen states and six Union territories are involved in the first phase of the election.

UNION CARBIDE LICENSE

RENEWAL OF LICENSE of the Union Carbide pesticide factory at Bhopal for the year 1985 has been refused by the chief inspector of factories in Madhya Pradesh, in view of the

"breach of the provisions governing safeguards" and the "inadequacy of provisions for safety." After receiving the application from Union Carbide India on October 18, it was rejected by the chief on December 14. This comes after the killer gas leakage from the factory that killed over 2,000 persons.

TAMIL BILLS RIFT

DIFFERENCES WITHIN THE Sri Lanka Cabinet over the government draft bills to resolve the ethnic problem have come into the open with Industries Minister Cyril Mathew, a Sinhalese Buddhist, scolding, publicly voicing his opposition to them. The position of Buddhism under the proposed amendments, the power vested in the district councils and the official

language to be used by these councils, were raised. Mathew claimed that these bills were "so vast and independent from any real central control that it very nearly grants the desired Eelam."

SIX KILLED IN DHAKA

SIX PEOPLE were killed in two separate incidents in Dhaka on December 23, when police opened fire on unruly demonstrators taking part in a 48-hour general strike to protest the martial law government, opposition and local administration. Security forces deployed in major cities made more than a thousand arrests as picketing, marches and minor clashes were reported from around the country during the second day of the strike.

THE IDEAS PAGE

A deeper politics for our times

The Rashtra Seva Dal's model of political education of citizens offers an alternative to the RSS, BJP



DESHKAAL
BY YOGENDRA YADAV

IT WAS THEIR singing that first caught my attention. Unusual for political meetings, the singer was tuneful, the song was soulful, though I did not quite get the Marathi lyrics. The singer, Sanjeev Sane, was a fierce trade unionist and an astute political strategist. Then followed a chorus, led by Sanjay MG, an engineering professor who held a "sanskar shiv" for underprivileged youth in Thane. The "MG" in his name stood for "Mangala Gopal" — he had chosen to include his mother's name along with that of his father, Nisha Shivkar did not sing, but the tale of how this unassuming activist had organised "parityakta", women "abandoned" by their husbands, was music to my ears. And then there was the self-effacing determination of Vilas Bhongade, a young Dalit activist who spoke through his actions.

Exactly 30 years ago, at the inaugural convention of Samajwadi Janparishad at Thane, this was my first introduction to the vibrant public life of Maharashtra. There was something very special about these young political activists — a fusion of idealism, ideology, energy and discipline. This was a far cry from the intense, loud and chaotic world of North Indian activism that I had experienced. Though varied in their personality and expressions, these activists seemed to be cut from the same cloth. Which school did they go to? I wondered. That is when someone mentioned "Seva Dal" to which all of them were related, directly or indirectly.

Rashtra Seva Dal (RSD, or just Seva Dal). Founded in 1941 by socialists, who were still within the Congress then, the RSD was a youth volunteer organisation, committed to nationalism, socialism, democracy, secularism and rationalism. Though not formed in response to the RSS, that was politically insignificant then, the contrast was evident. They shared one thing though. Like the RSS, the Seva Dal also focused on organising teenagers and youth through a routine of daily "shiksha" where a bunch of local youngsters came together for games, physical training, cultural activities and ideological discussions. After independence, the RSD moved out of Congress and worked closely with, without becoming a frontal organisation of, the socialist parties. The moving spirit of Seva Dal in its first decade was Pandurang Sadashiv Sane (1899-1949) or simply Sane (pronounced Saa-ne) Guruji, an iconic figure in Maharashtra. The song I first heard in that convention — *khara to ekchi dharna/jagala prem arpaave* — was penned by Sane Guruji. Named, Sanjeev Sane, who sang the song, was indeed after him.

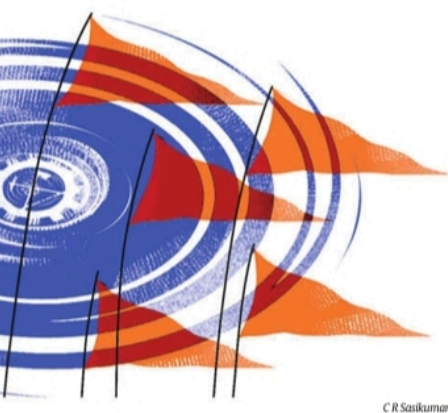
It is hard to beat Sane Guruji in a simple category like a socialist leader. A fearless constructive worker, a matchless organiser, a fearless protester against any form of injustice, Sane Guruji was a Gandhian, a nationalist, a socialist and a saint at the same time. His fiery speeches inspired the youth and his writings — especially *Shyamchi Aai* a book about his mother — have shaped the sensibilities of generations in Maharashtra. His book *Bharatiya Samkriti* offers a deep appreciation of Indian culture as an ever-dissolv-

ing quest for renewal (*navinata ki kishanbhauru vritti*). Rejecting all forms of superstitions and bigotry, he bases his reading on *advaita* philosophy that refuses to distinguish or discriminate on the basis of sect or faith, caste or gender.

Along with 82 other organisations and under the leadership of its current President Nitin Vaidya, the RSD has just concluded "Sane Guruji 125 Abhiyan", a year long celebration of his 125th birth anniversary. Over the years, I have come to see how wide and deep the Seva Dal's footprint has been in the purgani or progressive politics of Maharashtra. It spawned many organisations — Chhatra Bharati, Samajwadi Mahila Sabha, Muslim Satyashodhak Samaj, Samajwadi Adhyapak Sabha, besides *Antarbharati* to foster a bond among Indian languages, and *Seva Pathak* for constructive work. Organisations like SM Joshi Socialist Foundation and Sane Guruji Memorial Trust are working to keep this legacy alive.

Many of the better known leaders in all walks of Maharashtra's public life have been associated with RSD. These include political leaders like S M Joshi, Miral Gore, Madhu Dandavate and Bapu Kaldate, social activists like Sudha Devkar, Pramila Dandavate, Narendra Dabholkar, Hameed Dhandi, Baba Adhar and Medha Patkar, theatre and film personalities like Siram Laga, Nili Phule and Smita Patil and intellectuals like Acharya Jayadekar and Ganesh Devy. Maharashtra's public life would have been much poorer in the absence of the thousands of activists, professionals, writers, teachers, journalists, students home-grown organisations, movements and magazines that were associated with RSD. They have been a bulwark to defend constitutional values and democratic institutions in the face of the relentless onslaught from the RSS-BJP.

The RSD does not have today the kind of strength and position that it enjoyed in the first two decades of its existence. Yet it offers a model for deep politics necessary to reclaim our constitutional republic. One thing is clear: The current dismantling of the republic cannot be halted merely through electoral opposition to the BJP. We need deep politics that involves political education of citizens, cultivation of constitutional values among the younger generations, creative framing of issues and agenda, grooming of political workers and leaders and recreating this imagined community called India.



C R Sasikumar

ers and leaders and recreating this imagined community called India. This is what Rashtra Seva Dal did. This is what we lack so desperately today.

The lessons of Seva Dal model are not difficult to see. First, we need to target not just the youth, but school-going teenagers as well. Second, the focus should be on character building activities through sports and culture rather than on politics in the narrow sense. Third, any attempt to cultivate constitutional values and the ideals of a socialist and secular republic must be anchored into a positive nationalism, a robust regional culture and our civilisational ethos. Fourth, sangharsh or struggle against injustice must be combined with nirman, constructive action. And fifth, while intervening in the arena of electoral politics and state power, this deep politics would do well to keep an arm's length distance from any political party.

To be sure, the RSD is not the only model of this kind. We have had such initiatives across the country: *Dravida Kazhagam*, *Kerala Sahitya Shashtra Parishad*, *Karnataka Raja Rajyatha Sangha*, *Dalit Sangharsh Samiti* in Karnataka, *All Assam Students Union*, *Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha*, *Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini*, *Indian Peoples' Front*, *Jayesh in Madhya Pradesh*, *Samata Sangathan* and *Backward and Minority Community Employees Federation*. The creative life of most of these experiments was very short, though many of these organisations continue to exist today. They testify to the need and indeed the possibility of instituting deep politics all over the country. When we bemoan the lack of civic engagement among the youth, blame them for political apathy, or are shocked at their acquiescence in political bigotry, we should be asking ourselves: Have we built the institutions that cultivate constitutional values? Where are the study circles in their contemporary avatar? Who is drawing the youth to constructive work? Who connects their everyday issues and concerns to larger politics? The problem is not with them but with us. We have the model. The challenge is to act on it before it is too late. Here is a challenge, a life mission, waiting for the Sane Gurujis of our times.

The writer is member, *Swaraj India*, and national convenor of *Bharat Jodo Abhiyan*. Views are personal

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"In a city where accessible healthcare is increasingly out of reach, it is unacceptable that these public hospitals offer substandard services. This is a direct result of neglect... from the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) and the Ministry of Health."

— THE DAILY STAR, BANGLADESH

Indian chess 2.0 comes of age

D Gukesh's victory on the world stage, feats of his contemporaries are sure to inspire young players, many of them in small towns and villages



NITIN NARANG

IN A CRICKET-CRAZY country like India, it's a significant development when chess makes headlines and captures the nation's attention. D Gukesh's phenomenal victory has not only filled Indians with pride but also marked the beginning of Indian Chess 2.0. The year 2024 has been pivotal for Indian chess, with several historic performances from our players on the international stage. Today, India boasts of many chess talents who are ready to carry forward the legacy of Viswanathan Anand.

In a thrilling World Chess Championship, Gukesh displayed exceptional composure and skill to defeat defending champion Ding Liren 7.5-6.5 to become India's second world champion after Anand. Breaking records is no child's play — it takes decades of dedicated effort and years of hard work. By winning the title at the age of 18, Gukesh also became the youngest world champion ever, breaking the four-decade-old record of legendary Garry Kasparov, who claimed the title in 1985 at 22.

His victory has also shone a light on a new, inspiring side of his personality. Beyond Gukesh's brilliance as a chess prodigy, he is a humble and grounded young man rooted in Indian values. He spoke highly of his defeated opponent and expressed gratitude to the Almighty, the nation, society, team, family, and parents for their support. True hero celebrates victory and accepts defeat with equal grace. Gukesh's parents, Rajnikanth and Padmalakshmi, have gone through a lot. They gave up their careers and comforts to fulfil their son's aspirations.

Another Indian grandmaster, Arjun Erigaisi, has reached the gold-standard ELO rating of 2800. He became only the second Indian after Anand and the 16th player ever to cross this prestigious mark. Erigaisi now holds the fourth spot in the latest global rankings.

At the 2024 FIDE Chess Olympiad, India's teams won two gold medals in the team events, while in the individual category, it secured four gold medals. These victories have established India as the top chess nation in the world. The world admired the steady and studied aggression of our players. At the same time, our powerful Pentad, the G-5 — comprising Grandmasters Harika Dronavalli and Vaishali Rameshbabu along with International Masters Divya Deshmukh, Vantika Agrawal and Tanja Sachdev — delivered brilliant performances, earning praise from the nation and Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Chess is a mind game, and everything

depends on how contestants make their moves. It's a city where Indian chess players blink first. That's what Indian chess players learnt from Anand and have now taken it to another level. Indian chess has transitioned from the Anand era to a new pantheon of prodigies. Indian Chess 2.0 is a blend of *urja* (energy) and *ambhav* (experience), with Anand mentoring and guiding new talents. Five-time world champion Anand was once the nation's flag-bearer for India, keeping the country's dominance alive on the chess map and breaking the monopoly of the erstwhile Soviet Union and Western nations in chess. Watching Indian players dominate now, Vishi is sure to feel proud.

The All-India Chess Federation (AICF) is fully aware of the paradigm shift Indian chess has undergone in recent months and is ready to make this transition impactful. Gukesh has become a role model for the aspiring youth of the country, and heady times for Indian chess have just begun. Gukesh's victory is sure to spark significant corporate interest. The AICF aims to build on this momentum by creating more opportunities for aspiring players, including platforms, training programmes, top-tier coaching, and sustained player support. Gregorz Gajewski was more than a coach to Gukesh. He acted as a sherpa in his ascent to the world title. Notably, Gukesh also benefited from the guidance of Paddy Upton, renowned for his expertise in mental conditioning and experience with the Indian cricket and hockey teams.

With a budget of ₹65 crore, the federation has laid the foundation for a thriving chess ecosystem in India. Key initiatives include a dedicated chess development fund, financial backing through player contracts, and extensive coaching programmes at all levels. The federation also plans to support district and state associations and introduce an India-specific AICF rating system.

Challenges persist. They include integrating chess into school curricula, creating e-learning modules, identifying emerging talents, and strengthening grassroots academies to ensure AICF's long-term sustainability. None of these are insurmountable. The game was once a household staple in India, with every village boasting gifted players. People had a natural flair for the game, even in small towns like Gangoh, where I grew up. These hidden geniuses hone their skills in towns and villages, waiting for the right opportunity. Gukesh's victory and the feats of his contemporaries will undoubtedly inspire them to dream big.

Chess isn't a game that India has adopted. It is a homegrown sport deeply woven into the nation's cultural and traditional fabric. Our players have shown that chess can produce as much adrenaline as any other sport. Now, Indian chess is poised to write its next golden chapter — a story the world will eagerly watch unfold.

The writer is the president of the All India Chess Federation

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

RUPEE & DOLLAR

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "Currency matters" (IE, December 23). Last week, the Indian rupee breached the 85-to-the-US dollar mark. This underscores deeper concerns about the resilience of emerging market currencies, particularly in an era of strong dollar dominance fuelled by robust US economic data and a persistent hawkish Federal Reserve. India's economic landscape has faced notable headwinds. Growth has declined in the last seven quarters, while a widened merchandise trade deficit has added to the strain. Immediate measures like RBI interventions provide temporary relief, but the long-term focus must shift to building capacities of government is governed by the same impulse.

The importance of Raj Dharma as reiterated by Kautilya provides a framework for leadership for modern democratic governance. Kautilya's concept is in fact an elaboration of the essentially Indian concept of *antaryodhi*. The *Arthashastra* reiterates that, "The king should shoulder the responsibility of children, old, childless women, diseased persons and above all infirm who did not have any natural guardian to protect them." *Arthashastra* also describes the king as a servant of the state. In a similar vein, while describing Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj's approach towards kingship, many have used the term "upbhoghoonyu swami" — the complete ownership of subjects sans any personal aggrandisement.

India must share the responsibility of shaping the global discourse, drawing from the treasure of its civilisational worldview. The idea of South-South Cooperation would get new impetus if traditional societies take the lead in reforming the apparatus of democratic governance. PM Modi has already contributed through many distinct ideas.

The writer is in-charge of BJP's department of Good Governance

been rediscovered to fight our daily battles healthily.

Vaibhav Goyal, Chandigarh

THIS REFERS TO the article, "For the self and the world" (IE, December 23). Activities including meditation can calm the body and encourage bodily stillness that also calms the mind. Meditation is key in maintaining a focused mind. We live in a world where work pressure and competition are increasing. If one wishes to tackle them, a centered mindset is necessary. Meditation can also heal the body, and spiritually, help a person self-realise. That is the power of this age-old Indian tradition. The US's recent declaration of International Meditation Day is a great step towards embracing and promoting the benefits of the exercise.

Prachi Dixit, Jodhpur

POLL MONITOR'S TASK

THIS REFERS TO the report, "Change in poll rules part of conspiracy to destroy integrity of EC, says Cong" (IE, December 23). Adhering to standards for free, fair and transparent elections. Any change in the functioning of elections ought to be discussed among all stakeholders, be it political parties or the public. The Centre's unilateral decision to limit public inspection of election papers, without consulting other political parties, undermines the EC and encourages the body to be more opaque in its function. This is contrary to the spirit of a representative and transparent EC. In this case, the Opposition's concerns about the Centre destroying the integrity of the EC cannot be ignored.

L R Murmu, New Delhi



VINAY SAHASRABUDHDE

US PRESIDENT-ELECT DONALD Trump's decision to create a new Department of Government Efficiency and the shooting down of a C-130 of a premier healthcare company are two apparently unrelated incidents. However, it's possible to discern a common message in Trump's creation of a new department and the gruesome incident. There is a growing realisation for the need for better and more people-oriented governance. As we begin celebrations of the birth centenary of one of India's most popular prime ministers, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who was known for his emphasis on good governance, it is pertinent to revisit the concept in the context of the changing world order. India's experiences and experiences could enrich the global endeavour.

There are at least three reasons why revisiting good governance is critical today. First, in face of growing disenchantment with democracy in several parts of the world, the "unified theory" mooted by Harvard academic Pippa Norris merits serious consideration. It's central thesis is that "the institutions of both liberal democracy and state capacity need to be strengthened parallelly for most effective progress." One can reasonably argue that the outcome of the US elections shines a light on the liberal democracy's deficits and underlines the need for efficient statecraft. Second, given the inevitable role of the human element in good governance,

Traditional with modern

Indic ideas can impart more rigour to good governance

practice would require changing people's mindsets to be effective. Conversations in the past 10 years in the country offer significant clues. Third, we should explore how the Indic concept of *Raj Dharma* can resonate with the modern idea of good governance.

As is well-known, the origin of the concept dates back to 1992. A World Bank report of that year, "Governance and Development", marks the first attempt at defining the concept. Later, eight parameters were listed — participatory, consensus-oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive, and the rule of law — as defining attributes of Good Governance. While the Bank's definition incorporates aspects of the process of delivery, there is no mention of where Good Governance actually begins — implementation. Any definition of good governance must underline the importance of flawless, result-oriented implementation. Since implementation cannot be ensured without commitment and passion by those in charge at the grassroots level, attention must be devoted to their mindsets. Herein lies the importance of P2G2, a term coined by Prime Narendra Modi when he was the chief minister of Gujarat. P2G2 is pro-people good governance — it's the Ganges of sensitivity, commitment and sense of responsibility. Without all this Good Governance is merely theoretical.

It is against this backdrop that India originated concepts like "democratisation of technology", "Lifestyle for Environment", "women-led development" and "sab ka prayas" for participative and development-oriented governance. These merit consideration for inclusion in the list of new characteristics of Good Governance. There is evidence to suggest that India's success in the promotion of digital transactions has led to true democratisation of technology. LIFE or lifestyle for environment is a proposition that nobody can oppose, especially in the face of the climate change challenge. Women-led development compels men to shed chauvinism and accept women's intrinsic ability to lead. It's a crucial step to ensuring gender justice. *Sab ka prayas*, or "everyone making an effort", nips in the bud any inclination to outsource development to the government. In his blog written at Kanyakumari in May last year, PM Modi underscored the importance of the Indic concept of *antaryodhi*, and thereby the role of India. He said, "Our efforts, from empowering the poor to last-mile delivery, have inspired the world by prioritising individuals standing at the last rung of society."

Our ancient scriptures, history as well as culture are important inspirations to make good governance more meaningful. They make the concept more purposeful and result-oriented. As the Bhagwad Gita under-

lines, *adhisthan* is an important element at the foundation of everything, including governance. PM Modi's Karmayogi project for building capacities of government is governed by the same impulse.

The importance of Raj Dharma as reiterated by Kautilya provides a framework for leadership for modern democratic governance. Kautilya's concept is in fact an elaboration of the essentially Indian concept of *antaryodhi*. The *Arthashastra* reiterates that, "The king should shoulder the responsibility of children, old, childless women, diseased persons and above all infirm who did not have any natural guardian to protect them." *Arthashastra* also describes the king as a servant of the state. In a similar vein, while describing Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj's approach towards kingship, many have used the term "upbhoghoonyu swami" — the complete ownership of subjects sans any personal aggrandisement.

India must share the responsibility of shaping the global discourse, drawing from the treasure of its civilisational worldview. The idea of South-South Cooperation would get new impetus if traditional societies take the lead in reforming the apparatus of democratic governance. PM Modi has already contributed through many distinct ideas.

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