

THE ASIAN AGE

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Big challenge for Germany amid changing world order

The Germans have voted and short of saying "No Trump please, we are German" they have done everything to keep out an overbearing American influence. It is all but certain that Friedrich Merz of the conservative centrist Christian Democrats will be elected Chancellor. Once he strikes a deal with the third-placed SPD he can try to fulfil his promise of dealing with the new world order in Trump's second regime by seeing to it that Germany strengthens its own defence even as it continues to support Ukraine in defending itself in its war with Russia.

The stakes in a German election that invariably throws up mixed results got even higher this time as the far right Alternative for Germany, or AfD, backed by Elon Musk canvassing openly for regime change in a country that is neither that of his birth nor the one he is a resident of, was aiming for power at the expense of the centrist parties. AfD finished an impressive second but Merz will have no truck with it in sharing power, and he can afford to take that stance as he can weave a simple coalition of CDU and SPD and meet the next government with a simple majority.

The geopolitics of the world has been reduced to such a state that transatlantic machinations were so openly afoot in shaping a new order in which the US may be ready to abandon

Germany along with the rest of Nato and EU members as Trump is showing an incipient tendency to lean towards an authoritarian troika in Washington, Moscow and Beijing. Merz has suggested that he could seek nuclear cover from Britain and France if the US pulls out of Europe even as anxiety has taken over with the prospect of Ukraine so uncertain as Trump waxes and wanes over his peace deal ideas.

Of course, the businessman Merz, who owns a private jet and has never held public office before, must first form a coalition with the defeated Olaf Scholz's centre-left Social Democratic Party and, perhaps, the Greens before he can begin to govern. And there will be his compelling domestic priorities like convincing his people that sections can be found for the sharp rise in the cost-of-living index that hurts even more with no matching pay raises and the immigration problem which became such a huge poll issue that much of former East Germany seems to have voted for the AfD and the others have been demanding relief from Merkel-era policies that allowed unfiltered immigration.

Keeping the nationalist, anti-immigrant far-right at bay politically may be a task that Merz would have to leave for a little later even as he fights his own relative unpopularity while having to take on this stupendous task of trying to lead Europe in trade and security issues with Trump and reinvigorate a faltering economy that is a greater worry as Germany is Europe's biggest economy. The clearly anti-establishment vote that has changed Germany's political scene means that the AfD is here to stay and the centrists are facing the biggest crisis in their identity and their politics.

PM's drive on obesity welcome

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's call for an anti-obesity drive seeks to address one of the challenges that the country faces — growing incidence of lifestyle diseases among Indians.

The country has already got the dubious distinction of being the global capital of diabetes, contributing 22.7 per cent of global diabetic patients. However, the most alarming statistics relate to children — 73 lakh boys and 52 lakh girls were found to be obese in 2022 compared to just two lakhs in 1960.

Obesity was higher among urban people at 44.17 per cent compared to 36.58 per cent in rural areas. Similarly, 44.6 per cent of the educated is obese compared to 38 per cent of the uneducated because of sedentary lifestyle and consumption of fast foods.

According to an estimate, the annual edible oil consumption per person in India is 20 kg, which is over six times more than the 2.9 kg person in 1960-60. The WHO's ideal recommended per capita annual edible oil consumption is 12 kg per person.

The country's edible oil consumption increased faster than the production. India imports over two-thirds of its oil demand or 14.5 million tonnes. India's dependence on imported edible oil could send food inflation into a tailspin if the dollar gets strengthened phenomenally.

As part of achieving self-sufficiency in oil, a NITI Aayog report suggested a roadmap for increasing local oil supply and controlling oil demand through "behavioural approach", which include spreading awareness among people about ill effects of higher consumption of edible oil.

Mr Modi, the best communicator of the day in India, appears to have taken upon himself to educate people about the adverse effects of higher amounts of oil. His decision to rope in 10 celebrities from diverse fields coming from across India will amplify his message against excessive use of edible oil, which is not good for the health of people as well as the economy.

THE ASIAN AGE

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Editor

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AI revolution looms: Can India make a difference?

Indranil Banerjee



While technology has been an economic game changer through-out history, it has perhaps never been as pressing or critical as it is today. The rise and fall of corporations, societies and even nations today are entwined on technological advancement. And at the vanguard of this ineluctable dynamic is AI, or artificial intelligence.

Today, the leaderships of nations across the globe are aware, however dimly, of the criticality of AI. Not all, however, are in a position to do very much about it, except to look on while the leading players in this field race ahead. The clear front-runner in the race is the United States, with a handful of giant corporations illuminating the road ahead. Racing to keep up is the world's second largest economy, China, which is pouring billions to ramp up its AI capabilities and has recently come up with its astonishing AI genie, DeepSeek.

Other nations that have thrown their hats into the ring include India, France and a host of other European countries. The world-wide interest and nagging concerns regarding AI were reflected at the recent AI Action Summit co-chaired by France and India in Paris on February 10-11. Doing the honours were Prime Minister Narendra Modi and French President Emmanuel Macron.

The aim of this gathering was to find out if it was possible to pool together diverse national resources to stay in the AI game. This comes from the recognition, stated in the AI Action Summit declaration, that the "rapid development of AI technologies represents a major paradigm shift, impacting our

citizens and societies in many ways". The issue was how to diversify the AI ecosystem and narrow inequalities in the field. The summit statement called for "an open, multi-stakeholder and inclusive approach that will enable AI to be human centric, ethical, safe, secure and trustworthy, while also addressing the need and urgency to narrow the inequalities and assist developing countries in capacity-building so they can build AI capabilities".

Significantly, the United States, which is far in the lead in the race, declined to be a signatory to the summit's goal even though it participated in it. US vice-president J.D. Vance, who represented the country, evidently saw no percentage in a joint approach when his country was in fact winning. "The United States of America is the leader in AI and our administration plans to keep it that way," he declared, adding that other foreign countries could partner with American AI leaders if they wished to expand their own use of AI.

The 32 countries which signed the summit declaration are all lagwards, which includes China, India and France. They all want to establish rules of the game and try to prevent the United States from running away with the prizes. But this is going to be resisted.

Vice-president J.D. Vance made it amply clear that he would not tolerate any attempt to regulate the development of AI in a manner that would constrain its rise in the United States. "At this moment, we face the extraordinary prospect of a new industrial revolution. But it will never come to pass if over-

cash, it has outdies of valuable human resources and a vast and highly functional digital ecosystem. Political will too is not lacking. Prime Minister Modi, as he said at the summit, recognises that the world is at the dawn of the AI age and that "this technology was fast writing the code for humanity and re-shaping our polity, economy, security and society".

The Prime Minister's call for "collective global efforts" appears to be a reflection of the realisation that India cannot do it alone. Currently, India might be the largest consumer of AI but to become a producer like ChatGPT, DeepSeek or Alphabet's Gemini requires humongous investment in research as well as the construction of mammoth data centres where computing power is measured in terms of raw electricity consumed.

Such gigawatt consuming computing behemoths are only just beginning to come up in India. The India AI Mission launched in March last year with a \$10,000 crore budget seeks to accelerate the process. The Prime Minister's France visit tied up collaboration with France to build small-scale nuclear reactors for powering data centres.

Sam Altman, the man behind ChatGPT, had initially expressed scepticism about India's AI ambitions, but of late has admitted that the rapidly declining cost of AI hardware could allow smaller players to enter the race.

For India, the two positive factors are political resolve and intellectual talent. The Indian top leadership's interest and intent on developing AI can only be good for the country in the long run. If nothing else, a strong dose of AI could help reform the courtship and elephantine government-bureaucratic machinery and propel the country towards a new era of innovation.

The writer is an independent commentator on political and security issues

LETTERS

LEFT ISN'T RIGHT

The resurgence of right-wing populism is threatening the very basis of Western liberalism. What explains citizens' support for such parties as the AfD in Germany or for such leaders as Donald Trump and Giorgia Meloni? Is it simply a reaction against liberal values, or are there more profound socioeconomic causes at work? It is essential to address these movements instead of rejecting them to comprehend the changing political environment? How do liberal democracies make changes in response to these without jeopardising their essential values?

Anshu Bharti
Begusaraj, Bihar

FEMININE TOUCH

THERE WAS a very pleasing snapshot in the papers today of two ladies, side by side, cheerfully smiling. What of significance is that both are politicians, one the new CM of Delhi and the other the erstwhile CM and now the Leader of Opposition. What adds to the uniqueness of the frame is that it was captured inside the Assembly, where bonhomie and political grace have long been beloved to the Jurassic Age. Women are known to handle rivalry with far greater aplomb and retain focus on public issues far longer a time than men. Atishi was seen to be highly articulate and incisive while Mrs Gupta is a seasoned cadre woman given due recognition. One wishes that they continue to address the issues of Delhi even as they occupy opposite sides of the aisle.

R. Narayanan
Raj Mahal

VIRAT'S FAULT

THE MEDIA is guilty of giving wide publicity to the ITT baba seen at the Kumbh. He had predicted that India would lose badly to Pakistan. Now that he has been found making the wrong prediction, his career as a godman is over. I think he may be justified in blaming Virat Kohli for sabotaging their careers. But what if he was right in his predictions? By now he would have been on primetime TV. There will be many more such dongli babs across the nation. It is time to call them out!

Anthony Henriquez
Mumbai

Claude Arpi

How Gyalto Thondup, Dalai Lama's brother, fought for Tibet from his Kalimpong home

Gyalto Thondup, the Dalai Lama's eldest brother who passed away on February 9, aged 97, at his home in Kalimpong, West Bengal, was described by the New York Times as a "political operator in Tibet and the greater region", and "the second-most influential person" in Tibet, "eclipsed only by his brother, Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama".

The Dalai Lama said of his brother: "He was a good man who did his best for the Tibetan cause. I pray he will take a good rebirth as a Tibetan again and that he will be able to serve the Tibetan administration once more."

The "Noodlemaker of Kalimpong", as Thondup's biography called him, was born in 1927 in the tiny village of Talsen in the Tibetan province of Amdo. The International Network, a global coalition of Tibet-related NGOs, said: "Gyalto Thondup was a central figure in Tibet's modern history. He was liaising with global powers and leading efforts to support Tibetan resistance to China's occupation. Throughout his life, he played a crucial role in taking the Tibetan issue to the United Nations, resulting in three significant resolutions between 1959 and 1965."

But Thondup was first and foremost a great fighter for Tibet's independence. In *A History of Modern Tibet*, historian Melvyn Goldstein mentions the power struggle between the pre-independence supporters led by Gyalto Thondup and the Chinese authorities in Tibet in the 1950s: "A group, based in Kalimpong, known as Jenkenthism, fought for Tibetan freedom. The term is an acronym of the

titles of its three leaders, Gyalto Thondup, Talsen Shakpa and Khenjeng Lobzang Gyentso — literally, *jen* (older brother), *khen* (clerical), or fourth name official), *tsen* (Talsen or finance secretary), and *sum* (number 3)."

In August 1964, a month after dreadful floods which destroyed the Indian Trade Agency in Lhasa, Jenkenthism began to organise Tibetans living in India "to provide relief to the flood victims but also saw this as a perfect opportunity to launch the political organisation they had been planning. On August 8, they met in Kalimpong and openly started the Tibet Relief Committee, whose aim was to raise relief funds for flood victims. At the same time, they covertly started the Association for the Welfare of Tibet, to work for Tibetan independence," wrote Goldstein, adding: "The members took an oath in front of various protector deities, swearing to serve the cause of the organisation for as long as it might last."

At that time, the US coast guard general in Kolkata was contacted for support; in the following decades, Thondup would be the main interlocutor of the US authorities (including the CIA) for Tibetan affairs. The 1962 India-China war led to creation of the Special Frontier Force (SFF), a Tibetan army based in Chakrata, Uttarakhand, whose objective was to infiltrate into Tibet within six months of its creation. This did not happen, but here too Thondup was involved.

For most Indians, November 14 is Jawahar Nehru's birthday, but it is also another anniversary, though "uncelebrated": the SFF's creation. It

was also known as Vikas Regiment or "Two-Twos". Kenneth Conboy and James Morrison, in *The CIA's Secret War in Tibet*, recounted one day an emissary was sent from the Intelligence Bureau to Darjeeling "to fetch the Dalai Lama's brother, Gyalto Thondup. After years of attempting to court the Indians — often sympathetic but never committed — Gyalto relished the notion as he set in front of a select group of senior intelligence and military officials in the capital."

Thondup Gyalto told the meeting he needed 5,000 volunteers.

Ratuk Ngawang, one of the commanders, recalled that one day, Gyalto Thondup asked Andruk Gomo Tashi, the top Khampa guerrilla leader, to come to his residence in Darjeeling. Ratuk accompanied the Khampa leader, Thondup thought, to recruit Tibetan military academy in India. He sought Gomo Tashi's opinion, who told Thondup it would be an important military initiative that could make the Tibetan people more powerful. When Gyalto Thondup asked the Khampa leader about recruitment plans, Gomo Tashi said that 1,00,000 soldiers wouldn't be of much help, and the objective should be to have as many soldiers as possible.

The Dalai Lama's brother said he would speak with the IB to check if there was any possibility of finding Indian support, and told Gomo Tashi he should maintain strict confidentiality. This is how the SFF came into being.

While the move was orchestrated by R.N. Kao, RAW's first chief, Thondup was also indirectly instrumental in the Tibetan participation in the

1971 operations for Bangladesh's liberation. Rathuk Ngawang, by then a commander in Chakrata, said Kao instructed the SFF and advised leaders to prepare themselves and fight well. In his memoirs, *The Phantoms of Chittagang*, Brig. Surjit Singh Ubah, the SFF commander, recounted the details of the "Tibetans' achievements: "After we captured Chittagang, Mr Kao came to visit our regiment and gave awards and speeches in praise of the Tibetan unit's heroic battles."

Gyalto Thondup was not directly involved in the decision to send the Tibetan soldiers to the Bangladesh front as New Delhi had categorically banned from doing any political activities, but at that time, he was still deeply involved with the SFF in Chakrata.

Several years ago, during an interview, Gyalto Thondup spoke of one of his encounters with Xi Zhongxun, Xi Jinping's father, who showed him his watch: "In 1964, when His Holiness the Dalai Lama fled from Lhasa, he gave me an Omega watch... I think that it was an Omega that he showed me. I told him: 'Very good, keep it.' He attached a great importance to this watch because the Dalai Lama presented it to him, it came from India."

Tibet has indeed lost a great man who lived a great life.

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EDITORIAL

Making the Right Choices

It is no mystery that India's oil trade has undergone a major shift since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Once heavily reliant on the Middle East for crude oil, India turned to Russia as a key supplier after Moscow began offering steep discounts. In just a short span, Russian oil went from making up less than 1 per cent of India's imports to around 40 per cent, helping the country save billions in energy costs. However, in the wake of the fresh sanctions imposed by the United States targeting Russia's oil trade a month ago, the situation may again be on a changing course.

Western sanctions on Russia were meant to cut its energy revenues and limit its ability to fund the war in Ukraine. But the sanctions also reshaped global oil markets, creating opportunities for buyers like India and China to secure cheaper crude. For India, which imports over 85 per cent of its crude oil needs, this was a deal too good to pass up. Even as the West shunned Russian oil, India continued to purchase large quantities, refining it into fuels like petrol and diesel, some of which it then exported to European markets. However, the discounts on Russian crude have gradually shrunk. While Indian refiners once secured Russian oil at prices USD 18-20 lower per barrel than other sources, the gap has narrowed to less than USD 3. Meanwhile, the United States introduced fresh sanctions on 183 tankers last month, which make up Russia's so-called "shadow fleet." These ageing vessels have played a crucial role in moving Russian oil to buyers like India and China, bypassing Western restrictions. With many of these ships now blacklisted, transporting Russian oil will become more expensive. This could considerably raise the costs for buyers and potentially make West Asian crude a more attractive option.

India has so far managed to avoid direct involvement in the price cap imposed by the G7 and European Union, which restricts the use of Western insurance and shipping services for Russian oil sold above USD 60 per barrel. Indian refiners buy Russian crude on a "delivered basis," meaning suppliers are responsible for transportation. But with fewer tankers available, freight costs are bound to rise, eating into whatever discounts Russia can offer. This is already pushing Indian refiners to reconsider their options. In recent months, India has increased imports from Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, traditional suppliers they had taken a backseat after Russia's emergence as the dominant seller. With the cost advantage of Russian oil shrinking, this trend is expected to continue. There's also a possibility that Russia may be forced to offer deeper discounts to retain its market share, but how much it can afford to do so remains uncertain.

Evidently, India's energy strategy remains pragmatic. The country has consistently defended its decision to buy Russian oil, arguing that as a developing economy, it must prioritise affordability and energy security over geopolitics. Although Western nations have criticised India for continuing to trade with Russia, they have also indirectly benefited from it—refined fuel made from Russian crude has been exported to Europe and other G7 nations. As new sanctions take effect in March, India will have to navigate a changing oil landscape. While Russian oil will still be available, its cost-effectiveness is no longer guaranteed. If freight rates rise sharply and supply chains become more complicated, India may pivot further back to West Asian suppliers. At the same time, the situation remains fluid—if Russia finds ways to bypass the latest restrictions, discounts could return, keeping it in the game.

India's ability to adapt will determine how well it manages the anticipated changes. For now, its energy policy remains driven by economics rather than political pressure.

Dear Editor

A DISTURBING REALITY

The incident at Odisha's KITT, where a Nepali girl died by suicide to escape mental harassment, has once again reopened old wounds regarding the ragging problem in India. Today, higher education has become a necessity for securing good job opportunities. Colleges serve as the second stage of learning from an academic perspective. However, students entering college in their teenage years are often too immature to endure the mental trauma caused by ragging-related harassment. Unfortunately, ragging, which is a prohibited practice in India and considered a criminal offence under UGC guidelines as well as the Prohibition of Ragging Act, 2011, remains a silent tragedy in Indian colleges. The miscreant students take ragging supervisors lightly and casually. The irony is that many teachers, too, indirectly support these ragging practices, as seen in the video from KITT, which depicts the very purpose of the teacher-student relationship. Education stakeholders must take responsibility for preventing ragging. From principals to directors, teachers to college staff, everyone must first educate themselves on ragging prevention so that no student's life ends in such a tragic manner. India needs to take a strong stand against this silent menace to ensure a safe future for its students. Let us pave the way for a determined fight against ragging in India.

— KIRTI WADHAWAN, KANPUR via email

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PARANTAP BASU

Rather than addressing the fundamental issue of low national savings, Trump is attempting to tackle multiple economic problems using a single policy tool i.e., tariff

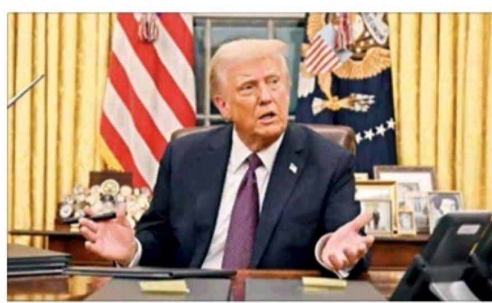
Terrible Tariffonomics?

Trump's tariffs reflect his belief that trade deficits weaken the US economy, but his approach may trigger economic retaliation and inflation, which could potentially isolate America and yet fail to address structural issues

A spectre is haunting this world, the spectre of Donald Trump's tariffs. Between the 15th and 18th centuries, Europe followed a doctrine of mercantilism which posited that maintaining a trade surplus was essential for the economic prosperity of a country. Countries with trade surpluses received gold coins from their trading partners with trade deficits. Today, international trade is no longer conducted using gold as a medium of exchange. Modern free trade economics argues that if citizens prefer foreign goods, they should be free to purchase them. Countries naturally specialise in producing goods in which they have a comparative advantage, ultimately promoting global economic welfare through free trade.

So why is President Donald Trump so fixated about the US trade deficit, to the extent of disrupting the global trading system? A businessman at heart, Trump may have perceived the trade deficit as a direct financial loss for the country. A simple back-of-the-envelope calculation of national income accounting identity reveals that a trade or current account deficit reflects a country spending more than its national income. In other words, a trade deficit indicates that national savings are lower than national investment. When a country runs a trade deficit, it must borrow from foreign sources to cover this shortfall. This results in a net capital inflow. In accounting terms, if a country's current account is in deficit, its capital account must be in surplus. Thus, the trade deficit is symptomatic of a deeper issue: insufficient national savings.

National savings consist of personal savings and government savings. Personal savings are the portion of disposable income (after taxes) that individuals set aside, while government savings represent the



Trump's approach could have far-reaching geopolitical consequences

surplus remaining after government expenditures are deducted from tax revenues. As of December 2024, statistics from the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) indicate that the personal savings rate of American citizens stood at just 3.8 per cent of disposable income, marking a decline since 2015. Meanwhile, the Congressional Budget Office reported that the federal budget deficit had risen to 6.4 per cent of national income—nearly double the 50-year historical average. At the same time, GDP growth remained sluggish, with the economy expanding at a modest quarterly rate of 2.8 per cent, according to BEA data. In contrast, China's economy exhibited stronger performance, with a GDP growth rate of 5 per cent and a significantly higher personal savings rate of 44.3 per cent of GDP in 2023, based on data from Statista. However, China's fiscal deficit remains comparable to that of the United States.

Rather than addressing this fundamental issue of low national savings, Trump attempts to tackle multiple economic problems using a single policy tool: tariff. He imposed

steep punitive import tariff on countries that did not comply with his trade demands, particularly targeting Canada, Mexico, and China. On the fiscal front, Trump seeks to offset the budget deficit by increasing import tariffs instead of raising income taxes. He believes that imposing tariffs would strengthen domestic industries. He also proposed that foreign companies establish production facilities in the US to receive tariff exemptions and tax breaks, aiming to spur economic growth.

But will Trump's "Tariffonomics" succeed? Higher tariffs would increase the cost of imported goods. If consumers reduce their purchases of foreign products significantly, tariff revenue might even decrease, defeating the intended goal. Additionally, countries facing US tariffs would likely retaliate, imposing tariffs on American exports—something Canada, Mexico, and China were already considering. Such measures could hurt US exporters.

Predicting the outcome of this trade war is challenging. According to BEA data, Canada and Mexico had strong trade ties with the US, accounting for 33

per cent of American exports and 28 per cent of imports in 2024. In contrast, trade with China was lower, with imports at 13 per cent and exports at 7 per cent. The US has long-standing concerns over China's unfair trade practices and intellectual property theft, justifying some tariffs. However, since US exports to China support many American jobs, a tariff war with these nations could pose significant economic risks.

As for the budget deficit, there are two primary ways of reducing it: raising taxes or cutting government spending. Since Trump has promised tax cuts to voters, it is unlikely that he will opt for tax increases. This leaves spending cuts as the only viable option for reducing the deficit. He is aggressively pursuing reductions in government spending, shutting down several government agencies and laying off employees.

Regarding economic growth, Trump envisages a fast-growing US economy driven by corporate tax cuts, deregulation and privatisation. Under Elon Musk's leadership, DOGE has initiated the closure of multiple agencies with a view to increase gov-

ernment efficiency and reduce spending.

What's really going on in Donald Trump's mind? Is he simply a megalomaniac aggressively pushing his economic agenda, or is there a deep seated strategy behind this "Tariffonomics"? In an intriguing article published in *UnHerd*, Yanis Varoufakis suggests that Trump is frustrated with America's status as a perpetual debtor nation, burdened by an overvalued dollar that enriches foreign central banks. Dollar should come down to a level which will make US export industries more competitive with restraint on imports. Tariff is an instrument to achieve this goal.

Trump views a global trade as a zero-sum game and yields import tariffs as a strategic weapon to force trading partners to come to the table for a serious talk. However, his approach could have far-reaching geopolitical consequences. China might strengthen its trade relations with other Asian countries, while the European Union could distance itself from the US, particularly given Trump's stance on environmental policies and his withdrawal from the World Health Organisation and NATO. Although Trump has not yet imposed special tariffs on India, he has threatened to do so. If enacted, India will also retaliate and deepen its ties with China and Russia, further isolating the US.

Domestically, Trump faces risks as well. If the trade deficit shrinks, foreign money will cease to come to Wall Street, upstaging his favoured investors. Additionally, growing economic inequality exacerbated by tax cuts for large corporations and Elon Musk's rapid advancements in AI risking displacement of jobs could further fuel public discontent.

The writer is Professor of Macroeconomics, Durham University Business School, UK. Views expressed are personal

Manipur Musings

What follows is a nostalgic recollection of the writer's connection with Manipur, particularly Tripura House, that was replete with royalty, familial bonds, and love despite bittersweet changes ushered in by time



SIDDHARTH DEV VERMA

My first glimpse of Manipur more than three decades ago did not instill much confidence. As the short flight from Calcutta taxied to a stop, all that I could see from the plane window were armed soldiers and barbed wire around the perimeter of the small airport. So much for the land of the graceful Manipuri dance, I muttered under my breath!

Last month I once again took a flight, this time to leave Imphal perhaps for the final time after completing a post-retirement assignment. The departing flight offered me a somewhat similar scene from my window seat—high brick walls had replaced the barbed wire but the soldiers were now present in greater numbers.

In the intervening years, I had lived in Manipur, married there and witnessed the birth of our children in Imphal. I had also dug out roots of my past and discovered relatives and traced some of the steps my late father took there as a young army officer.

My nephew Vijay came to see me in the guest house after learning about my arrival. I had never met him before but knew his father, my cousin Sasidhar—a boisterous man whose laugh was as loud as his heart was big. He had passed away a few years back while serving in Manipur and now his widow MK Jampasana Devi, daughter of Maharaja Bodhachandra, the last ruler of Manipur, lived in a big cottage named Tripura House in the palace compound campus of the Manipuri royal family. Her brother Okenderjit was the reigning titular Maharaja.

Vijay being roughly of my age, we became good friends and I started spending most of my free time in Tripura House. The lure of authentic homemade



Security challenges and internal strife serve as a blot to the serene landscape of Manipur

food made by the old family retainer was one incentive. She had a knack of preparing some old recipes which reminded me of the dishes my mother used to cook for my father—thin potato fries called bhaja, jai-pur snacks like gudok and shidol, and moustanga (boiled pork) chopped into tiny pieces and tossed up with oil, onions, vegetables and chilly. And meals were always served in huge thalis surrounded by a thrall of bowls, just as in the old days.

My sister-in-law was a regal but demure lady befitting her pedigree. Life had not been a bed of roses for her as it so often happens behind the high walls of palaces. The quick and successive deaths of her husband and two young sons had introduced her to a life of grief and mourning. She spent most of the day inside, seldom venturing out except for unavoidable family functions. Within the house, her loyal maid served her well doing all chores while she spent time resting, preparing and chewing pan, meeting relatives who came to meet her and planning small changes in the house with her son and daughter. I would often go to

her room which had a huge bed in the middle with an exquisite and many layered mosquito net over it. The tables and walls were adorned with black and white sepia photos of and with relatives from Cooch Behar, Jai-pur and other such royalities, reminders of happier times. In the midst of all this, Tripurasana would sit on the floor with a couple of large pillows for support and slowly chew on pan and betel nut. I called her Bhauji and she treated me more like a son than the Bhauji she addressed me as. Once I had driven my official jeep accidentally into a pond just outside the house and the next morning it had to be towed out by a crane. She gently admonished me—"Bhai, what will people think if they come to know your official status leave alone your connections with the Palace?"

Maharaja Okenderjit was a pleasant man with a look of a person who could in a moment's notice don a solar topi and jump on to a horse. He was an alumnus of Mayo, Ajmer but like many others of his ilk across the country, he had not been spared the vagaries of changing times.

The kingdom and the perks that came with the throne were all long gone but he seemed not to bear any grudge against democracy or harbour a feeling of loss. I more often found him in a cheerful mood much like a Wodehouse character entering a room with a hearty, "what ho! what ho!" He spoke perfect English and would often drop in to meet his sister. He would saunter in with a big smile and after exchanging pleasantries with Bhauji, call for Vijay and me and update us on his latest acquisitions or adventures. But behind the cheery and sunny exterior, like his sister, he too perhaps nursed hidden pains because often he would act in a surreptitious manner as if he was searching for something or trying to hide from someone. We once visited the hostel of the Regional Medical College to meet some students from Tripura. Since my jeep was out of action we engaged an auto rickshaw. He got into an argument with the driver on the matter of the fare. One of the students told the driver "Don't you know he is your king?" He replied "Ok maybe he is and what he's

that to do with my fare?" But he was a real king who just smiled and carried whatever regret or pain he might have had to his last resting place when he passed away at a very young age of forty-four in 1996.

A few months before I left Manipur for my final deputation to the Government of India in 2016, Bhauji called me and requested a meeting with the Chief Minister. There had been rumours of a government takeover of the Palace compound which included perhaps the Tripura House. The plan was to renovate the dilapidated main palace and beautify its surroundings and restore them to their old glory. My sister-in-law was not enamored by this project as it appeared to encroach upon the house built by her husband. It held too many memories to be left to the mercy of a government make over. The meeting was arranged and she arrived at the CM's office in her quiet, regal but simple manner. The CM got up from his seat and respectfully welcomed and addressed her. She explained her anguish at the Govt plan and made an appeal to keep Tripura House out of its ambit. She spoke slowly and quietly without any visible strain or trauma in her demeanor. He assured that her wishes would be considered.

The renovation plan was shelved but Vijay moved to Shillong with his family and my sister-in-law soon after. Tripura House still stands, albeit old, weary and locked up, a bitter sweet reminder that sometimes we become so attached to places that have been witness to so much pain and happiness in our lives in equal measure, that after a point letting go may be hard but living there is equally painful.

Views expressed are personal

Unprecedented visit

Whole-of-government approach to India-EU relations needed

The president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, alongside the entire European Union College of Commissioners, will visit India this week. This is a highly unusual event, and one of the first such meetings after the new Commission took office in December last year. It is being seen, both in Brussels and New Delhi, as an indication of the importance that the Commission, which will have a mandate for five years, gives to the India-European Union relationship. Much attention will naturally focus on whether this will be able to push forward negotiations on a free-trade agreement between India and the European Union. These negotiations were revived a few years ago but have not made substantial progress. This would indeed be a desirable outcome. At a time when growth in domestic demand is slowing and some large economies like the United States are threatening to erect troublesome tariff walls, the EU's vast internal market takes on even greater importance. The EU is also vitally important as a source of capital and technology for domestic business, and dismantling barriers between the two economies will allow for increased growth in both.

Resetting relations between two large, complex, and heavily regulated economies needs to be read from a much broader perspective. Relations between India and the EU need a whole-of-government approach rather than being subject to the bottlenecks of a few ministries and departments. After all, trade in the 21st century is much more about harmonised or interoperable regulations. On the commissioners' agenda for this visit are ministerial-level meetings with their counterparts in India. Many of the issues that hold up economic integration between India and the EU are not related to tariffs, but are the domain of other directorates-general within the Commission or ministries in the Government of India. For example, enhancing trade in digital services would require Indian privacy law and European data-security regulations to be more closely aligned. Meetings between those responsible for such issues in both jurisdictions are thus to be welcomed. Hopefully, they will also lead to a better understanding, in both Brussels and New Delhi, about each other's capabilities and limitations. The Commission is subject to the European Parliament and member states remain sovereign. Meanwhile, the silos within which Indian ministries operate and the power of state governments are not always fully understood in Europe.

Most importantly, such visits should allow bureaucrats on both sides to understand the degree of importance that the political leadership gives to deepening the relationship and increasing economic integration. With political prioritisation comes the willingness to put more on the table during negotiations. Thus, a renewed political commitment to integration will hopefully revive aspects of discussion — both on trade and in other domains — that have stalled. The geopolitical and geoeconomic impetus for such a commitment is obvious. Europe is feeling particularly vulnerable at this moment, given the unprecedented stresses that US President Donald Trump has put on the Atlantic alliance. Both in terms of security and trade, the US has signalled it will not be a reliable partner to Europe. These concerns, if to a lesser degree, will also be felt in India. It is sensible for both India and Europe to thus find ways to increase mutual support as well as their shared advocacy of a rules-based order globally.

Road to decentralisation

Rural local bodies need to be strengthened

A recent report released by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj and the Indian Institute of Public Administration offers a comprehensive analysis of India's decentralisation efforts by creating a state-level devolution index (DI). The index assesses key aspects such as the institutional framework guiding panchayati raj institutions (PRIs), the operations of gram panchayats (GPs), their finances, local capacity building, and accountability. The report does well to present evidence-based rankings of states, showcasing both advancements and areas that need further attention. Overall, devolution to rural local bodies increased from 39.9 per cent in 2013-14 to 43.9 per cent in 2021-22. Across all indicators, the southern states — Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu — in particular, seem to outperform the other states. Karnataka topped the rankings with a DI value of 72.2. Other good performers include Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu. Meanwhile, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar recorded the biggest improvement over the past decade. At the same time, there are glaring inter-state disparities. The extent of decentralisation remains far from satisfactory in states like Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, and Punjab.

The report highlights inadequate finances, particularly own revenue, and infrastructure and manpower shortages remain major challenges before GPs. The share of GPs' own revenue in a state's own revenue remains dismally low, indicating a lack of financial autonomy. Among all the states, GPs in Kerala had the highest share in a state's own revenue in 2021-22, but that too was a meagre 2.84 per cent. In fact, financial constraints have prevented PRIs from realising their potential because they remain heavily dependent on the upper tiers of government for fiscal support. The irregular constitution of state finance commissions (SFCs) in many states has worsened the situation. So far, only 10 states have constituted their sixth SFC. A study released by the Reserve Bank of India last year on PRI finances also corroborated the over-centralisation of fiscal power in India, including by state governments. It showed the revenue expenditure of PRIs was less than 0.6 per cent of gross state domestic product for all states. Other than financial management, the report rightly emphasises the severe lack of support staff in GPs. Some of the northeastern and hilly states are facing inadequate physical and digital infrastructure. In terms of representation of women, some states and Union Territories like Punjab, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, and Jammu & Kashmir still fail to meet the stipulated threshold. In contrast, states reserved for women far exceed the mandated quota in states like Jharkhand, Tamil Nadu, and Chhattisgarh.

Switzerland and some of the Scandinavian countries are examples of how decentralisation of governance and public finance yields better developmental outcomes. While the condition of PRIs has improved over the years, they need to do better in terms of raising fiscal resources and building administrative capacity. In this context, the report makes suggestions that should enrich the policy debate. These include the need to rethink the rotation terms of reservations from every election round to once in two-three terms; having the same electoral roll for elections to Lok Sabha and Assembly constituencies, municipal bodies, and GPs; timely constitution of SFCs; empowering GPs to levy property tax on all types of residential and other properties, regularly recruiting and training the support staff, and appointing a local government ombudsman to ensure accountability.

More bang for your buck

The Union government's civilian staff is on the rise, but the crucial question is whether it is leading to efficiency gains



Sometime in June 2022, the Narendra Modi government made a bold announcement on job creation. It outlined a plan to recruit one million people across different departments and ministries of the Union government over the following 18 months. According to the announcement, these recruitments were to be undertaken on a "mission mode."

The context of that announcement was both political and economic. Political because the announcement was made a little less than two years before general elections were due to be held in 2024, and jobs had already become a cause for political as well as electoral concern. Economic because the Indian economy was wrestling with the challenges of creating more salaried jobs for a rapidly rising number of people joining the labour market. The Union government, as one of the large employers, wanted to do its bit to address that political and economic need.

What gave impetus to fulfilling this promise were the numbers on vacancies in Union government departments and ministries, put out by the then minister of personnel, Jitendra Singh, in Parliament, a few weeks earlier in February-March of 2022. According to that data, total vacancies in central ministries and departments as of March 2020 were estimated at 870,000, with the defence ministry (247,000 civilian employees), Indian Railways (237,000), home ministry (128,000, mostly in central police forces), the department of posts (90,000) and the audit division (28,000) accounting for as much as 84 per cent of the total vacancies. Note that the total sanctioned staff strength in the Union government then was set at 4 million.

The Union Budget for 2025-26, presented earlier this month, provides an idea of how the Centre has gone about recruiting staff in all its departments and ministries, other than those in the armed forces. The reality is that this data does show an increase in the staff strength in different departments (including

Indian Railways) and ministries of the Union government. But this increase is not as big as was promised in June 2022.

The Union government's total staff strength (excluding the armed forces) was estimated at 3.17 million at the end of March 2022. Two years later, at the end of March 2024, that number rose to 3.3 million, a rise of just 137,000 or 4 per cent. There is now an expectation that by the end of March 2025, this number should go up to 3.66 million. Mind you, the number for March 2025 does not indicate the actual staff strength. But even you consider this revised estimate, subject of course to further revision, the increase in staff strength since April 2022 would be about 489,000 or 15 per cent. The criticism would be that against a promise of one million more government jobs, the achievement after three years is less than half of that goal. The government would defend this performance by arguing that achieving close to half of the target has at least helped address job concerns to some extent.

Without going into the merits or demerits of creating more jobs in the government, it is important to note that all governments from 1991 to 2022 succeeded in bringing down the staff strength during their terms in office. The total civilian staff strength of the Union government at the end of March 1991 was about 4 million. This came down to 3.32 million by the end of March 2014. The Modi government too reduced this number to 3.17 million by the end of March 2022. What is often ignored in most public policy debates is that governments over the years have succeeded in pruning their civilian staff strength without much acrimony or agitation.

This was possible because vacancies were deliberately not filled and several jobs were struck off the staff rolls but were brought back through contractors on temporary assignments. But to have slashed the official civilian staff strength by 21 per cent in about three

decades is a change that seems to have been brought about without any turbulence. Remember that nobody in these governments actually reduced the sanctioned strength of civilian staff, which continued to be 4 million. The fact also is that even after the Modi government has raised the civilian staff strength by 15 per cent in the last three years, the revised number of 3.66 million remains well below the sanctioned strength of 4 million.

But what contributed to the rise in the civilian staff strength in the last three years? Note that over 86 per cent of the total civilian staff is accounted for by just four heads — Indian Railways, posts, central police forces, and tax departments. In the first seven years of the Modi government, the Indian Railways saw a steady decline in its staff strength, from 1.32 million in March 2015 to 1.21 million in March 2022. And even as the overall civilian staff strength has risen by over 489,000 in the last three years, the Indian Railways has seen a small increase during the same periods — about 3,000 employees.

Of the four heads, the postal department and the police saw the largest increase by over 179,000 and 143,000, respectively, in the last three years. The two tax departments (overseeing direct and indirect taxes) have seen an increase in their staff strength by over 71,000, bringing their total strength to over 172,000. Many questions arise from the pattern of manpower hiring by the Union government.

The sharp rise in central police forces shows an increasing footprint of the Union government in matters of law enforcement, an area where states need to hire even more and improve the police-to-population ratio. The increasing headcount for postal employees raises the question of whether the department of post needs to focus on other kinds of operation in an era where people are moving away from postal communication to using e-mail and digital tools. You may also wonder why the tax departments should see such an increase in their manpower when digital filing of tax returns and online scrutiny and assessment are becoming the norm. The increase in the tax departments' manpower strength is quite staggering. Taken together, these four heads (Indian Railways, police, posts and tax departments) have accounted for over 80 per cent of the total increase in civilian staff in the last three years.

The pertinent question here is not whether the government should be hiring more staff. Indeed, the size of the Union government's civilian staff — whose cost at only about 1 per cent of gross domestic product is quite moderate compared with that in many developed countries or even developing countries — remains manageable. And this manpower cost for the Centre will be even lower if you exclude the Indian Railways from its staff strength. The more relevant question is whether the increased recruitment is being planned in a manner that ensures productivity and efficiency gains on the one hand and minimises government interference on the other. More staff should not mean less efficiency and increased bottlenecks.

RAISINA HILL

A K BHATTACHARYA

Making every Budget rupee count for cities

As the dust settles on this year's Budget allocations discussions, let's look at a few measures that need attention from the three tiers of government and other involved agencies to get the most bang for the buck from allocations meant for India's cities.

Allocation for the urban affairs ministry has remained around 2 per cent of the Budget outlay, as it has been over the past few years. But its distribution across urban sub-sectors and initiatives has changed. The share for urban housing has declined, with new schemes being slow to take off and the focus remaining on completing housing under earlier schemes. The share of transport, notably Metro rail, and basic services sectors has increased, as these schemes continue at a steady pace. The Smart Cities mission has been discontinued, while the Urban Challenge Fund, which also aims to realise cities, is an addition.

Starting with urban housing, allocations have been made for subsidies under three schemes — PMAY-U Phase 1, which has been ongoing since 2015, PMAY-U Phase 2, and industrial housing schemes announced last year. More than three-fourths of the urban housing allocation is earmarked for subsidies to complete housing under PMAY-U Phase 1. With 3.2 million houses still pending, it is pragmatic to prioritise their completion before launching major new housing initiatives.

This is exactly what this Budget has done. However, these to-be-completed houses, primarily catering to economically weaker section (EWS) households (i.e. those with an annual income of ₹3 lakh or less), involve a subsidy component that reduces the construction cost borne by households. This subsidy has remained unchanged since 2015, but with rising construction costs, the beneficiary share has increased.

So, households now need access to more funds than before. One way to address this is by enhancing their access to affordable home loans. Research on

PMAY-U Phase 1 has flagged the lack of access to such loans as a critical challenge for EWS households. It is, therefore, essential to ensure that PMAY-U Phase 1 beneficiaries have easier access to affordable home loans than they did previously.

Allocations for PMAY-U Phase 2 are solely for the home loan interest subsidy scheme (ISS), which reduces the EMI payable by households. Seventy per cent of the allocation is meant for EWS and low-income group (annual income between ₹3 lakh and ₹6 lakh) households, and the remaining for middle-income group (annual income between ₹6 lakh and ₹9 lakh) households. Research at CSEIP indicates that under a similar home loan subsidy scheme in PMAY-U Phase 1, only 21 per cent of the beneficiaries were EWS households. Greater attention is needed to ensure a higher proportion of EWS households are covered under PMAY-U Phase 2 than in Phase 1. Enabling easier access to home loans from financial institutions for these households is key in Phase 2 as well.

Allocations for industrial housing are meant for subsidising the development (in collaboration with industries) of rental housing for industrial workers. While this will give a boost to industrial growth and employment, it can also go one step further and boost the overall rental housing availability. Developing rental units for the general public alongside those for industrial workers within the same project could provide housing for workers in the supporting service enterprises that emerge around factories. This approach would help curb the growth of unauthorised and unplanned housing as industrial hubs evolve into cities.

Metro rail is the lifeline for many city residents and has seen a steady rise in budgetary allocations over the years. While some experts debate the metro's effectiveness compared to buses for smaller metro cities, it is undeniable that metro lines will become increasingly vital as these cities grow denser and larger

over time. Life and livelihoods for most residents in big cities like Delhi, Mumbai, and Bengaluru is unthinkable without the metro system. What needs priority now is well-planned, denser development along metro lines. Initiatives like the Delhi Master Plan 2041, which strongly emphasises transit-oriented development but is still in the draft stage, must be implemented without further delay. Only then will metro trains not only enhance transportation but also improve the overall quality of life for city dwellers.

Capital investments for the provision of basic urban services like water, sanitation, and solid waste management are covered under the AMRUT and Swachh Bharat Mission schemes. In addition, the newly launched Urban Challenge Fund also has provisions for spending on water and sanitation projects. To make the most of the government allocations, urban local bodies (ULBs) should be able to supplement these with investments from the private sector.

ULBs will be able to do so if their creditworthiness improves. A good-to-have condition is that their own revenues — from tax and non-tax sources — cover their recurring day-to-day expenditures on salaries, pensions, and the operation and maintenance of physical assets like water pumping stations and sewage treatment plants. These expenses fall under "revenue expenditure."

According to an ICRIER report, in 2017-18, the total revenue expenditure across India's more than 4,000 ULBs exceeded their total own revenues by ₹5,000 crore. But bridging this gap is not entirely up to the ULBs. For instance, more than three decades have passed since the 74th amendment, yet any revision in the ULBs primary source of own revenue — i.e. property tax — still needs the state government nod, in most states. So, the political and administrative goals of the state government have to align with that of the ULBs. Such alignment across domains is required not only for making the most of this year's Union Budget allocations, but also for achieving India's growth ambitions through its cities.

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The Xi enigma



BOOK REVIEW

GUNJAN SINGH

Ever since Xi Jinping came to power in 2013, there has been a rush among scholars and policymakers to understand him. This is no surprise. The man in command of the world's second-largest economy with one of the largest armies and populations will inevitably be the focus of global attention. Mr Xi sustains this interest by cultivating a mysterious persona, constantly surprising the world with his policies, a pattern that sets him apart from the last two generations of leaders.

This book by Michael Sheridan is the latest addition to the expanding body of literature that attempts to demystify the enigma of Chinese president-for-life. Given the volume of literature devoted to this enterprise, the challenge before any new Xi analyst is to present a new argument. Mr Sheridan attempts to do so by promising a biographical account of Mr Xi rather than just an exposition of his reign.

Even so, it is hard to shake the feeling that the book falls at multiple levels, principally because of the author's biases. To be sure, the author lays out a proper timeline of events and appointments that played a crucial role in the eventual rise of Mr Xi. There is a description of his family and of him being purged during the Cultural Revolution, his challenges with obtaining a party membership, his move to Puzhou, Zhejiang and to Shanghai. All this is well documented elsewhere too.

The author has painted a personality brimming with self-worth and narcissism and sees every personal move and policy Mr Xi adopted as a means to

smooth his path to absolute power in China. For instance, discussing Mr Xi's second marriage to Peng Liyuan, a major general in the Cultural Division of the People's Liberation Army who came from humble origins, the author concludes that "It may have been a love match but it was also a stroke of political genius. Xi's second wife was an asset, not a risk."

He describes Mr Xi's early campaign against corruption as a "populist move that also served as a mask for Xi Jinping's war on his foes." What Mr Sheridan overlooks in this analysis is that corruption was one of the major challenges for the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CPC) when Mr Xi became general secretary. In fact, anti-corruption drives have been a tool used by every leader in this Leninist party set up to strengthen their control and manage the image of the party in the past.

Mr Sheridan also indicates that Mr Xi believed from the start that he would be the leader one day. "Many see in Xi's life a quest for restoration. He came from a group indoctrinated through school and home to believe that they were destined to rule. They were told that one day they

would inherit their rightful places at the top of the party. The consciousness of being members of an 'entitled, elite generation of future rulers' remained with them, he writes. Anywhere with a passing knowledge of Chinese politics knows that being born a 'princeling', or descendant of senior CPC leaders, doesn't guarantee the assumption of the top leadership position in China. But the author ascribes to Mr Xi a sinister hidden ambition. As a young man, he writes, Mr Xi foresawed the mature politician he became, being "supremely pragmatic, a realist, driven not by ideology but by a combination of ambition and self-protection".

Apparently, "from day one, he never showed his hand." The discussions on family wealth are also interesting. The author says, "Xi Jinping's family was the greediest" and managed to accumulate and hide enormous amounts of money. In any political system, families and people close to the levers of power gain certain unfair advantages. Families of prominent CPC members were no exception. To argue that the gains in Mr Xi's family wealth were an aberration and highlight a lust for power and money seems unduly biased.

In addition, Mr Sheridan offered sensational facts such as illicit affairs and illegitimate children. But the lack of proper referencing beyond hearsay detracts from the veracity of this information.

When talking about the gains that Mr Xi made from his controversial zero-Covid policies, the author argues, "The psychological and political gains for the regime were so great that its leading figures boasted that China now controlled its people more

efficiently than the totalitarian system in North Korea." First, this statement ignores the fact that China has one of the most sophisticated surveillance systems in place, physical as well as virtual. Second, it is inconceivable that the zero-Covid policy ended as a result of people's protest and a fear that the party may not be able to control the growing anger and resentment. This book reads more like a long piece that seeks to stir up preconceived notions about Xi Jinping. As all historians know, things look different in hindsight. So it is challenging to determine with finality what Xi Jinping is thinking and what the impact of past purges would have had on his young mind. That said, his policies do provide clues to his idea of strengthening the party and the nation. Amendments to the Constitution have made him the leader for life and raised questions about his lust for power and the future of the CPC. But to say with finality that he is the last emperor seems far-fetched.

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Opinion

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FTA on fast track

Finalising the long-awaited FTA with UK should be a top priority at the highest levels of both nations

AFTER AN ELECTION-RELATED gap of eight months, the resumption of negotiations between India and the UK to finalise a trade agreement should be welcomed. Prior to the opening of the 15th round of negotiations — which have been taking place since January 2022 — Jonathan Reynolds, UK's secretary of state for business and trade, has had talks with India's Union commerce and industry minister, Piyush Goyal. There is no doubt a sense of urgency to resume trade talks — not just with the UK but also the European Union (EU) — due to US President Donald Trump's disruption to global trade with his weaponisation of tariffs. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen along with the EU College of Commissioners is visiting India on February 27-28 and the 10th round of free trade agreement (FTA) talks are set to take place on March 10-14 in Brussels. Both India and the UK want an agreement that is balanced and comprehensive and mutually beneficial. India has already lowered import duties on cars, high-end motorcycles, and bourbon, and proposes to allow 100% foreign direct investment (FDI) in insurance, all of which have a bearing on the resumed talks.

However, concluding such an ambitious deal is not easy, as it entails a complicated process of give and take for greater access to each other's markets to expand bilateral trade worth \$41 billion in the four quarters to the end of Q3 2024. India has a trade surplus of \$6 billion. There are 26 chapters in the FTA, which include goods, services, investments, and intellectual property rights. An investment treaty is also being negotiated. "India has much more flexibility to cut tariffs on UK," indicated Goyal. The unresolved issues include rules of origin, duty concessions on electric vehicles, Scotch whisky, social security agreement, liberalisation of financial services, and carbon border tax which also features in India's FTA with the EU. A critical area of interest for India is free visa movement for its professionals due to concerns over the UK's moves to curb legal migration by raising the minimum salary thresholds or charging large fees for skilled worker visas. The UK, for its part, is frustrated with the lack of movement towards the opening up of the Indian market for professional services in law and accountancy.

For such reasons, linking an India-UK FTA deal — or for that matter with the EU — is indeed challenging. Providing more ballast to the economic component of the India-UK relationship is imperative considering the long historical association. In this regard, setting unrealistic deadlines to ink FTA deals is far from efficacious. Goyal indicated "it is never too early and never too late to conclude an agreement. So, we will have speed but not haste." The UK, for its part, will not sacrifice quality for speed. A big advantage in concluding this deal is that it will serve as a template for India linking equally ambitious FTAs with the EU and other developed nations. While the good news is the resumption of negotiations, both partners can still follow the road map 2030 on trade and considerably step up investments in each other's economies. In 2023, the stock of the UK's FDI in India was \$17.4 billion while India's FDI in the UK was \$13.1 billion. If investments gather momentum, this is bound to result in greater bilateral trade flows and create win-win outcomes for both nations.

To do its job right, the Fed must see what's wrong

THE US FEDERAL Reserve has begun a process with vast implications for the global economy: rethinking the framework by which it sets the interest rates that influence prices and lending in the US and just about everywhere else.

To get it right, the Fed first needs to recognise what's wrong. At the January meeting of the policy-making Federal Open Market Committee, central bankers emphasised that the new framework must be "robust to a wide range of circumstances". This is a step in the right direction, given that the current framework, established in 2020, certainly wasn't robust to the Covid pandemic and its aftermath.

Developed at a time when inflation was consistently falling below the Fed's 2% target, the 2020 framework committed to aiming for above-target inflation to compensate for prior shortfalls. Specifically, the Fed pledged to keep short-term interest rates near zero until three conditions were met: The economy had reached maximum sustainable employment, inflation had reached 2%, and inflation was expected to stay above 2% for some time. Moreover, the "lift-off" from zero couldn't happen until the central bank had completed the asset-purchase programme known as quantitative easing — a long process that wouldn't even begin until substantial progress toward the three conditions had been made.

As a result, the Fed was very late in responding to a strong economy, a tight labour market, and soaring inflation. By the time lift-off happened, in March 2022, real output was rising rapidly, the unemployment rate was below the level officials considered sustainable, and the Fed's preferred measure of inflation had exceeded 5%.

Despite this compelling evidence, there's still debate about whether the Fed's policy framework was at fault. Some say the central bank just made a forecasting error, for which it later had to compensate by tightening monetary policy aggressively. Chair Jerome Powell has leaned into this explanation, saying that the framework "was more irrelevant than anything else." I don't buy it. If the Fed had ignored the framework and paid more attention to the policy rules it typically follows, it would have started raising short-term rates about a year earlier.

Some argue that the surge in inflation, which happened everywhere, was beyond the Fed's control. Yet it was US demand for goods, supported by a powerful fiscal stimulus, that helped drive global prices upwards. Also, many other countries experienced a spike in energy prices, which played a much smaller role in the US.

A third argument is that the Biden administration's \$1.9-trillion fiscal stimulus package was just too large. While it undoubtedly contributed to the economy's overheating, that didn't prevent the Fed from taking its impact into account and responding with tighter monetary policy.

Properly identifying mistakes matters. Otherwise, how can one be confident that the Fed won't repeat them? Credibility is crucial: Without it, central bankers' ability to influence financial markets and the economy will be impaired.

To that end, the Fed must recognise and remedy the 2020 framework's flaws and omissions. It should scrap the regime that kept rates too low for too long. It should subject greater rigour to quantitative easing and quantitative tightening. Was QE, for example, worth the \$500 billion to \$1 trillion that it cost the US Treasury, or did it merely stoke inflation? It should stop targeting an interest rate — the federal funds rate — that is increasingly obsolete. Relying exclusively on the rate paid on bank reserves would be considerably simpler.

The framework review will take several months to complete. May the Fed use the time well. There's plenty of room for improvement.



BILL DUDLEY
Bloomberg

POWER POINT

WHEN VOTERS WAKE UP FEELING POORER, LIBERALISM & OTHER SO-CALLED NOBLE THOUGHTS HAVE NO MEANING

Yet another Right turn

THAT GLOBAL POLITICS has been taking a sharp right turn is well-known. But very few could have predicted that the once outcast Alternative for Germany (AfD) party would be able to so firmly establish itself in German politics. True, AfD is nowhere close to forming a government after the election results were announced, but that's not the point.

The big deal is that AfD actually came in second and will be the principal opposition party. It is the first far-right party in Germany's post-World War II history to have attained such broad levels of public popularity — it has doubled its support to 21% of the vote since the previous election in 2021, and has significantly increased its share of seats in the Bundestag, Germany's parliament.

That's a big leap for a party which secured its first seats in the Bundestag just eight years ago and has been treated with extreme suspicion by successive German governments for its strident anti-migrant rhetoric. Hopefully, AfD's rising popularity will now force future German governments to stop treating far-right parties with disdain.

AfD's rise means a big headache for Friedrich Merz, chairman of the conservative Christian Democratic Union, who is set to become Germany's next chancellor. No longer tied with the liberal, "open door" policies of former Chancellor Angela Merkel, Merz has vowed to bring the party back to its more conservative roots as part of efforts to counter the far-right. He surely faces a tricky road ahead.

It's not a mere coincidence that high-profile figures from the Trump administration spoke out in support of the AfD in pre-election statements. In a scathing speech at the Munich Security Council, US Vice President JD Vance told Europe's

leaders that there is "no room for firewalls" in a democracy, a clear nod to the AfD.

Formed in 2013, the AfD started out as a party that opposed Germany bailing out other countries, mainly Greece, during the eurozone crisis. It won 4.7% of the vote in the election of that year. The AfD has since adopted various far-right and populist positions, opposing migrants and rejecting climate action.

But AfD's rise is not an isolated phenomenon. In a reflection of voters' dissatisfaction with the status quo, far-right political parties have won or made strong enough showings to challenge centre and leftist parties in France, Germany, Italy, Finland, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Croatia. It would thus be wrong to keep treating them as political outcasts.

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni rightly slammed the global Left recently for what she called as their "hysteria" and hypocrisy over painting spectres about the global rise of conservative leaders. "When Trump, Meloni... Modi talk, they are called a threat to democracy. This is the Left's double standard... but we are used to it, and the good news is people no longer believe in the lies, despite all the mud they throw at us. Citizens keep voting for us."

She is bang on. It's a fact that the eco-



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nomic vision articulated as the "Washington Consensus" — with a focus on free markets, trade liberalisation, fiscal discipline — began eroding with the 2008 financial crisis and the rise of China. It is now being challenged by Donald Trump in the very place of its origin.

At the heart of this lurch towards the right is economic discontent. Donald Trump's "America First" slogan in the US has given the voters who felt neglected by years of economic transformation a ray of hope. Trump capitalised on the fear and frustration of middle-class Americans who felt they were not getting their due in an ever-globalising world.

Meloni's Brothers of Italy party built its platform on a vision of national pride, advocating policies that would preserve Italian sovereignty in the face of what they saw as intrusive European Union regulations. The message from right-wing leaders in many countries, where economic growth has been low, unemployment elevated, national debt levels high, and inflation devastating to household budgets, focused on identity, sovereignty, and security of the nation.

Consider AfD's spectacular rise to understand why economic discontent is the main reason for the surge of right-wing

politics. The narrative in Germany has been for long been dominated by worries about the years-long stagnation of Europe's biggest economy and pressure to curb migration. In any case, AfD has been doing relatively better in eastern Germany, whose economy has historically been worse off than the west, and whose younger population often moves to the west in search of better education and job opportunities. Resentment against Germany spending money on helping other European countries when many of the country's own citizens needed attention and aid, was the highest in the east. The AfD's message about immigrants stealing the jobs of local people found a lot of resonance.

The main surprise, however, was that AfD gained some significant support in constituencies in the country's west, including the industrial city of Gelsenkirchen which has been suffering with stagnating economy and high unemployment. That shows why economic woes are at the heart of the emergence of the Right.

In the US, before the November elections, about half of US voters said they were worse off than they had been at the end of Trump's first term, even though inflation had slumped from 9% in 2022 to around 2% by late last year. In the UK, Rishi Sunak lost as voters saw prices had ballooned.

Large segments of the population can't continue feeling financially disenchanted, battered by a cost-of-living crisis, unaffordable housing, and bleak job prospects, while the elite who are making the policies grow richer. The lesson is loud and clear: When voters wake up feeling poorer every day, liberalism, free markets, open doors, and other such so-called noble thoughts have no meaning. The overwhelming feeling is: It's a Right turn can protect my jobs, so be it.

Citizen Stack sutras: A compass to evaluate DPI



MADHUMITHA P RAMANATHAN
SANJAY ANANDARAM

Respectively advocate for DPI and ISPIRT volunteer, & ISPIRT volunteer and ambassador

Such a DPI offers a blueprint for economic systems that promote fairness, self-reliance, and democratisation of opportunity

DIGITAL PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE (DPI) has emerged as a transformative force for delivering governance, powering sustainable development goals, empowering nations, and enhancing the well-being of people. Pioneered by India, DPI's sweeping impact is undeniable, benefiting over 1.5 billion worldwide. From G20 summits to Quad discussions and bilateral dialogues between leaders in developed and developing countries, DPI has emerged as a powerful instrument for driving equity and progress. Its unprecedented success — from digital ID, payments, credit flows, healthcare, agriculture, and mobility, to tax collections and more — has catalysed authorities and civil society. Inevitably, given the profusion of initiatives, there are differing interpretations across countries, non-profits, foundations, multilateral agencies, and private entities of what constitutes a DPI. Yet, as the landscape becomes saturated with promises and proposals, the challenge of distinguishing DPI innovations from those claiming to be so becomes critical. Invoking Socrates' statement that "the beginning of wisdom lies in definitions", we recognise the importance of clarity in determining what constitutes a DPI.

Need for sutras

The key objective of any DPI is to serve the public good. Instead of getting caught up in splitting hairs over "precise" definitions, the focus should be on the guiding principles that allow DPIs to be effectively vetted against. These principles, or "sutras" (literally a thread or set of aphoristic statements that govern or define larger ideas),

are India's invaluable offering to the world, encapsulated in the Citizen Stack — a trusted DPI ecosystem endorsed by the government of India that ensures digital infrastructure addresses the public good. Pioneered by India, DPI's framework to assess and validate DPIs. Backed by wide implementation and know-how, let's define the benchmark for what a global DPI is and ought to be.

What are sutras?

As the global conversation on DPIs intensifies, the *sutras* become the definitive guide for building public digital infrastructure. These encompass citizen agency and privacy; interoperability; techno-legal regulation; prevention of corporatisation and monopolisation; and safeguards against weaponisation.

These are not merely ideals but actionable frameworks. They ensure DPIs empower citizens, bridge digital divides, ensure the protection of sovereignty, and enable countries to navigate a complex landscape through a framework rooted in public ownership and provisioning. It is the blueprint for a future where digital infrastructure not only serves humanity but makes inclusivity and fairness tangible realities.

The issues

Why is vetting DPIs against the Citizen Stack's *sutras* so crucial? Imagine a platform like Microsoft Windows being classified as a DPI. While MS Windows undeniably qualifies as digital infrastructure, it is almost ubiquitous and available to all for a fee. Is it a public infrastructure for public good? How does one ensure that monopolistic tendencies do not dominate, shareholder interests are not prioritised over public good, and dependency on Windows does not affect agency and autonomy? Do ownership and provisioning of service provisions preclude or enable public good?

Countries need to, of course, collaborate without compromising their self-reliance and interests. DPIs offer the means to do so through the creation of institutions and standards that Citizen Stack champions.

The financial sector offers examples of the pressing need for fair competition and equitable access. Visa and Mastercard executives, in testimonies before US senators, have shed light on their dominance, with profit margins exceeding 50%. They offered preferential rates that benefitted large merchants like Walmart but adversely affected the smaller ones. Given the oligopolistic nature of the US payment market, small businesses have little choice but to use Visa and Mastercard services.

Introducing Citizen Stack

The Citizen Stack is a credible, proven alternative. For example, the payment DPI, India's Unified Payments Interface (UPI), is a game-changer processing over 15 billion transactions worth over ₹23 crore a month. By offering a transparent, accessible, and cost-effective alternative,

UPI — through the non-profit National Payments Corporation of India, owned by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and other banks — ensures low-cost, convenient, speedy, and safe services. Another DPI offering, the Open Credit Ecosystem Network, helps users build credit profiles to seamlessly access loans. It has, till date, processed 154 million "consents" (permission by citizens to share information from their accounts, such as banks, direct and indirect tax returns, with loan providers) via over 128 million accounts enabled by the RBI-approved account aggregator ecosystem. In addition, private sector participants innovate and create citizen-facing solutions (PhonePe, Google Pay and others). These use UPI and follow the *sutras* embedded in the DPI offering. These examples underscore the pivotal role of DPI in spurring innovation via partnership between the private — and multinationals to start-ups — and public sectors. Such collaborations inspire trusted global partnerships too, enhancing the overall impact and equitable growth of digital ecosystems. India's Citizen Stack *sutra*-based comprehensive approach — from policy, legal, institutional, governance, and funding, to implementation architectures — ensures the fidelity of DPI is maintained.

Such a DPI is not merely a solution for underserved populations. It offers a transformative blueprint for economic systems that promote fairness, self-reliance, and the democratisation of opportunity. The *sutras* therefore serve as a vital compass to evaluate DPIs. It is vital that they are adhered to so that DPIs remain true to their public or citizen-centric purpose.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

AI for the greater good

Apropos of "India's digital future: Beyond innovation" (FE, February 25), India does have the talent pool to create an artificial intelligence (AI) model of its own. It is also a fact that the number of those adopting the digital mode of transactions is growing at an impressive rate. The way India is making its presence felt in many diversified fields that were exclusive to the most developed

countries explains the vast scope and also the dire need for adapting AI to reach the further heights. However, it is equally important to ponder over how AI can be put to use to address the burning issues of the country such as unemployment and climate change. AI, though not a magic wand, should suggest ways to improve real-life issues before creating a heavenly picture that is meant to be appreciated and enjoyed.

—AG Rajmohan, Anantapur

Data purity

Apropos of "Insight drought in data deluge" (FE, February 25), even the best cook will find it extremely difficult to conjure up an appetising dish if the ingredients are not up to the required standard. Similarly, for an accurate estimate, the quality of data has to be good. Unfortunately in India, the purity and integrity of data is questionable and thus, predictions and outcomes are sometimes off the

mark. A prime example are our GDP growth and employment numbers. What is visible on the ground to experts is contradicted by the crunched numbers. We need to take a closer look at our data points and how it can be improved. That is why we sometimes see human intelligence and predictions score over sophisticated algos.

—Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra

Write to us at letters@expressindia.com

THE EDITORIAL PAGE

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

IN THE MIRROR OF UN

There are shifts that could potentially rearrange global landscape — and vindication for India's navigation of turbulence

DURING A UNITED Nations session commemorating the third anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the United States has, in a stunning volte-face, aligned itself with Russia twice at the UN. The US, under President Donald Trump, voted against a resolution introduced by Ukraine that called for "de-escalation, an early cessation of hostilities, and a peaceful resolution" to the war. Additionally, the US drafted and voted for a separate Security Council resolution that called for an end to the conflict but omitted any criticism of Russia — welcomed by the Kremlin as a "much more balanced" stance. This same three-paragraph resolution, however, failed to pass through the General Assembly until it was amended to include US support for Ukraine, with France proposing three amendments to categorically say that the war is a result of a "full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation." Russia voted "no" and the US had to abstain from its own resolution. It is evident that despite the seismic shifts that have brought the US and Russia closer, Europe remains resolute in its support for Ukraine. It is obvious, too, that arriving at a peace agreement acceptable to all parties will take a lot more time and effort and negotiation than the flick-of-a-pen approach that Trump appears to favour.

The US stance at the UN displays Trump's determination to foster closer ties with a Vladimir Putin-led Russia. Apart from the US, countries voting against the resolution included outliers to the global mainstream like North Korea, Iran, and Belarus. Those supporting the resolution included Germany, the United Kingdom, France and even Italy, despite its right-wing government under Giorgia Meloni. The US was the only G7 nation to oppose the resolution, putting it at odds with its traditional European allies — even as French President Emmanuel Macron in Washington warned the US president against a "surrender" of Ukraine. Trump said on Monday that he hopes for "major economic development transactions with Russia," while Putin has offered to sell Russia's rare earth minerals to American companies, including those in occupied Ukrainian territories. Potential business ties amid a larger US-Russia detente mark a fundamental transformation in the global order with Ukraine at its centre.

The changing dynamics mirrored in the UN vote also reveal shifts in the global attitudes towards the war. Ninety-three countries voted in support, compared to 141 in 2022. In the first emergency session resolution in March 2022 condemning Russia's invasion, only 35 countries abstained — that number has now nearly doubled to 65. These figures arguably reflect a rising war fatigue. China continues to abstain, maintaining its "no-limits" partnership with Russia while positioning itself as a proponent of peace. Meanwhile, India, with its own continued abstentions, stands vindicated. In the face of Russia's violation of Ukraine's sovereignty, Delhi had refrained from a direct condemnation and carefully carved out a space for manoeuvre that factors in its longstanding ties with Moscow. India should continue to protect and enlarge its distinctive space and leverage, sending out a message to friends and adversaries alike that it cannot be arm-twisted into taking a position that does not align with its national interests.

A PERSISTING LOW

Investor sentiment remains weak due to global and domestic factors. GDP data, Fed meeting could influence markets

INDIAN STOCK MARKETS have been experiencing sustained weakness. From the highs observed last year — on September 27, 2024, the BSE Sensex had touched 85,978 — it is down around 13 per cent. Since the beginning of this year, the Sensex is down about 5 per cent. While on Tuesday it was up marginally, most sectoral indices are in the red. The fall among the smaller firms is steeper — the BSE Midcap index is down almost 15 per cent since the beginning of the year, while the BSE Smallcap index has fallen around 19 per cent. After this correction, the Sensex is trading at a price to earnings ratio of 21.48.

There are both global and domestic reasons for the fall. A state of uncertainty has gripped global markets following the election of Donald Trump and his subsequent announcements on tariffs, taxes and immigration. Trump's tariff proposals, some of which have been kept on hold while others are already in effect, have soured investor sentiment. The threat of reciprocal tariffs weighs heavily on countries. But higher tariffs will be inflationary for the US. Inflation data released a few days ago has further complicated matters for the US Federal Reserve — in January, inflation rose to 3 per cent. On the domestic front, the corporate results season has been subdued. For instance, in the third quarter, HUL registered a 1.8 per cent revenue growth, while UltraTech Cement saw a growth of just 2.9 per cent. As per ICRA, 602 listed companies, excluding those in the financial sector, saw their revenues grow at just 6.8 per cent. Growth for the fourth quarter has been pegged at 7-8 per cent. Commentary from brokerage houses suggests that corporate profitability is "under strain". Foreign investors have continued to be net sellers with reports suggesting increasing allocations towards China. After withdrawing \$13.7 billion in October and November last year, net investments by foreign portfolio investors were -\$12.8 billion in the first two months of the year (data up to February 25). The pressure on the rupee continues. On Tuesday, it fell by 51 paise, settling at 87.23 (provisional) as per reports.

At the end of this week, the National Statistics Office will release its estimates for GDP growth in the third quarter, and the second advance growth estimates for the full year. These will provide clarity on the underlying economic momentum in the country. Thereafter, the March meeting of the US Fed will provide clues on the trajectory of interest rates. These will shape investor sentiments in the near term.

CLEAN UP YOUR OWN MESS

NASA's all-clear on an asteroid that could have struck Earth is the latest reminder: No do-overs are arriving from space

FOR HIS 2019 album *Wasteland, Baby!*, singer-songwriter Hozier wrote 'No plan' inspired by astrophysicist Katie Mack's lectures on the heat death theory of the end of the world. In her lectures, she posits that stars will burn out, that in the end, there will just be "infinite nothingness": "It's getting late/there's no plan/there will be darkness again." For those who were hoping to have "no plans" though, there is bad news: Humans may have to clean up their own messes; no do-overs are arriving from space. NASA announced on Monday that space rock 2024 YR4 is no longer a threat. As recently as last week, it had a 3 per cent chance of striking Earth, the highest ever for a large asteroid.

With climate disasters, wars and a pandemic making up a good chunk of the news cycle, this could well be the season of apocalyptic cinema. Between 2010 and 2019, an all-time high of 100 films framed end-of-times themes. The *Last of Us* (2023) is based in a post-pandemic world, *Don't Look Up* (2021) sounds the alarm on inaction in the face of extinction threats. *Silent Night*, *Avengers: Infinity Wars*, *A Quiet Place*, the list goes on. There seems to be a resigned surrender to the forces of nature. Instead of dread, then, an approaching asteroid could well have been the source of morbid relief. Only it isn't.

The idea that the world is beyond saving is not a new one. Films post World War-II sang the same tune, as did the ones of the Cold War era. In an *Irish Times* interview, Hozier said, "Whatever about the end of the world, 'No Plan' is just saying that that's the least of your worries." So, before getting swept up in the next doomsday fantasy, it may be wise to worry about making some plans for what happens if the world survives.



ANIL WADHWA

COMMEMORATIVE EVENTS WERE held at the United Nations and in Ukraine this week to mark the third anniversary of the war in Ukraine. In a remarkable turn of events, the US voted twice with Russia on Resolutions at the UN, marking a clear change of stance on the war by the Trump administration. The first was a resolution drafted by the European Union condemning Russian actions and supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity in the UN General Assembly. The second, a resolution drafted by the US that was tabled at the UN Security Council, called for a swift end to the conflict without explicit criticism of Russia.

The voting took place even as French President Emmanuel Macron was visiting the White House to convince President Donald Trump to favour the European and Ukrainian stance on the war. British Prime Minister Keir Starmer will follow with a similar effort on February 27. Notably, the UK and France attempted to amend the language in the Security Council but these attempts were vetoed. As many as 65 states abstained on the UNGA resolution, including India and China, while 93 voted for it and 17 states including Russia and the US opposed it. The UNGA also passed a US resolution but only after it was amended to include stronger language in support for Ukraine, which led to US abstention. The UK, France, Denmark, Greece and Slovenia abstained on the US-drafted resolution in the Security Council.

These actions are seen by the current set of leaders in Europe as Washington abandoning the European cause and upending the transatlantic alliance, seeking favour with Russia and casting doubt on the US's long-standing commitment to European security. However, it needs to be understood — and a clear hint was provided in J D Vance's speech at the Munich Security Conference a few days ago — that in the minds of the Trump administration, some in Europe have failed to listen to the populist concerns of voters. For over 75 years, the transatlantic relationship, with the backing of NATO and various dialogue mechanisms between Europe and the US, was

The US pivot

Pulling out of Ukraine, thaw with Russia may help Washington to focus on China

based on a meeting of minds on the basis of liberal and open thinking on both sides. The reelection of Donald Trump has given a fillip to far-right parties in Europe, whose thinking is supported by the current US administration. This is seen as "revisionism" by the current European leadership.

The EU's regulatory and fiscal strictures and its reach into the domestic spheres like freedom of speech of individual European countries have not found favour with the proponents of Make America Great Again (MAGA). The Trump administration leans towards political parties and individuals in Europe that do not want EU oversight in their energy, migration, digital and defence fields. Little wonder that leaders like Victor Orban of Hungary, Giorgia Meloni of Italy, Alice Weidel in Germany and Eric Zemmour in France have found a powerful backer in President Trump. Influential members of the MAGA camp have pledged support in bringing the far right to power in Europe. A series of transactional relationships could be the result of this, and the EU's projects like the green reporting rules or the digital services law could come under pressure.

In explaining Trump's actions and statements on Ukraine, US officials have insisted that his primary — in fact only — objective is to end the long-drawn-out conflict, which he believes was managed badly by the Biden administration. If allowed to continue, it can actually lead to another World War. Starmer, Macron, Nato Secretary General Mark Rutte and a host of other leaders in Europe want to continue supporting Ukraine and keep the conflict going. However, they will need to step in with equipping, munitions, never armistice and finances — a tremendous strain on Europe in the absence of US support. Europe, therefore, has to decide the future course of action based on stark realities. President Trump himself has not been expressive on the contours of a settlement that could end the conflict. If he wants to keep US troops out, he will need Europe to step in with its own peace-keeping troops — some like the UK have al-

ready offered this. According to Trump, such a measure is acceptable to Russia.

President Trump has thus cast himself in the role of a peacemaker without bothering about relationships or costs — overlooking frayed Western alliances. This is a major disruption in US foreign policy. Trump apologists see the rapid thawing of the Russian relationship as a first step towards weaning Moscow away from China and Iran — which they say could be a blow to the Chinese goal of replacing the US as the dominant global power.

After his meeting with NATO member states in Brussels a few days earlier, Defence Secretary Peter Hegseth's comments were revealing: If the US were to pull back from Europe and leave the European defence to Europeans, it would be a crucial development with regard to Washington's focus on the Asia Pacific. A few days later, Secretary of State Marco Rubio issued a joint statement along with his Japanese and South Korean counterparts on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference, stressing the maintenance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait as "an indispensable element of security and prosperity for the international community". It is, then, a possibility that the US administration is attempting to get Ukraine out of the way by making it a primarily European concern so that it can face the Chinese challenge from a stronger position?

While many see Washington's stance under Trump as a threat to international institutions, collective security based on sovereign equality and an erosion of the principle of sovereignty, there is not much pushback at the moment. In an uncertain and transactional world, the transatlantic alliance also seems to be metamorphosing into a new version of itself.

The writer is a former Secretary in the Ministry of External Affairs and has served as Ambassador to Italy, Poland, Lithuania, San Marino, Oman and Thailand. He is currently a Distinguished Fellow with the Vivekananda International Foundation



GURUDEV SRI SRI RAVI SHANKAR

SHIVA, THE MANY AND THE ONE

He embodies both 'saguna' and 'nirguna', transcending form and formlessness

IN GOOD FAITH

THE VEDAS AND Puranas have always catered to people from all strata of society, accommodating diverse intellectual and spiritual viewpoints. They address the depths of human consciousness while providing practical guidance for everyday life.

When it comes to Lord Shiva, there is a Vedantic view and a Puranic depiction. Shaivism does not perceive Shiva as a person but rather as a fundamental reality, or *tatva*. It classifies existence into 36 principles (tattvas). Earth being the first and Shiva as the 36th and ultimate principle. Shiva is often seen as *Chaitanya* — pure consciousness — because, as a direct experience, Shiva is the formless, all-pervading awareness that underlies existence itself. He is *Chidokasa* — the infinite space of consciousness. He embodies both *saguna* (with attributes) and *nirguna* (beyond all attributes), transcending form and formlessness.

According to a well-known Puranic story, Shiva appeared as an infinite pillar of light. Neither his head nor his feet could be seen, symbolising that he has no beginning or end. Brahma ascended in search of Shiva's head while Vishnu descended to seek his feet, yet both remained beyond reach. There are also stories that depict Shiva's anger, such as his confrontation with Daksha or the opening of his third eye to destroy Kamadeva. These are symbolic narratives conveying deeper truths about existence. No intelligent seeker should take these stories as literal occurrences; instead, they must look beyond the surface to grasp timeless wisdom about the nature of life and consciousness.

A sharp, focused mind is needed to decode

A sharp, focused mind is needed to decode these spiritual allegories. Shiva was not a historical figure who lived 15,000 years ago, sitting on a rock and weeping in ecstasy. Shiva is the cosmic principle, the divine energy that exists within every living being. Every emotion is an expression of his divine nature. They are not separate from him but manifestations of the infinite consciousness, reflecting the dynamic play of existence. Shakti is the dynamic energy that is inseparable from Shiva.

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Shiva is always worshipped in the form of a linga, not as an endpoint but as a gateway to transcendence. The linga represents the beginning of the four stages of spiritual realisation. The first stage, *samadhi*, is feeling the presence. The second, *samyoga*, is a sense of closeness with the divine. *Sanyoga* is when one begins to embody divinity. Finally, *sanyoga* is the ultimate state, the complete merger and realisation of oneness with the divine.

Among the 12 jyotirlingas in India, from the Himalayas to Rameshwaram and Badrinath to Gujarat, the first is the Somnath Jyotirlinga in Saurashtra. Ancient scriptures describe the Somnath Shivalinga as extraordinary as it never touched the ground, suspended in mid-air and defying gravity. In 1026 AD, Muhammad Ghazni came to India and was mesmerised by the levitating Jyotirlinga, plundered the temple and shattered the Shivalinga into pieces. It was believed that these pieces were

lost forever. However, a lineage of Agnihotri Brahmins secretly preserved some fragments, carried them from Saurashtra to Tamil Nadu and made smaller lingams. For centuries, they continued to worship them in secrecy, with reverence and adherence to the scriptures.

A hundred years ago, when the Shankaracharya of Kanchi Peetham was approached by this family, he instructed, "Keep it hidden and after 100 years, take it to a saint in Bangalore named Shankar." Following these instructions, the original Somnath Shivalinga has now been brought to me. These Shivalinga exhibit unique magnetism. Unlike typical magnetic stones, their field is concentrated at the centre, with minimal iron content.

Now, the original Somnath Jyotirlinga can return home after one thousand years. This is a moment of spiritual awakening for our nation. Before its consecration, the Somnath Jyotirlinga will be taken across India, from Rameshwaram to all 12 Jyotirlingas, offering devotees the chance to seek blessings. A 40-day purification ritual known as *kalarshra* will be performed following Shaiva Agama traditions, before the final consecration. The return of the Somnath Jyotirlinga is a reminder that truth and divinity can never truly be lost. Devotees will have the opportunity to receive *darshan* and blessings of the Somnath Jyotirlinga at the Maha Shivratri celebrations at our ashram in Bangalore.

This Maha Shivratri tap into the powerful cosmic energies of this night to transcend the world of duality. *Om Namo Shivaya*.

The writer is a spiritual leader and founder of The Art of Living Foundation



FEBRUARY 26, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

PAK POLL VIOLENCE

THREE PEOPLE WERE killed and several injured in clashes and four government buses were set on fire in Pakistan's first general elections in eight years. The police arrested over 30 dissidents to break up opposition demonstrations against the elections in which President Mohammad Ziaul Haq barred political parties from contesting.

BIRD HOME IN DELHI

THE IRON TERRITORY OF Delhi will have a bird sanctuary at Tughlaqabad Ridge. The Planning Commission has approved a proposal

to this effect by the Delhi Administration. An outlay of Rs 70 lakh has also been approved by the Commission for the coming financial year. The Delhi administration hopes to get more funding from the Centre soon. Besides the common variety of birds like mynas, parrots, orioles, woodpeckers, owls and a variety of water birds are expected to come to the sanctuary.

BARAMULLA VIOLENCE

The police resorted to firing on a violent mob, resulting in the death of one person in the border district of Baramulla. The villagers, who clashed with police personnel for several hours, also snatched a wireless set from a po-

lice jeep, which was later set ablaze. The number of people injured in the lathi charge, tear gas, shelling and heavy stone pelting is over 50, out of whom 16 are policemen.

RAJASTHAN BANDH

FOUR OPPOSITION PARTIES — the BJP, the Congress-S, Janata Party and Dalit Mazdoor Kisan Party — have decided to observe February 27 as a protest day "all over the country to express solidarity and sympathy with the people of Rajasthan over the killing of Man Singh." State units of these parties have been advised to hold public meetings and rallies on that day.

Looking again at EU

Europe has gone out of India's strategic calculus. European Commission President's visit provides an opportunity for Delhi and Brussels to deepen ties at a pivotal moment



RAJA-MANDALA
BY C. RAJA MOHAN

EUROPEAN COMMISSION PRESIDENT Ursula von der Leyen's visit to India this week, accompanied by the entire College of Commissioners (the European Cabinet), marks a critical moment in the EU-India strategic partnership. Von der Leyen arrives in Delhi amid significant global political shifts triggered by Donald Trump's return to the White House five weeks ago.

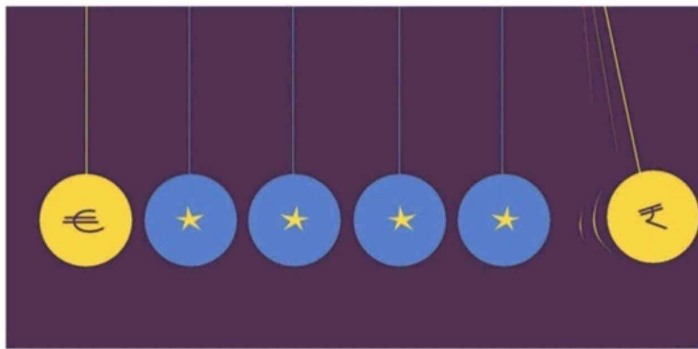
Although her visit was planned before Trump's re-election, her mission to deepen ties with India has gained new urgency. It was a deliberate choice for von der Leyen to make India her first international destination in her second term as the President of the European Commission. For India, which is scrambling to navigate the turbulence unleashed by Trump, Europe emerges as a valuable partner.

Despite their traditional emphasis on "strategic autonomy," both Brussels and Delhi have long relied on their partnerships with the US as the anchor of their global strategies. While neither can afford to disengage from the US, both India and Europe must now do more to strengthen their ties in response to Trump's unpredictable policies.

Trump is not only reshaping US policy towards Ukraine and Russia but also walking away from longstanding alliances and upturning the global economic order. His approach puts a premium on striking deals with rival powers such as Russia and China. Until now, India's strategy for managing US policy volatility has involved maintaining its ties with Russia and engaging in Moscow-led coalitions such as BRICS. However, Russian President Vladimir Putin is eager to negotiate a separate deal with Trump. Those in Delhi who recall the 1990s will remember how much the Russian elite aspired to be recognised as equal partners by the West. Some of Trump's Asian allies now fear he might seek a similar rapprochement with China.

In other words, the great power dynamics between the US, Russia, and China are once again in flux. Over the past century, these three powers have alternated between being allies, friends, enemies and frenemies. India cannot take any relationship for granted. This reality necessitates broadening India's strategic partnerships, and Europe remains the major missing link in India's strategic calculus. Von der Leyen's visit provides Delhi with the perfect opportunity to revitalise its engagement with the European Union—the world's third-largest economy after the US and China, and a vital source of science, technology, advanced industry, capital, and a vast consumer market.

Europe has not been absent from India's geopolitical considerations. Over the last decade, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has worked to overcome the prolonged neglect of India-EU relations.



C. R. Sankumar

While the two sides proclaimed a strategic partnership in 2004, momentum had waned by the early 2010s. Trade talks stalled due to a lack of progress, and Brussels appeared disinterested in even convening regular summits with India. At the same time, the EU remained focused on its deep commercial ties with China, cultivated over three decades.

By 2016, India sought to reinvigorate its engagement with the EU, prompting Brussels to convene a long-overdue summit. In 2022, following the pandemic, the two sides resumed trade negotiations, expanded their security dialogue, established a Trade and Technology Council, and launched a connectivity initiative. At the G20 Summit in Delhi in September 2023, both parties announced the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). As India recognised Europe's strategic value in a multipolar world, the EU also moved to "de-risk" its economic ties with China and increase its engagement in the Indo-Pacific region.

Given Trump's ambitions to reshape the post-war global order, neither Delhi nor Brussels can afford their traditionally meandering ways. Trump's decision to end US support for Ukraine—which has been resisting Russian aggression since February 2022—has left Europe in shock. To compound matters, Washington began direct talks with the Kremlin earlier this month in Riyadh, excluding both Ukraine and European representatives.

Further, Trump's Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth recently told NATO allies that Europe must take primary responsibility for Ukraine's security, increase defence spending, and prepare to defend itself against Russian threats. He also made it clear that the US would not indefinitely station troops in Europe, where approximately 100,000 American soldiers are currently deployed. Beyond rendering transatlantic relations, the Trump administration has launched an ideological offensive against European democracies. At the annual Munich Security Conference earlier this month, US Vice President JD Vance declared that Europe's primary threats were not external, but internal and stem from uncontrolled

immigration, unrealistic climate policies, and liberal extremism. Adding further strain, Vance and Trump ally Elon Musk have openly supported right-wing parties in Europe, particularly Germany's Alternative for Germany (AfD). During his visit to Munich, Vance bypassed Chancellor Olaf Scholz to meet AfD leader Alice Weidel. The AfD has more than doubled its electoral support in Sunday's elections. Meanwhile, Friedrich Merz, leader of the centre-right CDU—which secured 29 per cent of the vote—has criticised the US policy on Ukraine and Russia, condemned its interference in German elections, and vowed to reduce, step-by-step, German and European dependence on Washington. Given that the CDU has traditionally been one of Europe's most pro-American parties, this shift signals a profound transformation in European politics.

India, by contrast, appears to have started Trump's second term on a positive note, with Modi's visit to the White House earlier this month. However, the real test lies in implementing the ambitious commitments both leaders have made. Negotiating a free trade agreement and raising bilateral trade to \$500 billion annually by 2030 will be challenging, especially in the face of Trump's emphasis on reciprocal tariffs.

More broadly, India's strategy had assumed that the globalised economic order is irreversible. Trump is determined to dismantle that order. Meanwhile, India's trade deficit with China continues to rise, fueled by an ongoing boom in Chinese exports. Unless India takes decisive steps to reduce its dependence on Chinese imports, the deficit—already nearing \$100 billion annually—will grow even further. The answer lies in renewing economic reform at home and rebooting India's strategic partnerships, especially with Europe.

The writer is contributing editor on international affairs for The Indian Express

Taking a backward step

Bombay High Court's comments on consent in POCSO cases can demoralise survivors, adversely affect trial outcomes



AUDREY DMELLO AND FLAVIA AGNES

IN A RECENT ruling, Justice Milind Jadhav of the Bombay High Court granted bail to an accused who had been in jail for over five years for the rape of a 14-year-old girl in 2019. The Bombay High Court's decision should be applauded as it is in keeping with the Supreme Court's longstanding principle that "bail is the rule and jail is the exception". However, the judge's remarks regarding consent and other aspects of the case appear overreaching. These comments raise concerns about the interpretation of the judiciary of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act.

The case is of a 14-year-old girl who had gone to visit her married sister and did not return after the visit. The girl's father found her four days later with the accused, and an FIR under the POCSO Act was lodged.

The POCSO Act, passed in 2012, was a significant step in protecting children from sexual abuse and exploitation. The Act raised the age of consent to 18 years, ensuring that minors cannot legally consent to any form of sexual activity. This change aimed at aligning the legal definition of a child with the understanding that individuals under 18 are not mentally or emotionally prepared to make informed decisions about sexual matters, thus protecting them from coercion, manipulation, or abuse. The Act also introduced mandatory reporting, placing a duty on every individual to report incidents of sexual offences against children.

The Act has several beneficial provisions to be followed at police stations and courts, including fast-track trials where the child's testimony is to be recorded within two months and the trial to be concluded within one year. Victims are provided a support person to avoid re-traumatisation and to ensure rehabilitation. The POCSO Act has been amended several times since, but mostly to increase the severity of punishments, including the introduction of the death penalty.

Despite the noble intentions of the POCSO Act, the reality on the ground is far from ideal. A large number of cases remain unreported especially when the accused is a known person, and even when cases are reported, victims traverse a difficult legal journey and endure significant trauma, often receiving little or no support.

In this context, the Bombay High Court's comments are concerning. Justice Jadhav noted that although the girl was a minor, "the facts of the present case indicate that she (the 14-year-old victim) had sufficient knowledge and capacity to know the full import of her actions." The judge further remarked, "The girl was in love with the man, and had voluntarily stayed with him and had a consensual encounter".

These comments are problematic be-

cause they misinterpret the law regarding consent. The POCSO Act makes it unequivocally clear that minors cannot consent to any sexual activity regardless of the circumstances. Victim blaming and claiming that the victim consented to the sexual act is the most commonly used defence in rape trials. POCSO Act puts the onus of proof on the accused once the prosecution establishes a prima facie case. The premature comments of the judge on the merits of the case based solely on the FIR statement and medical reports will have a far-reaching impact, particularly for lower courts.

Anyone working with child victims of sexual abuse knows the trauma they have to go through on the day of reporting, FIR, medical examinations and statements before the child welfare committee often have contradictions as the child is dragged to all these agencies in the first 24 hours and has to repeat her story. Pressure from the police, her own family as well as the accused's makes the victim, already terrified and scared, extremely vulnerable. Contradictions in the victim's statements should have been evaluated by the trial court, which is in the best position to examine all evidence.

The judge's comments on the non-violent nature of the offence and the absence of criminal antecedents in the accused's record are also flawed as in most cases of sexual abuse the incidents are rarest violent. The harm caused by specific abuses, regardless of physical violence, is profound and life-altering for the victim. The judge's reasoning reflects an outdated and overly simplistic understanding of sexual offences.

At the same time, the Bombay High Court missed an important opportunity to address the issue of severe delay in the trial. In this instance, the case has been pending for over five years even though the POCSO Act mandates that trials be completed within one year. As of 2022, the Maharashtra Crime Records reported a pendency of over 38,000 cases with courts managing to dispose of only 5 per cent of pending cases each year. These delays cause a huge challenge for victims, who are forced to live with the uncertainty of prolonged legal proceedings.

Lastly, Justice Jadhav mentions that the Supreme Court has supported granting bail to young offenders in specific circumstances to avoid the regressive influences of prolonged imprisonment. Yet, he fails to pull up the lower court as to why the accused who had filed four bail applications, two of them in person, in the sessions court, was not granted bail.

Higher courts must interpret the law as it stands, ensuring that justice is served based on existing statutes and legal principles. It is the responsibility of Parliament to change or amend the law if it is deemed inadequate or outdated. It would be prudent for high courts to avoid making overreaching comments about victims and the merits of a case while granting bail as they demoralise victims and send a wrong message to the lower courts. These comments may also adversely impact the outcome of the trial.

Dmello is director and Agnes founder of Majlis, a legal centre for women and children. Views are personal

Overestimating the bonanza

Tax cuts in budget will have multiplier effects. But measure them accurately



RAJIV KUMAR

THERE IS A virtual tsunami of opinions on the historically unprecedented changes in the personal income tax (PIT) announced by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman for the fiscal year 2025-26 (FY26). The accolades are well deserved. To be bold enough to more than double the exemption limit and take a revenue hit of Rs 1 lakh crore shows exceptional fiscal courage. The budget attempts to achieve the difficult triple objective of reducing the fiscal deficit, maintaining the level of public capital expenditure, and handing a tax bonanza to the middle class.

Some commentators, including my friend Krishnamurthy Subramanian (KS), the former chief economic advisor in the Ministry of Finance, have argued that the revenue loss of Rs 1 lakh crore will be more than compensated by the growth of Rs 5 lakh crore in national income through the operation of the consumption multiplier. In a recent article ("Tax cuts will have multiplier effects," IE, February 7), KS argues that the rise in the disposable income of about 3.1 crore taxpayers as a result of the higher tax exemption and re-jigging of tax rates, by 0.3 per cent of the GDP, will result in an increase in consumption by 3.2 per cent and an increment of 1.8 per cent in the GDP. I wish that these eye-popping numbers were actually correct. Unfortunately, however, even a preliminary inquiry into the assumptions underlying these estimates, reveals them to be hyperbolic.

KS's assumption of the marginal

propensity of consumption (MPC) of 0.8 per cent or even 0.7 per cent for those paying the personal income tax (PIT) is far too high on several counts. First, higher income segments of taxpayers, also benefited by the exemption and reduction in tax rates, have a higher propensity to save, which lowers their MPC. Second, consumption by these income groups includes a significant proportion of imported goods and services, which results in consumption leakage lowering the domestic economy's MPC. Third, a rise in disposable income could be expected to encourage debt repayment which also raises the effective savings rate. Thus, a MPC closer to 0.5 per cent is a more realistic assumption. The rise in disposable income by Rs 1 lakh crore will, therefore, result in an increase of Rs 2 lakh crore in national income and not of Rs 5 lakh crore.

Furthermore, KS applies the increase in national disposable income to the real consumption and GDP levels to estimate the positive impact of the rise in disposable income. This is a mistake as the increase in disposable income should be seen in relation to nominal levels of expected consumption and GDP in FY2025-26. The nominal consumption level in FY26 is estimated to be Rs 200 lakh crore and the nominal GDP is estimated to be Rs 324 lakh crore. Therefore, with the more realistic MPC of 0.5 per cent and the resultant rise in consumption by Rs 2 lakh crore, the actual consumption growth will be 1 per cent (2 divided by 200) and the growth in GDP will

be only 0.6 per cent. These estimates are far more realistic. They yield a growth in GDP of 0.6 per cent, which is double the increase in disposable income of 0.3 per cent of GDP. This still shows a robust consumption multiplier at work. The finance minister should be complimented for taking this growth inducing fiscal step that will likely have a positive impact on investment sentiments and help trigger a rise in private capacity-building investment.

The loss in direct tax revenue could result in either a compression of public capital expenditure or an increase in government borrowings, thereby forcing the government to abandon the target for the reduction in fiscal deficit. There is a visible slowdown in government public capex in the budget estimates for FY26. Capital expenditure is slated to be Rs 112 lakh crore in FY26, virtually the same as the budget estimate for public capex in 2024-25 of Rs 11.1 lakh crore. With nominal GDP expected to rise by 10.1 per cent, this implies a decline in public capex as a share of GDP. This will imply a lower investment multiplier compared to the previous two years and will weaken the overall growth impact of the consumption multiplier.

The persistent and principal weakness in the country's current economic situation is the tepid performance of private investment over the last few years. This weakness in private investment could result in a weak supply response to the rise in private con-

sumption demand spurred by the rise in disposable incomes and the lowering of the repo rate by the RBI by 0.25 per cent. This could result in rising inflationary expectations in the economy, which is certainly avoidable. Therefore, the key policy measure for realising a consumption-driven acceleration in GDP growth is to catalyse private investment by improving the investment climate in the country.

In this context, the more important measure announced in the budget is the setting up of a high-level committee to identify the regulatory and compliance burden for private investors and recommend measures for eliminating them. Given the critical nature of implementing these measures to restore investor confidence, the finance minister should chair this committee. Measures to root out petty but widespread rent-seeking; reduce investor harassment and eliminate the prevailing uncertainty require the highest possible level of political backing. The committee could also include state finance ministers. Such a committee will send the strongest signal that this government perceives itself as a promoter and supporter of private investors and will do whatever is necessary to release the latent animal spirits, thereby ushering in an era of rapid and sustained economic growth.

The writer is Chairman Pahlé India Foundation and former Vice Chairman of NITI Aayog

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

TALK, DON'T FIGHT

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "Talk it out" (IE, February 25). The roots of the Belagavi border dispute date back to the reorganisation of states in 1956. Despite it having a significant Marathi-speaking population, Belagavi was merged with the Mysore state (now Karnataka) based on the 1881 census, which showed 64.39 per cent Kannada speakers and 26.04 per cent Marathi speakers. The flare-up comes after a bus conductor and a driver from Karnataka were allegedly assaulted for not speaking in Marathi, reigniting tensions that have persisted since the 1960s. Inflammatory statements of the ministers of two states have fuelled tensions. It is time that the political class takes up the issue. Dialogue not violence must be the way forward.

SS Paul, Nadia

FOR A COMEBACK

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "The new right" (IE, February 25). The rise of far-right parties is not merely due to people being "convinced" of a hateful narrative. In many cases, they are dissatisfied with the status quo and looking for alternatives, even if they disagree with the parties' stands on immigration and minorities. Their focus is their day-to-day survival. Any left-leaning parties that want to make a comeback need to acknowledge this reality.

Anany Mishra, Bhopal

NO DOWNSIDES

THIS REFERS TO the article, "The languages we speak" (IE, February 25). Tamil Nadu's Chief Minister should embrace the Three Language Formula (TLF) without conflating it with state politics or tussles with the Centre. The state can choose the languages alongside English. Offering multiple languages at crucial learning stages relates to increased cognitive flexibility. This is a welcome step for our education system. It will also preserve our cultural roots and linguistic heritage.

Shawna Jena, Guwahati

TRUSTING THE ECI

THIS REFERS TO the article, "Doing the right thing" (IE, February 24). As the challenges of organising elections have increased, so has the Election Commission's responsibility to ensure that they are free and fair. It is worrisome that people are losing faith in the ECI. Their trust in the body took a further hit when the executive was given a dominant position in determining its composition. Sweden's independent V-Dem Institute demoted India to an "electoral autocracy". The government's recent move to nominate the chief election commissioner without waiting for the Supreme Court's imminent ruling on petitions contesting the process reveals its unwillingness to include the CJI on the selection panel.

Kamal Laddha, Bengaluru

THIS WORD MEANS

NAKSHA

A new initiative, announced in the Budget, aimed at updating records of land in urban areas of the country

HARIKISHAN SHARMA
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 25

UNION RURAL Development Minister Shriy Singh Chouhan launched NAKSHA or the "National geospatial Knowledge-based Land Survey of urban Habitats" (NAKSHA) initiative last week from Raisin in Madhya Pradesh.

What is NAKSHA?

NAKSHA is a city survey and mapping initiative under the Digital India Land Records Modernisation Programme (DILRMP). It is spearheaded by the Department of Land Resources (DoLR) under the Ministry of Rural Development. A one-year pilot program has been launched in 152 urban local bodies across 26 states. According to the DoLR, "The NAKSHA program aims to create a comprehensive and accurate geospatial database for urban land records. By integrating aerial and field surveys with advanced GIS technology, the program enhances efficiency in land governance, streamlines property ownership records, and facilitates urban planning."

Why was this program needed?

The program addresses the need for updating land records in urban areas. While the land record system has improved in rural areas over time, several cities lack maps even today. Barring a few states such as Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Goa, most states in India have outdated or unstructured land records, causing inefficiencies in governance and taxation, a DoLR official told *The Indian Express*.

The idea was first mooted in the Union Budget last year. "Land records in urban areas will be digitised with GIS mapping. An IT-based system for property record administration, updating, and tax administration will be established. These will also facilitate improv-

ing the financial position of urban local bodies," Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said in her Budget speech on July 23, 2024.

In her Budget speech this year, she said, "Urban sector reforms related to governance, municipal services, urban land, and planning will be incentivised." Once completed, NAKSHA is expected to provide benefits such as comprehensive digital urban land records, reduction in land disputes, faster and more efficient urban planning, and improved property tax collection.

How much will NAKSHA cost?

According to the 2011 Census, India has 7,933 towns covering 1.02 lakh square km of the total 32.87 lakh square km geographical area. NAKSHA will cover 4,142.63 square km under the pilot project.

The initiative is entirely centrally funded, with the pilot project expected to cost about Rs 194 crore. At the unit level, the cost varies depending on the camera used. For a simple camera, the cost is about Rs 25,000 to Rs 30,000 per square km, while for a 3D camera, it can go up to Rs 60,000.

How will the survey be done?

Drones, aerial photography, and high-resolution cameras will be used. The three-stage process will first see the selection of an area and the drawing of a flight plan for a drone survey. Data will then be extracted from the drone flights. In the second stage, a field survey will help verify the conditions on the ground. Details such as property tax, ownership, and registration deeds will be linked with each land parcel and property. Thereafter, 2D/3D models will be prepared and draft land ownership details will be published.

In the third stage, claims and objections will be accounted for and addressed. Following these, the final maps will be published.

The dramatic duelling on the third anniversary of the war spotlighted the widening rift between the US and Europe. India held its neutral line — its abstentions reflected its policy of strategic multi-alignment

EXPLAINED FOREIGN POLICY & STRATEGY

The UN vote on Ukraine

The dramatic duelling on the third anniversary of the war spotlighted the widening rift between the US and Europe. India held its neutral line — its abstentions reflected its policy of strategic multi-alignment

SHUBHAJIT ROY
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 25

THE UNITED STATES suffered setbacks in two duels with its European allies at the United Nations General Assembly before it pulled one back at the Security Council on Monday, the third anniversary of the war in Ukraine.

At the end of the day's drama, the transatlantic partnership that is already facing an existential threat from a US policy reversal under President Donald Trump appeared to have frayed further.

India abstained on both UNGA resolutions, signalling foreign policy independence, but also betraying its diplomatic constraints.

Here's what happened

Ukraine introduced a three-page resolution demanding Russia's withdrawal from its territory, "de-escalation, an early cessation of hostilities and a peaceful resolution of the war against Ukraine," and a "comprehensive, lasting and just peace".

The US brought its own three-paragraph resolution seeking "a swift end to the conflict and... a lasting peace between Ukraine and Russia," but did not condemn Russia's aggression. Earlier this month, Trump had accused President Volodymyr Zelenskyy of "starting" the war.

Ukraine's resolution was passed 93-18, with 65 abstentions. The Group of 77 (G7) — barring the US voted with the Ukrainians; the Americans, Russians, and Israelis voted against. China, Russia's close ally since the war began, abstained.

When the US resolution was taken up, France proposed amendments saying the conflict was the result of a "full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation". After the amendments were incorporated, the US decided to abstain on its own resolution, which passed 93-18 with 73 abstentions.

A resolution similar to the original UN draft was then moved in the 15-member Security Council, where Russia vetoed the European amendments. This resolution passed 10-0, with France and the UK among the 5 abstentions.

The UNSC vote took place as President Trump met President Emmanuel Macron of France in the White House and the two leaders had a call with other leaders of the G7.

Change in the US position

This was the first time since President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine that the US voted with Russia and against its Western allies in the UN — a major departure and a break with Europe.

"Imagine a situation in which [football superstars] Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo start playing for the opponent's team after half-time," a senior European diplomat told *The Indian Express*. "That is what the US has done to Europe. After three years of supporting us on Ukraine, they are now playing on the side of the Russians," the diplomat said.

The changed US position was in line with Trump's direct outreach to Putin, his insults of Zelenskyy, and the exclusion of both Ukraine and Europe from the talks between the Americans and the Russians that took place in Riyadh on February 12.

Trump wants a "deal" with Russia to end the war — perhaps by Easter. He wants access to Ukraine's minerals and hydrocarbons, but Ukraine wants firm security guarantees first.

It is noteworthy that the 93 votes condemning the Russian aggression were far less than the 140-plus cast in favour of Ukraine in previous UN resolutions — and less than half the UNGA membership of 193.

India's UN abstentions...

The abstentions by India were no surprise. Before Monday, India had abstained at the UNSC at least six times and at the UNGA at least 12 times on resolutions on the Ukraine war. It has also abstained on war-related resolutions at other global platforms such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), World Trade Organization



Vote results are displayed at the UN General Assembly on Monday. Reuters

(WTO), UNESCO, and World Health Organization (WHO).

India has strategic partners on both sides, and it has been walking the diplomatic tightrope since the beginning of the war. The strategic multi-alignment is part of New Delhi's diplomatic toolkit, which helped when the 2023 G20 Leaders Summit produced a joint communique.

However, New Delhi has never supported the Russian aggression against Ukraine — and it has flagged the need to respect "territorial integrity" and "sovereignty", the "UN charter", and "international law". Prime Minister Narendra Modi famously reminded President Putin in September 2022 that "this is not an era of war".

India had also condemned the Bucha massacre early in the war, and backed the call for an international probe — significant because New Delhi has been generally wary of such interventions.

New Delhi has always asserted that it is on the side of "peace". By its vote in the UN on Monday, it showed that its neutral stance has not been impacted by Trump's upending of the position taken by the US in the conflict.

Sources in the Indian foreign policy establishment said this had been a "difficult call", but India had decided to "hold the line" — an assertion of the strategic autonomy of Indian foreign policy.

...And one significant nuance

Faced with the new geopolitical reality of direct US-Russia talks on Ukraine and the rapidly changing contours of the transatlantic alliance, India has nuanced its framing of the war slightly — moving from "two parties to the conflict" to the broader "parties concerned".

Ahead of his meeting with Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on the sidelines of the G20 Foreign Ministers' meeting in Johannesburg on February 20, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said: "We have long advocated dialogue and diplomacy [on the conflict]. Today, the world expects that parties concerned deal with each other to end the war."

This was different from what Pavan Kapoor, the Indian representative at the peace summit on Ukraine organised by Switzerland, said on June 16, 2024. Kapoor, who is now India's Deputy National Security Advisor, said: "We continue to believe that such a peace requires bringing together all stakeholders and a sincere and practical engagement between the two parties to the conflict... Accordingly, we will continue to engage with all stakeholders as well as the two parties to the conflict to contribute to all earnest efforts to achieve lasting peace in Ukraine."

Moving from "two parties to the conflict", viz. Russia and Ukraine, to the more general "parties concerned" widens the frame to include other countries — perhaps the US, with or without Europe. Despite the reference to "stakeholders" earlier, the mention of the "two parties to the conflict" had been very specific.

The reframing is an acknowledgment of the geopolitical realities that have emerged this month, and is intended to open up more diplomatic space for New Delhi to manage its relationships, sources said.

How US-Europe 'break' is changing the 'world order'

AAKASH JOSHI
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 25

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP has proposed that Palestinians should be removed from the Gaza Strip, and the area should be turned into a "river" under American control.

The United States also appears to have reversed its policy on the Russia-Ukraine war — and to be now working with the Kremlin to force a settlement on Kyiv.

In both these conflicts, America seems willing to move forward without the parties that are the most affected — Palestinians and Ukrainians — being represented.

Trump's detractors have argued that the "rules-based order" that the US and its Western allies have championed vis-à-vis China in the Indo-Pacific and Russia in Europe is now under threat from the US itself.

Nature of the 'threat'

Benjamin Jensen of the Futures Lab in the Defense and Security Department at the Washington think tank Center for Strategic and International Studies argued in a paper published last week that Trump aims to strike a "grand bargain" to reshape the world order and recreate the era of "spheres of influence".

In this understanding, empires or big powers in conflict tend to acknowledge, if only for a time, the broader hegemony of their rivals in particular areas that are often in geographical proximity. This impulse, repeatedly evidenced from the Hellenic world to modern times, has led to situations in which the rulers or people of countries with less economic and military power have had a very limited say in determining their own destinies.

The roots of many contemporary conflicts lie in colonialism. Consider:

■ At the Berlin Conference of 1884-85, European colonial powers carved up Africa among themselves, drawing straight lines on the map that ignored geographical and cultural realities on the ground. In the subcontinent, the Durand Line remains a source of conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan more than 130 years after it was established.

■ The February 1945 Yalta Conference, which ultimately led to the setting up of the Cold War camps, was arguably the moment when the US formally became the security provider for the "West". The leaders of the US, the USSR, and the UK met in the Black Sea resort town to decide the future of Germany and Europe. French leader Charles de Gaulle was excluded — this is still seen as a slight by many in France.

Does Trump's approach towards the Palestinians and the Ukrainians signal a return to this imperialist mindset?

Every act of US interventionism over the past decades — in Latin America, Asia, Middle East, or Afghanistan — has provoked cries of "American neo-imperialism". This cry is now being heard as the US appears to move towards a more isolationist stance in Europe — even though there does seem to be less outrage, at least in the West, about the idea of occupying Palestine.

Some analysts have argued that the US bargain with Russia on Ukraine aims to drive a wedge between Moscow and Beijing. The success of such a plan is far from guaranteed. At the Munich Conference of 1938, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain agreed to the German occupation of Sudetenland, the German-speaking parts of the former Czechoslovakia, but that did not stop Hitler. Before that, the "grand bargain" among European powers could not prevent World War I.

Indeed, while Trump's outreach to President Vladimir Putin may end the conflict in Ukraine early, a possible unintended consequence of the US action could be a re-approach towards China.

Politics at home, policy abroad

It can be argued that a month in office and a few announcements, even if they have come from the US President, are not enough to pronounce the end of the post-Cold War order. But there is another factor that may be more salient than Trump's Ukraine gambit.

Broadly, since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, foreign policies of the western powers have been domestic politics-proof. In the UK, for example, until Brexit, both Labour and Tory governments were broadly predictable in the positions they took on the "big questions" of foreign policy.

Even in India, the broad direction of foreign policy — the growing closeness to the West, maintaining ties with Russia, and even neighbourhood policy — has not been upended by changes of guard in New Delhi.

But Trump's election is seen by some as a "great disruption" — an event potentially as far-reaching as Mikhail Gorbachev's term in the USSR. This appears remarkable because democracies with strong institutions are seen as being more stable and considered than one-party systems ruled by strongmen.

The US and the UK aren't the only countries where domestic politics has become more consequential than before for foreign policy. The rise of the far right across Europe — from the AfD's dramatic success in Sunday's German federal election to Marine Le Pen's ambition of entering the Élysée Palace — threatens the idea of Europe as an economic and geopolitical union.

Indeed, changes in domestic politics in several countries are being driven by a new kind of internationalism, what strategic affairs analyst C Raja Mohan has called the "Con-Inter" — a nascent ideological formation akin to the Comintern or Communist International (founded in Moscow in 1919).

"The argument in the West is only partly about America and Europe disputing policies on trade, tariffs, defence, and even territory. It is [also] about conservative forces from across national borders within the West coming together to challenge liberal orthodoxy on various issues. The 'Con-Inter' is likely to leave an important policy legacy for the world on European security, global trade," Raja Mohan wrote in *The Indian Express* on February 20.

India in a changing world

The fact that political changes in some countries can now deeply impact foreign policy is a major reason for the foreseeable uncertainty in the world.

New Delhi has been broadly successful in its "balancing act" — an increasingly polarised world. The "multi-alignment" strategy — India has ties with Russia, Europe, the US and Israel and Palestine — has helped protect its interests. That challenge could become more difficult if the US under Trump begins to see all ties through a zero-sum prism.

That New Delhi is opening doors for a thaw with Beijing, and continues to engage with all the actors in Europe, is a positive sign. For the foreseeable future, it will likely continue its "wait and watch" strategy, while actively being a voice for peace. The latest signal came on Monday, when New Delhi abstained on UN votes on two resolutions, one of which was seen as being supportive of Russia and the other of Ukraine.

FOR THE FIRST TIME, A GENETIC DISORDER TREATED IN THE WOMB

FOLLOWING THE first-ever treatment for a rare genetic disorder known as spinal muscular atrophy (SMA) in the womb, scientists say a two-year-old girl shows no signs of the disease.

The girl's mother began taking the gene-targeting drug during late pregnancy, and the child continues to take it.

The results of the treatment were published last week in the journal *The New England Journal of Medicine*.

SMA is a debilitating genetic condition which affects motor neurons that control movement, and leads to progressive muscle weakening. "About one in every 10,000 births have some form of the condition — making it a leading genetic cause of death in infants and children," according to a report in *Nature*. The condition is caused by mutations in the survival motor neuron gene (SMN1) which causes a deficiency of a protein crucial for the survival of motor neurons in the spinal cord.

For treatment, scientists used an oral drug called risdiplam, which is given



to patients to slow the progression of SMA. Risdiplam is typically given to a patient soon after birth — the earlier the intervention, the better the results seem to be. Therefore, in the new trial, scientists decided to administer the drug before birth for the first time.

The mother, who was 32 weeks pregnant, took risdiplam daily for six weeks. The baby started taking the drug from roughly one week old, and will probably continue to take it for the rest of her life," the *Nature* report said.

The scientists found that the girl had higher levels of the SMN protein in her bloodstream, compared to those usually born with the condition. The girl seemed to have lower levels of nerve damage, and after 30 months had normal muscle development with no sign of atrophy, according to reports.

Scientists said that the success of the trial had opened doors for larger studies to see whether the findings could be replicated.

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ANAGHA JAYAKUMAR
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 25

THOUSANDS were praying for Pope Francis in St Peter's Square in Vatican City as the 88-year-old pontiff remained in a critical condition in Rome's Gemelli hospital where he was admitted on February 14.

The Pope was pneumonia in both lungs and although the Vatican announced a slight improvement in his condition on Tuesday, it remains precarious.

The fragility of the pontiff's health has raised questions about his ability to sustainably lead the Catholic Church even if he makes a full recovery from his current illness.

Since 1415, all popes except one have died in office. Benedict XVI, Francis's predecessor who assumed the papacy in 2005, retired in 2013, citing a "lack of strength of mind and body".

What happens if the Pope passes away or resigns, an event that is known as a papal nunciature or abdication?

EXPLAINED GLOBAL

If the Pope dies

Detailed laws and rituals, some dating back to the Middle Ages, govern the transfer of power from one pope to the next. The passing of the pontiff triggers the Interregnum, the period between two papacies. The death is verified by the camerlengo, the cardinal who serves as the treasurer of the Church. He ceremonially calls out the



Pope's baptismal name thrice — and pronounces him dead if no response is received. The Ring of the Fisherman, the Pope's signet ring bearing the seal of his papacy, is

broken off to symbolise the end of his rule. The papal apartment is locked and sealed, and the camerlengo informs the College of Cardinals that the Pope is no more. The

Nevenside, or nine days of mourning, follows. The Pope's body is dressed in papal regalia and placed for public viewing in St Peter's Basilica. In 2022, Pope Francis arranged for his body to be placed in a simple coffin, dispensing with the three coffins made of cypress, lead, and oak that are traditionally used.

The funeral is held within four to six days, and is led by the Dean of the College of Cardinals. Most popes are buried underground in St Peter's Basilica, but Pope Francis decided in 2022 that he should be buried away from the Vatican, in the Santa Maria Maggiore Basilica in Rome.

Sede Vacante

With the passing or resignation of the Pope begins the period of *Sede Vacante*, meaning "the seat is vacant", during which

the rule of the Church falls to the College. Within 15-20 days, cardinals under age 80 arrive from all over the world to participate in the papal conclave, the secret election process to determine a successor.

The cardinals, who are sequestered in the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican, vote in several rounds until a single cardinal enjoying a two-thirds majority. For each round of voting that does not yield a Pope, black smoke is released from the Sistine Chapel's white smoke signals the election of a new Pope.

A representative from the College of Cardinals stands in the main balcony of St Peter's Basilica and announces "Habemus papam" ("We have a Pope"). The new Pope, who chooses a name that usually honours a saint or a predecessor, then delivers his first address to the public from the balcony.

Researchers spot a clue as to why human and mouse genomes overlap

Parts of human, mouse, chicken, and dog DNA called ultra-conserved elements have remained completely unchanged for the last 80 million years. What biological constraints preserved them so precisely across such diverse genomes? For years, scientists were unsure — but this year, a research team made a breakthrough

D.P. Kasbekar

Eighty million years ago humans, rats, and mice shared the same mammalian ancestor.

More recently, researchers made the astonishing discovery that even today our genomes contain close to 500 segments that have remained totally unchanged since then. These segments are called ultra-conserved elements (UCEs). Nearly all the UCEs are also highly unchanged in the chicken and dog genomes, and many are significantly conserved in fish, too.

What biological constraint maintained the UCEs intact in so many different genomes for these tens of millions of years?

For a long time scientists had no idea — so much so that our ignorance was considered profound.

But a team made a breakthrough this year. Researchers led by David J. Elliott of Newcastle University in the UK reported in *EMBO Journal* that a UCE in a mouse gene has an important role in limiting the production of the protein encoded by this gene.

Using genetic engineering, they deleted this gene in mouse testes, and found that these mice over-produced the corresponding protein in their testes. The overproduction resulted in death of the sperm-producing cells and the mice becoming infertile.

This result suggested that if the UCE underwent any change that interfered with its role in limiting that protein's levels, it would result in loss of sperm production. Thus the altered UCE would not be transmitted to the next generation, accounting for the maintenance of the UCE across species.

From gene to protein

The DNA is a double-helix molecule. Each helix is a string of four bases. The double helix is held together because a base on one strand bonds with a base on the other. Each bond represents a base-pair. A gene is a relatively short stretch of the DNA molecule, typically only a few thousand base-pairs long.

When a gene is 'expressed', the cell copies its sequence of bases into a messenger RNA (mRNA) and loads it onto a cellular machine called the ribosome. There its base sequence specifies the sequence amino acids should be stitched together to make the protein encoded by the gene.

The mRNA also has any one of three short sequences of bases called stop codons. When the ribosome encounters a stop codon, it stops adding more amino



Nearly all the UCEs are also highly unchanged in the chicken and dog genomes, and many are significantly conserved in fish, too. GETTY IMAGES

acids and releases the newly synthesised protein.

Our genome contains 20,000 genes that code for proteins and another 20,000 used to make RNA that influence the expression of other genes.

(Some DNA sequences, called promoters and enhancers, bind to regulatory proteins which specify when and where other genes are copied into mRNA. These too are called genes because changes in their sequence can have visible effects on the organism.)

The poison exon

Researchers first identified UCEs as DNA sequences longer than 200 base-pairs that retained perfect sequence identity across the human, rat, and mouse genomes. That is, they hadn't tolerated even a single base-pair change in the last 80 million years.

Most UCEs don't code for proteins. Initially researchers thought the UCEs might be exceptionally long enhancers. A subset even showed enhancer activity in the mouse. However, mice bearing altered versions of UCEs didn't have significantly perturbed enhancer function, so the enhancer role couldn't account for the extreme conservation.

The fact that some UCEs could be deleted from the genome without any observable consequence only added to their intrigue.

After the RNA is copied from a gene's DNA strand, the cell subjects it to a

The fact that some UCEs could be deleted from the genome without any observable consequence only added to their intrigue

maturation step called splicing: splicing removes, or splices out, segments called introns from the newly made mRNA. The segments retained in the mature mRNA are called exons.

For some genes, an intron is removed from only a subset of mRNA molecules but retained in the rest. This gives rise to alternative forms of mRNA called splice variants: they vary in whether they contain an intron.

The mouse *Tra2b* gene has eight introns and nine exons. Interestingly, the *Tra2b* protein that the gene encodes for is used for splicing. There is a UCE embedded within the first intron of the *Tra2b* gene. Once the level of the *Tra2b* protein rises above a certain threshold in the cell, it recognises this UCE as an additional exon to be included in a new splice variant of the gene's mRNA.

The new exon does not introduce new protein-coding sequences. Instead, it contains multiple stop codons that cause protein synthesis to terminate, the mRNA to fall off the ribosome, and then the mRNA to enter a degradation pathway.

Effectively, the new exon prevents further accumulation of the *Tra2b* protein. Hence it is also called a poison exon.

In sum, the UCE in the *Tra2b* gene's first intron acts as a poison exon that limits the production of the *Tra2b* protein.

A precise intervention

A protein named Cre can recognise certain short sequences in the DNA and bind to them. The binding causes the DNA sequence located between the two short sequences to be cut out.

The researchers inserted these sequences into the first intron of the *Tra2b* gene, on either side of the UCE. Next, they engineered mice to express Cre in only the sperm-producing cells of the testes. These mice thus lacked the poison exon and were unable to limit the production of the *Tra2b* protein in their testes. This led to death of the sperm-producing cells.

Admittedly, completely cutting out a UCE from the genome is not the same as changing one or a few of its base-pairs. As of now, we know no biological function that depends on a unique 200 base-pair DNA sequence.

If altering even a single base-pair of the UCE keeps it from being included as a poison exon in the *Tra2b* splice variant and renders the mouse infertile, then an 80-million-year-old mystery will be cracked.

The new study represents a big step towards achieving this goal.

(D.P. Kasbekar is a retired scientist. kasbekardp@yahoo.co.in)

THE GIST

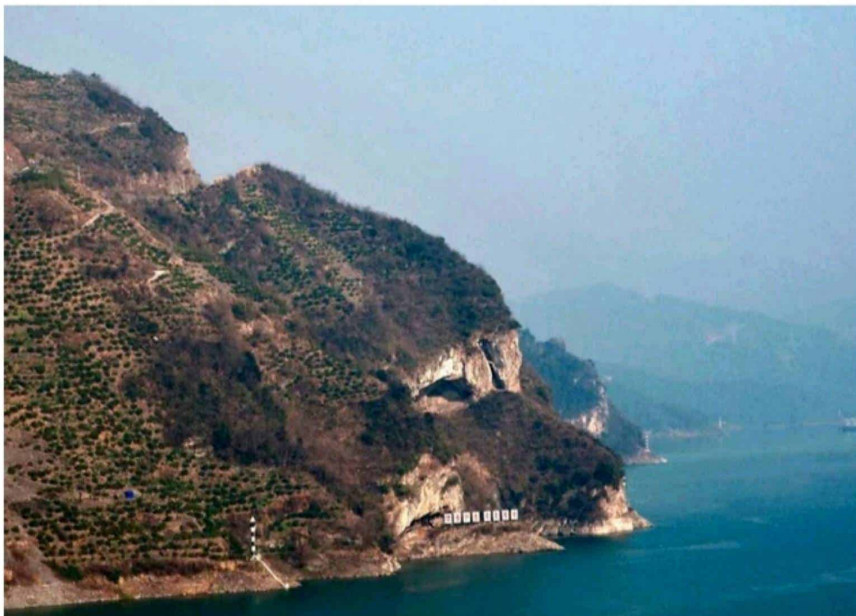
When the UCE was deleted in some mice, they over-produced the corresponding protein. This resulted in death of the sperm-producing cells and infertility. Thus the altered UCE would not be transmitted to the next generation

Researchers first identified UCEs as DNA sequences longer than 200 base-pairs. Most UCEs don't code for proteins. Initially it was thought UCEs might be enhancers. However, mice bearing altered versions of UCEs didn't have significantly perturbed enhancer function

The mouse *Tra2b* gene has eight introns and nine exons. It carries a UCE in the first intron. Once the level of *Tra2b* protein it encodes rises it recognises this UCE as an additional exon. The new exon contains stop codons that terminate protein synthesis, hence it is also called a poison exon

As of now, we know no biological function that depends on a unique 200 base-pair DNA sequence. If altering even a single base-pair of the UCE keeps it from being included as a poison exon and renders the mouse infertile, then an 80-million-year-old mystery will be cracked

BIG SHOT



This photo taken on January 20, 2025, and released by Guo Qingshan, shows the "puppy mountain" — which went viral over the Internet in China — in Yichang, a city in central China's Hubei Province. The tendency to see a face where none exists in an image is called pareidolia. AP

QUESTION CORNER

Leaping through time

Q: While leap years get an extra day, why are century years left out unless divisible by 400?

A: 400?

A tropical year is the time (365.242199 days) the earth takes to revolve around the sun. By having just 365 days in a calendar year, 0.242199 days are lost each year. To correct this error, Julius Caesar introduced a four-year cycle. The first three years had 365 days each and the fourth year had 366 days.

This correction was later found to be an overestimation of the year by 11 minutes and 14 seconds, amounting to 5.1204 days in 400 years. A course correction was brought about: to drop three days in 400 years. As a result, century years are not leap years unless divisible by 400.

Time measurements and calendars have often been refined over the years. The one followed now is the Gregorian calendar, named after Pope Gregory XIII of the 16th century. The pope promulgated an order in 1582 that only century years divisible by 400 would be leap



Time measurements and calendars have often been refined over the years. ALEXEY SAVCHENKO/UNSPLASH

years whereas 1700, 1800, 1900, 2100, etc. even though divisible by 4 would be normal years with just 365 days.

Accurate atomic clocks have recently detected a slowing down of the earth due to the moon's drag, by about 0.06 microseconds per year. It is not easy to account for such changes even though they affect our calculations of the date and time of the equinoxes. Nonetheless, the present system is working satisfactorily.

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KEYWORD

How political consultancies are rewriting Indian elections

While the impact of political consultancy firms on our politics continues to remain murky, there are disturbing indicators of how they can de-institutionalise political parties in the name of business

Aadva Narain
Divyansh Nautiyal

The New Delhi elections bore witness to an intense battle of narratives, with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) promising a double-engine sarkar to voters while battering the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) for its failures in governance, and its myriad corruption scandals. While the AAP attempted to reframe the discourse to welfare, and the Centre-State conflict, it nonetheless resulted in a rout for the party. The writers of these narratives, however, were not named on constituency tickets, but worked in the background, to prepare, package and professionalise the parties in fray.

India's tryst with political consultancy firms has been well documented. It started with Viplav Communications (founded in 2003) assisting a newer generation of MPs with their campaigns. It rose to prominence by strategising the Naveen Patnaik-led Biju Janata Dal's campaign in the Odisha Assembly elections of 2009. A distinct marker was the use of novelties such as the SuperCaller, which enabled them to reach hundreds of thousands of voters daily with pre-recorded messages. Since then, an outcrop of firms, including the Populus Empowerment Network (PEN), Showtime Consulting and JPAC Persona have consolidated their positions as important stakeholders in Indian elections. They have been hired by parties like the BJP and the Congress as well as regional parties like the Trinamool Congress, and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam. With respect to AAP, JPAC (Indian Political Action Committee) spearheaded its campaign for the New Delhi elections.

Americanising Indian elections

The rise of political consultancy firms represents an increasing 'Americanisation' of Indian election campaigns. These firms work in a war room-like setting with professionals from the ITs, IIMs and NLUs. They focus on data collection through voter surveys, social media and micro-targeted digital campaigns. The consultancy firms' ability to introduce sophisticated campaign technologies enable parties to shift from traditional ground-level mobilisation to tech-driven voter engagement.

Traditionally, Indian elections were party-driven, with political ideologies and grassroots mobilisation playing a dominant role. However, there is a trend towards personality-centric campaigns, where individual leaders overshadow their parties. Consultancy firms build a U.S.-presidential style campaign narrative around individual leaders rather than party ideology or collective leadership. The influential role of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in winning elections for the BJP, or the Congress constantly relying on Opposition leader Rahul Gandhi for their electoral prospects elucidate this trend.

The nature of political campaigns has also evolved into a more permanent and continuous process. Political leaders and parties remain in a perpetual state of campaigning, using social media narratives, television appearances, and



Different methods: A child waves the Congress flag during a rally for Delhi elections on January 30. AP

frequent rallies to maintain voter engagement even between elections. The increasing reliance on television and digital media has further reinforced the role of political consultants, with political advertising, cinematic-style campaign videos, and aggressive PR campaigns becoming common features of Indian elections.

The erasure of party cadre

As political consultancy firms continue to gain a foothold in Indian politics, their consolidation also reflects a deeper institutional problem within India's political parties. In a democracy, political

parties serve as an intermediary between the state and the people and perform multiple functions by doing so. They mobilise the electorate by engaging with citizens, understanding the issues which affect them and articulating them through their manifestos and policy solutions. However, the functioning of political parties in India is plagued by numerous problems.

There is a concentration of power within top leadership in many parties, especially regional parties such as the Trinamool Congress, the Nationalist Congress Party and Samajwadi Party, which resemble single family outfits, and

are controlled by their satraps. Decisions on aspects ranging from the nomination of candidates to deciding the basic stance and strategy of the party reflect the dictates of top leadership rather than the democratic collective choice of the party as a whole. With party cadres increasingly being unheard, underfunded, and unorganised, political parties became institutionally weak which left a vacuum that has now been occupied by political consultancy firms. A senior consultant who was involved in the Maharashtra elections (2024) remarked that 'political consultancy firms are hired by the top leadership of the party and directly engage with them for poll campaigning'. They undertake the very tasks which the cadre of a party is supposed to undertake – relay the feedback of the public to the top leadership of the party, understand the issues of the electorate, take voter surveys and frame pertinent issues for the polls among others.

While the involvement of consultants could boost electoral prospects of a party, its latent effects necessitate further scrutiny. In relying on consultants to understand ground realities in politics, political parties essentially bypass their cadre. Moreover, the feedback of consultants is often prioritised over that of the party workers/local leaders/MLAs. According to a consultant recently involved in the Delhi elections, this also creates friction between the consultants and party workers who feel their role is being deliberately undermined by 'outsiders'. The dominance of the political consultant, coupled with personality-cult politics, systematically sidelines the cadre structure and prevents the growth of independent power centres within a party.

With the increasing involvement of political consultancy firms within party structures, concerns have also emerged about unelected individuals exerting a disproportionate influence over decisions that should rest solely with democratically elected representatives. In the case of the Trinamool Congress-I-PAC collaboration in West Bengal, there were allegations that the consultancy firm wielded significant influence over ticket distribution, the selection of key poll issues, and even governance after the party had come to power. It raises important questions about the accountability of these firms in a democracy and the extent of their impact on political parties.

By outsourcing such functions to politically neutral or 'agnostic' professionals who focus solely on the process of campaigning itself, the ideological platform of a party becomes second fiddle. Politics is deeply ideological, tumultuous, and contradictory, but not an inconvenience to be bypassed. When these aspects of electioneering are outsourced to a firm, it weakens the link between the political party and the voters.

While the impact of political consultancy firms on our politics continues to remain murky, there are disturbing indicators of how they can de-institutionalise political parties in the name of business. The clientele of these firms – the political parties – must grapple with their reality, rather than shy away from it. They must work towards institutional strength, bolster their internal democracy and constantly engage with citizens to fulfil their mandate as important stakeholders of a democracy. For the long term, parties need to go back to the drawing board and revisit their founding principles.

Aadva Narain is a student at Jindal Global Law School. Divyansh Nautiyal studies at the NALSAR University of Law, Hyderabad



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian
S. Upendran

"How do you pronounce f.r.e.e.b.i.e.e?"

"The first syllable 'free' is pronounced like the word 'free' and the second syllable 'bie' sounds like the word 'bee'.

The stress is on the first syllable." "And a 'FREEbie' is anything that is given away free. Is that correct?"

"Correct. The tape that you're listening to right now, I got it as a freebie."

"Last week I got a couple of hand towels as freebies at the supermarket. But tell me, where did you get this cassette?"

"At the new shop on M.G. Road." "If they are giving away freebies, it must be a pretty big place."

"There's not enough room to swing a cat."

"Not enough room to swing a cat! What does it mean?"

"It means 'not enough room to live, work, etc in'. Many hotels advertise that they have extra large rooms. But when you go there, you find there's not enough room to swing a cat."

"The same is true of some chit fund companies as well. There's no room to swing a cat. But tell me, how did this expression come into being? And why, 'swing a cat' and not a 'rat' or a 'bat'?"

"Different people have offered different explanations about the origin of this expression. And the one that I'm going to tell you has nothing to do with the animal 'cat'."

"It doesn't? What does the 'cat' in the expression 'no room to swing a cat' refer to then?"

"It refers to a whip."

"A whip!"

"Yes. You see in the early days of sailing, sailors were whipped as a sort of punishment. And the whip that was used was called 'cat-o'-nine-tails'."

"That's a pretty long name for a whip." True. That's why it was usually referred to as the 'cat'."

"I see. And if you wanted to hit someone really hard with the 'cat', you needed to take a big swing..."

"...and in order to take a big swing, you needed a lot of room."

"I see. That's interesting. By the way, what does 'to rubbish someone' mean?"

"It means to 'criticise someone or something contemptuously'. For example, the Chief Minister's proposal was rubbishised by all his ministers."

"Can I say, 'Many Indians who stay abroad tend to rubbish India'?"

"Why, even Indians who stay here rubbish India. It's our national pastime. Hey, where are you going?"

"Mohan is taking me to a movie."

"Which one?"

"Cat-O'-Nine-Tails."

Published in The Hindu on August 1, 1995.

THE DAILY QUIZ

Virat Kohli scored a century on Sunday, making it his 51st ODI ton. Here is a quiz on some of his milestones

Sindhu Nagara

QUESTION 1

On Sunday, Virat Kohli also achieved another feat with respect to total runs in an ODI. How many did he score? In how many innings did he reach this milestone?

QUESTION 2

In Test cricket, he has got the most number of wins as captain of India. How many wins out of how many matches?

QUESTION 3

Kohli has scored the most double hundreds by an Indian player. How many?

QUESTION 4

Virat Kohli has scored the most runs in a single edition of the ODI World Cup, with 765. In which year was this?

QUESTION 5

In T20, Kohli is the player to have gotten the most player of the match awards, and player of the series awards. How many times for each respectively?

QUESTION 6

Kohli is also the player to have scored the most runs in the IPL. How many?



Visual question:

In this image taken on September 30, 2024, Virat Kohli completed another milestone, a feat he achieved on the fourth day of the Test against Bangladesh. He is only the second Indian cricketer to have done this, and the fourth overall. What is the milestone?

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. The year in which India and Pakistan faced off in a world cup for the first time.

Ans: 1992

2. The number of players who have appeared for both India and Pakistan. **Ans: 3. Amir Elahi, Gul Mohammad, and Abdul Hafeez Kardar**

3. This player has scored the most ODI runs in the fixture. **Ans: Sachin Tendulkar**

4. This player has the highest score in a single ODI match between two nations. **Ans: Saeed Anwar**

5. The number of times Pakistan won a match between the two in an ICC tournament. **Ans: 4**

Visual: Name this batsman. **Ans: Javed Miandad**

Early Birds: Dodo Jayaditya| Piyali

Tulsi| Tom Alan Faith| Abhay Krishan|

Sonal Das

Word of the day

Meticulous:

marked by precise accordance to detail

Synonym: punctilious

Usage: This book is the result of years of meticulous research.

Pronunciation: newth.live/ meticulouspro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /mɪtɪkjʊləs/

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AI has an environmental problem

AI has become an indispensable part of our lives, transforming how we work, live, and do business. Broadly defined, AI encompasses technologies that simulate human thinking and decision-making. While basic forms of AI have existed since the 1950s, the field has advanced rapidly in recent years, driven by improvements in computing power and the exponential surge in data availability. With the global AI market valued at \$200 billion and projected to contribute up to \$15.7 trillion to the global economy by 2030, AI adoption and its recognition as a driver of economic value have reached unprecedented levels. In the U.S., the announcement of the Stargate Project, involving more than \$500 billion in AI infrastructure investments over four years, is testament to this. In India, Reliance Industries is planning to build the world's largest data centre in Jamnagar, in partnership with Nvidia. India has also announced plans to build its own LLM (large language model) to compete with DeepSeek and ChatGPT. However, as governments race to tap AI's economic potential, it is crucial to acknowledge that its rapid rise brings not only opportunities but also risks, particularly environmental costs.

Impact across stages

The environmental impact of AI arises across several stages of its value chain, including energy consumption from infrastructure, computing hardware production, cloud data centre operations, AI model training, inferencing, validation, and related processes. In terms of hardware, data centres, the backbone of AI operations, contribute 1% of global greenhouse gas emissions, according to the International Energy Agency (IEA). This figure is expected to rise significantly as electricity demand from data centres is projected to double by 2026. Generative AI models like



Urmil Tait
U.S.-India AI Fellow,
Observer Research
Foundation

ChatGPT, which rely on sophisticated machine learning (ML) techniques, require 10-100 times more computing power than earlier versions, further driving demand for graphic processing units and worsening the environmental footprint.

Moreover, the rapid expansion of data centres is also fuelling a growing e-waste crisis. AI's software life cycle emissions arise from processes like data collection, model development, training, validation, maintenance and retirement, and are equally concerning. Training advanced AI models, such as GPT-3, can emit up to 552 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent – comparable to the annual emissions of dozens of cars. To mitigate these environmental risks, governments and the private sector must proactively work towards embedding sustainability into AI ecosystem design.

Global conversations on this issue have been gaining momentum. At COP29, the International Telecommunication Union emphasised the urgent need for greener AI practices. Such commitments demand that businesses also align their processes with sustainability targets. Over 190 countries have adopted non-binding ethical AI recommendations addressing the environment, and regions such as the European Union and the U.S. have introduced laws to curb AI's environmental impact. However, such policies are scarce. While governments across the globe are crafting national AI strategies, they often overlook sustainability, particularly the private sector's role in reducing emissions.

The way forward

To balance innovation and environmental responsibility, action is needed across the AI value chain. Investing in clean energy is a key step in achieving net-zero emissions. Companies can achieve this by transitioning to renewable energy sources and purchasing carbon credits.

Locating data centres in areas with abundant supply of renewable resources can also reduce strain on existing resources and help lower the carbon footprint. AI can also help optimise energy grids, particularly by integrating renewable energy sources. For instance, Google's DeepMind has leveraged ML to improve wind energy forecasting, enabling more accurate wind pattern predictions and facilitating better integration of wind power into the grid.

Using energy-efficient hardware and ensuring regular maintenance can also significantly minimise emissions. Equally important is the development of efficient AI models. Smaller, domain-specific models that are tailored to their applications can deliver the same outputs with less processing power, reducing demand on infrastructure and resources. A study by Google and the University of California, Berkeley, has found that the carbon footprint of LLMs can be minimised by a factor of 100 to 1,000 through optimised algorithms, specialised hardware, and energy-efficient cloud data centres. Further, instead of collecting new data or training models from scratch, businesses can adopt pre-trained models to new tasks.

Lastly but most importantly, transparency is essential in driving sustainability efforts. Measuring and disclosing the environmental impact of AI systems will help organisations understand their life cycle emissions and address the negative externalities of their operations. Establishing standardised frameworks for tracking and comparing emissions across the industry will ensure consistency and accountability.

Sustainability needs to be incorporated into the very design of the AI ecosystem, in order to ensure its long-term growth and viability. By balancing environmental responsibility with innovation, we can harness AI's transformative potential without compromising the Earth's future.

Consolidating the backward classes

All political parties have intensified their efforts to woo the community

STATE OF PLAY

M. Raleev
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After conducting a comprehensive survey to assess the socio, economic, educational, employment, political, and caste status of the people of Telangana, the Congress government is faced with the challenging task of consolidating its base among backward classes in the local body elections.

The survey spanning close to two months shows that the population of backward classes is 56.33%. The survey, engaging over 1.03 lakh personnel covering 94,261 enumeration blocks with 150 houses each, says that Scheduled Castes (SCs) comprise 17.43% and Scheduled Tribes (STs) 10.45% of the State's 3.7 crore population. Other castes formed the remaining 15.79%.

When the survey report was tabled in the Assembly, the Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) raised doubts over the numbers. BJP MLA Payal Shankar wondered whether it was constitutionally valid to categorise backward classes along religious lines (46.25% were categorised as backward classes in the Hindu community and 10.08% as backward classes in the Muslim community). Comparing the survey report with the Samagra Kutumba Survey, a household study conducted by the previous BRS government (then called the Telangana Rashtra Samithi government) on a single day in 2014, BRS members criticised the government for the rise in the number of other castes and the decline in the backward classes population.

The Congress held that the previous government survey



had no sanctity as it was not approved by the council of ministers not tabled in the Assembly. Minister N. Uttam Kumar Reddy said the survey is not just a data collection exercise, but a revolution in social justice, ensuring that the most vulnerable sections receive the benefits they deserve.

Amid the increasing demand for implementation of enhanced reservations for backward classes following the results of the survey, Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy asserted that the Congress is committed to providing 42% reservation to backward classes in the upcoming local body polls and dared the Opposition parties to allocate the same number of seats.

This again raises questions of whether implementation of higher reservations is possible in local body polls. The dedicated commission headed by retired bureaucrat, Busani Venkateswarlu, is said to have come up with a methodology of providing higher reservations to backward classes, at least in local body elections, without exceeding the 50% limit set by the Supreme Court.

In its report submitted to the government, the commission said that of the 12,751 gram panchayats going to the polls, 2,458 gram panchayats, including 1,281 located in the agency areas and 1,177 gram panchayats with a 100% ST population, have been set aside for the STs in line with the constitutional mandate

leaving another 10,293 gram panchayats. Of these, the STs were given 688 and SCs were given 2,113 in accordance with their population. The government could fulfil its promise of 42% quota to Backward Classes in these panchayats allotting around 4,200 exclusively to these communities.

The Commission suggested that reservations should be finalised for wards, gram panchayats, mandal parishad territorial constituencies, mandal praja parishad presidents, zilla parishad territorial constituencies, and zilla parishad chairpersons. Reservations could be finalised based on the population of the backward classes in the respective gram panchayats so that there will be no scope for legal complications.

The survey is being seen by some as a major initiative by the government to woo the backward classes. The Telugu Desam Party had the reputation of consolidating a major chunk of the community's vote in erstwhile united Andhra Pradesh. This vote scattered after the formation of Telangana. Given the crucial role the large number of voters of the backward classes play in elections, all political parties have intensified their efforts to attract the community. While the Congress has made public its intentions to formulate evidence-based policies, the BJP has been projecting leaders such as Union Minister of State for Home Bandi Sanjay Kumar and MP Eatala Rajender, both from backward classes. The BRS, however, has not announced any initiatives despite having data on the backward classes after the Samagra Kutumba Survey was conducted and will have to intensify its efforts to compete for the votes of this community.

India sole nation to curb Internet over communal unrest in 2023-24

Most of these shutdowns occurred in Manipur followed by Bihar and Haryana

DATA POINT

Vignesh Radhakrishnan
Samreen Wani

Globally, there were 88 Internet shutdowns due to communal violence in 2023 and 2024 and all of them were in India. In fact, nearly 95% of all Internet shutdowns ordered by the state due to communal violence since 2018 have occurred in India, says a report by Access Now, a digital advocacy group.

Chart 1 shows the number of Internet shutdowns in India due to communal violence and India's share in global shutdowns for the same reason. In 2023 and 2024, most of these shutdowns occurred in Manipur (54 instances), followed by Bihar (9), and Haryana (7) (Chart 2).

In 2024, there were 41 Internet shutdowns due to protests – the highest in the last seven years. India accounted for about 57% of global Internet shutdowns due to protests in 2024 – the highest for any country (Chart 3).

Manipur also featured first among the States where a shutdown was imposed in 2024 due to protests, followed by Haryana and Punjab. Jammu and Kashmir had 3 instances of Internet shutdowns due to protests in 2024 and Rajasthan and Maharashtra experienced 2 each (Chart 4).

Chart 5 shows the share of Internet shutdowns in India by reason since 2016. In 2024, over 50% of shutdowns were due to protests. In 2023, over 50% of shutdowns were due to communal violence. In 2021 and 2022, political instability was the main reason.

An Internet shutdown can be either a complete restriction, cutting off all access, or a partial curbing, limiting only specific services such as social media platforms. These shutdowns may be imposed at varying levels, affecting an entire state or targeting specific districts within a region.

Access denied

The data for the charts were sourced from Access Now. It also includes The Hindu's calculations

Chart 1: The number of Internet shutdowns in India due to communal violence and India's share in global shutdowns for the same reason

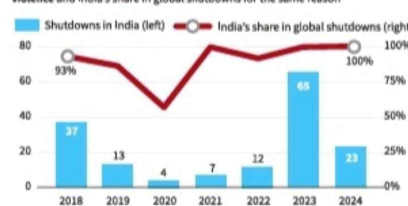


Chart 2: The chart shows the State-wise breakdown of Internet shutdowns due to communal violence in 2023 and 2024



Chart 3: The number of Internet shutdowns in India due to protests and India's share in global shutdowns for the same reason

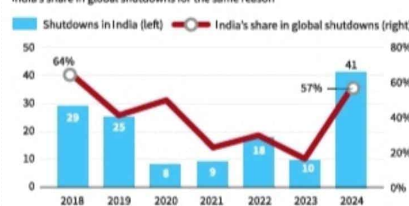


Chart 4: The chart shows the State-wise breakdown of Internet shutdowns due to protests in 2024



Chart 5: The chart shows the reason-wise share of Internet shutdowns in India (in %) between 2016 and 2024

Year	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Protests	50.0	37.7	21.4	20.2	7.8	8.7	19.8	8.9	50.6
Communal violence	0.0	0.0	28.2	10.9	3.9	6.8	14.8	55.4	27.2
Unknown	23.3	24.6	3.1	1.7	0.0	0.0	1.2	6.3	7.4
Exam cheating	0.0	0.0	3.8	0.0	1.9	3.9	3.7	0.9	6.2
Elections	0.0	2.9	3.8	3.4	1.9	0.0	1.2	0.9	3.7
Information control	3.3	1.4	0.8	0.8	0.0	2.9	1.2	12.5	2.5
Religious holiday/anniversary	0.0	0.0	0.0	5.9	4.9	1.9	3.7	8.0	2.5
Conflict	0.0	0.0	0.0	35.3	1.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Other	0.0	5.8	4.6	16.8	68.0	0.0	1.2	7.1	0.0
Political instability	23.3	27.5	34.4	4.2	10.7	74.8	53.1	0.0	0.0
Visits by government officials	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.8	0.0	1.0	0.0	0.0	0.0

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FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 26, 1975

Minister details recoveries from palace

New Delhi, Feb. 25: Finance Minister C. Subramaniam's statement in the Rajya Sabha to-day on IT searches in Jaipur and in Delhi showed that the Income Tax authorities had discovered so far from Moti Doongri Palace, the residence of Mrs. Gayatri Devi in Jaipur, gold mohars, sovereigns, half-sovereigns and primary gold with and without markings of approximate total value of Rs. 4.5 crores at current market rates. The total weight of gold was 848 kilograms. The search was still continuing.

At "Rajmahal Palace", the residence of Lt.-Col Bhowani Singh, the authorities had found large quantities of diamond-studded jewellery and jewellery made of emeralds and rubies. The jewellery was still to be valued but they "appeared to be very valuable".

In one of the strong rooms in the palace dynastic regalia of the Jaipur family had been stored. "It would appear that all the dynastic regalia are not at one place and the search party has requested Lt.-Col Bhowani Singh and Mr. Jai Singh to account for the same". Notices under the Income Tax Act had been served on the parties, the statement said.

From the residence of Jai Singh a substantial amount of jewellery and cash of approximately Rs. one lakh were found and sealed. The jewellery was yet to be valued.

Giving the outcome of the searches at City Palace, Jaipur, the statement said at the rear of Palace Museum there were certain rooms known as "Kapat Dwar", which was reputed to contain the treasure of the former ruling family.

The "Kapat Dwar" consisted of a large number of rooms containing various costly items, which were yet to be valued. But "gold utensils, weighing approximately one quintal and silver utensils and silver photo frames weighing nearly 50 quintals have been inventoried".

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 26, 1925

Rock-burst in Kolar gold fields

Oorgaam, Feb. 25: A severe rock burst occurred this afternoon in Nundydrug Mines and was located in 4,100 feet level between Kennedy and Oriental shaft. About 20 were injured including 4 seriously. Ten men are reported missing and every effort is being made to rescue them where ever they are.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Cases of illegal storage, excavation of minerals in Chhattisgarh

7,723 More than 7,700 cases of illegal excavation, storage and transportation of minerals were registered in Chhattisgarh in 2024. In 7,555 cases, the vehicles seized along with minerals were released after the recovery of the settlement amount. PI

The cost of rebuilding Ukraine's economy after Russia's invasion

524 In \$ billion. A new study by the World Bank, UN, European Commission and the Ukrainian government found that housing, transport, energy, commerce and education were the most affected sectors. Russian attacks sent energy sector damages up 70% in one year. REUTERS

Amount of money Singapore's citizens lost to scams last year

822 In \$ million. The amount lost to fraudsters rose by 70.6% as compared to 2023, according to the annual statistics on scams and cybercrime released by the Singapore Police Force. The total number of scam cases also increased by 10.6% to 51,501 cases in 2024. PI

The share of GDP the U.K. aims to spend on defence in 2029

3 In per cent. Britain will aim to spend 3% of its GDP on defence in the next parliament, due to begin in 2029, and will help to fund that increased spending by cutting its aid budget, Prime Minister Keir Starmer said. Mr. Starmer said the aid budget would be reduced from 0.5% of GDP to 0.3% in 2027. REUTERS

Tribal students who protested the living conditions in Odisha

100 Over 100 tribal students of a State-run residential school in Odisha's Mayurbhanj district walked the whole night to reach the district headquarters town of Baripada to protest the "inhumane" living conditions. PI

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Should a third language be compulsory?

Why is the Union government delaying funds under the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan to Tamil Nadu? When was the three-language policy first introduced and what did it mandate? What are the challenges in having extra language courses in government schools?

EXPLAINER

Rangarajan, R

The story so far:

There has been a tussle between the Centre and the Tamil Nadu government over the three-language formula in schools under the New Education Policy (NEP), 2020. The Union government has indicated that it needs to be complied with for release of funds tied to the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan. However, the Tamil Nadu government views it as a 'smokescreen' for Hindi imposition and insists that it would continue with its two-language policy.

What are constitutional provisions?

The Constitution provides that Hindi is the official language of the Union. English was originally meant to continue as the official language for 15 years from the commencement of the Constitution (till 1965). However, the Official Languages Act, 1963 provides for the continued use of English, in addition to Hindi, for all official purposes of the Union without any time limit. The legislature of a State may adopt any one or more of the languages in use in the State or Hindi as the official language(s) for official purposes of that State.

Further, the Constitution provides that it shall be the duty of the Union to promote the spread of the Hindi language so that it may serve as a medium of expression for all the elements of the composite culture of India.

What is the three-language policy?

The three-language formula was first introduced in the NEP of 1968. This policy and the Official Language Resolution, 1968 mandated the teaching of Hindi as a language in non-Hindi speaking States. There were protests against the same in Tamil Nadu and it has steadily followed its two-language policy of teaching Tamil and English in its government schools.



Firm stance: A protest against the three-language policy, in Chennai, on February 18. PI

The NEP, 2020 has retained the three-language formula albeit with a key difference that it doesn't impose any language on any State. It specifies that the languages to be learnt will be the choice of States, regions and the students, so long as at least two of the three languages are native to India.

What are the issues?

The Annual Status of Education Research (ASER) conducted regularly by renowned NGO Pratham leaves much to be improved upon with respect to learning abilities. The report of 2022 indicates that close to 60% of students in Class V could

not read a Class II level text. The report of 2023 reveals that 25% of youth in the age group of 14-18 years could not read a Class II level text fluently in their regional language. More than 40% of this age group could not read sentences in English. The learning outcomes in foundational numeracy skills like subtraction and division is equally poor.

As per the report on 'Analysis of Budgeted expenditure on Education' prepared by the Ministry of Education, Government of India, in 2022, out of the total revenue expenditure on elementary education estimated at ₹3.03 lakh crore (2019-20), 15% is spent by the Centre

while 85% is spent by the States. The total expenditure on elementary, secondary, higher and technical education by the Centre and States combined hovers around 4-4.5% of the GDP as against the target of 6% set out in the NEP 2020. Thus, the expenditure on education is yet to reach the desired levels.

What can be the way forward?

While English is not a native language, its proficiency has helped us in becoming globally competitive in various service industries. India is a multi-lingual country and the objective of learning more Indian languages in schools is desirable. However, the existing issues of learning outcomes coupled with constraints on resources require that the efforts of government run schools should be focused on improving the teaching of the mother tongue/local language and English, apart from foundational numeracy skills. Even in private schools where a third language is taught till Standard VIII, there is limited proficiency being attained by the students in such language.

The 2011 Census data reveals that approximately 26% of India is bilingual and 7% is trilingual. The corresponding figures for urban areas are 44% and 15%, as against 22% and 5% for rural areas. With rapid urbanisation and migration of labourers across the country, this number is bound to increase in the forthcoming Census, indicating that the young and adult population would learn additional languages according to their needs.

There must be a constructive dialogue between the Centre and the Tamil Nadu government to ensure that funding is not delayed.

Considering the share of expenditure borne by the States as well as regional diversities, there also needs to be a productive discussion on providing more autonomy to the States in policy matters relating to school education.

Rangarajan, R is a former IAS officer and author of 'Polity Simplified'. Views expressed are personal.

THE GIST

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What did the HC rule about arresting women at night?

Is the provision which restricts the arrest of women after sunset and before sunrise absolute? What did the 135th report of the Law Commission of India on Women in Custody recommend?

R.K. Vij

The story so far:

The Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court in *Deepa versus S. Vijayalakshmi and Others* ruled that the legal provision in the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS), 2023, which restricts the arrest of a woman after sunset and before sunrise, is directory and not mandatory. In this case, a woman was arrested at 8pm. A single Judge of the High Court held that the arrest was in breach of Section 46(4) of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC). However, a two-Judge Bench of the High Court, in an appeal, held that Section 46(4) of the CrPC was directory and not mandatory.

What are the safeguards?

Two safeguards are provided under Section 43(5) of BNSS (which corresponds

to Section 46(4) of CrPC) for the arrest of a woman by the police. First, no arrest of a woman shall be made after sunset and before sunrise except in exceptional circumstances. Second, even in exceptional circumstances, the prior permission of the jurisdictional magistrate must be sought by a woman police officer by making a written report. Section 46(4) of the CrPC is a beneficial provision incorporated to ensure the safety of women. However, the provision does not explain what would constitute an exceptional situation. In addition, the proviso to Section 46(4) states that the arresting police officer should not touch the person of the woman, unless it is a woman police officer or if the circumstances otherwise require it.

What did the Madras HC rule?

The Madras High Court said that Section 46(4) of CrPC does not spell out the

consequence of non-compliance of the provision. If the provision was intended to be mandatory, the legislature would definitely have provided for the consequences of non-compliance. A police officer who effects arrest, carries out a public duty. The Court underlined that there could be a situation where a heinous offence is committed by a woman in the night and the magistrate may not be available for obtaining permission. Under such a situation, the accused woman may escape. Therefore, such mechanical adherence to procedure can injure public interest.

What is history of Section 46(4) CrPC?

The 135th report of the Law Commission of India on Women in Custody (1989) recommended that ordinarily no women shall be arrested after sunset and before sunrise. If there are exceptional cases, prior permission of the immediate

superior officer shall be obtained, or if the case was of extreme urgency, then an arrest report with reasons shall be made to the immediate superior officer and to the magistrate. Similar recommendations were made in the 154th report of the Law Commission in 1996, and Section 46(4) of CrPC was inserted with some changes in 2005.

What has the Supreme Court said?

In a case, the Nagpur Bench of the Bombay High Court directed the State to issue directions to all police officials that no female persons shall be detained without the presence of a lady constable, and in no case after sunset and before sunrise. Here, the Supreme Court observed that a strict compliance with the said directive in a given circumstance would cause practical difficulties.

Will the ruling dilute the provision?

The Court has clearly said that despite holding Section 46(4) of CrPC(43(5) as directory and not mandatory, the provision cannot be rendered futile by the police. While failure to adhere to the statutory requirement may not lead to the arrest being declared illegal, the officer may have to offer explanation for the inability to comply with the provision. The Court also directed the police to issue guidelines, clarifying as to what constitute exceptional circumstances. R.K. Vij is a former IPS officer.

THE GIST

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Editorial



Blunt weapon

India should end Net curbs, especially when imposed without good reason

The number of Internet shutdowns in India was slightly lower in 2024 than in 2023, according to the Software Freedom Law Center (SFLC), India's annual report. A separate report by the web rights advocacy, Access Now, shows that India continues to lead globally in the number of government-ordered Internet shutdowns. The Union government has maintained that mobile Internet shutdown is an indispensable instrument in the toolkit to control law and order situations. Most of the Internet use in India is mobile. A closer examination of the shutdowns imposed even over the last year reveals some disturbing data: 41 of the 84 shutdowns in India in 2024 were imposed during protests, compared to the 23 that were imposed for communal clashes. Five were even issued for cheating during examinations. In situations on the brink of violence where rapidly spreading disinformation may sever off control of the authorities, there may be a case for considering restrictions on communications. But no shutdown is without a cost – the delayed information regarding violence can also impede fast response. The Supreme Court of India recognised this when it ruled, in *Anuradha Bhasin vs Union of India*, that each shutdown must meet the tests of necessity and proportionality. Internet shutdown impedes people's livelihoods, access to medical care and education. It is a blunt weapon and the least the government could do is to measure its impact and use it sparingly. The government has been urged on preparing such an assessment for years, but no headway has been made here.

Even for those in favour of retaining shutdowns as a tool in the repertoire of emergency policing, the process being followed is cause for alarm. Many a time, as Access Now and SFLC report, there is no valid order uploaded on government websites detailing the duration and the causes in detail, as required by the Telecommunications (Temporary Suspension of Services) Rules, 2024 and its preceding rules of 2017. Ideally, every shutdown should be followed by a sombre examination of whether it was necessary and what its deployment cost was. The ideal number of Internet shutdowns in any country is zero. It is especially troubling that 296 of them were imposed on millions around the world last year. India's case shows that there is an urgent need for circumspection and restraint. The Internet shutdowns index is, after all, one of the indices in which India should not aspire to lead.

Wild and safe

Habitat fragmentation has led to rise in human-wildlife conflict

Recent human fatalities due to wild animal attacks, deep inside forests, in forest-fringed human habitations, and even within villages, have highlighted growing human-wildlife conflict in Kerala, where nearly 29% of the land is forested. With a dry spell and an unusually hot summer expected, urgent measures are needed to prevent further escalation of this conflict, which now has political, social, and environmental dimensions. The Kerala government is facing criticism for its perceived inability to manage wildlife. Groups such as the Kerala Independent Farmers' Association (KIFA) and sections of the church advocate for culling wildlife, citing an alleged population boom. However, Forest Department data suggest otherwise. The wild elephant population, linked to 18% of human fatalities, has declined by 7%. Snakebites, responsible for 75% of wildlife-related deaths, have fallen from 113 in 2012 to 34 in 2023. Overall, human deaths from wildlife encounters have decreased from 146 in 2018 to 57 last year. Yet, this is no cause for complacency. A concerning trend is that many victims are from tribal communities, traditionally adept at coexisting with wildlife. The government should investigate this as part of its newly announced mission to document and assess the traditional knowledge of Kerala's 36 tribal communities in tackling wildlife encounters.

There are also several anthropogenic factors. Habitat fragmentation, particularly in elephant corridors such as Aralam Farm (Kannur) and Chinnakkal (Idukki), has forced animals into human settlements. Unregulated tourism, cattle grazing near forests, encroachments, and food waste dumping on forest fringes further exacerbate the issue. Invasive plants (*Sesuvia spectabilis*) and monoculture industrial plantations have also disrupted wildlife feeding patterns. In response, the Kerala government, in 2022, empowered local bodies to eliminate feral wild boars damaging farmland. Last year, the Cabinet classified human-wildlife conflict as a State-specific disaster, allowing the Disaster Management Authority to intervene. The government's decision to emphasise participatory forest and wildlife management is a step in the right direction, given the extreme views propagated by some sections. The Forest Department has restored 5,031 hectares of natural forest and built ponds and check dams. However, restoring areas dominated by industrial plantations such as eucalyptus and acacia is a challenge. While solar fencing has shown some success, the ₹52-crore elephant-proof wall at Aralam, one of 12 conflict landscapes, remains incomplete. The State's 10 missions to mitigate human-wildlife conflict must be prioritised. Given the region-specific nature of the problem, a multi-agency approach involving the Disaster Management, Revenue, Local Self-Government, Tribal Welfare, Agriculture, Health and Forest Departments is crucial to balancing human safety and sustainable wildlife management.

The right's rise, Europe's state of denial



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(2020-22)

Rony died a thousand deaths in the Munich Security Conference in Germany, that was held recently, and the United Nations General Assembly vote on Ukraine.

A few days ago, in Saudi Arabia, the United States and Russia, led by their respective Foreign Ministers, had held bilateral discussions on the Ukraine war. The Ukrainians and Europeans were not invited since it was felt that they need not be included at this point. In June 2024, at the behest of Ukraine, the European Union (EU) and the U.S., Switzerland organised a 'Summit on Peace in Ukraine' at the Bürgenstock. Russia was not invited since they felt that Russia was not needed at that point.

In Munich, U.S. Vice-President J.D. Vance accused Europe of strangling its right-wing parties, "shutting down" elections, "stifling" free speech and religious freedoms and encouraging "out of control" migration from non-EU countries, thereby endangering democratic polity, freedoms and "fundamental values". But before November 2024, the Americans and the Europeans had tried to prevent their right-wing and far-right parties from gaining legitimacy through the ballot since they were convinced that the rise of right in their countries endangered democracy and freedoms – and, in effect, their liberal western values. Romania's constitutional court even annulled the presidential election results where far-right independent candidate, Cluj Georgescu, who lobbied to cut off assistance to Ukraine, won the first round.

What the U.S. forgets

In February 2025, the U.S. is accusing Ukraine, Germany and the Europeans of not doing enough to find a solution to the conflict, pursuing an unwinnable war with Russia. But the U.S. forgets that it has already spent over \$110 billion in the Ukraine war, with \$65 billion for ammunition only – more than what top western countries have collectively given Ukraine. The U.S. also forgets that in March 2022, it was the leader of a European country who, at the behest of the U.S., sabotaged negotiations (which had already commenced in Türkiye) between the Russians and the Ukrainians.

And, in September 2022, close allies of Germany sabotaged the Nord Stream pipelines, rendering them inoperable and preventing Russia from supplying gas to Germany, which was its lifeline. But a reluctant, but much-chastised, Germany supplied Leopard tanks and other ammunition to Ukraine.

In addition, the U.S. exhorts Europe to take responsibility for its own security, substantially enhances its defence spending and not sponge on

the disproportionate American role in North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The U.S. contributes 16% of NATO's annual budget and to most of its troops. But the U.S. forgets that since the collapse of the Cold War, it was America that was reluctant to let the Europeans organise their own security and defence.

Today, the U.S. accuses the EU of not doing enough either on illegal migration from non-EU countries or on combating militant radical Islam to stop terror attacks that disrupt the western way of life.

A few years ago, in the UN, the U.S. and Europe, barring France, proclaimed that the danger of terrorism came from "racially and ethnically motivated violent extremism" (REMOVED) in the U.S. as well as the rise of right-wing violent extremism in Europe, and not from radical Islam or disastrous migration policies of the West. At the UN, their "liberal" Ambassadors kept silent when the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) tried to undermine the collective fight against terror and the UN Alliance of Civilisation (UNAOC) dismissed the terrorist attacks in France in 2020 as reaction to Islamophobia.

The problem with Europe

Europe, on its part, refuses to accept that its domestic policies, which, *inter alia*, encourage violent dissidents, radicals, terrorists, and refugees to seek citizenship, have transformed its demography, perhaps irrevocably. Its liberal open societies were taken advantage of by Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) terrorists, Khalistani separatists and terrorists, the infamous Hamburg Cell of al Qaeda (the pilots of the 9/11 terrorist attacks were from here) or by Islamic radicals killing Europeans in their own cities – Paris, Nice, Oslo, Vienna, Madrid, Brussels or elsewhere. Therefore, it was no surprise that right-wing parties began to sweep elections in Europe as a reaction to their leaders' misplaced priorities. The recent election results in Germany which kept the far-right at bay, but only just, may be the last chance to find that elusive balance within the EU.

As Mr. Vance said in Munich, "If you're running in fear of your own voters, there is nothing America can do for you." Of course, the U.S. forgets that Trump 1.0 refused to accept the 2020 election loss and that the first act of Trump 2.0 was to pardon the perpetrators of the storming of the U.S. Capitol in 2021. But Europe's claim that the U.S. is no less undemocratic or no less culpable in these issues, or the pointing to Germany's Nazi past and the danger of its resurgence or to Russian aggression are not excuses for illiberal action against their far-right.

EU leaders are complicit in the gradual eclipse of their own liberal values, allowing for the gradual rise of the right

Human smuggling must engage Parliament's attention



Anil Malhotra
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The plane loads of Indians being deported to India from the United States are lucky to be back alive. Shackled, handcuffed, humiliated and in dire straits, they have flown back heartbroken and in shame. But there is also the case of illegal immigrants from north India clearing ammunition fields in Iraq, who were abandoned. They were brought back home after emergency documents were issued.

However, the key issue here is about illegal immigration. Every year, countless young Indians attempt what is called 'irregular migration'. Backing them are the 'unethical merchants of death' who sponsor this activity and who have proliferated in rural Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Kerala and Gujarat. Manpower export – legally called human smuggling or *kabootarbaazi* – is one of the most profitable forms of trade. It requires no technical skill, no educational or professional qualifications, no financial investment, and has no fear or respect for any law, checks, punishment or even criminal action.

Horror and misery

Even though this menace is not new to India, we must learn from what has happened. The tradesmen of these flourishing rackets of human smuggling thrive on gullible youth who fantasise about making it big with dollar-fuelled dreams. In reality they are only waiting to be duped. This is organised crime that perpetuates horror and misery, and flourishes with impunity. Once in the net of these human smugglers, these migrants are vulnerable to exploitation and face grave risks to their life. As the world has seen, they end up being suffocated in containers, perish in scorching deserts, drown at sea or be herded into slave camps to work as forced labour. These human smugglers conduct their activities brazenly, without any regard for a precious human life.

Survivors often narrate harrowing tales of their

The deportations from the U.S. must push Parliament to enact a central law that strikes at the roots of human smuggling

ordeal – of how they were forced to sit in piles of human waste, deprived of food and water, while others around them have died and their bodies dumped at sea or on road sides. Human smuggling generates high net worth profits for criminals, who in turn fuel corruption and organised crime. This is a deadly business that needs to be combated with grave urgency.

Naive youth fall prey to agents and land up somewhere working as slave labour in ammunition dumps or fields in Iraq, or as illegal immigrants elsewhere, who suffer immensely with no hope of returning home. The smuggling of migrants is a very profitable business with a low risk of detection. For criminals, it is becoming increasingly attractive to deal in human merchandise. The business of death is becoming more organised, involving professional international mafias across global borders.

India needs to be alert and check this global menace. Sadly, the Emigration Act, 1983 – officially 'an Act to consolidate and amend the law relating to emigration of citizens of India' – neither defines human smuggling nor looks at the serious problems connected with this deadly trade. Thus, Parliament must waste no time in legislating an Indian human smuggling law. There are pieces of State legislation that are piecemeal and with a limited ambit of application – only to State territorial borders. Having a new central law is a composite solution and Parliament must set the ball rolling. There has been some discussion about the Emigration (Overseas Mobility Facilitation and Welfare) Bill, but its fate remains uncertain. Till then, any piece of State legislation would be welcome. In this, the Government of Punjab deserves praise for its efforts. But, sadly, its implementation is poor.

Punjab's Act

The Punjab Travel Professionals Regulation Act, 2012, is described as a law to provide for the regulation of the profession of travel agents with a

view to check and curb illegal, fraudulent activities, and malpractices such as organised human smuggling in the State of Punjab. Enacted to provide a licensing regime for travel agents, and with penal provisions, it has some regulatory functions to check human smuggling.

In this enactment, "travel agent" means a person who is doing a profession which involves arranging, managing or conducting affairs related to the sending of persons abroad or which arise out of the affairs of persons sent to a foreign country, and shall include a range of activities covering diverse practices. Likewise, "human smuggling" shall mean and include illegally exporting, sending or transporting persons out of India by receiving money from them or their parents, relatives or any other persons interested in their welfare, by inducing, alluring or deceiving or cheating them.

Europe seems to be in a state of denial. While the pursuit of ideology, liberal democracy and western values are laudable objectives, the EU leaders are complicit in the gradual eclipse of their own liberal values by allowing migrants, whose ethos are at direct variance with theirs. Their peoples' counter-reaction is to vote for the far-right fearing for their own identity, way of life and even religion. It is a classic case of liberal policies being taken advantage of by illiberal values.

However, on the Ukraine war, while Europe and the U.S. hitched themselves to the Zelenskyy bandwagon to emasculate Russia, in a dramatic turn of events, the chasm between the new U.S. initiatives and entrenched European positions burst into the open in the UN General Assembly when the U.S. voted with Russia against the European/Ukrainian draft resolution but could not stop it from being adopted. More drama could follow in the UN Security Council, but it is only a pyrrhic win for Europe – without America, the Ukraine war is as good as over.

The trans-Atlantic partnership is relevant

Despite the jolts at Munich and the UN General Assembly, proclaiming that the trans-Atlantic partnership between the U.S. and Europe is over is premature. The call from the U.S. administration for retreat from Europe seems tactical, to renegotiate a better deal, and not strategic. With a new centrist leadership in Germany, maybe it is time for Europe to undertake course correction, invest more in its own security, combat the rise of radical values in its societies, pursue a more independent foreign policy and rework its relations with the U.S. Ironically, the trans-Atlantic partnership is even more relevant now in the face of "no limits" partnership between Russia and China. The U.S.'s ability to walk away from Europe is overstated, just as the ability of Europe to weather the storm is understated.

When a reporter asked Mahatma Gandhi what he thought of western civilisation, he is reported to have replied: "I think it would be a good idea."

Parliament must act

A comparison of both Acts, i.e., the Emigration Act, 1983 and the Punjab Travel Professionals Regulation Act, 2012, shows that they enshrine regulatory mechanisms for recruiting agents and travel agents separately. Viewed objectively, both have complementary purposes in their own spheres. They are neither inconsistent or repugnant to each other. In fact, the two laws complement each other as they provide similar objectives, aims and functions for recruiting and travel agents, respectively. Punjab has enacted a law which no other State in India has done.

In fact, human smuggling is a silent issue in the Emigration Act. The authority of law vested in Punjab must be exercised to enforce this law. Finally, Parliament must seriously contemplate enacting a national law to control Indian borders to regulate the human smuggling industry and deal with irregularities with an iron hand. Parliamentarians must rise to save precious human Indian lives. There needs to be a central law which has teeth.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The political environment

The resurgence of right-wing populism is threatening the very basis of western liberalism. What explains parties' support for parties such as the AfD in Germany or leaders such as Donald Trump and Giorgia Meloni? Is it simply a reaction against liberal values? Or are there more profound socio-economic causes at work? It is essential to address these movements instead of rejecting them to

comprehend the changing political environment.

Anshu Bhatti,
Begusar, Bihar

It would not be wrong to conjecture that growing support for far-right forces, in Germany, Italy, France and other European countries have put the leaders of the United States and India in the same basket, portraying them as nationalists under attack from liberals. The possibility of national self interest

seems to be gaining ground given the rapidly with which Mr. Trump has moved to pursue national interests above anything else. India will have to tread with caution and have to be prepared for a more inward-looking Europe at a time when the U.S. is increasingly turning protectionist and shedding its pivotal role in global politics to give way to a more nuanced approach. A peculiar shift in favour of conservative agendas such

as anti-immigration policies and dealing with refugees have become contentious issues.

Vijay Singh Adhikari,
Nainital, Uttarakhand

The fight against obesity

That Prime Minister Narendra Modi has launched a campaign against the raging demon of obesity is praiseworthy ("PM names celebrities to add heft to battle against rising obesity", February 25). Obesity is more than just an

enemy of the body. It is a risk factor in catastrophic ailments such as heart disease, diabetes, and cancer. The step taken by the Prime Minister is a call to awaken the people of India and build a strong, health-empowered India. We must rise and become the warriors of this revolution.

R.K. Jain,
Barwani, Madhya Pradesh

India's victory
India's six-wicket victory

over Pakistan in the ICC Champions Trophy was a moment of national pride. While cricket rivalry can be intense, especially in this instance, there is a more important message. It is crucial to see sport as a bridge to peace. Let us celebrate this victory and the potential it offers.

Guvant Yvankat Ade,
Pune, Maharashtra

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



Food safety is non-negotiable

Union Minister of State for Health and Family Welfare Prataprao Ganpatrao Jadhav's call for a nationwide strategy for stricter monitoring of pesticide residues in food has special significance. At a function organised by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), the minister said all stakeholders must work together in promoting best practices for food safety and sustainability. He also stressed the need to review existing practices in pesticide monitoring and suggested that "a robust mechanism to address the challenges of pesticide residue" should be created in the country. Contamination of food with pesticides is a major threat to public health and it is for the governments, both at the Central and state levels, and their agencies to take the initiative to ensure that food and food products are free of health hazards. The threat has increased with the spread of commercial farming and the increased use of pesticides.

The harm done by pesticides is well documented. Scientific bodies in India and organisations like the WHO have many times issued warnings against pesticide residues in food. WHO has noted the prolonged presence of some pesticides in soil and water. Many of them are in use, especially in developing countries, despite a ban. WHO has developed norms for maximum pesticide residue but they are not followed. People who directly come into contact with them face greater health risks. Fruits and vegetables are deliberately spiked with harmful chemicals to make them last longer, to ripen them, or to make them appear shiny. These are injected into or sprayed on them. Widely consumed items such as pulses, milk, meat, and drinking water are most vulnerable.

Since self-regulation is difficult and consumers are often unaware of the contamination, it is the responsibility of government agencies to ensure that proper monitoring is done and food items are free of toxic substances. However, monitoring is poor. The agencies do not have the manpower to do the monitoring, the infrastructure to do the testing on a large scale, and the machinery to take follow-up action. There is widespread corruption in matters related to testing and monitoring. The risk is increasing because more people are eating outside their homes. The problem is real even in villages. Most people cannot afford what is sold as organic food. There are questions about how genuine they are, too. The FSSAI function was part of a series of consultations with stakeholders on issues like sustainable packaging, nutraceuticals, and antimicrobial resistance. The governments should initiate stronger measures to ensure that the food people consume is safe and does not damage their health.

Don't stoke tensions for politics

The recent assault on a conductor of the North Western Karnataka State Road Transport Corporation (NWRTC) in Belagavi has escalated into an interstate conflict, reigniting long-standing tensions between Karnataka and Maharashtra. The incident occurred when conductor Mahadev Hukkeri requested two students to speak in Kannada, as he could not comprehend Marathi, the language they were using. This seemingly minor request, rooted in a communication barrier, led to an altercation that quickly spiralled out of control. Hukkeri was beaten by a group of individuals, leading to his hospitalisation. In a twist of events, a counter-complaint was filed by one of the assailants, a minor girl, accusing the conductor of sexual harassment, resulting in a Protection Of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) case being registered against him.

As news of the assault spread, it ignited passions on both sides of the Karnataka-Maharashtra border, feeding into the decades-old dispute over Belagavi. The tension soon spilled over with retaliatory acts of violence, including an attack on a Maharashtra bus driver at Chitradurga and protests by pro-Kannada activists in support of Hukkeri. KSRTC buses were vandalised in Pune, leading to a temporary suspension of interstate bus services. These incidents underscore how quickly localised conflicts can escalate into broader regional confrontations, especially when historical grievances are involved. Belagavi was incorporated into Karnataka (then Mysore) under the States Reorganisation Act of 1956, while adjoining Marathi-speaking areas were placed under Maharashtra. While Karnataka maintains that the Mahajan Commission settled the issue in its favour, Maharashtra claims the matter remains unresolved as it is pending before the Supreme Court.

Politicians from both sides have seized upon the incident to further their agendas. Leaders from the Uddhav Thackeray faction of Shiv Sena have called for the Prime Minister's intervention, while Karnataka BJP has condemned the "insult meted to Kannadigas". However, it is crucial to recognise that the assault was not inherently tied to the border dispute or linguistic tensions. It was a local altercation that has been politicised and blown out of proportion. By framing the incident within the context of broader ideological and territorial conflicts, political leaders risk deepening divisions between communities that have co-existed for decades. Rather than exploiting the situation for narrow political gains, politicians must exercise restraint and concentrate on de-escalating tensions. The focus should be on holding individuals responsible for their actions, through legal means, rather than inflaming regional passions. This requires a balanced and civil approach that prioritises harmony over division. Leaders must resist the temptation to stoke ideological battles and instead work to foster understanding and cooperation so that such incidents do not lead to larger conflicts.

Politicians must not use Belagavi assault to trigger ideological and territorial conflicts

AI is likely to do what technologies have traditionally done – reshape, not replace, human efficiency

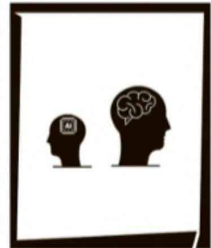
GURUCHARAN GOLLERKERI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's call for a global governance framework for AI at the Paris Summit, the United States breaking ranks arguing that it will result in over-regulation, and the recent launch of the Chinese Large Language Model "DeepSeek" have together reignited the man-versus-machine debate. In 1981, Alan Turing prophesied: "Once the machine thinking method had started... at some stage... we should have expected the machines to take control." Now is a good time to ask what AI is trying to accomplish. It is about making machines intelligent, but what does that entail? AI, at its core, remains a sophisticated tool for pattern recognition and data processing, not an autonomous form of intelligence. Humans are intelligent to the extent that our actions can be expected to achieve our goals. All other aspects of intelligence, such as perception, thinking, learning, inventing, listening, and so on, can be understood in terms of their contributions to our ability to act effectively. Since the inception of AI, intelligence in machines has been defined in the same way: machines are intelligent to the extent that their actions can be expected to achieve their objectives. However, because machines unlike humans lack independent objectives, we assign them objectives to achieve.

Predicting that machine intelligence will surpass human intelligence at some point is counter-intuitive. Machines do not possess intelligence. If we consider intelligence as computation, AI has undoubtedly made significant advances over the last seven decades. We have also created learnable machines that improve their ability to achieve objectives through training. Over the last decade, deep learning systems have learned to recognise both human speech and images, as well as to translate between different languages. This progress has been made using simple, narrow, application-specific algorithms. The goal of AI has always been general-purpose AI: machines that can quickly learn to perform well across the entire range of tasks that humans can

do. However, we are a long way from achieving general-purpose AI. It is important to understand what AI can and cannot do. AI, as it exists today, excels in automation, data analysis, and predictive modelling. Machine learning algorithms process vast amounts of data to identify patterns, automate repetitive tasks, and improve efficiency.

However, AI's strengths are also its limitations. Unlike human intelligence, AI lacks adaptability, creativity, and an understanding of abstract concepts. Intrinsic to AI is that it is bound by data and operates within the confines of its training data. Every AI model, no matter how advanced, relies on human-generated inputs. It cannot inde-



pendently acquire knowledge beyond what it has been exposed to, making it incapable of genuine innovation, it can only extrapolate from existing data. AI lacks general intelligence because consciousness is absent. AI, no matter how advanced, is ultimately a computational system running algorithms – its outputs are derived from statistical correlations, not genuine understanding, or self-awareness. Even if AI were to pass the Turing Test perfectly, it would only be simulating intelligence, not experiencing it. Sentience requires consciousness, emotions, and self-awareness – qualities that emerge from biological, not computational processes.

Overstating the powers

AI does not know that human beings exist at all or that they have minds. From the algorithm's point of view, each person is simply a click history. There is empirical evidence on the limits of AI and leading AI researchers acknowledge this. Geoffrey Hinton, a pioneer of deep learning, has pointed out that AI models struggle with rea-

soning and understanding causality. Yann Le Cun, another AI visionary, emphasises that machines do not possess common sense or the ability to independently navigate complex, real-world problems. Stuart Russell suggests that the world will likely never see a general-purpose AI. We must learn from history to understand why AI will follow the pattern of past technologies. The belief that AI will replace human intelligence mirrors historical trends of technological hype. The industrial revolution, automation, and the advent of computers initially caused concerns about widespread job loss, but they ultimately enhanced productivity and led to new fields of employment. Early robotics was expected to eliminate entire job sectors, but instead, led to job transformation rather than elimination. History demonstrates that new technologies often create more opportunities than they eliminate. AI will likely follow the same trajectory – reshaping, not replacing, human roles.

So, how must we envision AI and the future world? India must push ahead with developing foundational AI models and emerge as a leader in AI. The future lies in human-AI collaboration, where AI handles repetitive, data-intensive tasks, allowing humans to focus on strategic thinking, creativity, and ethical considerations. A simple axiom works well to drive home the point: "Technology does not solve problems, human beings do." Going back to read Adam Smith, who's widely reviled as "The Apostle of Greed", students are pleasantly surprised at what Smith says at the beginning of his first book: "It is so obvious to everyone that each of us cares deeply about other people that it hardly merits saying it, but I'm going to say it anyway." If AI systems are going to be making decisions on behalf of the human race, what does that mean? That's something scientists and philosophers have grappled with in the past few decades. I take an optimistic view of AI and the future: there are areas that will not be automated, either because we don't want to or because humans are just intrinsically better. Keynes called it "perfecting the art of life." AI or no AI, humanity will be faced with man's eternal quest: how to live agreeably, wisely, and well. Those who cultivate the art of life better will be much more successful in this future world.

(The writer is Director, School of Social Sciences, Ramaiah University of Applied Sciences)

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

Keys to escape speed limits

As a bank official, I could talk my way out of traffic tickets

SANDHYA VASUDEV

One encouraging thought is that Indian city roads are often congested or potholed that driving at high speeds is a rarity. When twin cities are within a distance of 30 km or less from each other, the connecting road is neither treated as a regular highway nor a city road, yet a speed limit is prescribed. On such roads, a moderate driver can maintain a speed of 70 kmph, but adhering to a limit of 50 kmph can be challenging, especially when the road ahead is wide and clear.

I recall my daily commute between Hubballi and Dharwad, twin cities separated by a distance of 23 km. I would struggle to complete my household

chores on time and leave for the office, only to face speed traps before hitting the highway. As I held the cash key for the bank, I was expected to arrive at least 15 minutes before business hours. The anxiety of being late would often get the better of me, causing me to unintentionally exceed the speed limit.

I would not even realise that the speedometer needle had hit the 50 km point until a police patrol would flag me down to speed zero. I remember that every time I would stop immediately, but thereafter my distress would be writ large on my face as I explained hastily, "Sir, I am an officer of... bank. I am holding the cash keys and need to reach before the customers. Look, here are the keys!" This would be enough for the police to relent and let me go. It was clear that the police had a certain level of respect for bank officials.

A large number of buses plied between the twin cities, and it was not uncommon to see a sense of camaraderie

among bus drivers. The moment a bus driver spotted a traffic patrol waiting in hiding with a camera, he would send a subtle signal with his hand to the vehicles behind. Driving between the buses at times proved useful for me, and I would adjust my speed just in time, silently thanking the driver.

However, there was one instance where I was not so fortunate. I set out along with my elder brother to a temple midway between the twin cities to offer prayers on his birthday, as my sister-in-law was out of town and he was quite alone.

Lost in merry conversation, I had hit the gas pedal hard, and I failed to notice that I had crossed the 50 km limit. But the police noticed and flagged me down. As I did not have an "official" reason as a cover to justify my speeding, I dutifully paid the fine. I pacified my slightly distressed brother that one man's loss was another's gain and not to worry much about it.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Bengaluru needs smarter governance, manageable municipalities

I refer to 25 panchayats may join new Bengaluru city corporations (Feb 25). Historically, Bengaluru had twin municipalities, dating back to the British era: Bangalore City Municipality and the Civil and Military Station, which were under British administration. Following independence, the twin cities merged into a single entity through an act of retrocession. As many old-timers can testify, Bengaluru has witnessed unprecedented growth, transforming from a city of 70,000 inhabitants at independence to a thriving metropolis of 14 million people, comparable to mega cities like London and New York. The population

has doubled since 2005, showcasing stunning growth for a developing-world city. The government should consider the Panel's recommendation to split the present large and unwieldy structure of Bengaluru into more manageable and sustainable municipal corporations. Now a well-known destination both domestically and internationally, Bengaluru requires better management and attention to sustain "Brand Bengaluru". Compact, viable, and sustainable municipal corporations will be more responsive to civic needs and grievances.

H N Ramakrishna, Bengaluru

Justice to survivors

Apropos 'Abysmal Pcoso conviction rate denies justice to survivors' (Feb 25), it is disheartening to learn that the conviction rate has plummeted drastically. The denial of justice to survivors is unacceptable and alarming. The police system and the judiciary should act effectively and swiftly to provide justice to the survivors and their families.

Aditya Negi, Bengaluru

Don't endorse violence

The Belagavi bus conductor assault case is a regrettable incident. The

violence between Karnataka and Maharashtra based on language is condemnable. Unfortunately, politicians from both states are supporting and endorsing their respective lawmakers. Language is merely a medium for communication and exchanging cultural and literary values between states. We must not forget that our diversity is our strength, and we should stand united.

Manu P Cherian, Bengaluru

Stop the drain

The article 'Stop the talent drain' (Feb 24) should be an eye-opener for those claiming that "India is

Shining". It is disturbing to note that many students have gone abroad for studies in the last five to six years, with most getting employed there and not returning to India. The government must create more opportunities and high-class universities for students across different fields to prevent a brain drain. Or else, India will be laden with Only Senior Citizens.

S Shashidhar, Bengaluru

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

SPEAK OUT

Modiji has set up a factory of 'jumlas' in Assam, whose mastermind is the most corrupt chief minister of the BJP. Recently, Congress leaders in Assam were attacked politically and physically.

The public will respond to these attacks by forming a Congress government after one year.

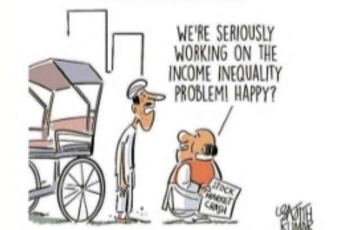


Manikarjun Kharge, Congress President

Our enemies are innovative and resourceful, and so are we. They never stop thinking about new ways to harm our country and our people, and neither do we.

George W Bush

TO BE PRECISE



IN PERSPECTIVE

From Myanmar, a distress call on hold

The world must disengage with the junta and act against its brutal oppression

PAUL NEWMAN AND AMAYA VALCARCEL

February 1, 2025 marked the fourth anniversary of Myanmar's military coup, an event that plunged the nation into chaos, widespread violence, and relentless human rights violations. Since General Min Aung Hlaing seized power from the democratically elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD), the people of Myanmar have endured a brutal campaign of oppression. With over 6,000 civilians killed, more than 3.5 million displaced, and over 21,000 political prisoners detained, the junta's reign has only deepened the crisis.

In a historic development, the Federal Criminal Court of Argentina issued arrest warrants for 25 Myanmar officials on February 13, 2025, charging them with genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. This move represents a significant step towards holding the junta accountable for its atrocities. The court's decision is a landmark moment, as it is the first time a foreign court has issued such warrants against Myanmar officials. The court's decision is a landmark moment, as it is the first time a foreign court has issued such warrants against Myanmar officials.

Since 2021, the junta has engaged in relentless attacks against its own people, employing airstrikes, extrajudicial killings, and systematic torture. Political activists, journalists, and innocent civilians have been targeted in widespread crackdowns, at least 2,000 individuals held in custody due to torture, medical neglect, and other inhumane conditions. Women in detention have faced sexual violence, as documented by the International Commission of Jurists.

The junta's violent suppression extends beyond urban centres to ethnic minority regions – villages have been bombed and entire communities displaced. Hundreds of political prisoners have succumbed to inhumane conditions in notorious prisons in the country, while reports of forced disappearances and summary executions continue to surface. Despite mounting evidence of human rights abuses, the international community's response has been disappointing by weak. Sanctions have failed to curb the military's access to weapons and financial resources. Global institutions such as the United Nations and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) are yet to implement decisive measures to restore democracy and hold the military accountable.

The ASEAN bloc, despite expressing concerns over Myanmar's political crisis, has not taken concrete steps to isolate the junta. The recent ASEAN summit reiterated the call for free and fair elections but has not enforced any mechanism to ensure compliance. Many powerful nations have maintained diplomatic and economic relationships with the regime, citing geopolitical and strategic interests.

The failure to take a firm stance against Myanmar's military has only emboldened the junta. To break the cycle of impunity and restore democracy, the international community must act decisively by severing all diplomatic and economic engagements with the military regime and ceasing the recognition of junta-led initiatives. They must exclude junta representatives from ASEAN platforms and instead engage with the National Union Government (NUG) and ethnic resistance groups. The UN should direct humanitarian aid through independent channels to reach the most vulnerable populations of Myanmar. They must coordinate international legal action to hold the military accountable for war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity and support a comprehensive, locally-led transition towards federal democracy and sustainable peace in Myanmar.

India has stakes
As Myanmar's immediate neighbour and the world's largest democracy, India is significant in influencing the course of Myanmar's political future and has maintained economic and diplomatic contacts with the regime, despite condemning the junta. India shares a 1,643-kilometre-long land boundary with Myanmar and has invested over \$1.75 billion in developmental assistance and joint infrastructure projects. Despite its democratic values, India has refrained from taking a strong stance against the military regime. Given China's growing influence in Myanmar, India must reassess its approach and support the democratic forces in Myanmar. By aligning with the international community in pressuring the junta, India can play a crucial role in ensuring regional stability and upholding human rights.

Myanmar's people have shown extraordinary resilience in their fight for democracy but cannot continue this struggle alone. The international community must move beyond rhetoric and take concrete actions to end the suffering and restore democracy. The world cannot afford to remain passive while millions suffer under the junta's rule. The UN estimates that over 20 million people in Myanmar require urgent humanitarian aid. As the ASEAN summit debates Myanmar's future, it is clear that any solution must involve genuine engagement with all stakeholders and the exclusion of the military junta from the political processes. The world must act now – before Myanmar's democratic aspirations are silenced forever.

(Paul is an associate professor at St. Joseph's University, Bengaluru; Amaya is a refugee lawyer and professor of Migration and Human Rights at Comillas University, Madrid, Spain)

South suffers as Centre prioritises politics over equity in the Budget

G KUMAR NAIK

Southern states and their leaders have strongly voiced concerns that the budget has overlooked their interests. While it was expected that Bihar might receive a special allocation with elections approaching, what truly shocked the South was the complete disregard for its needs—not just a smaller share of the pie, but the entire cake being given to Bihar.

Amid the celebratory rhetoric over exempting income up to Rs 12 lakh from taxation to benefit a large number of taxpayers, a glaring issue remains: the Union Budget's misplaced priorities, particularly its neglect of Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe communities and other marginalised sections of society.

SCs and STs constitute 25.2% of India's population, yet their budgetary allocations remain disproportionately low. Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana have enacted laws ensuring that budget allocations are proportional

to SC/ST populations. A National SC/ST (Scheduled Castes Sub Plan and Tribal Sub Plan) Act is urgently needed to legally mandate SC/ST budget allocations. Regardless of which party is in power or its ideological leaning, funding for SC/ST development must be proportionate to their population to bridge historical inequalities. The Parliament must rise above its political division and enact this law to ensure justice and equitable progress.

At a time when 40% of the country's wealth lies with 1% of people, with a historically high wealth gap and a rising unemployment rate, the central government should have increased allocations for social security and welfare schemes. However, overall budgeting for health and education has been reduced.

While the country needs a robust railway network, the government has focused disproportionately on showpiece trains such as Vande Bharat and Namoo Bharat. These trains serve already well-connected regions, ignoring the needs of underserved

areas. For instance, Karnataka has one of the lowest railway densities in the country. For every 100 sq km, Karnataka has only 2.62 km of railway tracks, whereas Uttar Pradesh has 6.24 km and West Bengal has 11.79 km. While the Railway Ministry acknowledged the disparity, the NDA government failed to address the issue by allocating more funds to improve the railway network.

As Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman rightly stated, agriculture is the first engine of growth. In 2016, the Prime Minister promised to double farmers' incomes by 2022. Yet today, far from seeing their incomes double, more than half of India's farmers are in debt. Consider Karnataka. The state produces some of the finest chillies in the country, known for their vibrant colour and rich flavour. Farmers in the Raichur district have had an excellent harvest, yet due to market failures, large quantities of red chillies are now lying unsold in cold storage. What good is a bumper yield if farmers can't get

a fair price for their produce?

The government must ensure that agriculture is not just about production but also about market foresight. Just as there is crop insurance for losses due to natural calamities, there must also be safeguards against market failures.

The Union Ministry of Agriculture must provide guidance on what crops should be grown and in what quantity, but unfortunately, this government's vision remains fragmented. The announcement of the Mission for Cotton Productivity in this budget is a welcome step. Karnataka, being one of the largest producers of cotton, is eagerly waiting for the rollout of the scheme. However, the Centre must implement the scheme in consultation with farmers.

As the Finance Minister rightly stated, MSMEs are the second engine of growth. But what is equally important as what was said in the budget speech is what was left unsaid. Between 2016 and 2021, 1.3 crore workers vanished from the informal sector, 24 lakh enterprises shut down, and manu-

facturing employment fell by 81 lakh jobs.

This budget talks about increasing loan limits under various schemes, but the reality is that MSME entrepreneurs in backward regions are unable to access even basic loans. The average loan size under the MUDRA scheme is just Rs. 50,000. If small entrepreneurs in rural and backward regions cannot even access Rs. 10 lakh loans, how does raising the limit help?

Banks are not lending to MSMEs in these regions but are busy writing off massive loans for big business entities. This is part of the story that was left out of the budget speech—the policies, the favours, and the massive write-offs that benefit the richest while small businesses are left to struggle and shut down.

Tertiary healthcare infrastructure is crucial for ensuring equitable access to specialised medical services. Yet, Karnataka is the only major state that still lacks an AIIMS. As the demand for setting up AIIMS in Raichur is still pending before the Central Government.

Despite making up only 5% of India's population, Karnataka contributes 8.4% to the nation's GDP. The Union Budget has doubled from Rs 24.42 lakh crore in 2018-19 to Rs 50.65 lakh crore in 2025-26, yet Karnataka's share has stagnated. In 2018-19, Karnataka received Rs 46,288 crore, but in 2024-25, it was allocated only Rs 44,485 crore, with an additional Rs 15,299 crore in grants. Given Karnataka's significant contribution, the state should receive at least Rs 1 lakh crore annually. Meanwhile, states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan are showered with funds.

The Union Budget should reflect equitable distribution of resources. The Southern states, which contribute significantly to the nation's economy, cannot be ignored. It is time for the government to correct its misplaced priorities and ensure that every state receives its fair share.

(The writer is a retired IAS officer and Congress Lok Sabha member from Raichur)

As the US and Europe tighten their borders, a fundamental principle of humanitarian law is being eroded: the protection of refugees from harm. The true meaning of civilisation and collective responsibility is to safeguard human life

DINA NAYERI

I've been thinking a lot lately about what it means to be "civilised." It's not caring for one's own; animals do that. It's not making music and art; cave men drew and sang. It is, I believe, to live with a moral standard that takes into account our fellow man, and to ask: What do we owe one another, and what do we owe strangers?

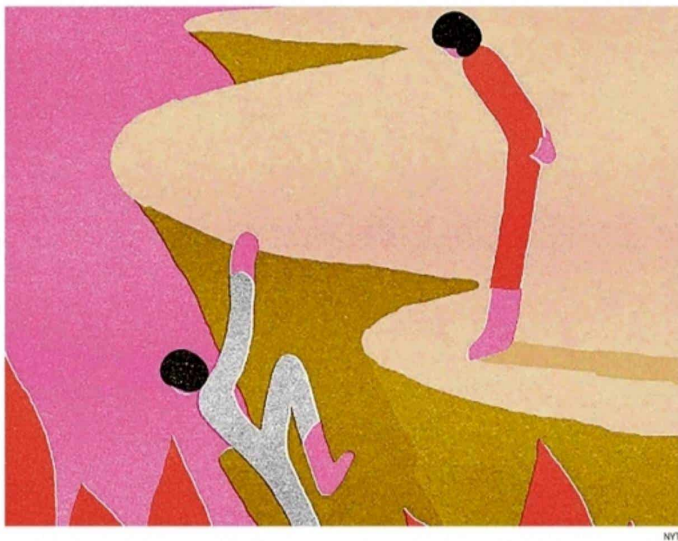
For me, to be civilized boils down to being willing to work against our own lesser interests in order to alleviate greater suffering, no matter the sufferer's identity or relationship to us. It is a high standard, but it is not herosism, it is putting one's own life in real danger for another.

After World War II, a large group of lawmakers decided to codify this principle of humanitarian duty into international law. Non-refoulement (from the French "refouler", meaning "to trample") is the idea that vulnerable people, once arrived on safe shores, should never be sent back into danger. Put simply, it is the premise that the least we can do is not knowingly send someone out to die. It is this idea that was challenged by the first Trump administration, with its "Remain in Mexico" policy, which denied responsibility for asylum seekers. Now, in his second term, President Trump has not only reinstated that harmful policy but also suspended thousands of existing asylum cases, and cancelled appointments and even flights for refugees already cleared to enter the United States. All of this goes against a contract this country signed 58 years ago.

One hundred and forty-five countries signed the United Nations 1951 Refugee Convention (the United States signed on to the bulk of the convention's requirements in 1967, including those on refoulement), which states: "No contracting state shall expel or return ('refouler') a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion."

The language in the treaty was designed to be all-encompassing, and to acknowledge that there will always be refugees fleeing persecution. The vaguest protected category, "particular social group," was added by a Swedish delegate who worried that some people who deserve shelter would not fit into the existing categories. How could anyone when this language was drafted, just six years after the horrors of the Holocaust, foretell whom the next atrocity would target? "Particular social group," then, was written as a catch-all, to make sure everyone who needed refuge would be covered by the legal language.

In 1981, my family fled Iran and landed in the United Arab Emirates. After nearly a year, we were recognized as refugees by the U.N.'s High Commissioner on Refugees and sent to a camp in Italy. There we sat for another six months or so, waiting and submitting to "credible fear" interviews, wherein asylum seekers must prove to an immigration officer that the danger back home is real, not imagined. My mother explained to the officers that her Christian conversion was apostasy according to Islamic law, and that before we escaped, she



America loses its soul when it rejects people fleeing danger

had been imprisoned, interrogated and told she'd be executed. As we told our story, I sensed that our interlocutors' aim was to save us, not to send us away. Later, too, I saw American neighbours and friends embracing this moral duty, a responsibility and an instinct to protect lives more vulnerable than their own.

But in the United States and in Europe of late, it seems as if government lawyers have treated the Refugee Convention like a checklist of obligations to reinterpret and wriggle out of rather than a sacred principle that bound together a shellshocked world after the savagery of the Holocaust.

The spirit of a broad and inclusive refuge has slowly been replaced by a narrowing of these categories to allow as few as possible to qualify. During the first Trump administration, Jeff Sessions, who was then attorney general, argued that women fleeing domestic violence did not qualify for protections as a social group. As ugly as it is, Trump is once again engaging in mass refoulement, turning away refugees who meet the strict criteria.

The writers of the original treaty tried to articulate something like: We can't know what evil will come next, but when it does,

we peaceful nations will shelter its survivors. Twenty-first-century lawyers have reinterpreted that to mean, essentially: We will shelter survivors, but only from the kinds of evil that we are legally forced to care about.

After receiving asylum in 1989, my mother, brother and I were resettled in Oklahoma. Pastors often asked us to share our story in their churches, and my mother gratefully did the rounds. It felt humiliating, but I liked the language of their sermons: We were "chosen," our journey a "miracle," our lives a part of "God's plan." I loved these words because they meant we were special. One sweet, grumbly old church man, though, didn't seem to think we were special at all. When we were at his house, he teased me about my accent, the books I hadn't yet read, my love of stewed spinach and yogurt. And yet he absolutely believed that bringing us out of Iran was God's work.

Now I understand that this man had a higher-order morality than all those who praised our faith, or our value: He didn't think we were extraordinary or anointed. He just thought that every life deserved saving. This standard has eroded in America and across Europe. We've become baser, more

self-serving, jealously guarding our spaces. These days, so much of our talk about migrants and refugees is about how much they do for our economies, for our communities and for our culture. But what about the sanctity of human life? America, this shining city on a hill, is now sending people back to face torture and death, *en masse*, despite our obscene resources.

Just this month we began shipping the most vulnerable to Panama; including Iranian Christians, facing the same risks my family did 36 years ago. The firmer our door remains shut, the more our language has become about exceptional people, deserving people and merit.

I don't think, for meritorious people, this is a very difficult position to keep, for our gatekeepers and for all of us: We don't send watched people back into danger. Even if it costs us money. And certainly not for some hypothetical fear for ourselves. We do this because we're civilized, and born lucky, and life is the minimum we owe to our fellow man.

(The writer is the author of *The Ungrateful Refugee* and *Who Gets Believed?* **The New York Times**)

NEET, JEE and the coaching trap

MATHEW C NINAN

The introduction of NEET and JEE, the nationwide entrance tests for medical and engineering courses, initially raised high hopes and expectations. It was an honest attempt to address the many drawbacks of the earlier selection methods. Previously, there were disparities between states, and multiple entrance tests were conducted across the country. Students not only had to take multiple tests but also travel long distances to appear for them.

To streamline the process, the Government of India established the National Testing Agency (NTA) with the main objective of creating a uniform and efficient testing system for the entire country. Now, after several years of implementation, it is time to assess the pros and cons of this initiative.

NEET and JEE select students solely based on their performance in these tests, with no weight given to their Class XII (Plus 2) scores—the qualifying examination. Under the earlier system, 50% of the selection criteria were based on board exam performance and 50% on entrance tests. This was a more balanced approach, acknowledging both a student's long-term academic performance and their ability to perform in a single test.

Currently, the only eligibility condition is that students must score at least 50% in their main subjects in the qualifying exam. Thereafter, the entrance test is the sole determinant of admission. This is one of the biggest flaws of the system.

As a result, students are compelled to abandon their schools after Class 10 and enrol in coaching centres—many of which function more as "teaching shops" than educational institutions. These centres drill students rigorously for entrance tests, often at the cost of extra-curricular activities and personality development. This raises an important question: Is it wise to turn students into mere test-taking machines? Schools that nurture these students for 10 to 12 years now watch helplessly as they leave en masse for these coaching centres, which charge exorbitant fees while promising guaranteed success.

In January 2024, the central government released Guidelines for Regulating the Coaching Centres and instructed states and Union territories to frame rules to curb their unchecked expansion

and malpractices. However, there is little evidence of any corrective action.

Although integrated coaching with +2 courses in schools and PU colleges has been declared illegal, this rule is widely ignored. Coaching centres continue to operate with impunity. The authorities must take a long-term view of this issue. The practice of disregarding qualifying exam marks and relying entirely on entrance test scores has weakened good schools while allowing coaching centres to reap the benefits of their hard work.

The Government of India must appoint an expert committee to study the impact of both NEET and JEE on the country's academic environment. Has the system improved or lowered the morale of schools and junior colleges? Is there merit in reinstating some weightage for board exam scores? Would such a change ensure greater fairness and equity, especially for students and schools?

Another pressing concern is the psychological toll these tests take on students. The immense pressure has led to a disturbing rise in student suicides. The government must examine these tragic consequences and ensure that young lives are not lost to an unjust system.

The efficiency of a testing system should be judged not only by its administrative efficiency but also by its impact on students' well-being. At its core, NEET and JEE have become a nightmare for students and the schools that have taught them for over a decade. Something is deeply flawed. It's not clear whether various school boards or state governments have raised these concerns with the HRD ministry, which oversees the NTA. The NTA must undertake a study on the feasibility and impact of the two-mast tests. The NTA owes an answer to the nation.

Recently, the Ministry of Education and CBSE announced that from next year, Class 10 students will have the option to take two exams. This move aims to reduce the stress of a single high-stakes exam and aligns with the NEP 2020. The ministry has noted that this model is similar to the SAT system in the US, which allows students to take multiple tests and submit their best scores. Hopefully, the same logic will be extended to entrance tests like NEET and JEE.

(The writer is Director, Little Rock Group of Institutions, Udupi)

OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

50 YEARS AGO: FEBRUARY 1975

Bulgaria in dead

Moscow, Feb 25
Former Soviet leader Marshal Nikolai Bulganin, 79, died yesterday after a long and serious illness. Said reported. Marshal Bulganin became a familiar world figure as Soviet Premier Minister and travelling companion of Mr. Nikita Khrushchev on international visits in the mid-1950s. He visited India in 1957 along with Mr. Khrushchev. The silver-haired Marshal and semi-aristocratic manner was a smooth contrast to the blunt Mr. Khrushchev. The era of "B and K" lasted from February 1955 until March 1958 when Mr. Khrushchev took over the Premiership.

25 YEARS AGO: FEBRUARY 2000

Mamata spares passengers

New Delhi, Feb 25
Railway Minister Mamata Banerjee today spared the passengers from an increase in railway fares in the 2000-01 budget proposals but imposed a five per cent hike in freight rates for all commodities barring some essential goods. Thus, for the first time in the last few years, the railway passengers, including upper class ones, have not been burdened. The minister has exempted commodities like foodgrains, sugar, edible salt, edible oils, kerosene, LPG, fruits and vegetables and urea, saying that this had been done with a view not to burden the common man.

OASIS | SRIM

Significance of Shivaratri

The essence of our consciousness is Shiva. Therefore, *Chidamandira roopam, shivoham shivoham*, means that that Supreme reality, whose spark is inside me, is Supreme consciousness. I am of the real form of Shiva, the auspicious all-pervading reality.

After midnight, begins a new day. Shiva finishes his dance of destruction. The dance of destruction is actually a renewal, where the old is destroyed and the new takes place. When Shiva, who is the representative form of that Supreme Being, dances this dance of destruction, the *Tandava Nritya*. It is said that the entire Universe shakes and shivers and everything falls to pieces. This is the renewing and destructive

aspect of divinity that you see every day in the outside world and the inner world.

When this turmoil takes places within, when the dance of destruction of Shiva takes place in our hearts, then much of the old is destroyed. All the aspects of the ego, are churned up, broken and thrown to bits by the *Tandava Nritya*. Only peace and blissfulness remain, which is the essence of consciousness. According to Raja Yogis, inside the *Sahasra chakra*, in the centre, is the point which is called, the "*Brahma rundra*" – the doorway of the Brah-

man. When one enters through that, one comes face to face with that which we call Shiva.

In the highest state of meditation, the yogi tastes the nectar that flows down. Anyone who has touched this nectar becomes so intoxicated and filled with the joy of Shiva, that nothing else is an attraction to him. It doesn't mean he needs to run away from the world. He could continue to be in the world but he realises that he is free of all this and is a part of that all-pervading Shiva. So, the Shiva or auspiciousness that we seek, is to be sought inwardly.

And the destruction that takes place is our connection to the outward. The snake that sits around Shiva is the ancient symbol of wisdom. The symbol that signifies the tremendous energy called *Parm Shakti* or *Kula Kundalini*, lies latent, coiled without action, in most people, in the *Mooladhara chakra*. The whole of the process of awakening, is the awakening of that energy. And it is a gradual progress through the different *chakras*, till it reaches the *Sahasra chakra* and becomes one with that Supreme Shiva. Shiva is nowhere other than in our own system. This is the inner significance of Shivaratri.

The Statesman

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NEP tussle

The escalating tussle between Tamil Nadu and the Union government over the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is not just a dispute over language policy – it is a deeper battle over state autonomy, cultural identity, and federal governance. Tamil Nadu, historically resistant to Hindi imposition, views the NEP as a direct challenge to its well-established two-language policy. The Centre's decision to withhold crucial educational funds unless the state aligns with the NEP has only intensified this conflict, turning an educational framework into a political flashpoint. Tamil Nadu has long championed its two-language policy – Tamil and English – as a reflection of its linguistic heritage and a tool for maintaining cultural distinctiveness. The three-language formula proposed under NEP, while ostensibly flexible, is perceived in the state as a veiled attempt to introduce Hindi through the backdoor. This resistance is deeply rooted in decades of opposition to linguistic homogenisation, dating back to the anti-Hindi agitation movements of the 20th century. The present standoff reinforces the sentiment that language policies cannot be dictated from the Centre without acknowledging regional aspirations. However, the state's opposition to NEP goes beyond language. Tamil Nadu argues that the policy undermines its autonomy in shaping education tailored to its socio-cultural needs. The state has sought to develop its own education policy, one that aligns with its principles of social justice and inclusivity. The NEP, with its push for vocational education from an early stage, has raised concerns about reinforcing caste-based occupational roles – an issue that Tamil Nadu has actively worked to dismantle over the decades. The Centre's decision to withhold over Rs 2,000 crore in Samagra Shiksha funds has further fuelled this dispute. Education, a subject on the Concurrent List, requires cooperative federalism, but the conditional release of funds undermines this principle. The state government has framed this move as an attempt to strong-arm Tamil Nadu into submission, calling it "blackmail." Even the opposition within the state, despite political differences, has largely supported the DMK government's stand, underscoring the widespread rejection of NEP in the region. On the other hand, the Centre argues that NEP is designed for national educational standardisation and that Tamil Nadu should not be an exception. It insists that the three-language formula does not mandate Hindi but offers flexibility, allowing students to learn any third language, including foreign languages. However, given the historical context of language politics in Tamil Nadu, such assurances have not allayed fears of cultural imposition. This standoff highlights a broader issue – the delicate balance between national policy frameworks and regional autonomy. Education is not just about curriculum and language; it is about identity, opportunity, and governance. Tamil Nadu's defiance is not merely political posturing but a reflection of deep-seated concerns about central overreach. A resolution to this conflict will require dialogue, mutual respect, sagacity, and a recognition that a one-size-fits-all approach to education may not work in a diverse nation like India.

New Framework

The appointment of former Reserve Bank of India Governor Shaktikanta Das as "Principal Secretary-2" to Prime Minister Narendra Modi marks a significant shift in governance strategy. This move introduces a dual leadership model in the Prime Minister's Office, with Mr Pramod Kumar Mishra continuing as Principal Secretary. The creation of this new position suggests a deliberate effort to enhance administrative efficiency, particularly in economic policymaking and financial governance. Mr Das, having recently completed his tenure as RBI Governor, brings a wealth of experience in fiscal management, monetary policy, and financial regulation. His stewardship during critical economic phases – ranging from the post-pandemic recovery to inflation control and foreign exchange stability – demonstrated a pragmatic and steady approach. His appointment to this high-level administrative role underscores the government's recognition of the need for technical acumen at the heart of policymaking. The introduction of two principal secretaries signals an evolution in the PMO's structure. The Principal Secretary plays a key role in advising the Prime Minister, ensuring policy implementation, and coordinating between ministries. By appointing Mr Das alongside Mr Mishra, the government appears to be reinforcing its ability to handle the increasingly complex demands of governance. This dual structure could mean a sharper focus on economic and financial matters, with Mr Das providing specialised insights into fiscal strategies, banking reforms, and global economic trends. This transition comes at a time when India faces both economic challenges and opportunities. With shifting global supply chains, geopolitical uncertainties, and evolving financial regulations, India requires a strong, forward-thinking approach. Mr Das's expertise could prove crucial in navigating these issues, particularly in ensuring that India's economic policies remain resilient and globally competitive. His presence in the PMO might also strengthen coordination between the government and financial institutions, leading to more effective policy execution. Another important aspect of this appointment is its potential impact on long-term governance reforms. The creation of a new top-level administrative role suggests that the government is looking at structural changes in how policies are formulated and implemented. If this model succeeds, it could ensure that policymaking is not just politically driven but also guided by technical proficiency. The challenge for Mr Das will be adapting to a role that goes beyond financial regulation. While his tenure at the central bank required balancing inflation control, currency stability, and banking sector reforms, his new position demands a broader vision – one that integrates economic policy with political and administrative realities. His effectiveness will depend on how well he collaborates with existing bureaucratic structures and aligns his expertise with the government's overall policy direction. Ultimately, this appointment reflects a strategic shift in governance. By bringing in a financial expert to a key advisory role, the government is emphasising economic stability and growth as central pillars of its administrative approach. If this experiment in dual leadership proves successful, it could redefine how India's highest office manages complex policy challenges in the years to come.

A for Apple, why?

Systematic and collective resistance against such normalised practices which are largely hegemonic in nature, is necessary to build an inclusive and independent system. Shadow wars on others' languages, especially on English, or futile grumbles of dejected hearts on International Mother Language Day shall neither save the mother nor the tongue. One has to understand that the best way to save a people's language is to preserve their culture and to instil a sense of pride among people about their own culture. If the tongue is to be saved, the mother needs to be saved first.



There is a popular joke about apples in the district of Murshidabad. A middle-aged father asked his ailing son whether he was gaining in strength each time the apple finished a slice of apple offered to him during his recovery from fever. This apparently not-so-funny joke speaks volumes about the relationship a rural child shares with the expensive and 'medicinal' fruit, the apple, it may sound absurd to urban ears, but, as they say, truth is sometimes stranger than fiction.

Many children from rural areas in this country, especially children from families of small farmers, have an apple in their first time in their life when they fall sick and a country quack advises the family to provide nutritious food to the ailing child. Thus the apple is an alien, elite too, fruit to such ill-fated children of rural India.

By no means is this fruit an integral part of their frugal existence, let alone their culture. But the worst irony of the existing education system in this country lies in the fact that the first English word an Indian child formally learns is apple!

It would be an impossible task to explain the reason behind the introduction of such a fallacious learning mechanism, without citing the impact of an obstinate and undying colonial hangover.

It is a well-known fact that the British colonialists introduced a Eurocentric academic curriculum in India, especially at the primary level, with the objective of hegemonising young Indian minds into the European culture and value system.

They planned to achieve this goal by instilling the idea of a superior Western culture among young Indian students through the English language. Thus the English language, in this context, served a dual purpose – first, it worked as a medium of communication, and, secondly, as a communicator of Western culture and its inherent value system. This was cunningly designed to produce the hybrid community – Indian in skin and British in taste.

Subsequently, this newly emerged hybrid community

developed a staunch sense of distaste towards its own language and, more importantly, its culture. To understand the politics of alienation involved in the entire process and also to facilitate a cultural fight back, the networks of linguistic and cultural hegemony need to be deconstructed at the very outset. Therefore the classic 'A for apple' equation and its cultural resonances must be understood vis-à-vis this larger politico-cultural framework.

It is quite normal to kick-start the formal cognitive process of a Western child with the image of an apple as it is one of the most common cultural images in Western countries, especially in England. Apple is so amply available in these countries that many of their dishes contain the fruit in one form or another. Even some of their religious scriptures and popular cultural texts contain multiple references and allusions to the apple.

Thus, an apple is such a popular image in Western culture that it catches the imagination of a Western child easily and quickly. Therefore, it is expected that their formal cognitive process would start with such a hugely popular image as that of an apple. 'A for apple' is thus not only expected but also effective from the cultural as well as cognitive perspective.

However, it is weird to repeat the same in the Indian context for obvious reasons. There is no denying the fact that knowledge of the English language is crucial in a vastly globalised world where English is used as the global lingua franca. But teaching and learning of the English language must not be done through a curriculum that may contain seeds of cultural or psychological colonisation.

A cognitive perspective of the well-known stories and rhymes taught at the primary and pre-primary levels across India would reveal the Eurocentric

nature of the existing academic framework in this country. Added to that, most of the pictorial illustrations supplied with stories and rhymes in the primary readers have explicit European touches.

In one such illustration, accompanying a popular farmer's story, the farmer is shown to have been dressed up almost like a detective, wearing a hat and a pair of gumboots! In the European context, this image is perfectly alright. But this creates a completely false image of a farmer in the budding Indian minds. Thus children get alienated unknowingly from their own culture.

In the same way, the relations between the black sheep and its master, between the farmer and his farm, between God and his creation etc. have been represented through Eurocentric images and sign systems. Thus, while learning the English language, children get immersed in a world that has no connection whatsoever with the world around them.

This intellectual alienation ultimately leads to cultural alienation, which, in the long run, proves fatal for this community of young learners. As stated earlier, an unpolished and unqualified contempt for whatever is originally theirs develops within such children and they feel ashamed to speak their mother tongue and also to have regard for their own culture.

Closing down of English medium schools, or dropping the English course from the academic curriculum, or imposing the so-called Indian knowledge system on children won't be a feasible solution to this serious problem. A rational restructuring of the existing English curriculum at the pre-primary and the primary levels, emphasising the Indian knowledge system, cultural images and icons, may initiate a whole new process of cultural re-membering. English language taught through Indian

stories and rhymes with typical Indian images and sign systems can be a viable alternative to the current conflicting curriculum. In doing so, the role of language as a communicator of culture must be kept in mind. The words of the Kenyan author and intellectual Ngũgĩ Thiong'o are highly suggestive in this context. While explaining the relation between language and identity he said, "Language carries culture and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceive themselves is how they look at their culture..."

The long existing colonial residues in the overall academic curricula, especially at primary and pre-primary levels, must stop now and forever. Time is ripe for India to make a new frame a curriculum for primary and pre-primary students that would encourage both teachers and learners to approach English as a medium of communication first and then as a carrier of culture. Indian culture of cultural superiority associated with English language, texts and techniques must be introduced with a view to creating an Indian cultural environment within the curricula and also within the classroom.

Without dispelling the aura of cultural superiority associated with English language, the spell of the cultural false consciousness among Indian students shall never be broken. This applies to other hegemonic discourses too. Therefore, systematic and collective resistance against such normalised practices, which are largely hegemonic in nature, is necessary to build an inclusive and independent system. Shadow wars on others' languages, especially on English, or futile grumbles of dejected hearts on International Mother Language Day shall neither save the mother nor the tongue. One has to understand that the best way to save a people's language is to preserve their culture and to instil a sense of pride among people about their own culture. If the tongue is to be saved, the mother needs to be saved first.

A MEMBER OF THE ANN ASIA NEWS NETWORK

Embracing smart citizenship in a digital age

By digitising all the data related to our lives, we can allow computers to handle these tasks automatically and accurately. This would save people a tremendous amount of time on paperwork, notations, confirmations, and submitting applications. In turn, this means society as a whole would become more efficient and save resources. Plus, digitisation can really boost business activities by encouraging investment and innovation in the future. Working on an exciting project called Deep Signature, which uses blockchain technology to create a "Smart Resident Card" for apartment complexes. Just imagine a resident who can move seamlessly through security checkpoints using a single unique code. They could access amenities and services in their community easily, securely, and at a low cost, like generating a QR code. While these solutions might seem small, they are perfectly aligned with the vision of a digitised government in the future. Imagine blockchain as a secure, unchangeable public record, and think of AI as your smart assistant that helps you find and make sense of information from that record. For instance, when you go shopping and scan a product with DeepQR, blockchain ensures that the information you get is accurate. Meanwhile, AI can recommend related products based on what you're looking for.

Việt Nam News

We're already used to interacting with AI such as ChatGPT in our daily routines, but blockchain can feel a bit more complex. In our view, AI provides results that are more about trends and probabilities, analysing data to give you the best guess. On the other hand, blockchain offers a way to verify data with complete certainty. The fusion of AI and blockchain is definitely going to be a game-changer, enhancing efficiency and trust, and making operations smoother in many aspects of our lives. For example, we're developing a smart green supermarket called the Smart Green Supermarket. In these supermarkets, all the products will have clear information about their origins, thanks to DeepQR codes powered by blockchain technology.

Plus, the AI system will quickly suggest products that fit your shopping needs. The best part is that there won't be any staff because everything will be fully automated, even the checkout process, which means you can expect lower prices. We're working on several digital technology projects using DeepSignature's blockchain technology. One of our standout initiatives is the Smart Green Supermarket designed to create a modern shopping experience for consumers. It allows shoppers to easily recognise products as they add them to their cart, trace the origin of items, generate orders, and make automatic payments – all through a simple QR code attached to each product. It's a seamless way to transform the shopping experience!

Another project we're developing is the Smart Resident Card. This combines DeepQR technology with scanning capabilities. It's not just a key for entering and exiting apartment complexes; it also enhances security and acts as a convenient tool for managing living expenses. Residents can schedule the use of amenities and pay for services remotely, all in one place.

These initiatives are real-world applications of the concepts of 'digital economy' and 'digital citizens' that we at DeepPro are passionate about. We aim to help people embrace a smart lifestyle in the digital age, one that is cost compared to foreign technologies. Currently, we're over 90 per cent complete and getting ready for a pilot launch soon.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

editor@thestatesman.com

A massive task

SIR, This is in response to the article, "The Mahakumbh at Prayagraj" by Sushma Sakkena published in *The Statesman* yesterday (23 February). No words are sufficient to thank her for depicting the real atmosphere of Kumbh. We the crores of people who could not make it to the Kumbh Mela have to feel the devotion and touch one experiences when one takes a dip in the holy water.

It is indeed not a joke that more than sixty crore people have already taken a dip which amounts to around half the population of India approximately. I am really moved by the mammoth arrangements made by UP Government administration to conduct such a huge congregation smoothly and efficiently. As the author has pointed out, the crowd was massive but the atmosphere was serene, full of devotion and religious fervour.

Though there were traffic snarls and vehicles needed to stop for hours for clearance, all waited peacefully, without any jostling or argument. People from all sections of society assembled, walked for miles peacefully, sometimes taking rest and awaiting home-made food. There was absolutely no grudge, no blame, total patience and submission before the Almighty.

Barring a few unfortunate incidents like the stampede at New Delhi railway station, fire at Maha Shivaratri, the huge event is almost over and will be completed on Maha Shivaratri. I would like to strongly condemn those politicians who are issuing statements from outside criticising the UP government regarding

arrangements. These people are trying to fish in troubled waters and they need to be isolated. Any insult to Kumbh Mela will now be equal to insulting crores of Hindus which I think no politician would dare to do. India should introspect on what stalwarts like Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Amritabh Bachchan have done for the development of this holy place where they were born and brought up?

Yours, etc., Dr. Purushotham Chattopadhyay, Kolkata, 24 February.

attending the Mahakumbh like Sushma Sakkena. However, this holy dip has been overshadowed by the commercialization of the event. Some leaders are calculating its impact on the GDP of Uttar Pradesh and announcing the government about so many devotees attending is reminiscent of producers quoting numbers to prove that their movie was a hit.

The success of the Kumbh must be counted by the change in the lives of the people who took the holy dip. And whether they have become better human beings. Would there be more peace in the families and less of anger against those who think differently? Yours, etc., Anthony Henriques, Mumbai, 23 February.

CHANGING LIVES?

SIR, Apropos the article "Mahakumbh at Prayagraj" there can be no question about the devotion and piety of crores of Hindus

epaper.thestatesman.com