THE ASIAN AGE

24 DECEMBER 2024

Positive push to Kuwait ties signals India's growing heft

I wait pulled out all stops to make the visit of an Indian Prime Minister for the first time in 43 years a truly memorable one with a civilian award, which is The Order of Mubarak Al Kabeer, and the Kuwait's Prime Minister being at the airport to offer a warm sendoff to Mr Narendra Mod.

With Kuwait heading the GCC now, the visit also highlighted the role of the region, with its fair sprinkling of Indians forming the majority expatriate population of a few member countries, in India's increasing global engagements, especially with the Gulf nations. Kuwait was the GCC (comprising Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE) country to which PM Modi was paying a maiden visit.

The civilian award was Modi's 20th in 10 years. More than an individual honour for a Prime Minister who enjoys a personal rapport with several world leaders, it is to be read as a sign of India's growing role in world affairs as seen lately in the country emerging as one of the leading voices of the Global South.

An unstated reason for the warmth on display

world leaders, it is to be read as a sign of India's growing role in world affairs as seen lately in the country emerging as one of the leading voices of the Global South.

An unstated reason for the warmth on display in the 2-day visit, the first since Mrs Indira Gandhi's visit in 1981, may also have been that a bit of the bitterness of the past lies forgotten. The invasion itself lasted under a week as a bit of the bitterness of the past lies forgotten. The invasion itself lasted under a week as a bit of the bitterness of the past lies forgotten.

Today, Kuwait freely acknowledges the contribution of Indian labour to the building of Kuwait from an oil-rich expanse of sand into a modern mation with a capital city to be proud of PM Modi's visit to a labour camp was India's way of admiring what its blue-collar labour force has done for It is the shared vision of the future that the leaders spell out as Emir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah of Kuwait and Crown Prince straining by which India can offer in terms of technology and tech infra, fintech, and pharmaceuticals.

The defence accord that is to do with training, maritime safety and joint production of defence equipment is an indicator of India's growing strength as a producer of defence equipment and this lends the weight to the elevation of ties to a strategic relationship, What India has offered several nations in a year of intense diplomacy and Prime Ministerial visits is reflective of its growing technological prowess as well its diplomatic approach of putting up front what could be of mutual benefit.

Maha Cabinet must start work

Mahar Cabinet must start work

Maharashtra Assembly elections, the state has witnessed only consumers over the government formation for nearly a month. After delays in deciding the chief minister and Cabinet expansion, chief minister bewendra Padnavis has finally allocated Cabinet portfolios to his minister bewendra Padnavis has finally allocated Cabinet portfolios to his minister bewendra Padnavis has finally allocated Cabinet portfolios to his minister bewendra Padnavis has finally allocated Cabinet portfolios to his minister bewendra Padnavis and the Legislative Council Chairman with tiself. But the delays in government formation suggest that the party is still not in complete control.

Mr Fadnavis was sworn in as the chief minister on December 5, which was 13 days after the election result. It took him another 10 days to form a duff-independent of the state of

THE ASIAN AGE

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Hobson's choice: India 'tilt' by Anura draws Lanka flak



he bilateral relationship between Sri Lanka and India surges and ebbs tempesticusly, and interest in the island nation's affairs has grown in India. And yet, few Indian reporters covering Sri Lankan President Anura Dissanayake's first state visit to New Behir recently, ventured beyond lazy, to the state of the state

sign dedicates committees to stop the unfair practice, indian trawlers still outfish the shallow waters of the shallow s

Indo-Pacific region. It is China that tops the Geneva-based "IUU Index". And this affects fishermen in both India and Sri Lanka. Furthermore, China has sensed opportunity in the unresolved fracas between India and Sri Lanka in the relatively small Palk Straits, and has been "culti-vating" Sri Lanka is fishing community. Among other

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things, it has set up a flourcommunity. Among other
things, it has set up a flouring and the sease of the contransparence of the India-China talks,
which also took place last
week, Even the fact
that a positive outcome of
the India-China talks,
which also took place last
week, may lead to a recalibration of their hostility
over Sri Lanka (where
China erijoys strategic
of debi-trap diplomacy)
stimulated no informed
speculation.
Other routine bullet
points that reporters tick off
whenever the two ountries
meet, are "the Tamil question" and the related "13th
Amendment" issue.
The amendment was coThe state of the transparency
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as is erroneously imagined by many Indians perambu-lating around that country on holiday.

have received 25 per cent of the Tamil vote at that poll: an unprecedented feat in the turbulent electroral history of Sri Lanka.

Them there was scarcely a mention of Prime Minister was scarcely a mention of Prime Minister of Prime Minister of Prime Minister of Tamil question. Love him or hate him, tis Mr Modi who first shed India's earlier obsession with Sri Lanka's "Tamil question." In the India's earlier obsession with Sri Lanka's "Tamil question." Be it to cook a snook at (Rajiv Gandhi's) Congress Party or not, it is the PfM who hardly 15 the PfM who hardly 15

our." New Delhi's cautiousness stems from an accurate estimate of the mood on the ground in Sri Lanka. India did come to the southern neighbour's rescue during its economic crisis of 3022 by extending aid worth nearly \$4 billion. India continues to stand as global

guarantor for Colombo over the question of restructur-ing its staggering external

and the state of t sir "Lanna's economy, manipulates its policies and that any connectivity projects with India' would be ejects with India' would be independence". And yet, here he was in New Delhi, co-signing documents which, the paper called, a "Hobson's choice" for Sri Lanka.

Jehan Perera, head of Sri Lanka's most respected think tank, the National Peace Foundation (NPR).

The writer is a veteran foreign correspondent and the author of Sri Lanka: The New Country

The rupee has crossed 85 to the dollar and citizens are the dollar and citizens are extremely concerned. A large number of students are stuck in foreign countries and they have to pay more from their pockets. Growth is at its lowest in seven quarters, while a wider merchandise trade deficit has added to the strain. Coupled with the outflow from domestic equity markets, these paint a challenging picture. challenging picture. challenging picture.
Investors are also eyeing the
upcoming US inflation data,
which could influence the
Federal Reserve's next
moves. While policymakers
could seize this moment to offer incentives to exportoriented industries and streamline processes for global trade, leveraging the depreciating currency to India's advantage, it's time now to boost structural

> Yash Pal Ralhan Jalandhar

MAHARASHTRA, the second-most densely populated state, is enduring had health substanceuter. There is a hage moderate and dectors, nurses and particular that in the product of the product and product and product and product and product and product as 122 per cent. 25 per cent and 29 per cent respectively. The CAG audit report also says 435 healthcare projects have been delayed over land acquisition. Despite an increase in healthcare spending the state's budget remains insufficient. Despite an increase in healthcare spend-ing, the state's budget remains insuffi-cient. The new government must take steps to address this immediately, espe-cially in rural heartlands, where the peo-ple are undergoing untold losses and suf-fering.

CHECK BUILDING MAFIA

APROPOS THE Mohali building colapse, this incident is an example of winth happens when, during the convention of the con APROPOS THE Mohali building col

Col. R.S. Narula (Retd)

Aakar Patel



2025 is likely to be a defining year, but may not be welcome to all hat should we look forward to in 2025? I mean "look forward to" in the sense of anticipate rather than welcome. It will be a defining year and period in

W of anticipate raths are several ways.

The most important developments will come after Donald Trump takes over as America's President again next month. What happens in US over the president again next month. What happens in US over the president like MT Trump. Most American Presidents, even when they campaign on the idea of change, actually prefer continuity. Even breakthrough figures like Barack Obama did not do much to change policy on things like war and the Middle East, and it has not been easy over the past four decades to separate the economic policies of Democratic Presidents from Republican ones. Joe Biden, for instance, continued with Mr Trump's tartifs on China.

Mr Trump is different because of his base and appeal to people who want disruption and want days to be a consecutive White House terms. This means that unlike sitting Presidents, he campaigned against continuity, but it also means that he will not be seen as a lame-duck especially because he is likely push for his successor as head of the Republicans.

Though he leads a political party seen as repre-

with a speech in which he referred to China 25 times. His 2016-2020 presidency saw tariffs which remain to this day but China has grown by 50 per cent since Mr Trump gave his famous escalator speech. It has not been possible for the US to stop China from growing. And China has now become is and the military front. For this reason, Mr Trump will have to choose to either escalator of give up. It is unlikely he will do the latter. His campaign was founded on escalaton. This will affect the world and it will affect us as well.

als wen.

People talk about the "China Plus One" strategy
of India benefiting from companies exting China
or hedging their bets elsewhere. But the fact is
or hedging their bets elsewhere. But the fact is
benefit and a strategy of the fact is the fact is
benefit and a strategy of the fact is
benefit and a strategy of the fact is
benefit and a strategy global trade becoming one
trade to leave when it closes. Our exports rise when
global trade rises, they flatten or fall when global
trade flattens or falls.

No matter which government is in power here,
this trend does not shift and will not shift. So,
we should not assume that an escalation in the USe talk about the "China Plus One" st

China trade war will favour us, it will harm every

China trade war will favour us, it will harm everyone.

Another issue that will affect the world negatively is on climate change. Mr Trump pulled out
of the Paris Accords in his first term and has
promised to pivot from the green energy focus of
Mr Biden (through his Inflation Reduction Act,
which gave lange subsidies for electrification)
towards more drilling and more agosline. This
will create a cocomed America where Pord and
General Motors continue making fossi fixel pickup trucks which only Americans drive while
China tightens its stranglehold over the global
production of electric and phyrid cars.

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before him and has seen it more as a cost centre than as a strategic asset. He wants Nao to pay for European security against a potential Russian Intreat and not America. If, like his tartiffs on China, this view is seen as wise by his successor, then it will result in a more permanent shift. Mr Trump does not see Europe and Mexico and Canada as strong allies but as nations which have to be brought to heel on the question of trade, and also security. This will raise questions in these places on whether they should be warming up to China on issues of trade and perhaps even other things like currency.















Opinion

Envisioning India as a global skill supplier

n 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.

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 Cooperation Council countries) and of the new destinations (Germany, South Korea, Japan, etc.) reveal the increased prioritising of skill-selective and skill-intense 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 gaps? 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.

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 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



S.K. Sasikumar

India must

design a

comprehensive

national policy on international

labour migration, with skill-centred

anchored as one

migration

of the fundamental

Labour and migratic analyst and former senior faculty, Labour Institute

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

formulating constructive polices. 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 th India must design and perationalise a comprehensive ational policy on international abour migration, with skill-centred migration anchored as one of the fundamental pillars 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 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

and necess a revew of the vadories with the control of the control 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

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

Hareesh P.

he Andhra Pradesh go-vernment has made several development plans for Kurnool, known as a backward district and the ga teway to Rayalaseema. It has proposed a drone hub, enhanced industrial activity with the development of the Orvakal industrial node, greater flight connectivity, and the es-tablishment of a High Court

Kurnool was the capital of Andhra Pradesh from October Aurnool was the capital of Andhra Pradesh from October 1, 1953 to October 31, 1956, the Teluguspeaking areas of the erstwille Hyderabad province were merged with Andhra State to form Andhra Pradesh. During the merger, the Sribagh 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 Jatals' proposal previous Jatals' previous Jatals' previous Jatals' previous Jatals' previous Jatals' previ

tals' proposal, the previous Ja-gan 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 capi-tals' 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-



dustries Minister T.G. Bharath announced in late November that the site survey for esta-blishing the Bench is under-way and said that the process would be completed in six

months.

Apart from the High Court,
Kurnool is eagerly awaiting
the implementation of other
promises too. Kurnool has always lagged behind in development. As it has very few industries and inadequate lopment. As it has very few industries and inadequate irrigation facilities, thousands of people have migrated from the district to other parts of the State in search of better opportunities. In 2022, when 13 new districts were carved out in Andhra Pradesh, Kurnool lost its major reservoirs to Nandyal district. Promises to develop the district have never been fulfilled or have been partially fulfilled, leaving several parts of the district underdeveloped.

The Centre recently amounced that it would pump in about \$2,700 crore for developing infrastructure in the Oryakal node of the Hydera-

Orvakal node of the Hydera-bad-Bengaluru Industrial Corridor. The government plans to integrate several manufac-turing clusters between Hyderabad and Bangaluru in the Orvakal node near Kurnool.

The plan to set up a 300-acre drone hub at Orvakal, the first-of-its-kind in the country will also boost industrial deve-lopment as it serve as a centre for training, innovation, and drone-related business. This is

part of the government's ambitious plans to turn the State into a drone capital. The Andhra Pradesh government is al-so planning to draft a drone policy. Drones are especially useful in the healthcare and agriculture sectors, and during calamities, as the govern-ment found out during the re-

cent floods in Vijayawada. The government believes The government that attracting investo rs to set up units at the Orvakal node will reap dividends, Orvakal is 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 Congess Party dominated the undivid-district of Kurnool in the

Party dominated the undivid-ed 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 go-vernment 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

Vignesh Radhakrishnan Amitha Reji George

coming increasingly scarce in Australia. The govern-ment attributed last year's sharp rise in immigration as a key factor that is contributing to the crisis. In implemented measures to restrict the inflow of students whose numbers skyrock eted last year, significantly outpac-ing the numbers of skilled migrants and other categories.

An Australian government de-partment's analysis shows that 60% of international students live in apartments, 26% in detached houses, and the remainder in hos-

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 I illustrates the Rental Affordability Index in the greated capital areas of Sydney and Melbourne, where a higher index indicates better affordability. Rent affordability, Rent affordability, Rent 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 Chiang, grew in number this year desfrom other countries, notably Chi-na, grew in number this year des-

pite 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 CM C

in Australia. China and India are shown separately because they form the top two shares of interna-tional students by a significant margin. The overall visa grant rate has dropped significantly from more than 90% before the pan-demic to below 80% after, in line with the new tightening. The grant rate for Indian students dropped 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 Indi 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 Melbourne (Victoria), where it is comparatively better. If the hous ing crisis was the primary factor for increased visa denials, Chinese for increased visa denials, Chinese students should have faced more rejections given their higher con-centration in Sydney. So, what ex-plains the higher denial rates for Indian students?

plains the higher denial rates for Indian students?

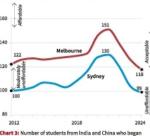
The answer might lie in another problem — mounting visa fraud. The Australian government's Department of Education says there is a higher proportion of "high-risk" student visa applications from India, Nepal, and Pakistan.

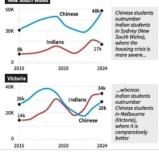
Chart 4 shows the visa processing time in days for Chinese and Indian students between April and July this year and last year. The processing time is separately denoted for three types of student visa applications: straightforward (satisfies most necessities), typical, and complex (lacks many requirements). Although the processing time has increased for Chinese and Indian student, Indian student visas are processed for a much longer time, which is attributed to sas are processed for a much lon-ger 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.

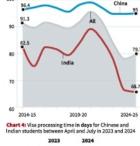
Stricter down under

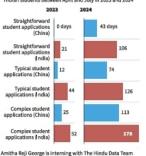
The data for the charts were sourced from the Australian The data for the charts were sourced from the Austral Government's Department of Home Affairs, the Department of Education, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's Housing Dashboard, SoS Econor and Planning's 2024 Rental Affordability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

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









FROM THE ARCHIVES The Man Tindu.

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 Choondal presented a paper on Nanthuny, 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 songo no 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 kattai. Nanthuny seems to be a corruption for Nan-dhvani meaning "good sound", It is in Nam-dhvani 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 Titte 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 Wadiyar (1578-1670). Chikka Devaraja Wadiyar (1673-1704) played the Kalavati Veena and composed the musical po Gita Gopala in the style of Gita Govinda. Krishnaraja Wadiyar (1895-1940) encouraged many distinguished musicians. Sri Jayachamaraja Wadiyar 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 Bolshevist Government in China. He knew that Japan had protected herself against the movement by an understanding with Mr. Changtsolin, and Japan and Korea would certainly be saved from the wave of Bolshevism. But it was also certain that the wave would 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 Mo

Casualties suffered by North Korea in Russia-Ukraine war

been killed or wounded in Russia's war with Ukraine, South Korea's Joint Chiefs of with Okraine, 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. MP

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. pn 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 Imports showed west Asian oil at a nine-month high while Russia account 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

In lakh. The Chaudhary Charan Singh International Airport has managed an all-lime monthly high of passenger movement in November. Dubai, Muscat and Dammam were the top three international destinations.

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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

Rakshith Shetty

The story so far: The story so far:

he 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 pressing concern – the extent and nature of dependency on China.

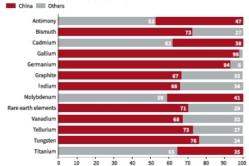
Is China a dominant player? Is China a dominant player?
China's unparalleled dominance in critical
minerals stems from its vast resource base
and strategic investments across the value
chain. As the world's largest mining
nation, China has discovered 173 types of
minerals, including 13 energy minerals, 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 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 ond reserves to include processing 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

China's 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

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 minerals which neavily depend on Western raw material imports, and it refrains from actions that could disrupt its refrains from actions that could disrupt it 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 2022 have no research extraction and 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 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 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

Why does India rely on imports? 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 particination in the absence mivate sector particination in the absence. 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 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 extracting critical minerals through recycling also seem promising. However, transitioning away from China will require sustained investment and long-term commitment to these various initiativ

The writer is a research analyst at The Takshashila Institution.

THE GIST

China's dominance extends beyond reserves to include processing and refining, with control over 87% of rare earth processing, 589% of lithium refining, and 68% of silicon processing.

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%.

Despite being endowed with significant mineral resources India's heavy reliance on imports stem from several structural challenges in its mining and processing ecosystem.

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?

The story so far:

n December 17, the Union Ministry of Home n 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 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 Andama & 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 subsequently for the States.

Why was it withdrawn?

A copy of the circular accessed by The Hindu said that the matter was examir 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 Kubi-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." d foreign hands.

After a military coup in Myanmar in February 2021, there was an influx of nented 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) betw een the two countries. llowing movement of people living vithin 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 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 visa, should compulsorily register with the FRRO within 24 hours of their arrival.

THE GIST

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

A copy of the circular accessed by *The Hindu* said that the matter was examined by the Ministry in "the backdrop of owing security concerns in rder areas of these States.

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:

The story so far:
December 4, Google
DeepMind unweiled GenCast,
an Artificial Intelligence (Al)
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 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

This process is called Numerical eather 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."

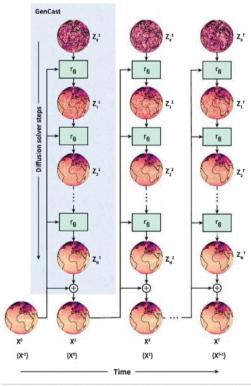
GenCast was trained in two steps: step
I in 3.5 days and step II in 1.5 days, both
with 32 TPU v5 instances. "TPU" is short
for 'tensor processing unit', an integrated
circuit Google developed to run
machine-learning models, sold via Google
Cloud. In December 2023, Google Cloud
launched a TPU called v5p: it contains
8.960 chins interconnected with a 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 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, I., SANCHEZ-GONZALEZ, A., ALET, F. ET

accurate than ENS on 99.8% of the 1.320 targets when asked to predict the 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

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 XI, is the final weather prediction for the next moment in time. To predict the weather for the moment after, the model begins by accepting XI as the input and starts afreel accepting XI 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 fa apps that use diffusion models include enAI's text-to-video model Sora and

OpenA'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° x 0.25°

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; integrated circuit Google developed to run machine-learning models, sold via Google Cloud. In December 2023, Google Cloud launched a TPU

(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 fo

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
mobabilistic wather forecasts are better. probabilistic weather forecasts are better at revealing the possibility of extreme "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

Madhavan Rajeevan wrote in The Hindu in December 2023.

This said, while GenCast's performance suggests Al 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

important observable to the 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 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 Al-based methods that enhance their forecasting.

Meanwhile, traditional models remain sesential 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".

"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 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.



Know your English

"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
a linear form. There is a spontaneity in 'Why is writing difficult?' 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 am not talking about inspired poets and 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 Is a wholly new start, and a different

kind of failure
Because one has only learnt to get the

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 deterriorating

deteriorating

In the general mess of imprecision of

Undisciplined squads of emotion."

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."

What does the second rule say?'

"We'll take it up next week." Published in The Hindu on November 1, 1994.

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

THE DAILY QUIZ

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

indulging in what profession?

Name the song composed by Husnlal Bhagatram that he rendered chord with PM Nehru?

QUESTION 4

immediately after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi that touched a

d around 7,405 songs in CM C

QUESTION 7

What is the significance of these lines 'Tere aaney ki aas hai dost, Shaam phir kyun udaas hai dost, Mehki mehki fiza yeh kehti hai, To kahin aas paas hai dost' from a song in Aas Paas?

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

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 'Tasvee' Teri Dil Mein' from *Maya* Infamous in Rafi's career?



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 Solfitude was "the greatest revelation in the Spanish language since "Don Quiotote", Ans: Pablo Neruda 2. García Márque began giving his manuscripts to this person before submitting them. Ans:

Please send in your answ

Fidel Castro

3. García Márquez consider 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 5. Garcia Marquez wanted this novel to be destroyed, but his sons published it a decade after his death. Ans: Until August 6. Garcia Marquez considered this his most important book from a literary viewpoint. Ans The Autumn of the Patriarch Visual: The location of this statue. Ans:

Biswas| Piyali Tuli| Sumana Dutta

Word of the day Requite:

Synonym: repay

Usage: She did not requite his love.

Pronunciation: newsth.live/requitepro International Phonetic Alphabet: //rkwart/





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FIRST COLUMN SUCCESS THROUGH WORKPLACE INTELLIGENCE

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



in today's dynamic work environment, workplace intelligence has become a cornestone for achieving personal growth, team cohesion, and organisational excellence. Workplace intelligence refers to the abil-ity of individuals and organisations to navigate, adapt, and thrive in the ity 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 comperhensive 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 pivolal 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 provide collaboration and overall success. 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 mini-mal 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 min-mizing 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, inno-vation 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-



resilience and adaptability needed to stay competitive. By fostering emo-tional 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 train by prolitoring saming and development, ryginisations as a mires at meriting 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 og social menigence by micracing with people inton interest to acceptorus 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, Chipotile 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 sus tainable 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 or giounasation and original anisorination, the implorance or workpairs intelligence will only grow. Artificial intelligence, remote work and place 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



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



ndia Post, a vital lifeline in connect ing citizens across the country, needs to undergo a comprehensive review of its services. This reform should focus on introducing inno-spector revenue gener-

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 subsidised offerings, such as postcards priced as low as 50 paise. While such subsidised, uring 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 they are sponsored. The introduction of sponsored Meghdoot postcards priced at Ra10 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 in multiples of Rs 10 would streamline the system and reduce inefficiencies.

the system and reduce inefficiencies International postal rates could follow consistent structure, with uniform tariff increases per weight slab for air and sur-



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

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.

nesses, 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 show-casing 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.

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 to obtaining stamps with their photostamps with their pho-

obean misused. Reports indicate instances of notorious individuals obtaining stamps with their pho-tos, tarnishing the program's cred-ibility. Since no robust mechanism exists to screen applicants' backgrounds, the programme i tible to abuse. Discontin nme is suscep-ontinuing 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

Enhancing Enhancing Consumer Convenience with Sticker Receipts

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.

cally 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 costs 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 30 could replace postal orders for fees under the RTI Act, streamlining the payment Rs 1b, 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 Matured 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 unscruptlous individuals may attempt to

lous 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. their accounts or claimed mature

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 savings
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 effectivethe services of the postal control of the control

banking ecosystems more effectively.

Revamping the Postal Ecosystem for Sustainability
India Post's transformation should emphasise efficiency, innovation, and customer-centricity. Rationalising tariffs, eliminating 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

tion medium. By embracing these changes, India Post can not only secure its finan-cial future but also continue serv-ing as a cornerstone of India's communication network.

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 Arvable. 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.

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



relying solely on the us or mental math tech-Abacus or mental math tech-niques—a feat that truly felt like magic. For the second time, the World's Largest Abacus & Mental Arithmetic Abacus & Mentai 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

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 Meenalshi Lekhi rightly said. Meenakshi Lekhi rightly said, "Smart brain produces smart solutions for every problem and prosperity is moving for-ward only when we have smart brains." Commending the efforts of the young par-ticipants, Lekhi emphasised

the importance of such initia-tives 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 experi-ence. Over 3 million children across the world have benefited from the Abacus and Mental Arithmetic curriculum, which encourages creativity, visual-isation, and focus while devel-oping strong arithmetic abil-

oping strong arithmetic abil-ities.

itles."
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 educariowever, innovative couca-tional programmes like the Abacus and Mental Arithmetic course are emerg-ing as a ray of hope, helping children manage stress while fostering mental stability and self-confidence

self-confidence.
According to Dr Snehal Karia,
CEO of UCMAS India, the
course is designed to enhance
children's mental stability by 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 arxiety and depression. The Abacus & Mental Arithmetic program's key lies in its structured approach to building self-assurance through innovative teaching methods.

methods. The encouragement and skills imparted during the training play a pivotal role in shaping a childs 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 conventional education, the course serves as a supple-mentary learning system to enhance cognitive abilities. There is an urgent need to complement the school's cur-riculum 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 over-

greater confidence. In a world where competition often over-shadows 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 infilatives to nurture well-rounded individuals who UCMAS International

such initiatives to nurture well-rounded individuals who well-rounded individuals who are prepared to face the chal-lenges of the future with con-fidence and creativity. (The author is a senior jour-nalist. The views expressed are personal)

Difficult choices

Slow growth complicates Budget mathematics

ast 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 \$2 per cent of Budget Estimates, were above the five-year rolling average; and the fiscal deficit, as a perentage of gross domestic product or 60P, 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 recommits 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

the document recommits 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 is 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 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 by 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

he big picture in the biennial India State of Forest Report (ISFR), released a he 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 Bhupender Yadav emphasises that India has augmented its carbon sink to 2.25 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

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 the first. Again, as environmentalisr 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

he year 2024 can be characterised as a "strong start, weaker finish" for India's economy, Itstart-edwith 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, policytradeoffs have worsened, due to a share-than-expected stump 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 20 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

amanon and just one Fed cut, in March, followed by a pause for the remainder of 202S. China is ilikely to announce more fiscal stimulus, but this is unilkely to drive a sustainable recov-ery, given the economy is not in a normal downcycle. These factors could slow global GDP growth to 29 per cent year-on-year in 202S, 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 FY2S was a one-off, and the economy will bounce back to 6.5-7.0 per cent over coming quarters, supported by high-re government spending and a rural recovery. This looks difficult.

Indis strong post-pandemic rebound was driven

SONAL VARMA

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) macroproidential tight-

Reserve Bank of India's (RBI's) macroprudential tight

defaults have risen for credit card and personal loans.

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 micronance, this champdown means borrowers will no longer
be able to roil over multiple loans. Overall, credit conditions are tight, and the household credit cycle is likely
to weigh on consumption demand in 2028.

India also faces a threat from China's overcapacity.

In response to Western tariffs, Chinawill likely redirect
exports into never markets, including India. Afready,
India's economic challenge from imports from China
spans low-ted (low-priced consumer goods, metals
and chemicals), intermediate and high-tech (specifically
green-tech) products. This is having several economic
implications, including and worsening
trade imbalance, pressure on firms'
profit margins and lower domestic
demand, higher credit costs and risling imports from China are likely to
weigh on private exports.

demand, higher credit costs and rising imports from China are likely 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 1y-0-yin 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 commodities-driven inflation. Food price inflation should moderate, due to bumper crop output, while a negative

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

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

Currency depreciation remains a risk Merchandise seports 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 atround 1.5per 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.

appropriate policy mix. Second, a credible path towards fiscal con

appropriate policy mix.

Second, acredible path towards fiscal consolidation will send a reassuring signal to investors. With plans afoot to move from deficit to debet angeting 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 finetune 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 restricts zone towards more neutral settines.

macrofinancial risks is lowering policy rates from their current restrictive zone towards more neutral settings. Also, the RBI should be more proactive on liquidity

Also, the RBI should be more proactive on liquidity injection. With the bankingsystem 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)

Being human in the age of AI

A rtificial 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, sensons), analyse the information, and make decisions based on their objectives. Such developments raise ethical questions. How do these and make decisions to asked on time to 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 life 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 cor-porations: This is not the first time

porations: 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 citizen created by law to enable investors to exploit 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 governance" is privatisation of everything, corporations and individual citizens competing, and the "invisible hand of the market" governing everything.

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 inter-ests of investors in the corporation. A corporation

does not have the conscience of a human being. Therefore, Toonscious 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-enthusasts dismiss resisters of new technologies as "anti-progress" Luddies. Ultimately, new technologies as "anti-progress" Luddies, Ultimately, new technologies have always turned out beneficial, hey 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

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 exam-

of socio-economic systems. While deregulation office systems. While deregulation office commiss, for example, may increase gross domestic product in the long run, it produces manywinners 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 minimising the role of governments are disrupting the livelihoods of people in poorer countries. Powerful technologies are invariably dual-use: Usable for good and harm. Products of the defence, Inance, 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 muclear technology was prevented unfairly by those in power, who were 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,

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 copporations — 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, flduciary responsibility. They bring money power, along with 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. Electoral democracy is an institutional innovation. Electoral democracy is an institutional innovation.

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. Lawsto 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. It is a 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, rimarily 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 ourage 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-agarandising unicoms and billionaires. When I ask my friends in management education and business media shy they do not do this, they say they too are running businessess. They must give the market what it wants. They too have this, they say they too are running busine 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 Internationa

Indians that make America great



SHYAM SARAN

The story of Indians in America is. he story of inclians in America is, by any measure, one of outstand-ing success. Indians take vicarious pride in celebrating a Sundar Pichai pride in celebrating a Sundar Pichai heading Google or a Satya Nadella taking Microsoft into an Al-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 ploneering 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 net-work in her adopted country, makes this book a must-read for anyone inter-ested 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 out-standing individuals in the "Techie", the "Healers" and the "Influencers" cat-egories, respectively. The concluding chapter seeks to identify some of the attributes these individuals share and explore whether they contributed to explore whether they contributed to their outstanding achievements.

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, maybe somewhat misleading because the stories are more about the grit and determination with which the 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 — "90 per cent perspiration and 10 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 drawupon 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 acknowledge that their adopted country gave them opportunities unavailable in India, that it rewarded hardwork and merit. Their success is a tribute to the US and its ability to outract 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 camouflaged 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 \$56,000; 739 creen to Indian Americans are college graduates, while the figure for the rest of the country is 30 per cent. It is no surprise that themore numerous amongst the diasporathe author profiles belongto the techie category. During the 1960s and 70s, the Indian Institutes of Technology in India, provided high-quality technical education to

INDIAN technical education to middle-class Indians at nominal cost. The graduates didnot find enough opportunities in Indianse Indianse

didnot find enough proporting the opportunities in Indiatoearna decent salary and, more importantly, to advance their skills in their respective fleds. For several years, nearly 40 per cent of all ITT graduates headed to the US, and some of the most successful Indian Americans are ITT alumni. Sundar Pichai, Shantanu Narayen (CEO of Adobe) and Nilkesh Arora (CEO 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 Chandrika Tandon fine 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 firmwith a loyal cliented. And then she called it quists to pursue her passion for Meteoric Rise of Indians in America Author:

MENDING CONTROLLED TO METEORIES TO MET

Author: Meenakshi Ahamed

female CEO of the multinational Pepsi.

Indian Americansin 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 abestselling
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 best. This includes

several other fields, Dr Gawande's later book, BeingMortal, 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 humane sensibilities.

humane sensibilities.
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 Kamada Harris may have been worthwhile, but the author excluded her because she identifies herself as her because she identifies herself as black. But I think Ms Harris does not

black. But I think Ms Harris does not reject her Indian identity. One would have preferred a clear distinction between quotes and the author's owncommentary, 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.

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-PAPER WITH PASSION-

Attack and aftermath

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

recent attack on a Christmas market in Magdeburg, Germany, has reignited con-tentious 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 shock-waves 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 sus-pect'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 initiately 2, for definitistrators gathered in Magueburg to voice their outrage. Profesters, some wearing black balaclavas, carried banners with slogans like "Reimigration Now" and "migration kills." The term "reimigration" 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 deep-

ened 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 address-ing security concerns without succumbing to fear-driven policies that erode the values of inclusivity and tolerance that underpin the nation's democratic fabric.



Navigating the intersection of

technology, law and human rights

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

hen 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 wast and
complex economic system—a
model of the "One Country, Iwo
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 goverrance 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
totels, and sprawling Special
Economic Zone (SEZ) generate
builten and the special
Economic Zone (SEZ) generate
builten and sprawling Special
Economic Zone (SEZ) generate
while the dice roll and fortunes
are made on Macau's gaming
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have the substantially to China's GDP.
The irony is palpable. The CCP,
a party bull 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
private in transforming China
into the world's second-largest
economy. Yet it also lays bare the
control of the condition at the heart of CCP

Xi Jinping's Macau visit was not Xi Jinpings Macau visit was not merely ceremonia. 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 di veer toward autonomy or dis-sent, as evidenced in Hong Kong. The "One Country, Two Systems" model—once lauded as a masterstroke of governance—has increasingly become a tool for consolidat-ing Beiling's authority. Hong ing Beijing's authority. Hong Kong's story is a cautionary

tale.

A vibrant hub of multinational corporations (MNCs) and transnational corporations (TMCs), in the Sen at the forefront of economic global-sation. 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 prodemocracy movements in 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 con-flicts, partly due to its economi-ic dependence on Beijing and the absence of a robust pro-democracy movement. Yet, this does not make Macau immune to the inherent ten-sions of "One Country. Two Systems." As Xi extolled Macauls success.

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

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

The underlying contradictions 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.

tion 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 econom-

ters, and even industries like gambling in driving econom-ic 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 entralisation, curbing dissent while championing economic liberalisation, curbing dissent while championing economic biberalisation. Macau's glittering casinos and towering skyscrapers are symbols of the first duality, where capitalism hrives 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-its treest of Macaus of the contribution of t

nt streets of Macau or the cor-ridors of power in Beijing, the CCP's experiment in con-trolled capitalism continues to shape the future of China— and the world.



MACAU'S SIGNIFICANCE LIES IN ITS UNIQUE

IDENTITY.

A FORMER **PORTUGUESE**

COLONY, IT RETURNED TO CHINESE SOVEREIGNTY IN 1999 UNDER THE PROMISE OF AUTONOMY

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, Lis no
secret that the first PM, JI. 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 participatedd in any struelle for Indian independ
in any struelle for Indian indenen-

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.

APATHY AT ITS WORSE

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 scampered for help amid

Indian diaspora remits \$129 billion



n 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 unwaveralso the hard work, dedication, and unwaverthe 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 horbible that 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
Sanskar. 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 stor 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.

Bidyut Kumar Chatterjee | Faridabad

ing 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 energiese 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 | Barrwani

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 Arravalli 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 eyewash 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 | Patalala

Sand your feedback to:

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

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

The term 'Digital Arrest of the 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.

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 dismanling 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 illic-it flow of funds and support-ing global financial regula-tions

ing global financial regula-tions. While the concept is still evolving, digital arrest encompasses aspects of cybersecurity, legal frame-works, and the social conse-quences of living in a high-ly 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 responsibili-

ties can equip individuals with the knowledge and tools needed to engage effectively and securely in the digital world. As the digital world. As 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 combating crime, it also poses risks to freedom and 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)

CONTROVERSY OVER AMBEDKAR

onally correct. Jai Prakash Gupta | Ambala Cantt



Selective indecision

The latest GST Council meeting's outcomes signal a capricious approach

outcomes signal a capricious approach

ell into the eighth year of India's revamped indirect tax regime, the apex
body governing the system met last
Saturday and unweiled a flurry of decisions that were punctuated by some broader issues it
those 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 threetiered levy for something as banal as popcordespite 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 Juby 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

by 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' hold further deliberations on insurance policies' levies soon, is not comforting, if not entirely calevies soon, is not comforting, if not entirely ca-sual – especially as the government has been pro-mising action on this front since the Budget ses-sion. 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 really 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. time this year as consumers held off on buying a

Canary in the canopy

Economic growth cannot be allowed to bypass environment laws hrough history, forests for humans have been sites of shelter, food, livelihoods, protection, and strength of spirit. Ac-cording to the new India State of Forest Report 2023, 25% of India's land is covered by forests or

2023, 25% of indust status is covered by forests rives, 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 counteracting forces of in-

dustrial development and the pressures of cli-mate change on the state have however troubled

entation of both Acts and the govern

India's 'steel frame' does need a check

ndia'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 narrativis 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

And the presence of the processing 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 envernance in India.

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 bureaucrast' 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



the Director of the Centre for Legislative Research and Advocacy, New Delhi

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 earshicking safestiant segints are segints arbitrary.

age or entity into the cevus 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

Government's push for reform Recognising the limitations of the IAS-centric administrative model, the Modi government has

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, influsing 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 renecting a denote area enor to insue rens ran-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 disrup 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 are

ecade ago. However, the lateral entry initiative has faced 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

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 tould help identify inefficiencies within the civil service, promote data-driven decision-making, and develop metrics to assess bureaucratic and develop metrics to assess bureaucratic performance. A time-bound commission, such as the DOGE's expiration date tied to the U.S. semi-quincentennial, 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

in 2013, have had limited impact oue to sack or 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 bureaucrast 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

he 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 Appellare Body (AB), the second tier of the WTO's two-tier dispute settlement system, has been non-operational due to the persistent blocking. non-operational due to the persistent blocking, by the United States, of the appointment of the Appellate Body members.

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 pugles the first state of dispute. 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 releva player in global trade. The larger game is no about killing the Appellate Body but, rather, making the WTO dysfunctional.

e promise understand the future, it is important to first ect on the past. The establishment of the WTO 995 marked a milestone in international law. in 1995 marked a milestone in international is The rise of neoliberal ideology in the 1990s played a critical role in this development. Th WTO established a comprehensive system of



Persistent

challenges

within the Administrative Service and the wider

bureaucracy highlighted the urgent need for administrative

Prabhash Ranjan

Professor and Director, Centre for Investment and Trade Laws, Jindal Global Law School

The legal

is being

international trade

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 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.

Politics.

As the international trading community

The transition from the General 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 ri over the last two decades. The U.S. facilitated 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 ody, which would provide it with a free hand to can now employ trade remedial measures and develop industrial policies to counter the Chinese challenge, exp if these actions violate WTO law. develop industrial poinces to counter the Chiniese challenge, even if these actions violate WPO law, as there is no one to call it out. A classic example of this is the Trump administration's decision 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 their impraision politics exhaust his predictions. indicates that international politics, rather than international law, will dictate international trade

This has led international lawyers such as Geraldo Vidigal 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 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-legalisation 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. Vidigal 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. can obscure this fact.

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
ludia as a unitary. India as a unitary, unidimensional, single-language nation, which it certainly is not. We 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 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 for simultaneous polls have not been quantified.

H.N. Ramakrishna,
Bengaluru

Rural employment scho 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 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,

Music season, safety This time of the year, Chennai is busy with its annual Marghazi music season. City residents and non-resident Indians alike throng 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 subhas 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 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.

dustrial 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 impeuts is 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 Chats, 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 degradel and 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 notical and actual forest 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 anyon

CM C

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

e 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.

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

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

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. farming octopus or importing farmed octopus meat has been introduced in

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 all, it's legal to farm chickens and cows. Is an octopus smarter than, say, a turkey?



Cephalopods are a broad class of mollusci 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 (*Idiosephus*) to the largest living invertebrates, the giant squid (*Architeuthis*) and colossal squid (*Mesonychoteuthis*), which can grow to over 40 feet in length and wells over 45 over 40 feet in length and weigh over 450 kg.

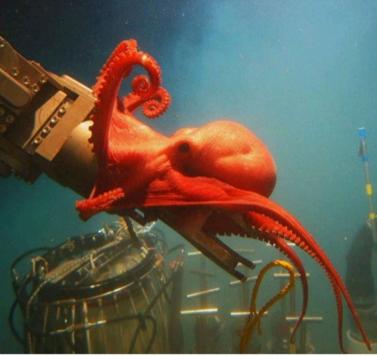
kg.

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.

vary tremendously. Almost everything that's known about cephalopod cognition comes from cephanopou cogninon comes rintensive 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

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 fewer on whether animals think like.

Historically, researchers have ended 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.



One option is a relative measure of brain to body size. The best-studied

brain to body size. The best-studied species of octopus, Octopus valgaris, 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 wulgaris, about 300 million, are not in the brain at all but distributed in

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 brain at all but distributed in

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 below their skin that contain coloured pigments and reflectors, revealing specific colours. Octopus vulgaris has up to 1,50000 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 cuttensn, sepia apama, uses us 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 vertebrates. The common cutilefish (Septi oficinalis), as well as the common octopus (Octopus vulgarès) and the day octopus (Octopus vulgarès) 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

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 1,50000 chromatophore in a single square inch of skin

ditions 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

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 leas 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 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

(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 D



A Kashmiri boatman breaks the frozen surface to ake his way through Dal Lake, Srinagar.A

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

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 in the valley also experienced extreme sub-zero temperatures, which caused water pipes in many areas to freeze.

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.

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. "If elft the wood hamam was cumbersome, and an electric hamam would be available at the push of a switch," Mr. Wani said.

"But nowels in creater have a habit of

But people in power have a habit of

proving us wrong."

With limited LPG and kerosene in the

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.

dealer, said. An official of the Kashmir Power Development Corporation (KPDCL) said that while there had been load-shedding

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 aiready. However, due to overloading of the circuit, distribution transformers and other allied infrastructure sometimes get damaged, leading to longer nower cuts." he said.

leading to longer power cuts," he said. The official added that although the KDPCL has maintained a transformer bank to keep disruptions to a minimum, the bank also suffers more damage during 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 science@thehindu subject 'Daily page'





JUDICIOUS ROLE

Justice B V Nagarathna

We judges have to have a deep sense of restraint when we are on the bench and off the bench. That is a given. Any person who cannot have that restraint would not accept judgeship. There are a lot of curbs on freedoms

Merge to survive

Electric mobility is disrupting the global auto industry, forcing alliances and consolidation

NDIA CANNOT BE immune to the churn in the global auto industry as legacy car makers confront the challenge of new mobility solutions. Alliances and mergers are taking place — Nissan Motor Company along with Mistubishi Motors signed a memorandum of understanding with Honda Motor Company to begin discussions on a potential merger — as sales of their combustion engine vehicles are sharply falling and they have to navigate the transition to electric vehicles. This year, Nissan expects to sell three million vehicles, sharply down from 4.9 million in 2013. Nissan and Honda's business integration includes establishing a joint holding company, forming the world's third largest automaker by sales. It is likely to be operational by August 2026. Both carmakers are already exploring possibilities of collaborating on electrification and software this year. There will definitely be convestment and co-development of electric vehicles with the merger. Nisrating on electrication and software this year. There will obtain they be converted and co-development of electric vehicles with the merger. Nissan's current travails include a slump in its value as it has suffered in the US due to a lack of hybrid models, and losing out to Chinese rivals not only in the mainland but also in Southeast Asia. The US president-elect's plans to slap a 25% tariff on vehicles exported from Mexico to America hit both Nissan and Honda

But what is that both partners bring to the table? Leadership of the poten-tial merger will see significant influence from Honda. For starters, both will invest billions of dollars in electric vehicles. The massive investments involved invest billions of dollars in electric vehicles. The massive investments involved have even led Honda to partner with Sony and General Motors. This is true for not just Japanese companies but also US and European firms. Volkswagen entered into a joint venture with electric vehicle maker Rivian which is a Californian start-up. Honda is known for its strengths in hybrid powertrains and it has a strong portfolio of fuel-efficient vehicles. The car giant aims to double hybrid car sales by 2030 providing a "bridge" until fully electric vehicles become more widespread. This is advantageous for Nissan as it cannot meet the demand for hybrid gas-electric vehicles in the US. Nissan had a head start with electric vehicles like the Leaf But could not build on that advantage. But thas innovative battery technologies that can helb Honda build a global sun-

with electric vehicles like the Leaf but could not build on that advantage. But it has innovative battery technologies that can help Honda build a global supply chain for batteries. Nissan aims to launch an electric vehicle with all-solid-state batteries developed in-house, which is expected to be a game changer for the popularity of electric vehicles, including pick-up trucks.

While the potential Nissan-Honda merger — despite their sharply different cultures and management styles — has global implications, both also have operations in India. Their share of the domestic car market, however, is low. Honda and Nissan had shares of 1.4% and 0.7% respectively in November in a highly competitive market dominated by Maruti Suzuki, which is expected to outself the second, third, and fourth largest carmakers combined sexpected to outsell the second, third, and fourth largest carmakers combined this year. In sharp contrast, Honda and Nissan are languishing as they rely on limited product portfolios like the Honda City, Amaze, and Elevate, and Nissan's Magnite and X-Trail. So if there is to be an upside to their market share, they need to bring a much broaderrange of product offerings, including hybrids that can take on Maruti. Till the time it rolls out electric vehicles, Maruti is currently selling hybrids in partnership with the global auto giant, Toyota. The potential merger could also help them address regulatory chal-lenges like complying with corporate average fuel economy norms. DEMAND DILEMMA

TIGHTENING GOVERNMENT CONTROL ON CHINESE SOCIETY IS AT ODDS WITH ITS GOAL OF RAISING CONSUMPTION

Struggles with a consumer society

HINA'S ENGINEERING PROWESS has been noth-ing short of extraordinary From world-class infra-structure and eco-friendly

ing short of extraordinary.
From world-class infrastructure and eco-friendly cities to space systems and high-speed trains, China's impressive accumulation of state-of-the-art physical capital splayed adminant tole in drivingits economy. But China's physical capital suppayed adminant tole in drivingits economy. But China's physical engineering ecomplishments on the supply side have not been transferable to social engineering efforts on the demand side, especially in stimulating consumer demand.

The disconnect arises out of the modern Chinese political system, which emphasises stability and control. While this focus has enabled the country to become the world's "ultimate producer", it has not been successful in uncovering the DNA of the Chinese consumer. Social engineering through government diktastands in sharp contrast to the incentive-based, free-wheeling, individualistic spirit that shapes human behaviour and consumption patterns in the West. With the bousehold consumption share of Chinese GDP remaining below 40%, compared to around 65% in advanced economies, China has little to show fortis long-standing theotoric onconsumer-lef enotomic facility of the displaying the comment of a long the concomment of the producer, include upward mobility of income and wealth, open communication and dissemination of information, individualism and freedom of choice, diminished inequality of lifestyles, intergenerational wealth transfers, and, ultimately, the ability to belet political representatives, Western consumer in is very much an aspirational proposition.

That raises a fundamental question: Schina's political system incompatible with modern consumer culture? That upsets on the face of China's newfound techno-

STEPHEN S ROACH

authoritarianism, which seems at odds with the basic freedoms on which con-sumerism is based. Recent technologica advances (especially in facial recognition and other forms of surveillance), in con-junction with a social-credit system and tightened censorship, are all but antithet-ical to the consumer society as we know it

Ultimately, it is far easier to mobilise the state's machinery to exert influence over producers than it is to allow basic freedoms to empower

freedoms to empower consumers.That goes back to the early days of the Peo-ple's Republic, when China's producers were under the strict control of The key to unlocking potential is to convert fear into confidence, the State Planning Com-mission. And it is true a transition that requires nothing short of a fundamental shift

mission. And it is true again today as the pendure in most Orining to a trans requires must of the most of the mos

since taken on a life of its own.

Xi sharpened his focus on bad habits in 2021, when a regulatory crackdown on internet-platform companies targeted not only Chinese entrepreneurs like Alibaba's Jack Ma but also the so-called lifestyle excesses associated with video Irrestyre careging games, online music, celebrity fan culture, and private tutoring. Such state-directed social engineering suggests that the Chinese authorities have little tolerance for the sense of possibility and optimism embedded in the DNA of Western consumer sociation.

Another example of this mismatch between ambition and regulatory mindset can be found in China's repeated

amoution and regulatory in the thing short tental shift t

Monetary policy always triggers debate as theoretical arguments on both sides: repo rate induces investment

or repo rate lowers inflation are equally strong

woman. Polling data point to two reasons: concerns over sharply rising child-rearing expenses and deeply entrenched small-family cultural norms. This latter point underscores the behavioural aspects of the problem — namely, that a generation of younger Chinese have grown accustomed to one-child familles. This very human resistance to the government's attempted coercion of family planning practices is not dissimilar to Beiling's strategy to push for increased consumer demand.

The key to unlocking China's consumer potential is to convert fear into confidence, a transition that requires nothing short of a fundamental shift in the minder framing households' decision-making.

But this is precisely where the government

But this is precisely where the government has been stymied. Incentivising human

has been stymied, incentivising numan behaviour is radically different from req-uiring state-directed banks to boost lend-ing for infrastructure projects or state-owned enterprises to invest in property. Admittedly, I am providing a Western perspective on a Chinese problem, and experience has taught methat such prob-lems need to be examined from China's compressed the beautiful property. own perspective. Even so, increasing con-sumption goes to the very essence of the human experience: Can there ever be a

sumption goes to the every researce united in the human experience: Can there ever be a flourishing consumer culture with Chinese characteristics that contradicts the aspirational ethos underpinning Western societies?

The ultimate solution to China's chronic undecronsumption problem maywell hinge on these deep considerations of human behaviour. A recent meeting of China's Central Economic Work Conference hinted at yet another big consumption stimulus to come. But if Chinese authorities remain steadfast in tightening control over social norms and the human spirit, then all the stimulus in the world — from trade-in campaigns to social-safety-net reforms — could be for naught.

Europe's hottest stock has an American architect

FORCE TO SEEK a government rescue barely a year ago, Siemens Energy was an unlikely candidate for Europe's best performing stock of 2024. The fact that a General Electric spin-off, GEVernova, unwittingly assisted list rival's resurrection is even more remarkable. Yet the more investors compare the two electrical power-equipment gainst, the more the German firm should benefit. Spun out of Siemens AG in 2020, Siemens Energy was forced to ask Berlin forfinancial guarantees in 2023 following quality problems and massive losses at its wind unit. From that nadir, the stock price has since increased around sevenfold as investors bet the wind issues won't require a dilutive recapitalisation and began paying more attention to the company's gas turbine and power-grid activities, which are benefit ting from rising electricity demand. This year's 300% price gain exceeds that of any other member of the Stoox Europe 60 index.

Siemens Energy's stock market debut during the early part of a global pandemic was inauspicious: the gas and power activities appeared to be low-growth and were barely profitable, triggering significant restructuring. Things soon got much worse: In 2022, Siemens Energy agreed to pay 64 billion to purchase the roughly one-third of shares in power subsidiary Siemens Games at Iddir's laready own.

But the wind unit hadn't sufficiently taken into account the risk of inflation when pricing contracts, and had neglected reliability in its hurty to develop larger, more powerful onshore wind turbines; the cost of rectifying blade and bearing problems contributed to a 64.00 million per quarter and isn't expected to breakeeven until 2026. After pausing sales of the two problematic onshore designs, Siemens Gamesa hais two of the contribute of a first pausing sales of the two problematic onshore designs, Siemens Camesa in Individual Contributes to convince ustomers the equipment is reliable. The second coming of Donald Trump — no fan of wind power — isn't encouraging.

But in Indisglat, investors may have overreact



of Donald Trump — no fan of wind power — isn't enouraging.

But in Indisdipt, investors may have overreacted to headlines describing the rescue as a government ballout. Siemens
Energy didn't require taxpayer money per se, the main problem was banks weren't willing to underwrite its large, multiyear contracts. Berlin ended up providing counter- guarantees, while former parent Siemens Chipped in a couple of
billion euros by purchasing a stake in an Indian joint-wenture
from Siemens Energy.

The increased demand for power isn't just because of
tends like population growth, rising temperatures (spurring
demand for air conditioning) and electric vehicles. The International Energy-Agency-says global electricity consumption
could grow six times faster than energy demand until 2035,
Meanwelhle, 2024 is expected to be the first year Int af global
utilities spent more on capex than the oil and gas industry, according to GF Vernova.
Spurred also by the shift away from burning coal and oil and the need to ensure
electricity supply continuity on dark, windless days, the gas turbine market is returning to growth. Industry-wide turbine orders are not rack for their best year since 2015,
notes Norgan Stanley analyst Max Yakes. Revenue at Siemens Energy's grid technologunit gree by around one-third in fiscal 2024, with an hike of around one quarter
expected in the coming year. The division is planning to hire thousands of new staff.

Thankst customer remanances and the comment of the

ning to glown Initiasity while turnine rotters are for track to their best year sinte 2015, notes Morgan Stanley analyst Max Yates. Revenue at Stemens Energy's grid technology unit grew by a round one-third in fiscal 2024, with an hike of around one-quarter expected in the coming year. The division is planning to hire thousands of new staff. Thanks to customer prepayments, plus proceeds from the India disposal, the group has already swung back to an etcash position. But the terms of fits government rescue currently prevent the firm from paying dividends: so it's likely to try to unbook itself from that support as quickly as possible.

This divergence in capital returns — earlier this month GE Vernova a mounced a modest dividend and up to \$6 billion of sharebuybacks — is one reason why investors tend to favour the US company. While GE Vernova's wind unit has also been losing money after offshore turbines suffered bade faultres, it's not been as big a disaster as Siemens Camesa. The upshor is that GE Vernova's market capitalisation is more than twice as large its German rival's even though both companies have similar revenue. European investors have become wearily accustomed to US firms fetching a glant permium. And it's fair to say both companies trade on very high multiples of near-term earnings. Still, Siemens Energy's massive equipment and service order backlog provides a decent visibility on future earnings. If shareholders can gain more confidence the wind reliability issues are truly in the past, its breakout year could turn out to be more than a flash in the pan.

The conundrum of reporate arguments

decreases as it varies with the inflation rate



MADAN SABNAVIS

THERE IS A growing voice that the reporate needs to be cut; and this message also comes from some of the minutes of the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) meeting. The advocates of a rate cut have also reiterated that when inflation is high due

reiterated that when inflation is high due to food inflation, a high rep rate cannot quite bring down prices of food items. Therefore, logically, the focus should be on growth which could be under pressure. The important point here is that the MPC has been mandated to target head-line inflation at 49% within a band of 29%. This target is east in stone and bringing in any other consideration may be viewed to be outside its mandate. So, if one wants to leave aside food inflation it would mean going back to the mandate and changing

be outside its mandate. So, if one wants to leave aside food inflation it would mean going back to the mandate and changing it. There are talls of revising the composition of the consumer price index, which is afternough. Once done the weights would change, and if food has a lower weight it should reflect in the overall index. Now, the Reserve Bank of India (R81) did consciously deviate from this mandate during Covid-19 when it did everything to support growth that in turn would help preserve employment in tough times. So, an exception was made when the repo rate was lowered to 49b, With conditions being normal, it would be hard to justify the stance of doing everything to support growth. Besides, it is generally argued that growth is stable and that the 5-49b number for Q2 was a billy. The projection for GDP growth is still in the range of 6.5-79b, a far cry from the nega-

tive growth rates during Covid. Also considering India remains the fastest-growing largee conomy, the justification of rate cuts to support growth is not fully in place. The next question to ask is whether cutting the repo rate actually increases lending and hence growth. The theoretical argument is that lower policy rates make banks lower lending rates and industry borrow more to invest leading to higher growth. But in reality, it does not work in this simplistic manner.

The RBI has been pub.

manner. The RBI has been pub-lishing what is called the weighted average lending rate (WALR) on fresh loans weighted average lending rate (WALR) on fresh loars since 2015-16. This rate is more relevant from the point of view of borrowers as it reflects the actual cost of funds and normally tends to be lower than the quantum of reporate change. In this nine-year period, on two occasions growth in credit increased when the WALR declined. In 2017-218, the increase in credit growth was 13.3% asagainst 10% in 2016-17, while in 2021-221 twas 8.6% compared with 5.6% in the previous year. There was otherwise a direct relation between the voice in the previous year. There was otherwise a direct relation between the voice in the previous year. There was otherwise a direct relation between the voice in the year of the year. The year of the year. Year of the year.

The history of the repo rate shows there are almost the same number of increases and

WALR rose cumulatively by 148 bps. Yet credit growth spiked by 15% and 20,2% in FY23 and FY24. This is not surprising because industry does not borrow merely because interest rates are low. Credit is linked to a purpose which is always related to demand. Companies borrow when they need to expand capacity as demand increases. If demand growth is sluggish, there is less incentive to borrow. After all, borrowing and not using the machinery to generate output does impact profitability. This also applies for the retail segment, which has borrowed a lot post-Covid as there was pent-up demand as well as consumption that the shows as it is shown as a consumption and borrowing and not always and the same an

The history of the repo rate shows there are almost the same number of increases and decreases as it varies with the inflation rate. Since 2010 it was raised 23 times and decreased 18 times. The argument that companies don't borrow because interest rates are presently high is not convincing. Besides, if the economy is dong well and demand is robust, the higher interest cost can be absorbed (the ratio of my leng well and demand is robust, the higher interest cost can be absorbed (the ratio of interest cost to tumower varies from 2-5% in non-finance industries) or passed on. Therefore, to assume that lower interest rates are necessary for credit to hicrease or for investment may be misplaced.

This also raises the issue of the ideal reporate. There are studies which talk for a real rate of 15-29%. This is something that has to hold over a longer period and not on amonthly basis. Hence if we are targeting 4% inflation, a repo rate of 5.5% or 6% loss fair. But inflation, a repo rate of 5.5% or 6% in the region of 4.5-5%, in which case the range of 6-6.5% seems appropriate.

Monetary policy always triggers deal as the oretical arguments on both sides —repo rate induces investment or repor rate lowers inflation are equally strong, if one were mould be compenied. A Keynesian would pitch for the growth paradigm. Ultimately it is a judgment call taken by the MPC with a lot of subjective coming in. This makes the exercise extremely interesting.

Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Downturn for India Inc

Apropos of "Winner, but for how long?" (FE, December 23), most results of the listed companies show a tepid or lukewarm topline growth for quite a few quarters. It is inevitable that this would bring the stock prices down and thus erode the value of the premoters' these. The previous promoters' shares. The revival of demand is key to get the wheels of Indian economy moving. Wages and salaries have not kept up with

inflation, and the starting salary in the top-notch information technology sector has barely changed in the past decade. With disposable incomes declining, households are generally postponing purchases until better times. India Inc must understand that the good times are not going to last if this trend in demand continues. The sooner they realise it, the better it is going to be for all concerned.

—Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra

Modi's Kuwait visit

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Kuwait is pivotal in fortifying the bond between India and Kuwait, emphasising economic cooperation and cultural exchange. The visit could lead to enhanced trade relations, with Kuwait being a major supplier of crude oil to India, and opportunities for Kuwait investments in sectors like information technology, pharmaceuticals, and renewable

energy in India. The presence of a significant Indian workforce in Kuwait alrois brings discussions on labour lights and remittances to the fore, aiming to improve expatriates welfare. Modi's engagement with the Indian diaspora in Kuwait underscores the commitment to maintaining strong links, enhancing the bilateral relationship.

—Amarjeet Kumar, Hazaribagh

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

- Ramnath Goenka

FORMULATE PLANS TO ARREST RAPID FOREST DEGRADATION

HE 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-q-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 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 den-sity 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 im-provement 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 county'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 scrubs. The scariest 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 biodiver-sity, 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 wor-rying trend as climate change looms larger.

FILLING ASHWIN'S SHOES WILL BE A BIG CHALLENGE

AVICHANDRAN Ashwin's retirement announcement came out of the blue. Not that it was unusually sur-prising 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 rari-ty—will not be easy. There are not many in the domestic circuit who could come close to the veteran. Jalaj 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 Ko tian 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

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 play ers. The Book Post was one such essential intervention

OR the last 97 years, Time magazine has been anointing a staple of Time and Neussueek, 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 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 influence 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 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 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 ou understanding what it does. A cleverly structured algorithm in 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. We reconomy, our buying decisions, our consuming decisions and our very being. It's scar, but it is amidst us. None of us c

Anyone with a smartphone under-stands 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 BUOOR





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 belps 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.

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 un.

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. Physicals apart, it is a mean machine. It is a multi-sensor equipped animal. I will stop calling it a

machine now. It's an animal with an al-gorithm that is more alive, kicking and learning oriented than any before. Of the

Jearning oriented train any otere. Of the 28 sensors strategically placed in it, there is one on the egg tray. I have space for 24 neatly placed eggs. Every time the eggs are taken out, the algorithm is quick to calculate and work out a replenishment schedule. Over a period of time, my refrigerator is learning my family's love for eggs and is planning how much to replace and when.

My fridge, in the bargain, is never empty. And never over-full either. My refrigerator has learned my wife's baking love and the periodicity of her passion. It keeps pace with egg replenishments, just as it plans for everything else my refrigerator is proud to stock. Give it time, and the refrigerator will tell me what I want and when. Life is ensier than before. Life is boring as well. Less routine. Less replenishment planning oriented. In time my pal the refrigerator will tell me why we should not be consuming so many eggs a week for a family of 4. It, he, she or they (I have started respecting the algorithm that put my refrigerator mind together) might even want to guide me to the latest research on the subject of how many eggs are good.

The algorithm is more alive than before. It is influencing everything. It is making a lot of things easier than ever before. In many ways, it is giving birth to do and what not to do. In the beginning I flought man made the algorithm. Today, the algorithm is making me.

My list of detailed and involved algorithm interventions in our lives today the algorithm is making me.

My list of detailed and involved algorithm interventions in our lives consulted in the proper of the algorithm and its superabilities to be the biggest intrusive and influencing factor in our lives.

Many of us will not realise it, but there is a little bit of the algorithm in ur lives algorithm is waiting in the wings, just as it is waiting to give all of us wings, even as we silently complain as to how a whole lot of decision-making is not in our hands anymore.

the year, the algorithm.
(Views are personal)

(harishbijoor@hotmail.com)

RELIGION IN THE TIME OF UNCERTAINTIES

few months ago, Elon Musk said 'woke' was a virus and he would not rest till he destroyed it. Apart from other motivations, he said he 'lost' his young son to the left as the progressive establishment wholeheartedly assisted the boy's irrevocable transition to become a girl

What must a father or mother do when What must a ramer or momer up when they lose the right to protect their children from what they consider legitimate personal choices when the wards are legally minors? The problem is not personal. It is cultural, social and political. When does a child's individual preference of the problem is not a trible property of the problem is not person. ence get precedence over a well-meaning and god-fearing family's rights?

When does a child's individual preference get precedence over a well-meaning and god-fearing family's rights?

Except there is no god, the family, too, is a disintegrating unit in the West. In The God Delusion (2005), Richard Dawkins Critiques the idea of a supernatural deity and argues against the 'god hypothesis'. He contrasts a creator-designed world with a naturalistic worldview, where the universe is governed solely by physical laws. Dawkins is not the first to challenge he idea of a creator. Since the 1850s, when Charles Darwin published On the Origin of Species, the idea of god has been on a shaky ground. But at no point in history has he/she been more challenged. Secularism, a kind of deification of the human, has taken centre stage. Humanity's move from divine right to human rights and the individual's central loe in the universe seems to be a second stage of the Renaissance. But if neither god, king, priest, mother or father are acceptable as figures of authority, how does that crowded absence impact society? Remember, these are the days when the very idea of the hero is dead. Can secularism fill the void? Not too well, it turns out.

To a great extent, this explains the results of the recent US elections, in which a strong patriarchal, anarchist-libertarian like Donald Trump won against a seemingly stable, warm and rational person like Kamala Harris.

Even more than the dire economics of the American situation, MAGA has been a cultural correction. Commentators described it as a fork in the history of civilisation' because they thought the fringe and the 'looney left' had taken over the American mainstream culture.

In 21 Lessons for the 21st Century, Yuval Noah Harari discusses the role of nationalism and religion in contemporary society Hesuggests that in times of uncertain.



C P SURENDRAN

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 commu nity 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 accept-ed notion of nationalism. Can there be an



Since the 1850s, when Charles Darwin nublished On the Origin of Species, the idea of god has been on a shaky ground. Yet, in times of uncertainty, people often gravitate towards nationalism and religion to find meaning and stability. So it can be a reliable tool to unify the multiverse of India

England without the Anglican church and Anglo-Saxons? Or India without lord Ram and Hindus? Without these fictions, it becomes hard to define a nation.

So, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi is trying to 'unify' the multiverse of India through appeals to traditional forces such as religion, he is merely tapping into a rich, reliable vein. One of the great challenges of power is to hold things together. On the other hand, Rahul Gandhi would like to play the underprivileged card as he believes a resurgence in that quarter amounts to national progress.

But that, too, is politics: Rahul is, after all, the opposition. Because it is not very difficult to solve the caste impasse. For example, if you arrive at an acceptable mini-

mum income for the underprivileged, then really all you need to do is directly transfer sufficient affirmative doles to their ac-

velist, and screenplay writer. His lates One Love and the Many Lives of Osio

counts. In the space of a generation, they are likely to find themselves more propor-tionately 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 supremacism may eventually frag-ment societies into tribes of competing grievances, making their return to broad-er, unifying narratives more appealing. Indeed, this is possibly why the world

grievances, making their return to oreacier, 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 left), believers tend to right 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 fore 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. Houelbeecq'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.

(Vieus are personal)

MAILBAG

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.

Rajarao 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, I am afraid state governments may boycott future council

eetings as a protest. yaprakash 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 easily protect the area with a fence or cover the top. But the lethargic attitude and less awareness among owners is the reason for this type of immantal incident.

Secure borders

Secure borders

Ret: Bangladesh stirring trouble to hide
crisis (Dec 23). It is a matter of concern that
Bangladesh is going the Pakistan way in
radicalism and indomanetalism. 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 Sridharan, Chennal

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 relebrate. At a time when people are being divided so much, such an article is more than welcome.

VSuresh, Chittoor

Festive cheer

Pessive crises:

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

Perema, Thanjavur

comment

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

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 ad-

dress 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: Al. 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.

IOBAL 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

To be 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 sugges-

tion 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 reverb 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

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

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 COPINATH USING AL

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 barrelling 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 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

have your say!







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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 regined 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 that you consider the property of the committee also made a slew of measures to improve the farmers' welfare.

wedfare.
Such a report, coming as it did
amidst the raging protests of farmers
on the issue, should have been de-libented by all the parties, which could
have paved a way for providing the
nuch-needed succour to the much
wronged Indian farming community.
The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Agriculture, Ani-mal Hus-

bandry and Food Processing, chaired by former Punjab Chief Minister Charanjit Singh Chanin, strongly pitched for raising budgetary alloca-tions, paying suitable compensation for stubble disposal and rolling out a debt waiver among a slew of meas-ures.

a doct waver among a sieve of measures.

The report comes against the backdrop of protests by farmers' organisations since February at Punijab and Haryana border, spearheaded by Samyukta Kisan Morcha (non-political) and Kisan Mazdoor Morcha (KMM), for a legal guarantee of MSP on all crops. Vened by vagaries of nature, insufficient credit, market volatilates and fleecing by various layers of middle men and officialdom, a large number of farmers 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 finan-cial stability for farmers, reduce the severity of farm distress driving sui-cides by farmers across the country, It also sug-gested certain measures that help mitigate market volatility and alleviate the sufferings of debt-ridden farmers.

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 ru-ral 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 contri-bution to employment declined from 81 per cent in 1981 to 58 per cent in 2018. The rot had set in a long ago. But successive budgets paid no at-tention to the issue. For instance, the percentage share of agriculture in the total Central outlay declined from 3.53% in 2020-21 to 2.54% in 2024-25.

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 re-port drives home the message. Legally guarancing 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' Tears welling 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 such as strengthening cooperative farming on the lines of Amul model

farming on the lines of Amul model are also begging attention for years.

As the MPs had no time or concern about their plight, farmer leader lagit Singh Dallewal, 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

2024 is a year of bullet & ballot

A S the year 2024 nears its end, 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 marred by the madness of war. This includes the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the Isra-el-Palestine war, Syriás 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

LAW SHOULD CHAR IS OWN COURSE

YOU Reditorial that 'Celebs and politicos fail to act fairly' is an apt editorial. Actor Alba 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 leader was arrested or fixed. In Alba 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 flza.

Rakir 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 unneces-sary debate in the assembly and ensuring smoother crowd management. I wonder in place of Allu Ar-Jun, if a bunch of Alla fans created such a scene, would they have not been taken into custody. Even then will BIP and other parties have attacked the government? Of course, the state government could have acted without much noise to prove that they don't discriminte.

Nagarajan, Hyderabad**

CREATING anything out of nothing is the sole technique of political masters. The editorial 'Pushpa-2' row: Celebs & politicos fall to act fairly (December 23) is exactly true to its real sense. Death of Revath and serious injuries caused to her son Sritej 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 Allu Arjun is made a scapegoat for no fault. Police are very enthusiastic to establish the case with more weight by exhibiting reels repeatedly in media.

Ramalakshmi, Secunderabad

A BSOLUTELY, both celebrities and politicos 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! Allu Arjun should have checked with the police before venturing out on that fateful day. Ever since that stamped eo-curred, 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.

Govardhava Myneedu, Vijayawada**

A fier 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 Allu Arjun and film personalities for not personally consoling the victim's family so far. Tol-twood, 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 Strieb uts of arn on paid his promised amount of Rs 25 lakh which is most minimal. He can pay one crore, a burdenless 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

Israel orders 'impossible' evacuation

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

Israel launched bomb, artiller, and sniper attacks.

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

its electricity, the Anadolu Agencyreported.

"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 addi in a statement on Sunday.

"We cannot execute these." in a statement on Sunday. "We cannot evacuate these patients safely without assispatients safely without assistance, equipment, and time."
"Every bomb that slams into
Kamal Advan 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 "unprece-dented"
attack in a message Saturday
evening local time:
The Israeli military has

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

created an intimidating en-vironment that makes peo-ple feel it's unsafe to leave. Mahmoud said he lost con-tact with the hospital Satur-day night. Responding to reports from the hospital on Sat-urday. World Health Or-ganization (WHO) director Tedros Adhanom Ghebreye-sus called for a cease-fire around the hospital and for the protection of patients and staff. Tonight's reports of bombardment near Ka-mal Adwan Hospital

and staft. Tongists reports of bombardment near Ka-mal Adwan Hospital and order to evacuate the hospital are deeply worrisome, Ghebreyseus 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 Patestine 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. sieged enclave.

sieged enclave.
Arguing that the "re-lentless assaults on Kamal Adwan Hospital—a sanctu-ary meant to save lives in northern Gaza—are part of

or not. In this case, the faccal 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 con-nection 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

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

quadcopters, 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 Derie Balah." The Israeli military has ordered evacuations from the hospital, but they have also created an intimidating environment that makes peo-WAR ON GAZA HOSPITALS TARGETED AGAIN 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

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.

take days.

In a second message on Sunday, he linked the IDF's attacks on Kamal Adwan to similar attacks on hospi-tals similar attacks on hospi-tais throughout Gaza. In Octo-ber, a report from the Unit-ed Nation's Independent International Commis-sion of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory con-cluded that "Israel has per-

petrated a concerted policy to destroy Gaza's healthcare system, 'carrying out nearly 500 attacks on healthcare fa-cilities be-tween October 7, 2023 and July 30, 2024. Abu Safiya said that the IDF did not provide hospi-tals with the support they needed when it ordered evacuations, such as equip-ment and safe passage: "We call on the world to witness needed when it ordered evacuations, such as equip-ment and safe passage: "We call on the world to witness this pattern once again. We have repeatedly requested assistance and have openly 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 75,000+ civilians in north Gaza. We call on the world

setermination 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
healthcare system. "These
attacks are ongoing and have
not stopped for nearly 80
days since the ground aggression on the northern
Gaza Strip Gover-norate
began, which has claimed
the lives of thousands of 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 hospital, the IDF told The Wash-ington Post that it had not targeted Kamal Adwan on Saturday to its knowledge. It 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 Reu-ters. The IDE further told Reuters on according to Reu-ters. The IDF further told Reuters on Friday that it had helped to evacuate more than 100 patients from Kamal Ad-wan 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 34 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

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 jazzera. "We appeal to the whole world to bring this war to an end." The official Gaza Health Ministry death toll from Israels 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 Annesty International and accounted for beneath the rubble. This month, both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch issued reports labelling Israel's as-sault a genocide.

'WASTE TO WORTH'

BE EXCRETA WISE

The country needs to turn wastewater into water and not pollution leagues have studied the excreta sums of different cities. The city "shit-flow" dia-gram 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 toi-lets 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 could be either connected, or not, to a sewage treatment plant (STP). This STP could be working, or not. In this case, the faceal sludge—human excreta—could be conveced but no

EVERY society must un-L'derstand how the excre-ta it produces is managed. It teaches us many things about water, about waste, about technologies. It also teaches us about economics and politics: of who in our societies is subsidised to defecate. Every society must con-

SUNITA NARAIN

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 prac-tices to turn wastewater into water and not pollution. Today, the discharge of effluent is adding to our health crises as socie-ties continue to drink this 'Sewage'-laced water. All this then points to the solution ahead—the way to take that "wasted" water and make it "usable' so that it can be returned to the hyit can be returned to the hy drological cycle.

Over the years, my col



The fact is, this treated water and sludge is rich in nutrients. Today, the glob al nitrogen cycle is being de-stroyed 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

that in most cases, these underground drains have either lost their connec-tions—they need repair— or are not connected to the

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 sur-vey. in most cases, our sur-vey found that the septic tank

is not built to any speci-fications-it is a "box" to fications—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?

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 his for treatment. Septic tanks are decentralised

raste collection systems instead of thinking of build-Instead of thinking of build-ing an underground sever-age network—that is never built or never completed— it would be best to think of these systems as the future of urban sani-tation. After all, we have gone to mobile telephony, without the land-line. Individual septic tanks could be the way to achieve full sanitation solutions. For this, the government.

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-

This is where the real op-

portunity lies. The fact is, this treated water and sludge is rich in nutrients. To-day, the global nitrogen cycle is being destroyed because we take nutrient-rich human excreta and file spose 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 treat-ed sludge for soil enrichment. But this also means that we need new standards to be set for reuse of treated wasterwater, 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 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.

water-wise.
(Writer is Director Gener-al of CSE and editor of Down To Earth, an environmental-ist who pushes for changes in policies, practices and mind-sets; Courtesy: https://www.

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 emphasizes the need for enhanced urban planning, better public transportation options, and environmen-tal policies to tackle the challenges of such rapid motorization. Traffic jams are a big problem in Bengaluru. On the other hand, parking their webicles 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 R472-85 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

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



ANIL SASI LOOKING AT 2025

A PRONOUNCED DIP in econ APRONOUNCED DIP in economic output in the first three quarters of 2024 notwith-standing, 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 dur-ing their rand-in dames of the superior their careful property have a Whether 6%.

ng their rapid-growth phases. Whether 6%-olus growth would be enough for a country

ing 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 bring is tback to trend after data
aberrations triggered by the pandemic and
the subsequent buoyancy on an ahnormally
low statistical base. Finance Minister Nirmala
Sitharaman has said the lower-than-expected GDP growth of 5.4% in the second
quatter of FV25 was only a "emporary 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 ZSEGDP expansion as "overly optimistic".

Weeks later, RBI was forcet to name is foreof 7.2% GDP expansion as "overly optimistic" Weeks later, RBI was forced to pare its fore-cast by more than half a percentage point.

THE POSITIVES

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

Government spending

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 kept 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 are
likely in Q3 — merely signals a progressive nor-

FY25 — another set of dismal numbers are likely 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 side in growth from 8.6% to 7.8% to 6.7% to 5.4% in 2024.

"...lt 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 so mething more fundamental as the ability of the state to spend what is budgeted...



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 hantha Nageswaran said at a CII event on December 12.

US

After a couple of quarters of likely sub-After a couple of quarters of likely suboptimal economic output, GDP growth is
projected to settle around 65.5%, which could
mark the real rate of growth going back to
trend. The question that RBPs overestimation—and subsequent correction—poses is
this; did the central bank keep interest rates
high for longer than needed because it hab
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 RBPs 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.

change in the second half of the fiscal and later One indication is the surge in order backlog for capital goods companies that suggests invest-ment activity is likely to grow going forward. For instance, in utilities, 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, pro-vides 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 Pronab

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 Enterprise (MSMEs), which have been hit repeatedly by shocks such as demonetisation, implementa-tion of GST, and the Covid-19 lockdown, are

tion 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 meant 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 reducation level of post-graduate and above were reported as work-graduate and above were reported as work-graduate and above were reported as

graduate and above were reported as work-ing 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



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 moder-ated to 0.8% in Q2 FY25 from 1.2% in Q1 FY25. m 2.5% in FY24 and 10.8% in FY23, Nomura said.

Savings-investment gap

Savings-investment gap
The decline in the household financial savings rate could present another challenge. The
RBFs latest Financial Sability Report shows net
financial savings of households fell to 5.3% of
CDP in PY23 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 bonus, minus anymoney 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 e-routier growthy.

Sliding credit growth

Growth in credit has been falling -households, which mostly borrow to finance 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 islows and corporates are unwilling to borrow.

While bad loans have been coming down, there are new concerns over a significant rise

While bad loans have been coming down, there are new concerns over a significant rise in NPAs in the personal loan and credit card segments. Both these types of credit are un-secured and carry high interest rates. In November 2023, the RBI had increased risk weight on the exposure of banks towards consumer credit, credit card receivables, and non-banking finance companies.

Fiscal prudence

hit a new high in October 2024 — a key posi-tive. On the structural drivers of India's share gains in global services exports, Mishra and his team say the disaggregation of global serv-ices value-chains, rapid increase in global cross-border telecom bandwidth, and the

surge in remote-working are adding to the de-mographic trends supporting the growth in India's services exports to developed markets. In November, India's services trade exports

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 Al.

big cities are pressure points and blamed the "muted demand" partly on high food infla-

tion, Carmakers are pointing to worries on de

THE NEGATIVES Sluggish investments Performance is tapering off for many cor porates, and investments are struggling. Executives at Tata Consumer Products Ltd have flagged concerns over "softness" in ur-ban demand; those at Nestle India have said big cities are preserve points. 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 PY24 will stabilise public debt at around 83% of GDP—a promising indicator of sustainability, given India's growth outlook, according to the IME.

But competitive loosening of purse strings by states poses a fiscal problem. The IRB has flagged concerns over a sharp increase in expenditure by states on various subsidies, including farm loan waivers and cash transfers.

cluding farm loan waivers and cash transfers Axis Bank's India Outlook report said tha by 2025, 14 states would have some version of "handow" school and the some version 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 Bs. 19 lakh crore every year, or about 0.6% of the country's GDP.

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.

NEXT: CLIMATE

EXPLAINED ENVIRONMENT

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

JAY MAZOOMDAAR

THE 18TH biennial State of Forest Report (ISFR-2023) by the Forest Survey of India(FSI) found a marginal gain of 156 sq km in forest cover, and a sizable 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 now under forest (21.78%) and tree (3.41%) cover. But this leaves all good to the country cover.

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 lates bleenial 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 2025 threshold at the turn of the millennium. Between 2003 and 2013, forest

Forests within forest

biotic pressure, a forest can improve or de-grade to the next density category — a VDF patch may thin to become a moderately dense

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 (410,75 sq
tmat 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
blotic pressure. a forest can improve or de-

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

LOST	2021-23	2003-13	2013-23	2003-23
VDF to NF	295	288	1,277	1,565
MDF to NF	3,362	6,714	15,086	21,800
VDF to scrub	24	5	65	70
MDF to scrub	313	144	1,153	1,297
Disappeared	3,994	7,151	17,581	24,732
VDF to OF	228	134	1,128	1,262
MDF to OF	5,166	6,414	22,249	28,663
TOTALLOSS	9,388	13,699	40,958	54,657

9,3	888	13,699	40,958	54,657		TOTAL GAIN	10,1	04	10,025	46,0	002	56,027
iΕ	1	2021-23:716	1 2003	3-13:-3,674	-1	2013-23:5,04	14	20	03-23:1,370		Source	r: ISFR 2003-23
cane	av av	er 70%): MDP.Moden	ate Dense Fores	t/canopy 40-70%	LOF:	Open Forest (camapy)	0-40%1:5	hrub/c	anapy under 103	: NF: N	n-Fores	t/no canony)

dicates the broad trends over two decades

Forest balance sheet

NETCHANG

FOREST DAILANCE SINCE THE STREAM SHOWS THE STREAM SHOWS THAT SHOWS THE STREAM SHOWS THE STR

CHANGE IN DENSE FOREST COVER 2003-2023

NF to VDF NF to MDF

Scrub to MDF

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 nonforested or scantily forested land to dense or even very dense forests in successive two-year windows during 2003-2023. These are all and the state of year windows during 2003–2023. The plantations, say experts, because n

2021-23

839

102

1.494

8,610

2003-13

3,631

105

3.903

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

nopy under 10%); NF: Non-Forest (no canopy)

2013-23

7,554

1.043

11.701

2003-23

11,185

1.148

15.604

20 years, with 716 sq km gained in the 2021-23 cycle alone. On paper, though, India's dense forest cover has grown by 21,601 sq km (63) between 2003 and 2023 due to a series of un-explained revisions of data presented in ISFR-2005, 2009, 2015 and -2021 which added 20,232 sq km of dense forest to the inventory.

The implications

Under this opaque veneer of overall stabil-ity and growth in forest cover, the trend of steady replacement of natural dense forests with plantations has been criticised by experts.

Plantations usually have trees of the same age (and often the same species), are vulner able to fire, pests and epidemics, and ofter act as a barrier to the regeneration of natural forests which are more biodiverse, perform a wider range of ecological functions, and support numerous species.

support numerous species.
Old natural forests also stock a lot more can bon in their farme and in the soil. In 2018, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) flagged India's assumption that plantations reach the carbon stocklevel of existing forests in just eighty users.
Plantations are often promoted for their rapid growth which can achieve carbon targets faster. But they are also harvested more readily, defeating climate goals in the long run.



EDITORIAL

Ambiguous path to clarity?

ndia, fondly dubbed as the 'mother of democracy', is no stranger to the ceaseless cycle of elections. With 28 states, eight union territories, and nearly a billion eligible voters, poils have been a constant feature of the nation's political landscape. Against this backdrop, the debate around feasibility and implications of 'One Nation, One Election' has been reignited with the introduction of two related bills in the Parliament.

On paper, the ONOE idea seems logical. Hold-ing simultaneous elections for the Lok Sabha and state assemblies could indeed reduce campaign costs and strain on administrative resources, and ensure more focused governance. Supporters of the idea view it as a game-changer—their argument being it could boost indias GDP by up to 1.5 per cent, as projected by former President Ram Nath Kovind-led committee. Here, it may also be pertinent to note that the Centre-ruling BJP has been backing, in fact pushing, this idea for quite a long time. Vociferously criticised by the Indian National Congress and other opposition parties, the issue has, Congress and other opposition parties, the issue has, obviously, created a rigorous political slugfest.

obviously, created a rigorous political slugfest.

It cannot be denied that beneath the surface of the ONOE proposal simmers a disturbing network of challenges and concerns. Critics have already warned that simultaneous elections could undermine India's federal structure, which would lead to centralisation of power and weakening of state autonomy—a deadly blow to India's much-cherished principle of federalism. It is an unanimously accepted fact that India's democracy thrives on its diversity, and regional parties often serve as critical voices for local aspirations. Aligning all elections risks tilting the balance in favour of national parties, potentially marginalising regional voices and eroding democratic accountability. This is the biggest and most notable criticism that questions the Intent behind the introduction of the Bills in the parliament, as well as its structural inadequactes. The logistical challenges of implementing this system are indeed massive. India's electoral machinery would need substantial investment in voting machiners, paper audit systems. seven to imprementing this system are indeed missive. India's electoral machinery would need substantial investment in voting machines, paper audit systems, and security personnel to ensure a seamles process for nearly 900 million voters. A 2015 report suggested that new equipment alone could cost over 92 billion rupees. The government and Ramnath Kovind Panel have thus far failed to explain how they will cover the new expenses, and whether it will really be as inexpensive as it is made to look like. Furthermore, synchronising terms of existing assemblies and Parliament would require constitutional amendments, ratification by at least half the states, and a consensus that seems elusive in the current political climate. Another major road-block is the pending delimitation exercise, which can have sharp correlation with the ONOE proposal. Rushing through the scheme before the delimitation exercise takes place could lead to inconsistencies.

The historical precedent of simultaneous elections, practiced from 1951 to 1967, might seem interesting to some, as they cite the same for promoting the idea of ONOE. However, one must not ignore the fact that political instability and early dissolutions of state assem-blies back then had led to the staggered elections we see today. Reviving the old system would demand significant political deft and coordination among India's diverse political spectrum. An all-round consensus is required to avoid the recurrence of the same disorder, in case ONOE becomes a reality.

India's democratic framework offers a delicate balinclus democratic transeours chares a deficate balance of unity and diversity, as well as central authority and regional autonomy. Any reform, especially one
as sweeping as simultaneous elections, must prioritise
inclusivity and consensus. Rushed decisions risk allenating sections of the population. Ultimately, it can be said
that the essence of democracy lies in representing the
will of the people, not in imposing uniformity for convenience. While the vision of 'One Nation, One Election is
ambitious, its own whether it strengthens ambitious, its success depends on whether it strengthens or stifles the democratic spirit that makes India unique.



A PIVOTAL MOMENT

This refers to the editorial, "A delicate path forward". The recent Special Representatives' meeting in Beijing betweer India's National Security Adviser Ajit Doval and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi marks a pivotal moment in bilateral diplomacy. This first dialogue in nearly five years, following the 2020 Galwan valley clash, reflects onatria anjoornacy, rms jirs aaanogu in rearry jire years, following the 2020 Galwaw valley clash, reflects a cautious yet significant shift toward normalizing ties between the two Asian giants. Central to the discussions was the implementation of the October 2024 disengagement agreement in Laadak, Both sides committed to maintaining peace and tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control, a critical step to prevent future conflicts. The meeting also underscored a six-point consensus aimed at deepening cooperation in areas such as border trude, data sharing on trans-border rivers and the resumption of the Kallash Massanovar Yatra. While the agreements signal progress, challengs persist. The border dispute remains a complex and sensitive sizes, compounded by historical grievances and mutual mistrust. The emphasis on confidence-building measures and step-by-step resolutions demonstrate pragmatic diplomacy. However, translating these commitments into actionable change will require sustained political will and vigilance.

- KHOKAN DAS, KOLKATAvia email

millenniumpost.in

On the brink of transition?

Amid governance failures eroding public trust in Chief Advisor Yunus' interim government, Bangladesh may be witnessing a sharp political shift, with the BNP—led by Tarique Rahman—capitalising on the volatility

SHANTANU MUKHARJI

India, in all its wisdom and political and diplomatic maturity, is watching the developments in

Bangladesh very closely

ald appear from es that the Ba games that the Bangia-desh Nationalist Party (BNP) is playing that it is now clear it is on a fast track to hog the political space in Bangladesh and fill the vac-uum created in the wake of the regime change in Dhaka. Pa Chairman Tarique Rahm Chairman Tarique Rahman is issuing statements at regular intervals from his hideout in London, calling for unity and constantly cautioning the people against any attempt by Hasina to make a comeback. With most of the crimir cases against him withdraw cases against him withdrawn, he is naturally emboldened and remains active on social media and in the vernacular press, trying to marginalise all other political forces and ensuring they do not get the slightest elbow room for any manoeuvres.

manoeuvres. In a politically significant development, the party's Gen-eral Secretary, Mirza Fakhrul Alamgir, spent several days Alamgir, spent several days conferring with Tarique in London and returned only recently with a fresh blueprint. The party, in a carefully crafted plan, is keeping the freedom fighters and the pro-liberation narrative alive. This is partic-ularly relevant because Vic-tory Day (December 16) has just passed, and Bengali emo-tions are still reminiscent o tions are still reminiscent of the bloody sacrifices made by intellectuals and the country during the liberation war 53 years ago. This is a formidable realities. years ago. This is a formidable political weapon that the BNP will likely use in its political machinations to come back to power after so many years in oblivion.

The BNP has also started wooing the Hindu minority, who continue to suffer large-sale structites at the hands

who continue to suffer large-scale attroctites at the hands of religious extremists and fanatics. In this way, the party aims to wean away any sym-pathy that the remnants of the Awami League (AL) or the Jamaat are trying to gen-erate for vote-bank purposes. At the same time, the BNP is deftly maintaining good rela-





tions with those lobbies upset with developments following the arrest of ISKCON leader Chimmoy Krishna Das. The party, with ambitious political designs, is striking a delicate balance between all the political camps that matter in the current power game. Such signals clearly indicate that once the remaining cases against Tarique are cleared (major cases against Tarique are cleared (major cases against Tarique are cleared (major cases against Tarique are cleared franjor asset with the clear for a fine and the clear for a fi

ing muscles to exhibit to the people that BNP was still a

force to reckon with, fanning anti-India sentiments. Their march was to protest against India's alleged interference in the internal affairs of Bangladesh awell as to register their ire against the vandalism of the Bangladesh Consulate in Agartala. The march, however, was stopped 1 km before the Indian border.

In the meantime, under Chief Advisor Muhammad Yunus, there is a thought Yunus, there is a thought Yunus, there is a thought Yunus, there is a thought

Chief Advisor Muhammad Yunus, there is a thought being fostered that the almost defunct South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), founded by General Zia, must be revived. Many ideas are also being generated that Bangladesh, in order to isolate India, must try to join the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), commended to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), commended to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), commended the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), commended the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), commended the Asian Countries to become economically and commerciation of the Asian Countries to become economically and commerciations. Asian countries to become economically and commercially independent of India. Political analysts in Dhala feel that it is time for Bangladesh to seek new partners and friends and move on, ignoring India, though in reality, this is easier said than done. Crucially, Tarique Rahman is silently crafting a policy to adhere to these plans, as today there is a virulent anti-India sentiment prevailing in the country. It is now easier to capture the mindset of the people, who mindset of the people, who are living in a state of uncer-

tainty due to the failed and poor administration of the Ymus-led government.

Another important factor to remember is the considerable following of the BNP among the armed forces, mainly because of ex-President Zia. There must also be many adherents of the Jamas in the Cantonment, but they can be easily sidelined by the relative charisma of the BNP, which, in the absence of the relative charisma of the BNP, which, in the absence of the relative charisma of the BNP, which, in the absence of the relative charisma of the BNP, which, in the absence of the relative charisma of the BNP, which, in the absence of the relative charisma of the Jamas and the state of the property of the p and harboured anti-India
Indian insurgents, giving their
activities a fillip, history bears
testimony to this. Indian security and intelligence agencies
are alert on this score.

Meanwhile, fast-changing political developments in
Bangladesh clearly indicate.

Bangladesh clearly indicate that Chief Advisor Yunus is

gradually losing his grip on governance, and people too are losing trust in his administration, with no area of activity under control—be it economic downsilde, rising prices, failing law and order, or below-par external affairs pol-icies. Knowledgeable quarters below-par external affairs po-icies. Knowledgeable quarter-within Bangladesh are not rulwithin Bangladesh are not ruling out a change in the administration sometime next year,
with the army now playing
a tacit role, asserting a definite roadmap, possibly for a
new dispensation, upsetting
all the plans currently in the
pipeline. They claim it's just a
question of time. This could
be the likely reason why the
BNR under Tarique Rahman,
is in a hurry to come to power,
and much will depend on how
Mirza Fakhrul, with his new
charter received from Lonharter received from Loncharter received from Lon-don, implements the plans on

don, implements the plans on the ground. India, in all its wisdom and political and diplomatic matu-rity, is watching the develop-ments very closely, especially after the recent visit of For-eign Secretary Vikram Misri. The Bangladesh Foreign Office shouldn't underesti-mate India or assume that all is lost between the two coun-ries, and it must dissed the tries, and it must dispel the wishful thinking that Banglawishful thinking that Sangladesh can conveniently wipe India off its drawing board. Regimes come and go, but a country with solid democratic foundations, like India, with established institutions and a wibrant democracy, will continue to pursue its policies and objectives irrespective of whether a government is favourable to its desires. The Bangladeshi media, which has sadly taken on India, targeting its media in particular arither acerbically, must take note and tone down its rhetoric, as it is doing more disservice to blatt. doing more disservice to bilat-eral ties than contributing to

any repair. The writer is a retired IPS officer, Adviser NatStrat, and a former National Security Advisor in Mauritius. Views expressed are personal

shone forth undiminished. His message in his last address to

Onward to Nagpur to Meet Doctorji

The historic meeting of Hedgewar, Golwalkar, and Syama Prasad Mookerjee in the summer of 1940 coincided with the expansion of the RSS and paved the way for India's unity amidst calls of division



ANIRBAN GANGULY

While the

year saw an

Sangh's work, 1940 was also a

expansion of the

challenging year for the RSS

t was in the summer of 1940 that Sri Guruji and Dr Syama Prasad Mook-erjee first met. On May 16, 1940, Dr Mookerjee left Calcutta for Bombay to attend the Hindu Mahasabha's work-Calcutta for Bombay to attend the Hindu Mahasabhak working committee meeting to be held in Dadar between Maylls and 19. The Hindusstan Standard reported that Dr Mookerjee, then member of the Working Committee of the All-India Hindu Mahasabha had "left for Bombay on Thursday (16.5.1940) evening to attend the meeting of the Committee to be held at Dadar on May 18 and 19. It also reported that 'Dr Mookerjee will stop for a day at Naggar on his way back from Bombay, Intimation was received in Nagpur, that Dr Mookerjee would be coming on May 20 to meet Doctorji:

1940 was a significant year for the RSS. It was significant in terms of the Sanghis growth and spread By that year Judkashad started spreading throughout the length and breadth of the country' and in the Officers Training Cammi (OTC) in other Contrarys Training Cammi (OTC) in Germs (OTC) in Germ

the country' and in the 'Offi-cers Training Camp' (OTC) in Nagpur, there was representa-tion from across the country. Nagpur, there was representa-tion from across the country. The editor of an informative and succinct biography of Dr Hedgewar. 'Dr Hedgewar: the Epoch Maker', records that 'over 1400 Swayamsevaks took par' in the OTC and out of them 600 were from the Frontier Prov-inces, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Blara, Bengal, Madras, Karna-taka, Maharashtra and Gujarat'. In his authoristive biogra-

taka, Maharashtra and Gujarat:
In his authoritative biography of Dr Hedgewar, Rakesh
Sinha, for instance, writes of the
RSS's rapid expansion during
that early phase, and how it was
'beginning to spread gradually
in other provinces as well. Sinha
writes that '1.500 Swayamewaks beginning to spread gradually in other provinces as well.' Sinha writes that '1,500 Swayamsevaks attended the 1935 winter camp held at Nagpur' and 'by 1936, there were 200 shakhas of the



war first mat in 1940

Sangh throughout the country with 25,000 Swayamsevaks.
Come 1938 this figure touched
350 with 40,000 Volunters.
This rose to 500 and 60,000
Swayamsevaks respectively by
1939 and at the beginning of
1940, the number of shakhas
increased by a further 200,000
Swayamsevaks to the RSS fraterrity. While the number of
shakhas remained constant at

ternity. While the number of shakhas remained constant at the beginning of 1941, the number of Swayamsevaks had now reached 150,000.

The RSS's footprint and presence had begun percolating across India. Its message was being absorbed and accepted across remains and occial diseracross regions and social diver-sities. It was a difficult year and yet the Sangh grew at a steady and measured pace. There were continuous reports coming in of its 'unceasing growth.'

continuous reports commig in of its' uncessing growth.

In a letter to Golwalkar, Dr Hedgewar wrote of how in the rapidly changing circumstance, our activities are also growing in full steam. It is clear from this that our organizational growth does not depend on any particular programme. Such indeed is the great potential of our ideal and our method of work. Our mission is bound. of work. Our mission is bound to succeed despite any odds.' Succeed it did, over the decades, despite concerted attempts to suppress and decimate it. The 1940 summer OTC in Nagpur, thus, was the result of a farsee-ing plan drawn up by Doctorji. During this planse, he would often be heard asking Swayam-revuks as to how many of them would be needed for achiev-ing the freedom of the coun-try? This often-made query indicated the direction of his thinking, In a letter, Dr Hedgethinking. In a letter, Dr Hedge-war articulated his plan which could make the Sangh most effective. In the course of the next three years, Dr Hedgewar proposed, of making at least proposed, of making 'at least three percent of the population of cities and one per cent in vil-lages' Swayamsevaks 'equipped with full uniform.'

Anticipating and keenly following national develop-ments, while being treated at Rajgir between February and Ioliowing mastices are remarked at Rajgir between February and mid-April 1940, for his illness, Doctorji, hardly took rest. He saw the Muslim League harden its stance and adopt devious and well-strategised methods to push through its demand for a separate Islamic homeland. He insisted on redoughing the effort to spread the land. Fee insisted on redou-bling the effort to spread the Sangh's work, 'Expand, grow faster, faster and faster still,' was his message to Swayam-sevaks in those crucial days.

Many often heard him mutter,
'O, look there! The year 1940
is already passing! And yet we
have achieved nothing we con-tinue to be a subject nation. But someday we shall attain free-dom.' While Jinnah schemed to break India, Dr Hedgewar, the unalloyed patriot, then working on a different dimension and in his last days. was exercised with

his last days, was exercised with the thought of India's freedom. While the year saw an expansion of the Sangh's work, 1940 was also a challenging year expinite the year saw an expinite the year saw an expansion of the Sanghis work, 1940 was also a challenging year for the Sangh, 9 May 1940, Dr. Hedgewar, the Sanghis soul and founding essence, had fallen seriously ill. Ceaseless organizational work and travel, execution for the mission he had undertaken, and an increasingly indifferent health had finally taken its toll. Though he insisted on staying at the Nagpur OTC camp. Doctori could not participate in its serioul not participate in its serioul for the Nagpur OTC was the last RSS programme of Dr. Hedgewar's life. It was, writes Rakesh Sinha, truly reflective of the Sanghis all-India character. Describing its conducting programme, the popular English weeldy Ashrutar wore that there was an unanticipated crown of the witness the closing. that 'there was a crowd to witn

crowd to witness the closing ceremony of the OTC. There were many important personaltites from Nagpur and other parts of the country. Sangh leaders from other provinces were also present. Within fifteen years of its founding, the RSS had undoubtedly and surely started emerging as an all india movement. It was in these circumstances that the meeting between Doctorij and Syama Prasad took place with Sri Guruji also present. Within a month of this historic and significant meeting. Dr Hedgewar died at the

message in his last address to Swayamsevaks, was on the need to 'organise the entire Hindu society from Kanyakumari to the Himalayas.' The Sangh, he exhorted, 'should not be the preserve of only the Swayamsevaks, but must cover the entire Hindu people outside the Sangh fold. Our object should be to show to the people the true path of national salvation' and that of national salvation and that path was that of organisation — the only path to salvation for Hindu society lay in organiz-ing itself and in unity, and the Sangh, he said, 'will strive on to accelerate the pace' of being organized and united. 'As we continue our efforts,' he fore-told, 'a golden moment will arrive when the entire Bharat will stand as one undivided and told, a golden moment will arrive when the entire Bharat will stand as one undivided and indivisible entire. No power on earth will then cast its malicious eyes on Hindusthan. We have not set out to assault arrybedy. But we must always be vigilant and resist any outsiders' efforts to assault us! I was an unequivocal message for unity and a full-throated call for organized action against the forces that were bent on creating disruptions and division. 1940 was also a politically loaded year for India. In March that year, while Doctory iconvalesced and worked in Raigir, the infamous Lahore Resolution was passed by the Muslim League led by M.A. Jinnah, demanding Pakistan. The meeting between Dr Hedgewar, Gol-walkar and Dr Syama Prasad Mookerjee in Nagpur thus in May 1940, took place against the backdrop of these momentous developments.

The writer is a member of the National Executive Committee (NEC), Big and the Drector of NECC, Big and the Drector of Nector of Nect

National Executive Committee (NEC), BJP, and the Director of Dr Syama Prasad Mookerjee Research Foundation. Views expressed are personal

WORDLY WISE

TAXATION IS JUST A SOPHISTICATED WAY OF DEMANDING MONEY WITH MENACES.

- TERRY PRATCHETT

The Indian **EXPRESS**

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

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

TTAKES FOUR hours to reach Kuwait from India but it took four decades for the Prime Minister [of Inda]. "PM Narendra Modi 's comment during his visit to Kuwait

— the last Indian PM to visit the country was India Gandhi — underscores the

diplomatic and strategic neglect of a region that should have been of visit impor
tance 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 russents. The protocol was that in work and the protocol and 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 institutionalise defence cooperation, as well as on other areas such are newables. For India, Kuwait is also a key source of investment — singly as well as the current newatters, ror mata, kuwant is also a key source or investment — singly a weet as the cur-prest president of the Gulf 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 mod-

or in into a great dipionant successes of the tast occasion or not appeared to the cape and the 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 it 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

NITS 55TH meeting, the GST council deferred taking a decision on several press-ing issues. These included the demand for lowering the tax on health and life in-surance 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 tion 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 or goods and services where dimerent tax rates are imposed, ror instance, a new montrasing, Sp. Strinivasan, Managing Director of Coimbator's Annaporant Horlets, 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 been packed/frozen parathas and rotis, India stands out as one of the few countries with such a complex indirect tax structure. Of TIS 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 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 oncess 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 cons

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

OST PEOPLE, NAYSAYERS 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 totem 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, over 7,000 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 Hindmotor 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 taxi, 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 trythm, the Ambassador mean the joy of a family evening out or the in-ritation of rush-hour commute where the litary of complaints about the traffic or the con-

inflation or trust-note commune where one inlandy occumplines about the trains or the con-dition of roads bound the driver and commuter in flishilp.

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?

Arrest the decay



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

GIRISH KUBER

"SOMETHING IS ROTTEN in the state of Demmark" laments Marcellus in Shakespeare's Hemlet. Many a Maharashtrian 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 writnessing over the years. True that it took almost a month for chief minister Devendra Fadnavis to allocate portfolios even after the landslide victory in state assembly elections held on November 20. It is also true that the Blrash Shinde-led Shiv Sena and Ajit Pawar's NCP, even though fairly acquainted with the Bly's style of functioning, found it difficult to come to terms with the changed political reality in which the BJP has acquired the status of Big. Brother and as such laid claim over a bigger pie of the power. This political slug-feast, 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 Fadnavis wasted no time in admitting the stress on Maharashtra's finances and ninding "newer waws" to moop up more rev-ways" "SOMETHING IS ROTTEN in the state of

ister Fadnavis 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 riches state back in the game which, of late, has been in close competition with southern states. It is easier said than done —Fadnawis is aware that it is much easier to fix the lacklustre administration than to cement the state's fragmented polity, the BJP sown 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,

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: Ajit Pawar and Elenath Shinde. Add to this melee, Raji Thackeray's Maharashtra Navnirman Sena that Bjl' 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 fructifies shot up to such an extent that industrial investment became less and less attractive. No new would dare say this for obvious reasons, but corruption in the corridors of Maratalay as 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, Kamataka, and even smaller ones such level or the supplement of the state's investment climate. edly 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 re-ality. There are hardly any big-ticket indus-trial 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' finifa projects that are often touted as development. There are two responses to this development narrative.

are often touted as development. There are two responses to this development narrative. First, by making it clear that it was never all hunky-dowry before these political machi-nations began post-2019 election results. The rotin 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 unde the same regime that Hyundai opted for Tamil Nadu over Maharashtra when the South Korean giant found J Jayalalithaa, the then chief minister of Tamil Nadu, to be more 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 driving out, mega investments in the Nanar refinery project, a joint venture between India's Fortune 500 Global Oil majors — IOCI, BPCL and HPCL — and Saudi Aramo. "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 then chief mini

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 infa-talk and will not be unfair to dismiss them as a "please contractors" exercise.

This makes the task before Fadnavis neatly cut out. His first and foremost challenge will be to bring Maharashtra' histatise which he had conceived in his first term as chief minister to attract investment. It stopped because of ter to attract investment. It stopped because of Covid and the political mess afterwards. Fadnavis, as chief minister, will have to ensure a smooth ride for industrialists and investors even if this means disamning some of his re-cently acquired colleagues and allies. To his credit, one must admit that after the initial hiscups and teething troubles, Fadnavis has started showing flashes of administrative and started showing flashes of administrative and political acumen by denying "important" port-folios 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

"KHAMMAGHANI. KAISI hain aap? Is every-thing well with the family? Mirchi wada khaaya?" Ustad Zakir Hussain said over the phone on a cold December evening as Inav-igated the dusty lanes of a village near Kumbalgarh during a holiday. He was visiting India for a series of concerts. His fabulous India-jazz outfit, Shakti, with John McLaughlin, his friend of 50 years, was about to complete half a century. This is how Hussain's friendshins were.

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

Long, steady and fun because he always made an effort.

He was calling from his Napean Sea Road nome in Mumbal, where his parents had moved in 1970. Whenever Hussain returned to India from San Francisco, he stayed on the first floor of Simila 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 biyani made for her eldest son whose now American palette couldn't handle spicy flood, where his Abbaji, Ustad Allah Rakha, would sometimes stand near the living-room window with him, and do tabla bot riyanz (the moment from the iconic Raghu Rai photograph), and where his' bbd renched 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 Rajashani 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 when the sundersor for another person. This is also probably when the sundersor for a mother person. This is also probably when the sundersor for a mother person. This is also probably when the sundersor for its audience for

obsessed word of music, it snowed deep re-spect 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 thought 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

During a performance in Delhi for Kathak exponent Pandit Birju Maharaji S 75th birth-day, he said. "Maharaji id nace on my fourth birthday... Now that Maharaji il nace on my fourth birthday... Now that Maharaj ji has turned four, I thought 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. But at a tabla workshop, it was about challenging himself in diverse ways of arriving at lenging himself in diverse ways of arriving at the sam (first beat of the rhythm cycle). While the sam (first beat of the rhythm cycle). While accompanying aristes, it was about surren-dering to the art of sangut and finding ways to make the "nain instrument" shine. He was always on guard, focused, like the first day of independent driving. "The day I start to think that I have it in me, is the day it'll be the end of Zakir Hussain. Which is why it's important to remain a student," he told me once. Among so many artistes that I meet, most of whom want traff lime how ever at the vare of whom want traff lime how ever at the vare.

Among so many artistes that I meet, most of whom want to tell me how great they are, there are only a handful who find ways to gaze inwards, polishing their skill so that it sounds better the next time. In Zakinji's case, the beats were always carried out with precision and passion but they were also kep tin check by an assiduous process of self-reflection. That's what lifted 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 concrets. No disagreement course, kept attending his concrets. No

course, kept attending his concerts. No dis agreement 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, here 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 is 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," stof all darsing, with a huge smile. I couldn't stop my sheepish grin.

all darling, Happy Valentine's Day," said Hussain with a huge smile. Loudn't stop my sheepish grin.

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

No one teaches you how to grieve for an artiste. One can desperately try to hold on to the music's belliance, the rigour or the many memories — the Taj Mahal ad; his vulnerability when he was the pallibearer for Shiv Kumar Sharma's hearse, holding on to the national flag that wrapped him; the fun he had with the brass hand that was trying to impress him with a jugalband during his daughter's engagement; there is so much to be grateful for as Hussain departs, Ver it feeds, 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 pleassure was always ours.

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INDIAN EXPRESS

DECEMBER 24, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

LS POLLS START

THE BASIC SHAPE of the eighth Lok Sabha will be cast when voters in 379 constituencies accounting for more than 70 per cent of the seats exercise their franchies. The political fortunes of 28 central ministers led by PM Rajiv Candhi, 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 has been refused by the chief inspector of fac-tories in Madhya Pradesh, in view of the "breach of the provisions governing safe-guards" and the "inadequacy of provisions for safety." After receiving the application from Union Carbide India on October 18, it was re-jected by the chief on December 14. This comes after the killer gas leakage from the fac-tory that killed over 2,000 persons.

TAMIL BILLS RIFT

DIFFERENCES WITHIN THE Sri Lanka Cabin er the government draft bills to resolve the unic problem have come into the open with lustries Minister Cyril Mathew, a Sinhales Buddhist hardliner, publicly voicing his op position to them. The position of Buddhisr 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 cen-tral control that it very nearly grants the

SIX KILLED IN DHAKA

SIX PEOPLEWERE killed in two separate inci-dents 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 lo-cal administration. Security forces deployed in major cities made more than a thousand arrests as picketing, marches and minor clashes were reported from around the coun-try during the second day of the strike.

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A deeper politics for our times

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



BY YOGENDRA YADAV

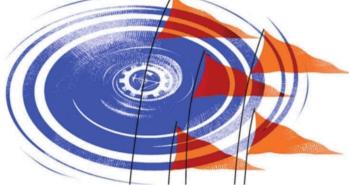
BY YOGENDRA YADAV

IT WAS THEIR singing that first caught my attention. Unusual for political meetings, the singer was tuneful, the soning 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 MC, an engineering professor who held a "sansalar shivit" for underprivileged youth in Thane. The "MC" in his name stood for "Manglad Copal" — he had chosen to include his mother's name along with that of his father. Nishas Shivurlar did not sing, but the tale of how this unassuming activist had organised "partystwar" downer "abandoned" by their husbands, was music to my ears. And then there was the self-efficing determination of Vilas Bhongade, ayoung Dalit activist the house of the history of the self-efficing determination of Vilas Bhongade, ayoung Dalit activist which was the self-efficing determination of Vilas Bhongade, ayoung Dalit activist meeting the self-efficing determination of Vilas Bhongade, ayoung Dalit activist may be self-efficing determination of Vilas Bhongade, ayoung Dalit activist may be self-efficing determination of Vilas Bhongade, ayoung Dalit activist may be self-efficing determination of Vilas Bhongade, ayoung Dalit activist may be self-efficiently be self-efficiently be self-efficiently be self-efficiently of the self-efficiently of the self-efficiently of the self-efficiently of the self-efficiently determination of the self-efficiently of the self-efficiently determination of the self-efficiently of the self-effici

focused on organising teenagers and youth through a routine of daily "shakha" where a bunch of local youngsters came toggether 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 Same (1899-1949) orsimply Same (pronounced Saa-ne) Guruji, an iconic figure in Maharashtra. The song I first heard in that convention – Ahvan to e kehri dharma/isgala prem arpow – was penned by Sane Curuji, indeed, Sanjeve Sane, who sang the song, was named after him.

It is hard to box Sane Guruji in a simple category like a socialist leader. A faceless 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 Aui a book about his mother — have shaped the sensibilities of generations in Maharashtra. His book Bharatiya Sanskriti offers a deep appreciation of Indian culture as a never-dissolv-

book Bharatiya Sanskriti offers a deep appre-ciation of Indian culture as an ever-dissolv-



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close to the kind of strength

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.

and position that it enjoyed in

ing quest for renewal (navinata ki kshanbhangurvitir), 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, easte or gender.

Along with 82 other organisations and under the leadership of fits current President Nitin Vaidy, the RSD bas just conducted "Sane Gaunji 125 Abhiyan", a year long celebration of his 125th birth anniversary, Over the years, I have come to see howwide and deep the Seva Dal's footprint has been in the purogamitor progressee politics of Maharashtra. It spawned many organisations — Chharta Bharati, Sanajiwadi Mahila Sabha, Muslim Satyabodhak Samagi, Samajiwadi Adhyapak Sabha, besides Antarbharati to foster abond among Indian languages, and Seva Pathakfor constructive work. Organisations lile SM Joshi Socialist Foundation and Sane Guruji Memorali Trust are working to keep this legacy alive.

Many of the better known leaders in all walls of Maharashtra's public life have been associated with RSD. These include political leaders like S M Joshi, Mrinal Gore, Madhu Dandavate and Bapu Kaldate, social activists like Sudha Verde Parmila Dandavate, Narendra Dabholka, Hamed Dalwal, Baba Adhav and Medha Patkar, theatre and film personalities like Sriam Lagu, Nilu Phale and

Narendra Dabholkar, Harmeed Dalwai, Baba Adhav and Medha Patkar, theatre and film personalities like Sriram Lagu, Nilu Phule and Smita Patil and intellectuals like Acharya Javdekar and Ganesh Devy, Maharashtra's public life would have been much poorer in the absence of the thousands of activists, pro-fessionals, writers, teachers, journalists be-sides home-grown organisations, move-ments and magazines that were associated with RSD. They have been a bulwark to de-fend constitutional values and democraticin-stitutions in the face of the relentless onstitutions in the face of the relentless on-slaught from the RSS-BJP.

shaught 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 polities that involves political education of citizens, cultivation of constitutional values among the younger generations, creative framing of fissues and agenda, grooming of political works-

community called India. This is what Rashtra Seva Dal did. This is what we lack so

Rashtra Seva Dal did. This is what we lack so desperately today.

The lessons of Seva Dal model are not dificult to see. First, we need to target not just the youth, but school-poing teenagers as well. Second, the focus should be on character building activities through spots 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 struggle against injustice must be comb with nirman, constructive action, And fifth

with nirman, constructive action, And fifth, while intervening in the arean 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 Kazhgan, Kerala Sahiyas Shastra Partishad, Karnataka Rajya Rajyatha Sangh, Dali Sangharsh Samit in Karnataka, All Assam Students Union, Chhattisgarh Mukit Morcha. Chibatta viva. Sangharsh Samit on Karnataka, All Assam Students Union, Chhattisgarh Mukit Morcha. Chibatta viva. Sangharsh Samit on Karnataka. All Assam Students Union, Chnattisgam Wilst 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 o experiments was very stort, protogram inany or these organisations continue to exist today. They testify to the need and indeed the possi-bility 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 ac-quiescence in political bigority, we should be asking ourselves: Have we built the institu-tions that cultivate constitutional values? tions that cultivate constitutional values? tions that cultivate constitutional values? Where are the studycicles in their contemporary awatar? 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 point is to act on it before it is too late. Here is a challenge, all file mission, waiting for the Sane Gurujis of our times.

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

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



IN A CRICKET-CRAZY country like India, it's a significant development when chess makes headlines and captures the nation's attention. D Gulesh'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 swear all historic performances from our players on the international stage. Today, India boats of many chess talents who are ready to carry forward the legacy of Viswanathan Anand.

In a thilling World Chess Championship, Culesh displayed exceptional composure and skill todefeat defending champion Ding litera 75-65 blocome India's second world champion after Anand. Breaking records is no thil's play — It alzes decades of dedicated effort and years of hard work. By winning the Itit de Lincerha also mig the Itit de Lincerha also mig

champion after Anand. Breaking records is no child's play – it akes decades of dedicated effort and years of hard work. By winning the title at the age of 18, Cukesh also became the youngest world champion ever, breaking the four-decade-old record of legendary Carry Kasparrov, who claimed the title in 1985 at 22.

His victory has also shone a light on a new, impairing side of his personality. Beyond Cukesh's brilliance as a chees prodigy, he is a humble and grounded young man rooted in Indian values. He spoke highly of his defeated opponent and expressed gratifude to the Almighty, the nation, society, ream, family, and parents for their support. Atrue hero cleichates victory and accepts defeat with equal grace. Gukesh's parents, Rajinikant and Padraukamra', have gone through alet. They gave up their careers and comforts to flight their sors a sapirations.

Another Indian grandmaster, Arjun Erigais, 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.

player ever to cross this prestigious mark. Erigaisi now holds the fourth spot in the

Erigais now holds the fourth spot in the latest global rankings.

Arthe 2024 FDE 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 stady and studied aggression of our players. At the same time, our powerful Pentad, the C-5 — comprising forandmasters Harlia Dronavalli and visibalia Rameshibabu along with International Masters Divya Deshmuth, Vantika Agrawal and Tania Dronavatil and Vashali Rameshbabu along with International Masters Divya Deshmukh, Vantika Agrawal and Tania 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 ri-vals blink first. That's what Indian chess players learnt from Anand and have now taken it to another level. Indian chess has

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 urgia (energy) and anubhava (experience), with Anand mentoring and guiding new talents. Five-time world champion Anand was once the lone flag-bearer for India, keeping the country's dominance alive on the chess map and breaking the morropoly of the eratvihile Soviet Union and Western nations in chess. Watching indian players dominance to the players of the production of the production of the players of the production of the players of the coaching, and sustained player support. Orgegor Caleswid was more than a coach to Gulesh. He acted as a sherpa in his as-cent to the world title. Notably, Gulesh also benefited from the guidance of Paddy Upton, renowned for his sepertise in rela-ta conditioning and experience with the Indian cricket and hockey teams. With a budget of 8s 65 crore, the feder-ation has laid the foundation for a thriving chess ecosystem in India. Key initiatives in-clude a dedicated chess development fund, financial backing through player contracts,

financial backing through player contract

clude a dedicated chess development fund, inancial bacing through player contracts, and extensive coaching programmes at levels. The federation also plans to support district and state associations and introduce an India-specific ACF rating system.

Challenges persist. They include integrating chess into school curricula, creating elearning modules, identifying emerging the clean, and strengthening grassroots academies to ensure AICF's long-term sustainability. None of these are insurmonable. The game was once a household staple in India, with every village boasting gifted players. People had a natural flar 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 poportunity. Gulsesh's victory and the feats of his contemporaries will undoubtedly inspire them to feram big.

Chess isn't agame that India has adopted. It is a homegrown sport deeply wowen 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 Ardenaline as any other sport, Now, Indian Ardenaline as any other sport, Now, Indian Arthold.

golden chapter — a story the world will ea gerly watch unfold.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

RUPEE & DOLLAR

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Currency THIS REFIERS TO the editorial, 'Currency matters' (IR. 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 ear of strong dollar dominance fueled by robust US economic data and a persistently 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 merchandise trade deficit has added to the strain. Immediate measures like RBI interventions provide temporary relief, but the long-term focus must shift to-wards bolstering economic fundamen-tals. By turning challenges into opportu-nities, India can chart a more resilient path forward, ensuring that currency fluctuations become a stepping store rather than a stumbling block. Khokan Das, Kokata

KEY TO WELLNESS

KEY TO WELLNESS
THIS REFERS TO the article, For the self and the world (IE, December 23). Life is getting back on track in today's post-covid age. However, many lifestyle changes made during the pandemic compromise mental, emotional, and physical well-being. Meditation is a practice rooted in Indian tradition, powerful tool which helps in reducing stress. It can help with bringing physical and mental calmness, It enhances positivity and emotional steadiness, can strengthen one's immune system and can help alleviate aches and pains. As the writer suggests, meditation is a human being's happiness quotient and it is worth commending that it has

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, a piritually, help a person self-realise. specification can also note at the booty, as spiritually, help a person self-realise. That is the power of this age-old Indian tradition. The UN's recent declaration of International Meditation Day is a great step towards embracing and pro-moting the benefits of the exercise. Prachi Dixit, Jodhpur

POLL MONITOR'S TASK

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). Ademocracy stands 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, this
Opposition's concerns about the Centre Opposition's concerns about the Centre destroying the integrity of the EC can-not be ignored. LR Murmu, New Delhi

Traditional with modern

Indic ideas can impart more rigour to good governance

VINAY SAHASRABUDDHE

US PRESIDENT-ELECT DONALD Trump's de-cision to create a new Department of Government Efficiency and the shooting down of a CEO of a premier healthcare com-party are two apparently unrelated incidents. However, it's possible to discern a common message in Trump's creation of new depart-ment and the gruesome incident. There is a growing realisation for the need for better and more people-oriented governance. As we be-gin celebrations of the birth centenary of one of India's most popular prime ministers, Atal Bihar Vajpayce, who was known for his em-phasis on good governance, it is pertinent to phasis on good governance, it is pertinent to revisit the concept in the context of the chang-

investit the concept in the context of the changing world order. India's experiments 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 parallely 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,

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 expine 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 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 sovernance must underline the importance of flawless, result-oriented implementation. Since implementation cannot be ensured without commitment and passion by those in charge at the underline the importance of flawless, result-oriented implementation. Since implemen-tation cannot be ensured without commit-ment and passion by those in charge at the grassroots level, attention must be devoted to their mindsets. Herein lies the importance of PZG2, a term coined by Prime Narendra Modi when he was the chief minister of Guisar PZG2 is mea-penel penel questrance. Gujarat, P2G2 is pro-people good governance
— it's the Gangotri 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. 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 restuning gender justice. Sab ka prayas, or "everyone making an effort," migs in the bud any inclination to outsource development to the government. In his blog written at Kanyakumar in May last year, PM Modi undersocred the importance of the India concept of anyoday, 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 more purposeful and result-oriented. As the Bhagwad Gita under-sult-oriented. It is against this backdrop that India orig-

lines, adhishthan is an important element at

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

The importance of Raj Dharma as reiterated by Kauthlya provides a framework for leadership for modern democratic governance. Kauthlya's concept is in fact an elaboration of the essentially indic concept of mytodryo. The Arthashastra reiterates that, "The king should shoulder the responsibility of children, old, childless women, diseased persons and aboveal 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 Shhaji Mahara's approach towards kingship, many have used the term "upblogshoonya swami" - the complete ownership of subjects sams any personal aggrandisement.
India must share the responsibility of shaping the global discourse, drawing from the treasure of its civilisational workieva. The idea of South-South Cooperation would get new impetus if traditional societies take the lead in reforming the apparatus of deminating powers.

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