



Give and take

The India-UK trade deal may set the template for the EU and U.S. deals

The India-United Kingdom Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA), signed by the two countries on Thursday, is a good example of the give and take between two large economies of comparable size. While the U.K. has agreed to provide India duty-free access to about 99% of its tariff lines, it has been more conservative when it comes to the movement of professionals. It has set an annual quota of just 1,800 visas for niche professional roles such as yoga instructors and classical musicians, and the agreement falls short of making commitments on broader visa categories such as business visitors or IT professionals. This was something India had been keen on. On the other hand, while India has opened about 90% of its tariff lines for duty-free import from the U.K., it has kept key agricultural products such as dairy products, apples, oats, and edible oils out of the deal — key demands of the U.K. Similarly, while India has committed to reducing duties on automobile imports by a substantial 100 percentage points over time, these are subject to a graded quota over the next decade, which gives the domestic industry time to adjust. A sign of a good deal is when both sides walk away happy but not satisfied. In any case, such bilateral deals should not be viewed as a zero-sum game where one side's loss is another's gain. Enhancing bilateral trade is in both countries' interests, especially at a time when the world's biggest trading powers are raising tariff and non-tariff barriers.

The U.K. is a relatively small trading partner for India, but therein lies ample scope for growth. While at a macro scale the gains might initially be limited, the sector-wise increases have the potential to be significant. Sectors such as agriculture, textiles, leather and chemicals are all set to see quick gains. There is potential for longer term benefits too. The U.K. is a major gateway to Europe, which is a much bigger trading partner of India's. Goods destined for Europe could be routed through the U.K., and the duty-free arrangement will likely enhance this flow. Companies in other countries that already export to the U.K. will also start viewing India more favourably as an investment destination so as to take advantage of the duty-free access. It is now up to the government to help Indian exporters scale up and compete internationally. Another important consideration is that such a deal sets the template for future ones. The general trend is that the bigger the economy being negotiated with, the bigger the concessions given. The United States and the European Union will now want more from India than what has been conceded to the U.K.

Healing Manipur

Fragile peace demands political actors pursue genuine reconciliation

The imposition of President's Rule, once a frequent and politically motivated tool of the Centre, has declined considerably since the 1990s. This welcome shift is a consequence of S.R. Bommai, the landmark judgment, the rising influence of regional parties in national politics, and public revulsion to its misuse. In recent years, its application has become rare, reserved for genuine constitutional breakdown or severe internal security challenges, such as in Manipur. On Friday, President's Rule was extended there by another six months, from August 13. But few would contest the extension, as the Centre is struggling to find a durable solution to the ethnic conflict. Following the resignation of N. Biren Singh and the fall of the BJP government, there has been a discernible but fragile calm. A crackdown on militant groups that had operated with impunity has reduced open violence, and some families displaced since May 2023 have begun to return home. However, these positive developments are overshadowed by the unbridled and deep-seated ethnic schism between the Kuki-Zo and Meitei communities. The landscape of Manipur is still carved up by buffer zones, rigidly segregating communities. The political chasm is just as stark: Kuki-Zo groups are resolute in their demand for a separate administration, while hardline Meitei organisations persist with a narrative that brands fellow citizens as "outsiders".

Administrative steps, particularly those that reiterate de-weaponisation and a defanging of militant groups acting for ethnic interests, must continue. They not only break the aura of impunity with which these groups function but will also encourage moderates to raise their voices for reconciliation. During Mr. Singh's tenure, prominent civil society activists seeking to halt the conflict by critiquing the biased nature of governance were hounded. But the administrative measures to improve the rule of law must be supplemented by political gestures. The BJP enjoyed support in the valley and the hills when it was elected, but has been unable to bridge the ethnic hostility. This is largely because the party's national leadership has shown little inclination to treat the issue urgently, leaving it to civil servants and security forces to tackle the problem. While the continuation of President's Rule might seem inevitable in Manipur, its success should not be measured by the absence of violence alone. The Centre's responsibility is to foster political conditions to bridge the ethnic divide, but that responsibility must be shared. Political parties and civil society groups must defy the hardliners and begin the painstaking work of reconciliation. The future of a peaceful Manipur will be written by the initiative of committed political actors willing to transcend ethnic divisions and work toward the genuine healing of their fractured society.

Kargil, Pahalgam and a revamp of the security strategy

It is the 26th anniversary of the Kargil war that was fought between India and Pakistan in the icy heights of Kashmir, but the memories are still fresh. It was also the first 'live televised' conflict, which brought the war (July 3-July 26, 1999) into the living rooms of India. Victory was hard fought and won through the sheer grit, the determination and the love for 'Bharat' that the Indian armed forces showed. India not only evicted the Pakistani forces but also forced Pakistan to withdraw and seek a ceasefire.

All this sounds familiar and similar to what happened recently. On April 22, 2025, Pakistan-based terrorists launched a terror attack on innocent civilians at a popular tourist spot in Pahalgam, Kashmir, killing 26 tourists (singling out only the men). What followed next was the most devastating punishment that India has ever delivered on Pakistan's terror network in the form of Operation Sindoor (May 7-10, 2025). In four days of pin-pointed and extremely effective strikes, the Indian military struck nine terror bases across Pakistan and took out 11 military air-bases in Pakistan, bringing Pakistan to its knees in a matter of 96 hours. And if reports and analysis are to be believed, India's BrahMos missile strike on the Nur Khan Base in Pakistan, at the foothills of the Kirana Hills, crippled a key nuclear weapon storage facility too. Pakistan made a request for an immediate ceasefire.

If Kargil was a watershed moment for India in its conventional fighting capability, Pahalgam has set the bar against any future terror attack in India. Over two decades, India has steadily re-strategised its security policies, sending out a clear message to Pakistan and the world that India will not tolerate any future misadventure.

The lessons from Kargil

The context of the Kargil war was set in a period when India was tentative and vulnerable. It may be recalled that India had declared itself to be a nuclear weapon state in May 1998. India's nuclear tests prompted Pakistan too to test its nuclear devices within weeks. All of a sudden, South Asia was home to two nuclear-powered adversaries. India was threatened with economic sanctions by the western countries for having gone nuclear. In addition, India was not in a very strong position due to its weak economy and a coalition government at the Centre.

The fight against terrorism in Kashmir since 1990 and continuing insurgencies in the North-East led to the strengthening and the modernisation of India's military being put on the back burner. Kargil also happened in the backdrop of India's attempts at a reconciliation with Pakistan — Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee had travelled to Lahore in February 1999 in what became a famous bus-ride across the border. This was also the time before the 9/11



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If Kargil was a watershed moment in India's conventional fighting capability, Pahalgam has set the bar against any terror attack in the future

terror attack on the Twin Towers in New York (September 11, 2001) and there was hardly any support for India's fight against Pakistan-based terror in Kashmir.

Kargil was, therefore, a rude wake-up call for India. It was the first war between India and Pakistan after 1971 and fought under the nuclear overhang. It demonstrated that limited war was still possible even between nuclear-armed states, provided the escalation was controlled. A Kargil Review Committee was set up which made many key recommendations, laying the foundation for many structural changes that have taken place over the years. One of the most significant shortcomings highlighted was the intelligence lapse. Neither military nor civilian intelligence agencies had worked on the possibility of any large-scale military infiltration by Pakistani forces in Kargil. The absence of real-time intelligence and effective aerial surveillance led to a delayed decision making and early losses. The war also exposed serious shortcomings in terms of equipment, logistics and the operational readiness of India's armed forces. India's troops lacked the wherewithal to fight war in high altitude areas as they did not have specialised high-altitude gear, adequate artillery support, and real-time communications.

The structural changes

A number of new agencies were set up such as the Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA) in 2002 and the National Technical Research Organisation (NTRO) in 2004. Measures to strengthen coordination between the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), the Intelligence Bureau (IB), and military intelligence wings were undertaken, leading to a revamp of the National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS) and the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC). The appointment of a National Security Adviser (NSA) too was made a permanent fixture in the strategic decision-making hierarchy, headed by the Prime Minister. There were many other institutional and structural changes that were made in order to enhance the intelligence set up in India.

On the conventional front, the Kargil war was a timely lesson to modernise the military, in equipment and strategy. There was a clear realisation that India had few allies who would assist it in a time of war; therefore, modernisation and self-reliance had to be priorities. It led to the evolution of India's "Cold Start Doctrine", aimed at rapid mobilisation and swift, limited incursions without breaching the nuclear threshold. There was great emphasis on mountain warfare preparedness which included the raising of a Mountain Corps in the Indian Army. The war also highlighted the urgent need for joint coordination between the three wings of the armed forces, a unified command and operational coordination. Some of these have led changes such as the

appointment of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) in 2019 and the process of setting up integrated theatre commands.

A key lesson from Kargil was the modernisation of equipment and weapon platforms, with an emphasis on home-grown technologies and self-reliance in production. The acquisition and the deployment of modern weapon platforms such as Rafale fighters, Apache attack helicopters, Chinook heavy-lift helicopters, and S-400 missile defence systems, home-grown artillery and BrahMos missiles are some of the results.

The long fight against terror

Unlike Kargil, which brought in massive changes in conventional military, India was slow in fighting terror proactively. For decades, Pakistan kept hurting India without any heavy costs to itself. Among the major terror incidents, the most important was the hijacking of an Indian Airlines flight, IC-814 on December 24, 1999, just after Kargil. In one of India's weak moments, New Delhi agreed to release derailed terrorists.

The terror attack on Parliament, on December 13, 2001, led to a year-long mobilisation of Indian armed forces under 'Operation Parakram', but it did not result in any direct punishment to Pakistan. The 26/11 Mumbai terror attack (November 2008) — widely considered to be India's 9/11 moment — also did not lead to any punishment for Pakistan.

It was only after the Uri terror attack (September 18, 2016) that the strategy of a fight against terror began to take shape. The surgical strikes were not only a strong reply but also a statement of intent. Taking the intent further, following the terror attack on a Central Reserve Police Force convoy in Pulwama, Kashmir, on February 14, 2019, the Indian Air Force (IAF) launched strikes on a terror camp of the JeM in Balakot (February 26, 2019). This was the first time that the IAF had crossed into Pakistan airspace to launch a strike.

The recent Pahalgam attack has set a new threshold. By striking key terror locations and military assets deep into Pakistan, India has made it clear that the era of restraint and patience is over. Pakistan will have to pay a heavy price for any terror attack hereafter.

From Kargil to Pahalgam, India has had to learn many hard lessons. The good news is that India is no longer in any mood to relent. In May 2025, India's conventional military capability has displayed what it is capable of. 'Make in India' is bearing fruit, with many outstanding weapon platforms being made in India now. Fighting terror too has got a new meaning after Pahalgam. However, the Indian political and military leadership has to remain vigilant and stay ahead of the curve. There cannot be another Kargil or Pahalgam, ever.

The scientist who made 'mangroves' a buzzword



Selvam Yathilingam
is a former Executive Director of the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, and has four decades of experience in mangrove research and management

Mangrove forests, once considered to be marshy land, now occupy a central position in the coastal ecosystem and climate mitigation moves

day, this charter serves as a basis for mangrove conservation efforts at the global level.

The ISME conducted an assessment of the economic and environmental values of mangrove forests, including those in India, as well as the current state of their conservation. The ISME also organised a series of workshops on mangrove conservation and sustainable utilisation, published a manual of mangrove ecosystem restoration, and produced a World Mangrove Atlas. These activities, slowly but surely, transformed the common perception of what mangroves are: from an idea of them being marshy land waiting for conversion to other uses to their being central to a multiple-use coastal ecosystem. The ISME is promoting applied research, providing training to various stakeholders, and acting as a centre of knowledge products on mangroves.

Global infrastructure for conservation

Another vital contribution of M.S. Swaminathan was the development of the GLOBAL Mangrove database and Information System (GLOMIS), a searchable database on mangrove species, research, and species, including the Mangrove Ecosystem Information Services, which focused on documenting genetic resources. In 1992, a team of scientists surveyed and evaluated 23 mangrove sites in South, Southeast Asia, and Oceania over nine countries, with scientific inputs from M.S. Swaminathan, to establish a global network of Mangrove Genetic Resource Centres. These centres are now conserved, monitored and managed as 'Protected Areas' by the respective governments.

At the national level, M.S. Swaminathan was instrumental in revolutionising India's management of mangroves. India has a long history of mangrove management, dating back to 1783. However, this period was marked by extensive clearance and reclamation of the Sundarbans mangrove forests, primarily for agriculture and settlements. The practice of clear-felling as a system of mangrove management was widespread in India from the British colonial period until 1980, when the Indian Forest (Conservation) Act was enacted.

The working plans prepared by the British, and later by the State Forest Departments of independent India, showed that attempts to restore mangroves in clear-felled areas yielded minimal results. On the other hand, local communities were blamed for the poor results. Here, researchers from the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, under the guidance of M.S. Swaminathan, played a key role.

Participatory research during 1993 and in the following years, first with the Tamil Nadu Forest Department and then with other States and local communities, revealed that changes in the biophysical conditions of the mangroves, due to the clear-felling system of management, were the primary reason for their degradation rather than resource utilisation by local communities. Based on this scientific evidence, a hydro-ecological method of mangrove restoration — commonly referred to as the fishbone canal method — was developed and pilot-tested in the mangroves of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, and West Bengal.

This method later evolved into a Joint Mangrove Management programme, which the then Ministry of Environment and Forests, evaluated in 2000 through a committee and recommended for replication in all suitable areas. This resulted in more investment by the Centre and State governments for mangrove restoration and conservation. The immense role played by mangroves during the 1999 Odisha super cyclone and the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, in reducing the loss of life and damage to property and natural resources, paved the way for valuing large-scale restoration of mangroves, in India and globally.

Rise in mangrove cover

World Mangrove Day (July 26) is also an occasion to look at whether there has been change. The India State of Forest Report (ISFR) 2023 says that the total mangrove cover in India is 4,991.68 km², which accounts for 0.15% of the country's total geographical area. If one compares the ISFR 2019 to the ISFR 2023, there has been a significant increase, of 16.68 km², in the country's mangrove coverage.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

India-U.K. trade deal

At a time when the global economic architecture is in the throes of stress in the wake of arbitrary, impulsive and imperious salvos of fiat flights by the Trump administration, the

comprehensive trade agreement between India and the United Kingdom is fresh air (Front page, "India, U.K. ink trade deal, extend framework of ties", July 25). This pact should be used as a template for similar pacts

with other countries such as the United States as well as the European Union.

Ravi Mathur,
Noida, Uttar Pradesh

Thailand vs Cambodia
It is shocking that there is a

flare-up in Southeast Asia, between Thailand and Cambodia. In a world that is weary of conflicts, the earlier this faceoff is resolved the better it is.

R. Sampath,
Chennai

Dealing with China
India should exercise extreme caution in dealing with China. Seemingly peaceful gestures should not lead to a Trojan horse moment for India. China's plan for a dam in Tibet will

give it significant leverage in dealing with India. New Delhi must be very alert.

Britto S.,
Sivagangai, Tamil Nadu
Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the postal address.

GROUND ZERO



Women discuss their debts in Dekuli Chatti village in Darbhanga district of Bihar. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

In Bihar, a matter of life and debt

In Bihar, increased borrowing from multiple sources, both institutional and informal lenders, has led to excessive debt burdens. Borrowers struggle to repay loans with high interest rates while dreading recovery agents, who intimidate and harass them. **Sobhana K. Nair and T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan** report on the lack of political thrust on bringing in any regulatory mechanism in the State that is set to go to the polls later this year

Chandra Devi, 53, holds up a loan slip, its creases more prominent than its text. It states that she borrowed a loan of ₹35,000, allegedly from RBL Bank, a private sector institution, in May 2024. "I have to repay the loan and an interest rate of *do taka* (2%)," Chandra declares. But the slip states that the interest rate is a hefty 25% over two years.

Chandra is sitting in a mango orchard with a group of women at Dekuli Chatti village in Darbhanga district of Bihar. Around her, children climb trees under an overcast sky. Some of them clamber to the top, others hang upside down from branches. Their mothers sit on a yellow plastic sheet spread over the grass. While watching their children's antics, they share their struggles on repaying dues. According to the 2022 caste survey of Bihar, 34% of households in the State earn ₹6,000 or less per month.

In June 2025, Piramal Enterprises, an Indian non-banking financial company (NBFC) focused on financial services, published a study. In it, they stated that the share of Indian households from economically weaker sections of society – that is, those earning ₹1-2 lakh a year – who borrowed from formal channels, such as banks and NBFCs, contracted by 4.2% between 2018-19 and 2022-23. At the same time, the share of households borrowing from informal or non-institutional sources of credit, such as money lenders, friends, families, and shopkeepers, grew by 5.8%. The data also shows that Bihar accounts for the highest share (8%) of households in India who borrow from non-institutional lenders. The study was based on data from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, an independent private entity that serves as an economic think tank as well as a socioeconomic database.

However, many households that borrow from non-institutional lenders also borrow from microfinance institutions, which are regulated by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), the country's central bank.

The RBI defines a microfinance loan as "a collateral-free loan given to a household having an annual income up to ₹3,00,000". According to Sa-Dhan, an RBI-approved self-regulatory body for the microfinance sector, there are 224 such institutions in India.

While loans from microfinance institutions help impoverished borrowers across India, borrowers are often unable to repay them and fall behind. They also sometimes run away, fearing that microfinance companies will demand repayment using strong-arm tactics. As a result, many households remain trapped in a cycle of debt.

When loans become nightmares

Chandra belongs to the Musahar community. Musahars are among the 18 Scheduled Castes in Bihar who were recognised as Mahadalits by Chief Minister Nitish Kumar in 2007. They are socially and economically the most backward among Scheduled Castes.

Chandra says she doesn't know the name of the bank from which she borrowed a loan; instead, she identifies it by its location – Donar, a locality in Darbhanga. "I was asked to give my Aadhaar card, nothing else," she says, about the process of securing the loan.



Since 2022, I have been given 1,100 households to track. At least 450 families who defaulted on their loans have disappeared

MAHESH
Recovery agent

The slip she holds says the loan was taken for 'agriculture-livestock/dairy/poultry/cattle' purposes, but Chandra, the mother of two daughters and a son, says she borrowed it for her older daughter's wedding.

Before the wedding, the groom's family demanded a motorcycle as part of dowry. Chandra borrowed money from the village *mahajan* (money lender). When that didn't suffice, she went to a women's self help group (SHG). Finally, she secured a loan, allegedly from RBL Bank.

As Chandra's husband has been out of work for several months due to an illness, her family depends entirely on the amount her son sends home. "He sells apples in Kolkata, so he cannot always send money," she says. "After all, everything is so expensive these days."

Chandra also worries that she has a teenage daughter who will "soon be of marriageable age."

Punam Devi, 42, who is also from the Musahar community, keeps two documents close to her chest. One shows that she took a loan of ₹40,000, allegedly from Pyramid Finserve, an emerging NBFC, in July 2024. Punam borrowed the loan for her younger son, who had been diagnosed with meningitis. The other document shows that she borrowed another loan of ₹75,000, allegedly from Utkarsh Small Finance Bank Limited, a commercial bank focused on "providing banking and financial services, particularly to underserved and unserved sections of the population, primarily in rural and semi-urban areas." This loan, borrowed to pay for treatment of her husband who lost a leg in an accident, was cleared on March 23 this year with an interest rate of 28%, as per the document.

Punam says she had to pay installments every fortnight. After her husband's accident, the family's income is now nearly negligible, making it all the more challenging for them to repay the loan.

Both men were treated at private hospitals. "We don't get admission in government hospitals," she says. The other women nod along.

Parvati Devi, 38, says her husband works in Bengaluru, Karnataka, as a daily wage labourer. He left 15 days ago and will return only next year.

"We had to borrow money for our eldest daughter's wedding," says Parvati, who also belongs to the Musahar community. "We borrowed nearly ₹1.5 lakh from the local money lender four



The recovery agent took away everything I had – a table, a chair, my bed, the cooker, the gas cylinder, and even my supply of wheat for the year. He stripped my house empty

SOMINI DEVI
Borrower

years ago. Unable to repay the loan, I took three loans from three microfinance institutions." Her total liability amounted to ₹1.35 lakh and she had to pay monthly installments of about ₹7,000.

'Agents never fail to turn up'

Chandra, Punam, and Parvati sought loans for weddings or for treatments in hospitals and struggled to repay the amounts. Many of these women accessed microfinance institutions through group lending. In this process, borrowers form small groups and the members of the group are jointly liable for each other's loans.

Banks appoint agents to recover overdue loan payments or outstanding debts. The women say recovery agents never fail to turn up, and the amount of money their families have is usually never enough to meet the final sum.

This week, a recovery agent stood at Parvati's door, threatening and abusing her the entire day. "I was not scared," Parvati says. "I shouted at him as well. He said he would file a case against me. I told him, so be it." The recovery agent left only after she managed to put together the amount, which fell short of ₹1,000, she says.

Mina Devi is due to pay her monthly instalment of ₹2,450, but she is ₹50 short. "He (the recovery agent) won't take the amount until I give him the full amount," she complains. Mina worries about his response. "Last time he told me, 'Why don't you go to the road and beg? And in the process if you die, the loan will be waived off.'" According to the RBI, when a borrower dies and there is no collateral, the lender can recover the amount from the legal heirs, and only up to the limit of what the heirs inherit.

Mina's husband spends at least six months working in the fields in Punjab, so she has to deal with the agents on her own. "When a male member of the family is not around, the agent hangs around for hours," she says.

Rekha Devi has three loans to repay, with the total liability amounting to about ₹1 lakh. She says, "He (agent) asked me why I don't sell my body if I have no money to pay the instalment."

The women say the agents often threaten to take away possessions they have painstakingly collected over the years – beds, pressure cookers, gas cylinders, even the odd plastic chair.

In Somini Devi's case, this became a reality. Somini's husband is no more. She has six children – three daughters and three sons – and all of them are married. She says she has been left alone to repay the loans she borrowed for their weddings and for other expenses.

"The recovery agent took away everything I had – a table, a chair, my bed, the cooker, the gas cylinder, and even my supply of wheat for the year. He stripped my house empty." When asked if she reported the incident to the police, she stares blankly. "How can we?" she murmurs.

The women say at least 20-25 families in their village alone have fled fearing recovery agents. As they start counting and naming the families, many of them turn towards Pawan Devi.

Pawan took loans from five microfinance institutions for her son's wedding, but she has been unable to repay the amount. Pawan and her family fled the village, spent more than a year in Punjab, and returned only last week.

Pawan cannot recall the name of the village where she and her family stayed. "Barring the biting cold, it was better there," she says. "The landlord didn't charge us for electricity or water. There were clean toilets. And we had a regular income working in the fields." Pawan says what she cherished the most about her stay in Punjab was the absence of recovery agents.

But the agents she dreads are now back at her

doorstep. "They come every other day. Sometimes they stand outside for hours. Sometimes they enter the house and start rifling through our papers. The other day, they took away my son's Aadhaar card," she says.

Around 30 kilometres away at Navtol village in Bhawanipur panchayat of Darbhanga district, Mahesh Kumar Roy, who says he is a recovery agent with Muthoot FinCorp, is on his daily rounds of the village. Mahesh, who hails from Darbhanga, goes from house to house on his motorcycle. He pulls out the sheaves of papers rolled up between his motorcycle handles and runs his finger along the names.

"Since 2022, when I joined the company, I have been given 1,100 households to track. At least 450 families who defaulted on their loans have disappeared. I make regular rounds, but all I see is locked homes," he says. Mahesh adds that people "disappear only after they have paid 15-16 instalments" and "after we have managed to recover at least 60% of the principal amount."

Mahesh prides himself as a "decent" agent. Aware of the reputation that recovery agents have, he looks at the crowd gathered around him and asks them whether he is intimidating or threatening. They all say 'no'.

Rules on paper

The RBI issued exhaustive guidelines in 2022 collating the piecemeal directives it had issued earlier. It said that the lenders must "provide the flexibility of repayment periodicity on microfinance loans as per borrowers' requirement". That is, the repayment period of the loan must be moulded to the requirements of the borrowers, rather than the needs of the lender. To ensure that microfinance loans do not unduly burden the borrowers, the RBI directions also include a provision that says each regulated lender must ensure that the monthly repayment burden of a household should not exceed 50% of the monthly income of that household.

RBI also has a separate set of guidelines for recovery agents. It defined what would be deemed as harsh methods, such as use of threatening or abusive language, persistently calling the borrower and/or calling the borrower before 9:00 a.m. and after 6:00 p.m., harassing relatives, friends, or co-workers of the borrower, publishing the name of borrowers, the use or threat of use of violence or other similar means to harm the borrower or borrower's family/assets/reputation, or misleading the borrower about the extent of the debt or the consequences of non-repayment.

However, the regulations on the interest to be charged on these loans simply say that the interest rates and other charges and fees on microfinance loans "should not be usurious", and that the RBI would scrutinise this aspect of the loans.

Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Assam have specific regulations for microfinance. Several other States such as Kerala, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh have laws regulating money lenders, which also include microfinance institutions. Assembly elections are scheduled in Bihar in October, but there is no political thrust in the State on bringing in any regulatory mechanism in this regard.

Jayati Ghosh, Professor of Economics at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, U.S., says it is not surprising that the RBI guidelines for microfinance institutions are not being implemented in State policy. She also says there are fundamental flaws in the microfinancing model. "While it makes credit accessible for the poor, there is high interest and lack of monitoring of how repayment is ensured, which allows for threats, intimidation, and pressure to take on multiple loans," she says. "In many places, linkages with banks through the SBL (SHG-Bank Linkage Scheme) have been provided, but these also provide limited funds. Only in States where these SHGs are effectively co-operatives that create income-generating opportunities (such as Kerala's Kudumbashree) has this been more successful."

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A loan recovery agent at Bhawanipur village in Darbhanga district. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

WEST BENGAL



Ajay Kumar, the supervisor at Vikas Bhatta, in Jhajjar, Haryana, pointing to the area in the brick kiln where the police allegedly entered. SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

Citizenship under suspicion

Following the recent detention of residents of West Bengal by the Delhi police on suspicion of being illegal Bangladeshi immigrants, **Alisha Dutta** finds out how an exchange of land parcels between the two neighbouring nations in 2015 is affecting those who opted for Indian citizenship

Bharat Karmakar is jolted when oil droplets from an overheated *kadhai* hit his arms on a sultry June afternoon. Having absent-mindedly dropped a chunky fish head into the wok, Karmakar, instead of stirring, had carelessly held on to the *khunti* (spoon for deep-frying, in Bengali), while staring at the speeding vans of the Delhi police.

For the 50-year-old, who has been single-handedly managing a Bengali eatery on the Delhi-Haryana border, seeing the police vans was not new. However, in the past few months, the connotations have changed. "The Delhi police would often enter this part of the highway to patrol or follow illicit liquor traders, but now they are looking for Bengali-speaking labourers who work in brick kilns," he says.

The road in front of Karmakar's shop leads to Haryana and ends on the Rajasthan border, with both sides of the road dotted with brick kilns. He says in the 37 years he has been running the eatery, this is the first time that there is vigilance on Bengali-speaking people. Police in plain clothes have come by in the past few months asking about the number of Bengali-speaking people coming to the shop and if he ever suspected that they were Bangladeshis from their accents.

"In this part of the world, only people from West Bengal and Bihar come in search of *mach-bhaat* (fish-rice). Following their trail, the police come to ask questions," he says, while stirring the *kadhai* full of *macher matha diye chorchori*.

The police arrive

On the same day, about 15 km from his shop, six Bengali-speaking persons from West Bengal's Cooch Behar district were detained by the Delhi police on suspicion of being illegal Bangladeshi immigrants. While one of them was released two days later, the remaining five were released six days later following the intervention of the West Bengal government.

The persons who were detained say they hail from Dinahata in Cooch Behar and were employed as daily wage workers for 10 years in the National Capital Region (NCR). They claim that they used to reside in one of the 111 Indian enclaves located deep inside Bangladesh that were exchanged with 51 Bangladeshi enclaves in India as per the Land Boundary Agreement signed between the two countries in 2015. Following the agreement, they decided to move to Dinahata.

They say people living in the enclaves in India were given the choice of moving to Bangladesh or staying put and becoming Indian citizens. The Delhi police had seen Bangladesh-related documents on the mobile phones of women and men from this part of India.

Around 4 p.m. on June 25, two vans of the Delhi police zoomed into Vikas Bhatta, a brick kiln in Jhajjar, Haryana, recalls Trilok Kumar, 50, the manager of the kiln. At least six police officers,

some in uniform and others in plain clothes, stepped out and walked straight to the staff quarters, he says. "They did not stop to answer our questions about why they were here," he adds.

Inside the cluster of bare-brick rooms, with a common kitchen and two bathrooms, the police officers looked around and asked for labourers who spoke Bengali, he recalls.

In the next few minutes, Shamshul Haque, Rizaul Haque, Rabiul Haque, Rashida Begum, Roman Haque, and Johurul Miyan were allegedly asked to produce their government IDs to prove that they were Indian citizens.

"We informed them that the verification of each of the workers had been done by the Bahadurgarh police (in Haryana). Yet, the officers of the Delhi police said the workers were lying and took them away in their vans," says Trilok.

They were taken to the Shalimar Bagh police station in Delhi and detained on suspicion of being illegal Bangladeshi immigrants, he adds.

As Trilok and his supervisor, Ajay Kumar, paced up and down near the main gate of the *bhatti* (kiln), they received a call from the police station. "The SHO (station house officer) told me that the workers had all confessed that they were from Bangladesh and that they were to be deported the next day by flight. He said I must arrange to send their families to the *chowki* (police station) by 10 that night," says Ajay.

Connecting families

Ajay dialled the sole number he had of one of the families of the detained persons in West Bengal.

He got in touch with Sharmeen Khatun, Shamshul's 19-year-old daughter, and told her that her father and uncle, along with their neighbours, had been picked up by the police. He reassured her that they had not committed any crime.

Sharmeen was not surprised by the development, but was scared about what would happen to her relatives. "I reached out to the West Bengal Migrant Welfare Board and asked for help," says Sharmeen, adding that barring the information Ajay had given her, she had no other details for close to 48 hours since the detention. The West Bengal government had set up the board in 2023 to take care of the needs of migrant workers.

Ajay and Trilok booked a car and took the wife and minor son of one of the detainees to the police station. "We packed all their documents — Aadhaar cards, voter ID cards, land documents, and travel passes (issued by the Indian government to those who had changed their nationality in 2015) — to show the police that they were innocent," says Trilok.

However, when they reached the police station at 8 p.m., the police allegedly took the documents and detained the woman and her child.

On June 27, Ajay recalls 52-year-old Johurul getting out of an autorickshaw in front of the iron gates of Vikas Bhatta. "He had bruises on his legs and hands, and they were swollen," he says.

Johurul broke down and claimed that the police had thrashed him, says Ajay.

Johurul says the police used a belt-like *patta* made of coarse material to beat him up. "They took me aside in the same cell where all of us were kept. They began incessantly hitting the soles of my feet and then my arms, coercing me to say that I was a Bangladeshi, but I stuck to the truth," he says.

He adds that the detainees were first kept in a lock-up at the police station and a day later taken to a detention centre near Azadpur Mandi, a wholesale fruit and vegetable market in Delhi. "At the detention camp, the men were kept separately from the women and children," he says.

Action and reaction

Trinamool Congress MP Samirul Islam, who heads the West Bengal Migrant Welfare Board, alleges that the migrants were harassed simply because they were "Bengali-speaking Muslims". He claims that BJP-ruled States are branding Bengali Muslims by branding them as Bangladeshis.

On July 4, Deputy Commissioner of Police (North West) Bhisham Singh said he was told by his subordinates that the six persons were picked up from a railway station in Delhi. The kiln in Ha-

ryana is outside the Delhi police's jurisdiction. "They were detained just for a day for verification when they were trying to flee," he said. "People who work in the brick kiln have been leaving the city ever since the monsoon hit the northern States," he added.

This is standard practice as the kiln is shut through the rains. Singh said he was told that the six workers were from Bagerhat in Bangladesh.

On July 9, he admitted they were "illegally detained" and that people should not be kept in detention for more than 24 hours. "However, we never beat up anyone, even if it is proved that they are Bangladeshi nationals."

He said the six had produced their Aadhaar cards, but the document is no longer considered a proof of Indian citizenship. "People must have a voter ID card to prove that they are from India."

In the first term of the Prime Minister Narendra Modi-led National Democratic Alliance government at the Centre (2014-2019), there was a push for Aadhaar cards. Many government facilities were inaccessible unless an Indian national possessed the document.

Singh said while all six detainees were released after their documents were verified, they "confessed" that they were originally from Bangladesh. He also said the police found call detail records and monetary transactions linked to mobile numbers in the neighbouring country.

Bengalis in Delhi

Rizaul confirms this. "They found Bangladeshi documents on our devices because five of us were Bangladeshi citizens till 2015. After the Land Boundary Agreement, it was left to us to choose which country's citizenship we wanted," he says.

The 42-year-old adds that while they tried telling the police the full story, the investigators did not want to listen.

He adds that the transactions were money transfers to his ageing parents, who live in the Phulbari subdivision of Bangladesh. Rizaul is one of the 922 people who registered their names for Indian citizenship in 2015.

"My brothers and I chose to become Indian citizens, while Ammi (mother) and Abbu (father) wished to take their last breath in our ancestral home in Bangladesh," says Rizaul.

The family found a place in Dinahata, while several people settled in two other camps in the district: Haidibari and Mekhliganj.

In August 2024, sources say the Ministry of Home Affairs had ordered a nationwide crackdown on Bangladeshi nationals staying illegally in India. Bengali and Bangladeshi language, food, and dress habits are similar.

A senior official of the West Bengal government says on condition of anonymity that those who hail from the enclaves have been struggling more than other Bengalis. "The sight of an old Bangladeshi document has become proof enough for officials to harass and later deport people who possess them," he says.

On July 2, Shamshul and the five others boarded a train back to their home town.

"In 2016, when I got this job offer, I gathered some of my neighbours and brothers from my village and set out for work in Delhi and Haryana. However, we have to leave now as we are being targeted for speaking Bengali and wearing *lungis*," he says, unsure of their future.

Shamshul, who is a contractor, says they can make up to ₹300 a day in West Bengal, but there is no regular work. In the NCR, they can make up to ₹600 a day, with guaranteed work.

Rizaul agrees, saying they would not have put their safety at risk if there was work in their home State. "After the monsoon, despite the risks, I will consider going back. How else will I feed my wife and children?" he says.

The government official says almost all men in West Bengal's villages work outside the State.

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Belongings at the staff quarters at Vikas Bhatta, a brick kiln in Jhajjar, Haryana, from where six Bengali-speaking migrant workers were detained by the Delhi police on June 25. SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

TELANGANA



Spanning 158 km, the ORR has developed its own map of danger-specific kilometre markers where tragedy repeatedly strikes. Topping the list is the 144.5-km stone, now infamous for seven deaths and eight injuries, making it the single deadliest point on the expressway. NAGARA GOPAL

Engineered for speed, not safety? The cost of a fast corridor

Hyderabad's 158-kilometre Outer Ring Road has seen over 30 deaths in 2025 so far and 369 fatalities over the past five years — numbers that point to a deeper malaise than mere driver error. Road safety analysts warn that most accidents stem not from a single mistake but a chain of preventable errors such as speeding, poor lane discipline, misuse of road shoulders and inadequate driver training. **Lavpreet Kaur and Naveen Kumar** drive the full circuit in 90 minutes to uncover why this high-speed corridor keeps turning into a scene of tragedy

The passport had come in the morning. The trip was booked. The dream was days away.

On the night of May 9, Deepesh Agarwal (23) slipped out for a drive with his friends Sanchay Malpani, 22, and Priyanshu Mittal, 23, in his gleaming new Tata coupe, a birthday gift from his parents just five months earlier. They had only just begun paying the EMIs. By dawn, the car and the three young men were reduced to ashes in what is now being called one of the most gruesome crashes this year.

The trip to Turkey, planned for May 10-20, was to be Deepesh's last hurrah before settling down and focusing on his career. "Just let me go on this one trip, and after that, I will do whatever you want," he had promised his mother, Indu. But fate had other plans.

An inconsolable Indu recalls how Deepesh, the eldest son in the joint family, had always been ambitious and enterprising. "I never stop him but that night, I just felt something. I told him not to go. He said he was just meeting friends nearby," she says, sobbing.

Around 11 p.m., that Friday, the trio had set off on a late-night drive on the Outer Ring Road (ORR), from Shamshabad to Ghatkesar. Almost three hours later, their car rammed into a goods carrier parked negligently, without hazard lights near Gandhi Cheruvu bridge. The collision sparked a fire, likely to have started from the car, and engulfed both vehicles. Police later said the goods vehicle driver, Erukala Krishna, had stopped to help another trucker whose fruit crates had spilled on the road. But his failure to alert oncoming traffic proved fatal, said an officer from Abdulapurmet police.

Sanchay had already packed his bags. His flight to the U.S. was just weeks away. After years of hard work, the 22-year-old was finally headed abroad to pursue MBA — a dream he had chased with quiet determination. But that night, everything changed.

His uncle Ram, who was in Spain when the call came, still remembers the moment his world crumbled. "The ground beneath my feet shifted. Sanchay wasn't just the youngest earning member in the family, he was the brightest. He had already stepped in to manage our family's tyre business, something we have built over generations. He had so many plans. It's all gone now," he says.

Grief now lingers at the Malpani residence in Hyderabad, a sleek four-storey home once alive with chatter. Malpani's elder brother Pranav, sit-



Driver behaviour has not evolved with better roads and faster vehicles. People drive powerful cars with minimal training and licences are issued without teaching the basics.

NARESH RAGHAVAN, Road safety author and driver training coach

ting quietly near the entrance, shares, "He said he was stepping out to grab a bite with his friends. It was late, but that wasn't unusual. He and Deepesh were very close."

Deepesh and Sanchay are among the 31 people killed on the Outer Ring Road (ORR) in the first four months of 2025 alone. The high-speed expressway, designed to make commuting faster and safer, has instead become a death corridor.

Around mid-July, five men were killed in a similar late-night crash near the Bonguluru exit, their car slamming into a slow-moving lorry. When police arrived, the vehicle was a mangled cage. The truck driver had fled.

Year after year, the numbers outpace the warnings. Data from the Cyberabad Commissionerate shows 36 fatal accidents on the ORR in 2021, resulting in 44 deaths. The toll rose in 2023 with 42 fatal crashes and 51 deaths, and remained high in 2024 with 42 accidents and 49 deaths. The first four months of this year have already seen 16 deaths.

Rachakonda's numbers mirror the trend: 185 lives lost and over 540 injured on the ORR in five years. Despite brief dips in fatalities, the road has remained perilous with 2023 emerging as the deadliest yet with 51 deaths. In 2024, the death toll remained at 49, but injuries surged to 158, the highest in the five-year span. And 2025 is already off to a grim start with at least 15 fatalities and 38 non-fatal crashes.

Yet, enforcement gaps, poor signage and reckless driving continue to be overlooked, until the next crash forces the headlines.

A pattern of peril

A deeper look at five years of ORR crash data reveals chilling patterns. Some are consistent across commissionerates while others are more region-specific but one trend is undeniable: the early morning hours, especially between 3 a.m. and 6 a.m., are the deadliest stretch of the day. In Cyberabad, 46 accidents occurred during this window in 2021 alone. Though numbers dipped to 16 in 2022 and 15 in 2023, the risk persists, driven by fatigue, low visibility and reckless speeding on near-empty roads.

Rachakonda echoes the pattern. In 2024, five fatal crashes were recorded between 3 and 6 a.m. — the same number as during the 9 a.m. to noon slot, making them the deadliest periods.

Sundays and Thursdays also stand out as the most accident-prone days year after year. In 2021 and again in 2023, Thursdays topped the charts

with 40 and 22 accidents, respectively. Sundays consistently followed close behind, likely due to late-night returns or weekend outings ending in tragedy.

Heavy vehicles are at the heart of many of these crashes. In Cyberabad alone, trucks were involved in 519 accidents over five years, leading to 119 deaths and 436 injuries. Rachakonda's 2024 data show a similar story — trucks accounted for 26 of 53 recorded accidents. But it is car occupants who bore the brunt, and 39 of those crashes resulted in fatalities or injuries for those in smaller vehicles.

Two-wheelers, despite being officially banned on the ORR, remain a stubborn presence. Cyberabad logged 25 cases from 2021 to 2025, nine of them fatal. The numbers vary — three in 2021, seven each in 2022 and 2024, and already four deaths in the first four months of this year.

In Rachakonda, pedestrians, road workers and even lorry drivers have been among the lesser-reported victims. In one instance, a lone two-wheeler rider was fatally hit by a truck.

Most of the accidents happen in the dead of night, says Cyberabad traffic inspector G. Guruvai, when enforcement is lax and riders tend to stray onto the expressway, deliberately or not.

The data makes one thing clear: stricter surveillance, better signage and physical deterrents at entry points are urgently needed, especially during the off-peak hours when danger hides in the dark.

The problem isn't just the driver, it is flawed road design. Safety must be built into the road, not added later.

MAHAVI PAI, CEO of WRI India

Spanning 158 km, the ORR has developed its own map of danger — specific kilometre markers where tragedy repeatedly strikes. Topping the list is the 144.5-kilometre stone, now infamous for seven deaths and eight injuries, making it the single deadliest point on the expressway.

Not far behind is the 14-kilometre marker, with five deaths and eight injuries reported over five years.

The 61-kilometre point is another high-risk zone, with two fatalities and seven injuries, followed closely by the 142-142.5 kilometre and 40.5-41 kilometre stretches, both of which have seen recurring accidents.

The 61-kilometre segment of the ORR within Rachakonda jurisdiction is especially complex. It spans two traffic zones: Traffic-I (Yadgaripally to Musi Bridge) and Traffic-II (Musi Bridge to Harshaguda). Though seven toll gates — Keesara, Ghatkesar, Taramatipet, Peddamberpet, Bongloor, Ravirala and Thukkuguda — dot this stretch, they have done little to rein in the death toll.

Officials admit that current interventions are insufficient. Poor lane discipline, inadequate monitoring of heavy vehicles and unchecked speeding continue to make these zones lethal.

ORR's emergency network

To improve emergency response, 16 Trauma Care Centres (TCCs) and 10 Advanced Life Support (ALS) ambulances have been set up along key interchanges on the ORR. Launched in 2020 by Hyderabad Growth Corridor Limited and now managed by TOT concessionaires, the system is run by two major healthcare providers — Apollo Hospitals and Yashoda Healthcare.

Apollo Hospitals manages five TCCs with ambulances at Pedda Amberpet, Bonguluru, Tukuguda, Shamshabad and TSPA, and oversees additional centres at Taramatipet, Ravirala, and

Pedda Golkonda without dedicated ambulances. Yashoda handles a similar mix: five ambulance-equipped TCCs at Kokapet, Patancheru, Dundigal, Shamirpet and Ghatkesar, with centres at Kollur, Sultanpur and Medchal operating without ambulances.

Each centre, located within toll booths, has two beds, life-saving equipment and telemedicine support for real-time consultations. ALS ambulances, staffed by trained paramedics, cover 8-kilometre stretches and meet national care standards.

Emergency care is free. Since launch, over 5,300 accident victims have been treated — 1,200 stabilised on-site and 2,000 given first-aid before being transferred to hospitals like Osmania, Gandhi, Apollo DRDO and Yashoda.

Fast roads, slow reforms

"The problem isn't just the driver, it is flawed road design," says Mahavi Pai, CEO of WRI India, which works with local and national governments, businesses, and civil society to address India's development challenges. Built for speeds of 120-160 kmph but with much lower posted limits, the mismatch creates risk even for law-abiding drivers, he points out, adding: "Safety must be built into the road, not added later," he adds, calling for regular safety audits, better signage, speed-calming measures like rumble strips and alignment of design and legal speeds, especially as developments such as new land use, banquet halls, hotels and service roads change traffic patterns.

His WRI colleague Srinivas Alavalli advocates for continuous monitoring using cameras, speed detectors and signage that warns drivers of accident-prone zones and shares real-time accident statistics. "People need to see the cost; every death should be part of the public conversation."

On the other hand, road safety author and driver-training coach Nareesh Raghavan believes driver behaviour is the primary cause of the accidents. "Driver behaviour has not evolved with better roads and faster vehicles. People drive powerful cars with minimal training and licences are issued without teaching the basics."

Speeding causes over 70% of ORR crashes, he says, pointing to reckless overtaking, poor lane discipline and slow drivers clogging fast lanes as major triggers. Even with signage, entry/exit ramps confuse undertrained drivers.

"In other countries, driving tests train you to make decisions at high speeds, for instance, taking the next exit safely if you miss one. That level of training is missing here."

Drunk driving remains another threat. Cyberabad police issued 173 challans by April 2025 alone, 119 of those at one spot — Rotary Circle-II. These numbers stood at 423 challans in 2023 and 371 in 2024. "Alcohol dulls judgment and motor skills. The idea of hitting high speeds at night after a long day, and possibly a few drinks, is a recipe for disaster," Raghavan says.

He criticises the push for "seamless driving," which often means fewer patrols. "Abroad, patrol vehicles follow suspicious drivers and conduct mobile sobriety checks. We don't have enough patrol vans on ORR, or even in other major Indian cities."

Raghavan says most ORR crashes aren't caused by one mistake; it is a chain of poor decisions, many of them entirely preventable. He also underlines the deadly misuse of the road shoulder. "That solid white line on the left marks a shoulder; it is not a driving lane. It is for emergencies only. Parking there requires hazard lights and warning cones placed 50 to 70 metres behind. But when people overtake via the shoulder, it often leads to underrun crashes, where survival is almost impossible."

Trade triumph

India-UK CETA sets the stage for US, EU pacts

The Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) between India and the United Kingdom is a welcome addition to the country's evolving trade policy architecture in a challenging geo-political landscape. It is a crucial instrument not just in defining India's trade with the UK but as an instructive template in high-stakes, parallel negotiations currently underway with the US and the European Union.

The Double Contribution Convention with the UK that exempts temporary Indian workers from social security contributions for three years is significant. Indian professionals working temporarily in the US on H-1B or L-1 visas similarly end up paying social security without qualifying for benefits, effectively forfeiting substantial sums in contributions. The social security agreement with the UK decidedly works as a strong bargaining chip for India in its deliberations with the US. At the same time, India has agreed, for the first time in any free trade agreement, to open up its auto sector by softening import duties from 100 to 10 per cent on luxury vehicles under a quota system. The government has explained that the market access is calibrated to protect India's stronghold in the small and mid-sized vehicles and affordable electric mobility. It will benefit only a handful of luxury car brands in the UK. However, given that the US and the EU have bigger automobile industries, it does open the doors for hard bargaining by them for similar concessions.

Also in a first, India has opened up about 40,000 high-value contracts from central ministries and departments to UK bidders — a move that is being seen as a strategic shift away from using public procurement for domestic industrial development. This may encourage negotiators in the US and the EU to demand identical concessions in their respective FTAs. Viewed strictly in terms of bilateral trade with the UK alone, which the CETA aims to double by 2030 — from \$56 billion to \$112 billion — India can look forward to opportunities across sectors such as agriculture, food processing, seafood, textiles, engineering goods even as it has agreed to slash average tariffs on imports from the UK from 15 to 3 per cent. UK has agreed to eliminate tariffs on about 99 per cent tariff lines for Indian goods as it eyes the market access for its Scotch whiskey, automobiles, aircraft parts besides participating in government procurement, financial and professional business services.

India must, however, temper enthusiasm with realism. Past FTAs, whether with ASEAN, Japan or South Korea, have not yielded the expected dividends for the Indian industry. Tariff liberalisation led to import surges, while Indian companies struggled to penetrate partner markets due to stringent standards and non-tariff barriers on one hand and their own constraints in terms of scaling up, capacity and financial wherewithal on the other. The success or otherwise of the CETA with UK will be determined by how it pans out on the ground in the coming years.

OTHER VOICES.

The Guardian

Global inequality: rising tide leaves most boats behind
This year's global wealth report by the City Bank UBS confirms what is self-evident but rarely confronted: while riches are accumulating, their distribution remains starkly unbalanced. In the 56 countries and economic areas surveyed, the report says global personal wealth grew 4.6% in 2024. However, not all boats have been lifted by this tide. The gap is growing between those who hold assets and those who don't. The figures are shocking: just 60m of the world's adults — 1.6% of the population — have net personal wealth of \$226tn, or 48.1% of all the world's riches. At the other extreme, four in 10 adults — 1.57bn people — have only \$2.7n, or just 0.6% of all the world's personal wealth. Economists now argue that inequality is no longer a by-product of growth but a condition of it. *LONDON, JULY 24*

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

How to End the Epstein Follies

Are there grown-ups left in Washington? Politicians who have never seen the government files on Jeffrey Epstein are demanding full "transparency," which is easy to say if you aren't responsible for the consequences of disseminating unproved accusations, victim details, hearsay, and who knows what else, even as law enforcement thinks that none of it supports further criminal investigation. The House is breaking early for the summer to avoid votes on forcing disclosure. Attorney General Pam Bondi and FBI director Kash Patel now insist the files contain plenty of child porn that Epstein downloaded, but no "client list" or predicate for new charges. But Ms. Bondi and Mr. Patel previously fueled the idea that more would be coming that might unravel a grand conspiracy, and they also won their offices because of loyalty to Mr. Trump. *NEW YORK, JULY 24*

Stumbling through the unclaimed assets maze

The heirs should not be made to jump through hoops to claim assets of the deceased

POINT BLANK.



LOKESHWARRI K

Most of us are guilty of having several idle bank accounts which are relegated to the back of the mind, along with the small amounts lying idle in them. It's the same with dividends which are sent to old addresses because we forgot to inform the registrar and transfer agents while hopping cities.

Though these amounts may be insignificant to the investor, they add up to a substantial amount. That is probably why there is a concerted move from the RBI, SEBI and other regulators to make it easier for investors to reclaim their assets.

These measures could help investors trace their long-forgotten assets, if they so desire, but the main problem why unclaimed assets are high is due to the difficulties faced in claiming financial assets of the deceased. Many heirs prefer to just give up on their claims, spooked by the red tape involved. The solution is to be more empathetic when dealing with this process and to be alive to the problems faced by senior citizens.

UNCLAIMED BALANCES
While the total value of unclaimed balances across asset classes is large, of concern is that they are continuing to grow in recent years.

Bank deposits are the preferred saving choice of most Indian households; and it is therefore not surprising that the largest unclaimed balances are lying with banks. The amount outstanding in the Depositor Education and Awareness (DEA) fund towards the end of March 2025 was an enormous ₹97,545 crore. The balance is up 24 per cent from the outstanding amount of ₹78,212 in the previous year.

As the equity culture grows, unclaimed shares and dividends are also on the rise. A parliamentary response revealed that ₹8,108 crore was lying in SEBI's Investor Education and Protection fund towards unclaimed dividend, as of March 2024. According to Capitaline database, at least ₹12,000 crore is being held as shares in unclaimed suspense account in March 2025.

Surge in mutual fund investments too is accompanied by increasing unclaimed balances with fund houses. Unclaimed dividend lying with mutual funds amounted to ₹918 crore towards the end of FY24, while unclaimed redemption amount was ₹402.8 crore. The insurance regulator, IRDAI, has reported that ₹20,062 crore was unclaimed account as incurs as of March 2024.

The Employees' Provident Fund, which is another area where savings are pooled, reported unclaimed balances in its FY24, up from ₹1,638.37 crore in FY19.

The numbers enumerated above add to a whopping ₹1,47,540 crore. But the list is far from complete. There must be such balances lying in other investment vehicles such as REITs, InvITs, company fixed deposits, small savings etc, which could increase the number manifold.

REGULATORY EFFORTS

There have been a slew of regulatory measures taken in recent years to speed up the return of these unclaimed balances to investors.

Unclaimed balances across financial assets add up to ₹1,47,540 crore. But if such balances in REITs, InvITs, company fixed deposits, small savings etc, are added, the number could increase manifold

The RBI has stipulated that the facility of updating the KYC for activating inoperative accounts should be available at all bank branches. Identification of customers through video be facilitated and authorised business correspondents can be used to activate inoperative accounts. The UDGAM portal further allows access to all the funds transferred to the DEA fund. Banks are also told to put out the names of unclaimed deposits on their websites.

Unclaimed shares and dividend are transferred to the Investor Education and Protection Fund if unclaimed for seven years, and investors can claim their assets through the website.

IRDAI specifies that insurers must transfer policy amounts not claimed for more than 10 years to Senior Citizens Welfare Fund. The beneficiaries and policyholders then have 25 years to claim the dues.

Where does the problem lie? Despite these regulatory efforts, unclaimed assets are continuing to mount. Why is it so?

Unclaimed balances in banks, stock market and pension funds arise due to two main reasons. One, due to investors forgetting to close accounts or redeem their money and two, assets not claimed by heirs on the death of the investor.

The facilities made available by the regulators can help in instances where the investor has been lax in closing accounts or informing the RTA about change of address etc. Given increased digitisation of financial services and the capture of nearly all yearly income by the Income Tax Department, it is quite likely that instances of dormant accounts and unclaimed interest, dividend etc will move lower in the years ahead.

But there is a real problem in case of transmission of financial assets of the deceased. Banks require numerous documents including the death certificate, photograph and KYC of all legal heirs, letter of disclaimer, letter of indemnity, besides asking heirs to fill

numerous forms. Many senior citizens hold shares in physical forms and the paperwork needed to convert these to demat forms is so complex that most heirs are likely to just let it go. With many of us Indians using different versions of our names in different KYC documents, expanding the initials in some instances and retaining the initials in others, the problems facing legal heirs tend to compound.

THE WAY OUT

There is a need for the financial services industry to treat requests for transmission of assets of the deceased with less suspicion and more empathy. They need to treat instances such as spelling mismatches in the documents of the deceased (which is very common) or signature mismatches, less stringently. This needs to be communicated to all those who are in the customer service department. This could make the heirs more willing to engage with the banks or RTAs to claim their dues.

Bank accounts, mutual fund folios, insurance and pension accounts can be categorised as high-, medium- and low-risk based on the profile of the investor. For instance, if the bank account is the salary account of an employee at a reputed company, it can be classified as low-risk. The KYC procedures, forms to be filled etc be less stringent in low-risk accounts and vice versa for high-risk accounts.

The forms that need to be filled for the process can be further simplified. A common portal for claiming the financial assets of the deceased can be considered. This portal can be updated on the death of the investor so that all the accounts can be frozen. The required documents can be uploaded at one place and can be accessed by all RTAs, banks, insurers, MFs, PFDA etc. If the goal is to bring down the extent of unclaimed assets, regulators need to understand the hardships being faced by investors and try to iron them out.

Why IEX is shocked by CERC's market coupling order

With a single electricity price to be set across all exchanges from January 2026, IEX's dominant position may be under threat

bl.explainer

KS Badri Narayanan

Why is IEX in the news?

Shares of Indian Energy Exchange (IEX) crashed as much as 30 per cent to hit a low of ₹131.50 on the NSE, as the Central Electricity Regulatory Commission (CERC) announced on Wednesday that it had decided to implement market coupling in a phased manner for electricity trading. This is expected to significantly impact the revenue and profitability of the energy exchange.

What does the CERC order say?

There are two types of trading on power exchanges: real-time (RTM) and day-ahead market (DAM). The CERC order stated that, from January 2026, grid India will consolidate energy prices on all power trading platforms, and a single price will be disseminated. This is called the coupling of the day-ahead market.

"This arrangement would facilitate an efficient functioning of the power exchanges and also help instill faith of

the market participants in the power exchange operations," says the order.

A similar coupling of the real-time market is expected to occur at a later date.

How will market coupling work?

Currently, electricity is traded on the market leader IEX, Power Exchange of India and Hindustan Power Exchange of India. IEX has an approximately 85 per cent share of the market overall, and a 100 per cent share in key segments, such as DAM and RTM.

Today, sellers and buyers of electricity bid on these exchanges, and therefore, the price discovery on each of the three is different.

Under "market coupling," there will be a single market-cleared price common to all three exchanges. This means that the three exchanges will merely collect bids and submit them to the appointed agency to determine the common price.

This is similar to an agency determining a common price for Uber, Ola, Blusmart, etc. Essentially, this means that the dominant exchange (IEX) will lose its mojo, because, unlike now, under market coupling, there would be no particular reason for a

PRICE DISCOVERY. IEX's market share may dip *GETTY IMAGES*

bidder to choose IEX over the other two exchanges.

How is the Day-Ahead Market (DAM) different?

The Day-Ahead Market is where electricity is bought and sold one day in advance. Integrated Day Ahead Market (IDAM) of IEX is a physical electricity trading market which allows market participants to buy and sell electricity for the next day. Power generators offer to sell electricity at a set price while buyers place bids to buy.

The prices and quantity of electricity to be traded are determined through a double-sided closed auction bidding process. The exchange (such as IEX) matches buyers and sellers through an auction.

How will the CERC order impact IEX?

In FY25, DAM and RTM contributed approximately 50 per cent and 30 per cent, respectively, to IEX's turnover. A central algorithm, likely managed by the Grid Controller of India, will match bids and allocate trades, as individuals do now.

Therefore, IEX will lose control over price discovery, as other exchanges, such as PXIL and HPX, will gain access to the same pricing. Market coupling can therefore hit the revenues of IEX. According to experts, transaction charges will also come down due to increased competition. If other participants offer better transaction fees, traders may shift to them.

According to experts, market coupling if implemented, could lead to IEX's market share declining from 84 per cent currently to 70 per cent by the financial year 2027.

✉ **LETTERS TO EDITOR** Send your letters by email to bleditor@thehindu.co.in or by post to "Letters to the Editor", The Hindu Business Line, Kasturji Buildings, 859-860, Anna Salai, Chennai 600002.

UK trade deal

By signing the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement with the UK, India has signalled its willingness to bring down its tariffs substantially and encourage more investment into the country. The primary goal of the agreement is to double bilateral trade between the two countries from roughly \$56 billion now. Average tariffs on British products will fall from 15 per cent to 3 per cent, boosting UK exports, India will have unprecedented duty-free access for 99 per cent of its exports to the UK, particularly labour-intensive segments such as

textiles, leather, footwear, and gems and jewellery, as well as sectors like engineering, agri-foods and auto components. No doubt, the India-UK Free Trade Agreement is a significant step forward.

M. Jayaram
Shivajinagar (TN)

Both PM Narendra Modi and his UK counterpart Keir Starmer deserve appreciation for striking such a 'well-balanced' trade deal, if the media reports are any indication. As against this, the US President Trump is learnt to have forced several countries like Vietnam,

Japan, Indonesia, the Philippines and even UK to sign as per his own whimsies, which mandated 'zero' duty for the US exports to them but simultaneous levying of 10-20 per cent duty on imported goods by them. In this context India needs to be very during its trade negotiations with the US and EU.

Kumar Gupta
Punjab (Gujarat)

Conserving precious resource

The article 'Groundwater management requires deep relook', (July 25), has not come a day too

early. It is one of the many important issues begging attention and concerted remedial efforts. Many attempts aimed at sustainable water resources management have faltered due to archaic laws. The authority rightly refers to the fact 19th century British Common Law can no longer cope with or guide and regulate modern day water needs/management. Recognising and legalising the concept of water resources among national assets, enforcing reasonable restrictions on unbridled groundwater extraction and mandating water audit for various

agricultural and industrial uses must be ushered in. Adoption of prudent water conservation norms, coupled with promotion and incentivising of rainwater harvesting should become the norm. Upkeep and maintenance of water bodies should be vested with communities and not left to individual whims. It is time we learn a culture of respectfully reusing of our water resources keeping in mind the welfare of future generations. Water is the elixir of life, as potable water is turning scarce a resource.

Jose Abraham
Kattiparambil (Kerala)

[OUR TAKE]

India & UK pull down tariff raj

The trade agreement between the two nations is a win-win deal for both

Forty-two months after India and the UK opened negotiations on a trade deal, the two countries signed the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) on Thursday, dismantling significant tariff and non-tariff barriers for trade. The deal is a hard-won one, considering the long-drawn-out negotiations between the two sides. Given it seems balanced and beneficial from the vantage points of both countries, it has been worth the wait. CETA gives India deeper and wider access to the world's sixth-largest economy, while the UK can tap into India's mammoth market. The deal targets to double bilateral trade in the next five years — up from \$57.8 billion in 2024 to around \$112 billion by 2030.

To that end, CETA gives India duty-free access for 99% of its merchandise exports to the UK — up from zero or near-zero duties for 65%. There will also be duty cuts on 90% of Indian tariff lines for imports from the UK — with a commitment to phase out duties entirely for 85% of the goods in the next 10 years. While freer bilateral trade is in the offing, Indian negotiators have done well to protect and further Indian interests in key sectors; holding up its red lines on agriculture — dairy, apples, oats, among others — protects Indian farmers, who would have had to otherwise compete with cheap imports from the UK in the domestic market. This is significant given how important the farm sector is for India — one of the reasons for India refusing to join the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership was the anticipated fallout for the domestic farm sector, especially dairy. This is complemented by the unshackling of labour-intensive Indian exports such as textiles, footwear, processed and non-processed food items, including marine products, from UK tariffs, with the companies involved typically being small and medium enterprises (SMEs). This has also been done for UK's exports in sectors such as medical devices, automobiles, aerospace, and liquor (Scotch whisky and gin), pulling India's average tariffs on UK products down to 3% from the pre-CETA 15%. The mobility concessions within the Double Contribution Convention that should benefit Indian IT and IT-enabled services, financial and legal services, educational services are significant considering the current climate in the UK towards immigration.

The non-tariff wins for India are not small either. CETA has steered away from the UK's earlier insistence on India meeting stringent environmental standards; the agreement instead terms it "inappropriate" for parties to apply their environmental laws, policies or measures in a way that would constitute an "arbitrary or unjustifiable discrimination" or "disguised restriction" on trade or investment. A similar approach has been adopted regarding labour standards, when it comes to non-tariff protectionist measures. The deal also provides for the easing of sanitary and phytosanitary measures, which could lead to rejections of Indian products by UK authorities.

Beyond all this, the real gain from CETA is the signal it sends to the world. At a time when the consensus on global trade governance is crumbling, the deal can be a template for India's ongoing negotiations with other advanced economies such as the US and the EU. CETA shows India will not be forced into accepting deals that undermine its interests or skew heavily on the side of the developed country/bloc partner. The UK deal could also impact India's existing trade deals and set the tone in negotiations with Asean members, Japan, and South Korea. The deal is a win-win for trade as bilaterals displace plurilateral trade governance.

India-UK FTA: A bold pathway to closer trade ties

It addresses India's concern on weaponisation of environmental and labour standards for disguised protectionism

India and the UK have signed a historic free trade agreement (FTA). Coming on the heels of India's other key FTAs with Australia and the UAE, the India-UK FTA promises to give a significant boost to the existing bilateral trade of \$56 billion between the two countries. Spanning 30 chapters and comprehensively covering a wide range of issues, from trade in goods and services to labour, environment, and gender, the FTA is a new deal for businesses and people in India and the UK.

India's labour-intensive sectors, such as textiles, leather, gems, and jewellery, are going to be significant beneficiaries of this FTA, as the UK will eliminate its tariff rates on these products. India, on its part, will lower tariff rates for passenger automobiles and other vehicles that are of interest to Britain. For instance, as per India's Schedule of Tariff Commitments, the tariff rates on passenger automobile vehicles will be reduced to 1%. However, this reduction has been placed in the staging category EIO, which means that the tariff rate shall be reduced in ten equal annual instalments. Thus, India has negotiated a more extended transition period, which will allow Indian industry ample time to prepare for the competition, in line with British cars. Moreover, the Indian automobile industry — a key success story of India's economic liberalisation — is robust and competitive enough to ward off import competition. Thus, the fear that the Indian automobile industry will suffer, as some have opined, due to the India-UK FTA, is exaggerated.

A key area covered by the India-UK FTA is

government procurement. India has opened its government procurement market to British bidders, marking a significant shift in Indian policy, which has historically restricted foreign competition in this area. However, India has also protected its national interests by ensuring that the provisions related to government procurement do not apply to procurements made for national security purposes, to preferences established under public procurement policies for micro and small enterprises (MSEs), and to the procurement of agricultural products made to support agricultural programmes. Additionally, Articles 15.4(8) and 15.4(9) reference the Make in India (MI) programme. Article 15.4(9) explicitly allows India to adjust its MI programme as per national needs, while still adhering to the overall requirement of non-discrimination.

The environment chapter is another vital part of the India-UK FTA. Negotiators had held that the inability of the two sides to see eye to eye on the so-called carbon tax issue — the UK's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), which would impose a tax on India's carbon-intensive products, such as steel, aluminium, and cement — could derail the FTA. This did not happen. There is no mention of a carbon tax in the environment chapter. While concerns regarding the UK's CBAM, which is set to come into force in 2027, and its potential to encumber India's market access are genuine, Article 21.3(5) may save the day for New Delhi. This article states that domestic environmental laws should not be imposed in a manner that constitutes arbitrary or unjustifiable discrimination or results in a disguised restriction of international trade. India can utilise this provision to ensure that the UK does not use the CBAM or any environmental law for protectionist reasons.

The chapter on labour illustrates India's ongoing move away from its traditional stance of not linking trade to labour issues. A major concern among those who oppose this trade-labour



Prabhash Ranjan



The India-UK FTA represents a bold attempt to restructure the bilateral economic relationship between the two countries.

BLOOMBERG

connection is the fear that developed countries might exploit labour standards as a means of trade protectionism. To address this concern, Article 20.2(3) of the India-UK FTA clearly states that labour standards should not be utilised for protectionist purposes. Furthermore, Article 20.3 explicitly acknowledges the right of countries to develop their labour laws according to their own priorities, thereby providing India with sufficient policy space.

As part of the chapter on services and movement of natural persons, India is also expected to benefit from a more liberalised trade in services regime. This would facilitate the movement of Indian professionals to work in the UK.

A significant part of the India-UK FTA is Chapter 29, covering dispute settlement. This chapter is important because it demonstrates the continued reliance of India and the UK on the judicialisation of their international economic relations. I.e., a proclivity to use judicial mechanisms rather than diplomacy to settle their trade disputes. The dispute settlement chapter allows the two sides a choice of forum to bring a dispute. Article 29.5 explicitly states that if a dispute arises over a matter under the FTA and a substantially equivalent matter under any other international agreement that binds both countries, including WTO, the complaining country may select the forum in which to settle the dispute. Such a possibility is real since obli-

gations that countries accept under an FTA may significantly overlap with those in WTO.

A critical element of Chapter 29 is Article 29.11(8), which provides that a panel constituted under the FTA to settle a dispute between the two countries shall consider relevant interpretations contained in the WTO panel and Appellate Body reports. This provision, also present in other FTAs such as the India-UAE and Australia-UK, demonstrates the importance and the UK's attachment to the WTO jurisprudence that the US has sought to discredit. Notably, the dispute settlement chapter does not apply to chapters on government procurement, environment, and labour. This, arguably, gives India elbow-room for policy manoeuvre.

In summary, the India-UK FTA represents a bold attempt to restructure the bilateral economic relationship between the two countries. Its significance, however, goes beyond just advancing bilateral trade. It validates that bilateralism and plurilateralism will be the mainstay of international trade law-making in the foreseeable future, as WTO stands essentially crippled. Furthermore, the FTA would reinvigorate India's trade negotiations with other countries, including the European Union.

Prabhash Ranjan is a professor and vice dean (research), Indira Global Law School. The views expressed are personal.

Cricket diplomacy can serve India in the neighbourhood

Broadly, soft power is utilisation of a country's cultural strengths as opposed to being coercive to influence and prevail over other nations. More commonly, the arts, entertainment, language and institutions have been components of cultural diplomacy. But sports, too, plays a role, from the extravaganza of the Olympic Games and football World Cups to the Wimbledon championship.

In the early 1970s, ping-pong diplomacy broke the ice between the US and China. Cricket diplomacy has occasionally been employed by India and Pakistan as an ice-breaking measure. Today, the game has become India with a valuable soft power ingredient.

In 1928, India, despite being under British rule, stunned the world by lifting the gold medal in hockey in the Amsterdam Olympiad. Other than Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent freedom struggle, no facet of India in that period made an impact on the international community as Jai Singh's team's triumph did.

Thereafter, India completing a hat-trick of gold in the 1936 Berlin Olympics rather jolted the German dictator, Adolf Hitler, whose world view was of white Aryans constituting a superior race. To his dismay, India thrashed Germany 8-1 in the final. In short, independent India inherited hockey as an instrument of soft power. People worldwide would yearn to witness the Indians' dribbling skills.

Fast forward to Mexico 1968: India earned neither a gold nor a silver in hockey for the first time in 40 years. In contrast, three years later,

India caught the imagination of the cricketing world by notching back-to-back Test series victories in the West Indies and England. Then, India's unexpected triumph in the 1983 World Cup pitched cricket as its new soft power. The win instigated the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) to reach out to the Pakistan Cricket Board to jointly stage the next such event in 1987 — after England had monopolised hosting rights for the first three competitions. The Indo-Pak collaboration conjured a financial package neither England nor Australia could match. India's friendship with other stakeholder countries ensured decisive support for the bid.

As cricket burgeoned in popularity in India and the footprint of television simultaneously expanded, Indian corporates started bankrolling broadcasts. This, in turn, created an opening for the BCCI to demand licence fees undreamt of before from broadcasters. Progressively, India became cricket's financial powerhouse.

Today, BCCI's monetary stranglehold over cricket is such that not merely other cricket boards, but also the International Cricket Council (ICC), are at its mercy as in no other sporting discipline. India, contrary to Brazil in soccer, have never been undisputed champions of the game. Indeed are yet to win the most prestigious World Test Championship; but BCCI unequivocally controls the sport.

India as a team are the darling of BCCI's counterparts, because they fill their coffers with bountiful revenue from digital and TV networks, advertisers and sponsors. But they are



Ashis Ray



The BCCI's muscle is best channelled towards... winning hearts and minds

not always popular with host cricket lovers, as they perceive BCCI to be a bully and as having inequitably captured the ICC. BCCI was party to ICC's decision to award this year's Champions Trophy tournament to Pakistan. Therefore, India's refusal to play in that country was not only a breach of its commitment, but an infringement of the ICC rules applied in the 1996 and 2003 World Cups, namely forfeiture of points for abstentions, which Australia and England suffered. India also denied unfair benefit from playing at a solitary venue and by summoning spinner Varun Chakravarty as a replacement in their squad to suit the consistent conditions.

ICC allowed the special dispensation. A

majority of the participating sides permitted this for pecuniary gains; but it did not please the non-Indian public — thereby impairing India's potential goodwill.

It is also opportunistic to meet Pakistan in over-limbs World Cup, but not the World Test Championship. The powers-that-be in India are understandably displeased with Pakistan. So, the principled approach would be to have no links with them at all. In 1974, India preferred to default against South Africa instead of playing against them in the Davis Cup final because of its apartheid regime.

The BCCI's muscle is best channelled towards magnanimity, consequently in winning hearts and minds; not arm-twisting and seeking undue conveniences in the field. India can capitalise diplomatically on the robust following the Indian Premier League enjoys in England, Australia, South Africa, New Zealand, the West Indies and South Asia, many of whose cricketers figure in the tourney.

In 1987, with the anti-India General Zia-ul-Haq holding the reins in Pakistan, India's ties with it were unsatisfactory. But BCCI seeking PCB's cooperation helped to temporarily soften Pakistani people's wariness towards India.

Therefore, South Block could consider lifting its long-standing ban on Pakistani cricketers partaking in the IPL. This year, Bangladeshi cricketers were also *de facto* debarred. Lifting the barrier would encourage people-to-people friendliness.

The Indian government's anger with its neighbouring counterparts to its west and east and their proxies need not spill over into punishing individual cricketers. Pakistani and Bangladeshi cricketers crossing swords with the world's best in franchise Twenty20 would likely delight and suitably melt cricket fans in Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Ashis Ray is a journalist and author of *The Trial That Shook Britain*. The views expressed are personal.

History writing must go beyond textbooks

The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) has released the long-awaited social sciences textbook for Class 8, for a capricious leadership from Ladakh to Pondicherry. Coming up with a textbook is a long haul. First, identify the authors/authors. After a lot of "research", the book is drafted, approved, and published. Then, parents buy these and teachers select "important" sentences that the students commit to memory. At some stage, these will have to be regurgitated in the exams.



Narayani Gupta

Why then so much discussion on the book, not by children, parents, or school teachers, but by university teachers and pub-

lic intellectuals? Because groups of the latter on either side of the debate believe such books are endowed with the power to leave an imprint on readers' minds. But, the power of a history textbook is not in the statistics relating to people killed in battles and buildings destroyed — it is in the manner in which change is conveyed. History is dauntingly difficult to write, unless you take refuge behind obscure abstractions.

I recall a conversation from decades ago. In 1986, I was talking to a gentleman, whom I had just informed that I taught history. We

discovered we were the same age, and had been in Class IV in 1952. Suddenly, he got animated and asked me whether I remem-

bered the textbooks we had read. A competition of recollection followed. We had both enjoyed British history rather jolted Indian history — the texture of the books, the illustrations, the narrative. We were not a whit less patriotic for that. We both realised that the history of any country, like a play or a novel, can be conveyed either with beauty and even humour, or in a dull and lifeless manner. The NCERT textbooks of 2005 featured in anecdotes and cartoons, only to have the cartoons and illustrations ignored in the classroom and, later, deleted from the books.

Teaching history can be such fun if we let the children fully interact with the teacher on the subject. A public school teacher in England, on the first day of teaching 10-year-olds about the Norman conquest of England, asked them kindly if they had any questions. A little fellow stood up. "Please, sir, did the Anglo-Saxons ever grope?" The Cambridge graduate did not know the answer.

In the last 20 years, there has been a wonderful revolution in India — a blossoming of books for children, many of the stories situ-

ated in the past. Can't the NCERT have the courage to open up textbooks to competition from young, bright, and honest writers of new students, Subhadra Sengupta, cruelly felled by Covid, had a massive fan following. Her delightful historical novels were despite her lack of attentiveness in class!

There have been many writers who wrote history for children — Charles Dickens (*A Child's History of England*), Jawaharlal Nehru, while in prison (*Letters from a Father to a Daughter*).

The world knows EH Gombrich, the art historian, but it was only in 2005 that his first book, written in 1936 in German, was translated into English, as *A Little History of the World*. He had written it when he was 26, in six weeks, with energy, humour, and imagination. I am sure we have many other Gombrichs in our country, who can relieve tired and solemn middle-aged writers of the burden of communicating with the young.

Narayani Gupta is a Delhi-based historian. The views expressed are personal.

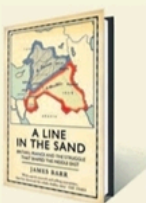
[EDITOR'S PICK]

HT's editors offer a book recommendation every Saturday, which provides history, context, and helps understand recent news events

DIVIDE AND RULE IN WEST ASIA

French President Emmanuel Macron on Thursday announced the decision to recognise the State of Palestine, underlining the urgent priority to end the Gaza war and bring relief to its civilian population. He said the French people want peace in West Asia and that it was their responsibility alongside Israelis, Palestinians, and European and international partners to prove that peace is possible. This week, we recommend *A Line In The Sand* on the role of the UK and France in shaping conflicts in West Asia.

In 1916, the UK and France divided the region as per the Sykes-Picot Agreement, condemning it to upheavals. *A Line In The Sand* is an introduction to the cast of characters involved in the division, their ambitions, resentments, and sympathies, drawing from declassified material about a Franco-British proxy war in West Asia during the Second World War.



A Line in the Sand James Barr 2012

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

More than a trade pact

India-UK FTA is a launchpad: 'Global Britain'
meets 'Make in India for the World'



Soumya Bhowmick

ON A WARM July afternoon at Chequers, Prime Ministers Keir Starmer and Narendra Modi finally signed the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA), which negotiators from London and New Delhi have been pursuing since 2022. The deal is the largest the UK has sealed since Brexit and India's first with a G7 economy over a decade, marking the end of a stop-start process that spanned four Indian budget cycles and two British prime ministers.

For London, the agreement is intended to deliver the 'Global Britain' dividend that has eluded successive Conservative governments since the United Kingdom departed from the European Union. Labour's new leadership can now point to preferential access to a market of 1.4 billion people for sectors ranging from premium spirits to cutting-edge aerospace. At the same time, India gains early access to European markets just as its export-led 'Make in India for the World' strategy accelerates. Strategically, the pact aligns neatly with the wider India-UK Roadmap 2030, which already encompasses cooperation on climate action, critical minerals, and maritime security, providing both capitals with a rules-based alternative to supply-chain dependence on China.

At the heart of CETA lie steep tariff cuts. Average Indian duties on British goods drop from around 15 per cent to just 3 per cent on 90 per cent of tariff lines, with the eye-catching reduction on Scotch whisky — from 150 per cent today to 75 per cent immediately and 40 per cent over 10 years. High-end cars arriving from the UK will see levies plummet from well over 100 per cent to 10 per cent within a quota of 25,000 units, and British salmon, chocolates, and cheese will enter on near-zero tariffs. In return, the UK eliminates duties on almost every Indian export, from labour-intensive textiles and leather to gems, generic pharmaceuticals and marine produce.

While India-UK trade currently represents a relatively modest share of each country's overall external sector — accounting for approximately 2.4 per cent of the UK's total trade and about 1.8 per cent of India's combined merchandise and serv-

ices trade as of 2024 — the bilateral relationship has demonstrated consistent upward momentum. Investment linkages are equally significant, reflecting a mutually reinforcing economic interdependence supported by a dynamic ecosystem of transnational firms.

Against this backdrop, the proposed trade agreement carries both symbolic and material promise. The UK Treasury anticipates an annual GDP increase of approximately £4.8 billion by 2040, alongside investment and export gains valued at £5 billion. Concurrently, India's Ministry of Commerce projects a potential expansion of up to \$34 billion in bilateral trade over five years. Though these figures may appear modest in terms of aggregate GDP — translating to less than half a percentage point of output for either country — they hold considerable significance at the sectoral and regional levels. Targeted tariff reductions and regulatory alignment are poised to deliver significant benefits for key constituencies, including Scottish distilleries, Midlands car manufacturers, Tirupur knitwear exporters, and India's rapidly growing processed food and marine sectors.

Less talked about, but extremely valuable, is the way CETA plugs both countries into the Indo-Pacific's fast growing supply chains. The treaty allows up to 60 per cent of a product's parts to come from third-country suppliers without losing its 'Made in the UK' or 'Made in India' label. These flexible rules of origin could multiply the agreement's benefits, as firms gain access to cheaper inputs and larger markets simultaneously. Add India's new freight corridors and Britain's emerging free port zones, and the deal looks more like a springboard into the 'China plus one' production shift now reshaping global manufacturing.

Still, the agreement leaves several concerns unaddressed. Delhi had lobbied strongly for a more expansive 'Mode 4' mobility framework to facilitate the movement of its IT professionals — seeking concessions on top with those granted to Australia. However, Britain's domestic immigration policies constrained the scope of the offer. Meanwhile, Britain's financial and legal sectors are frustrated by the absence

of the preferential access they enjoy under the UK-Australia deal, just as Indian agricultural exporters continue to face rigorous sanitary and phytosanitary checks on goods like mangoes, chillies, and seafood.

Crucially, the bilateral investment treaty, intended to anchor investor-state dispute settlement provisions, remains under negotiation, leaving key protections undefined. The agreement's implementation is also not immediate — it must first pass through parliamentary scrutiny in Westminster and receive cabinet approval in New Delhi — a process that could be delayed if domestic lobbies or legislators seek exemptions. India was also unsuccessful in securing an exemption from the UK's forthcoming Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism, which could result in future tariffs on carbon-intensive exports.

Moving forward, several critical dimensions merit attention: Whether subnational actors such as Maharashtra or Gujarat design targeted incentive frameworks to optimise access to UK public procurement markets; how India's existing goods trade deficit with the UK shapes domestic political discourse, particularly if imports of Scotch whisky or luxury vehicles expand significantly; and whether a potential digital trade protocol can facilitate the UK's fintech integration with India's public digital infrastructure, contingent upon India's willingness to revisit data localisation policies.

Finally, the India-UK trade pact may not constitute a transformational macroeconomic breakthrough, but it holds considerable geopolitical significance and commercial relevance across a diverse array of sectors. The substantive value of the agreement will depend less on its formalisation at Chequers and more on the efficiency of its ratification processes, the robustness of regulatory implementation, and the extent to which both governments can resist domestic protectionist pressures that risk diluting the intended liberalising thrust.

The writer is fellow and lead, World Economics and Sustainability at Centre for New Economic Diplomacy at Observer Research Foundation

MISSING IN MANIPUR

Continued absence of a popular government in the state is the problem. Extending President's Rule is not a solution

IN FEBRUARY THIS year, the N Biren Singh-led government's failure to stanch ethnic violence since May 2023 prompted the Centre to intervene and impose President's Rule in Manipur. The provision is intended as a temporary mechanism to ensure the governance of a state in which there has been a 'failure of [the] constitutional machinery'. It is not designed to be a permanent solution or a substitute for a popular government. President's Rule is a means to an end, not the end by itself. In this context, the government's move to extend President's Rule by another six months, scheduled in this Parliament session, raises questions about whether the Centre's efforts so far have significantly advanced the objective of restoring normalcy in the state.

While it is reassuring that no major episode of violence has occurred since last November — when 22 people were killed over 11 days, most of them in Jiribam district — it is also true that there has been little progress in the dialogue between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities. Three key issues require urgent resolution: Free movement, the relocation of internally displaced persons, and the circulation of weapons. In early March, Home Minister Amit Shah had called for unrestricted movement across Manipur in an effort to reverse the segregation of the two communities. However, that initiative collapsed on its very first day. According to this newspaper, fresh negotiations are now underway between the government and Kuki militant groups under the Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement to reach a deal that would allow free movement of people and goods. On relocation, former Manipur Chief Secretary P K Singh announced earlier this month that efforts are being made to resettle those displaced by the conflict in three phases, with the goal of completing the process by the end of the year. As per estimates from the Manipur Home Department, around 57,000 people continue to struggle in over 280 relief camps across the valley and the hills. Finally, despite the Governor's efforts to curb the circulation of illegal weapons, roughly 3,000 looted arms are still unaccounted for.

It is only natural for the people of Manipur to feel increasingly restless over the continued absence of a popular government. This is why the NDA's Meitei and Naga MLAs have also been campaigning for months to push for its restoration, while Kuki-Zo groups are wary of the prospect of another partisan leader at the helm. The Centre may believe that extending President's Rule is in the state's best interest for now, but it needs to move with urgency to restart the political process. Simultaneously, it must take steps to curb the influence of militant groups on both sides that could derail attempts at reconciliation. Peace — and the return of the mediating role of politics — must no more be held hostage to entrenched ethnic rivalries.

BELLING THE BOARD

National Sports Governance Bill empowers government to clean up sports federations, including BCCI. There will be challenges

NEARLY A DECADE ago, when the Supreme Court was hearing the recommendations made by a panel led by Justice R M Lodha, set up by the Court to suggest reforms to the Board of Control for Cricket in India, then Chief Justice T S Thakur asked the BCCI a rhetorical question: "Are you refusing to be reformed?" In the coming days, the cricket board could, again, face a similar question. For years, the BCCI has acted on its own on governance issues. Through the National Sports Governance Bill, which Sports Minister Mansukh Mandaviya introduced in the Lok Sabha on Wednesday, the government has shown a will to bell the cat.

So far, the BCCI has resisted all attempts to bring it under government regulation. Its main argument has been that since it does not seek funding from the sports ministry, it isn't answerable to it. Unlike other sports, the cricket board, an autonomous body, isn't covered under the Right to Information Act, 2005. However, with cricket returning to the Olympics in 2028, it could be forced to align with other national federations and follow the standard good governance practices. The government aims to achieve this by bringing the BCCI under the National Sports Board (NSB), as the Bill envisages. The NSB will have sweeping powers to lay down rules and oversee the functioning of all federations — from unconventional games like aya tata to mainstream sports like cricket.

Indeed, sports governance issues go beyond cricket. The Bill seeks to bring in legislation to improve "the governance of the sports bodies and achieve better results in sports and reduce the disputes and litigation, inter alia, involving sports federations". It relies on two main pillars — the NSB will be a SEBI-like body that will govern all sports, and the creation of a National Sports Tribunal, which will take the burden away from the lower courts and high courts. With the NSB, there are fears of government overreach and the question of appointing the right people, free of conflicts of interest or bias, to head the organisation. At the same time, there are concerns that the formation of the Tribunal, which will have the powers of a civil court and decide on disputes ranging from selection to election, could disenfranchise athletes and administrators of their right to approach the courts. Whether or not the government, through this Bill, succeeds in cleaning up the messy Indian sports administration depends on whether or not it manages to enforce its provisions in letter and spirit.

AMERICAN ICON

Hulk Hogan was the best-known face of pro wrestling worldwide. Hulkamania will live on

IN THE EARLY 2000s, a pair of heels (unsympathetic wrestlers) might be taking turns to pound on an unfortunate babyface (sympathetic wrestler) in the ring, or Mr McMahon, the promoter of WWE, might be getting too full of himself. And then the opening notes would ring out, and the wrestling fan could whoop in joy; it was what one didn't dare hope for. As the lyrics of his entrance music followed, Hulk Hogan in all his roaring, shirt-ripping, bandana-ed glory would emerge. Someone was about to get leg-dropped. This was an American icon, and the macho righteousness that he and his theme song, 'Real American', projected, stood in stark counterpoint to the alternative representations on offer: Green Day's 'American Idiot', or Team America: World Police. It also foreshadowed his later political trajectory. As US President Donald Trump posted after the news of his death on Thursday, Hogan was "MAGA all the way".

This wasn't the peak of Hulkamania, the great fan craze that had its first wave in the 1980s, or the time of his most famous feats, such as the body-slammings André the Giant — supposedly weighing 520 pounds. Terry Bollea, the son of a construction worker, got the nickname "Hulk" thanks to his size and 24-inch biceps even before he joined what was then the World Wrestling Federation in 1979. He would go on to become the best-known face of professional wrestling worldwide.

Hogan also tried his hand at other ventures, including acting, with a filmography ranging from *Rocky III* to low-budget '90s films. In the 2000s, there was the inevitable reality TV series, *Hogan Knows Best*, in which he appeared alongside his family. There were scandals, too, such as a leaked sex tape of him with a friend's wife, which led to a legally consequential case against media site Gawker that pitted freedom of speech against the right to privacy. As far as sports entertainment is concerned, though, few would dispute fellow wrestler Sting's characterisation of Hogan — "the greatest of all".



E P Unny

LIKE CARTOONISTS OUTSIDE Kerala, the national Opposition missed V S Achuthanandan. From Rahul Gandhi to Akhilesh Yadav and M K Stalin to Omar Abdullah, not a single player from the multiple parties that seek to build a country-wide alternative was present at his funeral. More than the 101-year-old himself, people's response to his demise could have set them thinking. In an entirely non-choreographed public gesture, grieving men, women and children waited for hours in pouring rain to get a last glimpse of the hero.

Had V S been an unlikely Delhi presence like the late Congress party veteran K Kamraj in the late 1960s and early '70s, cartoonists outside his home state would have taken to him. Kerala's cartoonists loved V S. He looked, moved, spoke, and gesticulated with a stylised flair that verged on the comic. You only had to complete the caricature. He didn't seem to mind at all. He was happy to pose on occasion for dozens of cartoonists who sat around and sketched. He knew it was vital to be in cartoons as much as in newspaper headlines and later on TV screens and social media.

Early on in his public life, under medical advice, he shed weight to become the familiar shoulders-raised, ramrod-straight figure

WITHOUT V S

Kerala will miss VS Achuthanandan, who was always in the frame

with not an ounce of flab. White dhoti, white kurta, black rimmed glasses and a wrist watch. He managed to defy age and look mostly the same through some five decades in public life, out of which he was in power as CM for a mere five years. Mostly in Opposition with no immediate prospect of office, he never lost public attention through these distracting times. For six long years before he died, V S was out of the news, and at his funeral four- and five-year-olds were seen hoisted on parental shoulders. He had become a bedside story and the kids wanted to see their hero. This goes against the palpable anxiety of younger politicians about getting out of sight, out of mind.

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This goes against the palpable anxiety of younger politicians about getting out of sight, out of mind. If you are in office for less than one-tenth of your extra-long political life, how do you remain so visible, so popular, and so effective a campaigner in poll after poll? Those were decades when Kerala experimented with politics more than most other states. Coalitions rose and fell every once in a while, to eventually settle down to a neat pattern of alternating in power every five years. This comfort zone has since been breached by the incumbent two-term Left government, but the basic electoral transaction remains. Parties ask for your votes, and you expect returns — *sarkari* freebies and welfare. Coalitions vie with each

other to woo micro-segments of voters.

V S had to deliver in this kind of competitive transactional space, and he did, but on his terms with no guarantees. He would get you land if you were landless and a home if you were homeless, not as a favour or out of mercy but because he was convinced that was your right. When he fought the corrupt, what came across more than his clean image was his crusading zeal. He went after the corrupt till they were brought to book. For women's rights, few mainstream politicians could have fought as relentlessly. When live TV came to Kerala, his activism played out in field trips cut out for televising. As sceptical about the bourgeois courts as any doctrinaire comrade, he didn't hesitate to build up a fine network of lawyers to advance public causes in courtrooms.

It took 25 years for the non-Congress stalwarts of the freedom movement to unseat the Congress party in 1977. And that happened after a traumatic excess like the Emergency. Now, again, when the ruling party is clearly dominant, the opposition has to be ready for a long-distance run. They should take a good look at the life of this centenarian marathoner.

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JULY 26, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

JOGINDER REJECTS PACT

THE 'MERGED' AKALI Dal of Joginder Singh has rejected the "so-called memorandum" jointly signed by Harchand Singh Longowal and Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to settle the Punjab problem. According to a resolution, unanimously adopted at a meeting of the ad-hoc advisory committee of the 'merged' Akali Dal, the agreement is unacceptable because Longowal does not 'represent' the Sikh masses. Joginder Singh, president over the meeting.

NO WATER SHARING

RAJASTHAN HAS REFUSED TO accept that

portion of the Centre-Akali accord which deals with sharing of river waters. The Chief Minister, Hari Dev Joshi, told the Vidhan Sabha during a stormy three-hour debate that he had discussed the relevant portion of the agreement with the former law minister and called a meeting of his cabinet, which supported his stand.

PUNJAB POLLS

THE PUNJAB GOVERNOR, Arjun Singh, said in New Delhi that he would send his recommendations on holding elections in the state to the Centre by August 15 at the latest. Singh said the Government would consult the Akalis as well as other Opposition par-

ties before making a final recommendation to the Centre.

STARVATION DEATHS

AT LEAST SIX persons have died of starvation since last fortnight and many more are struggling for survival in the Konna block of Kalandi district, which the Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, is to visit. The Chief Minister, J B Patnaik, got first-hand knowledge of four deaths when he visited the benighted families in Ghata village, 10 km from Konna on July 20. This knowledge, however, does seem to have percolated to other authorities. There is no estimate of the number of starvation deaths in the district in the past three months.

Start-up at the policy table

An evolution in the G20 architecture showcases the power of a dual approach: It harnesses both the stability of the large and the agility of the small



CHINTAN VAISHNAV,
GIULIA AJMONE MARSAN,
VUYANI JARANA

LANDMARK DEVELOPMENT occurred under India's G20 presidency in 2023: World leaders formally recognised Startup20 as an official Engagement Group of the G20. This marked a significant evolution in the G20's architecture. Until then, all business-related issues – whether for multinational corporations or early-stage start-ups – were channelled exclusively through the Business 20 (B20) group. With the inception of Startup20, the G20 now hosts two distinct business-focused platforms: B20 for large, established enterprises, and Startup20 for emerging and early-stage ventures – each with an equal policy voice.

This achievement was the culmination of nearly a decade of gradual progress. In 2015, under Turkey's presidency, the SME and Entrepreneurship Task Force was organised. Japan followed in 2019 with the formation of the 'Young Entrepreneurs' Alliance, an initiative that continues independently. Italy's 2021 presidency introduced the first G20 start-up competition – the G20 Innovation League – which was expanded by Indonesia in 2022 into the G20 Digital Innovation Network. These efforts, spanning continents and income levels – from emerging markets like Turkey and Indonesia to advanced economies like Italy and Japan – were early signals of a growing recognition: That start-ups and SMEs are critical engines of inclusive and sustainable global growth.

India capitalised on this momentum, propelled by its own rapidly expanding start-up ecosystem, to propose the formal establishment of Startup20. This initiative brought an ambidextrous character to G20 – making it able to harness both the stability of the large and the agility of the small. The Covid pandemic showcased the power of this dual approach: For the first time in history, vaccines were developed and deployed within a year. Relatively smaller companies like Moderna, and Bharat Biotech, and Oxford's labs drove early development, while giants like Pfizer and AstraZeneca scaled them globally through partnerships. It was a clear case of large and small working in tandem to deliver unprecedented impact.

When we launched Startup20 in India, the overarching objective was to produce policy recommendations to harmonise the global start-up ecosystem while retaining the autonomy and vibrant diversity of national ecosystems. When Brazil assumed the G20 presidency in 2024, this vision faced its first real test. Brazil sought both to strengthen its domestic start-up ecosystem – earning recognition from its government and visibility on the world stage – and to advance the global policy priorities inherited from India. Both objectives were achieved, and important lessons emerged as the forum prepared for its next chapter in South Africa in 2025.

The first two years of Startup20 succeeded in creating a structured process for producing a policy communiqué that captured the collective demands of global start-up and SME ecosystems. However, they also revealed two critical gaps: There was no systematic process for translating these recommendations into national policies, and no mechanism for long-term continuity. In response, the forum proposed the creation of an international secretariat to address these gaps – an inherently 'start-up-like' solution for a start-up-focused platform.

India's inaugural policy communiqué had issued a bold call: To increase G20 nations' collective investment in the global start-up ecosystem to \$1 trillion by 2030. To realise this ambition, it proposed several foundational steps. One, developing a global start-up definition and harmonising governance standards. Two, creating mechanisms for accessing global capital, talent, and markets. Three, promoting inclusion by supporting underrepresented groups and four, identifying and scaling start-ups aligned with global priorities like the SDGs.

Brazil refined these themes and introduced new ones. In the area of finance, it proposed standardising investment information, leveraging tokenisation for access to capital, and using blended finance instruments for deep tech. It elevated environmental sustainability as a core theme, emphasising start-ups in renewable energy, circular economy, and social enterprise – core pillars of Brazil's G20 agenda. Additional emphasis was placed on education, capacity building, and corporate governance. A new



CR Sasikumar

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task force on regulation and public policy was created to develop guidelines for ethical innovation and harmonised regulatory frameworks across nations.

Now, with South Africa's G20 presidency having launched Startup20's 2025 convening on July 21 in Johannesburg, the work continues with five dedicated task forces – foundation and alliances, finance and investment, inclusion and sustainability, trade and market access and township and rural entrepreneurship.

Several firsts define the South Africa chapter. For the first time, townships and rural areas are receiving focused policy attention. For the first time, private-sector leadership is being encouraged to represent national interests. And crucially, for the first time, there is a concerted effort to develop a mechanism for implementing policy recommendations – not just producing them.

As Startup20 enters its third year, we must still ask the foundational question: What is this forum doing that wouldn't happen otherwise? The answer is clear: Startup20 provides the world's highest policy platform where G20 nations' start-up and SME ecosystems can collectively articulate their needs – needs that no single country can address alone. In doing so, it ensures that the agility of the start-up world has a seat at the global policy table – right alongside the powerhouses of business and government.

Vaishnav is founding chair. Ajmone Marsan is member, the International Secretariat, and Jarana is the South Africa chair of Startup20. Views are personal

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The horror unfolding in Gaza is a collapse of the very global norms the UN was founded to uphold. The UN's moral failure in Rwanda and Bosnia must not be repeated in Gaza. This time, the world must not look away." — **DAWN, PAKISTAN**

All parties should welcome SIR

Periodic revision of electoral rolls is a mandatory practice in any country. Opposition's criticisms are misplaced



RAM RAJYA
BY RAM MADHAV

IT IS HEARTENING to see the Election Commission of India (ECI) stand firm on its now-complete Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of the electoral rolls in Bihar ahead of the upcoming elections to the state legislature. The Opposition parties have been stalling Parliament, arguing that the SIR is politically motivated and intended to deprive lakhs of voters of their voting rights. They threaten to boycott elections, too. The ECI is a constitutional body with autonomous powers and responsibilities. Those critical of its actions have approached the Supreme Court. They could have gone to the ECI itself.

The Supreme Court did raise some concerns and sought clarifications from the ECI, but it refused to stay the verification process as demanded by the petitioning NGOs. The ECI refused to budge before the political threats and reacted strongly to their criticism, asking whether "fearing these things", it should "pave the way for some to cast fake votes in the name of deceased voters, voters who have migrated permanently, or those registered in two places, fake voters or foreign voters?"

India opted for universal adult franchise at the time of independence, which was not so common even in Western countries. The US reached that stage only in 1965 through the Voting Rights Act. Full suffrage became a reality in the UK through the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act, 1928. Learning about India's decision, Britain's then-Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, found it appropriate to warn Jawaharlal Nehru that "the Asiatic republics are few and of recent establishment. Their record is not very encouraging. They tend to degenerate into dictatorships or oligarchies."

But the Indian leadership had decided, while drafting the Nehru Report in 1928, that every eligible citizen aged 21 years or above would have the right to vote. B.R. Ambedkar was insistent that it should be a fundamental right. However, in its wisdom, the Constituent Assembly decided to incorporate it not as a fundamental right under Part III of the Constitution, but as a constitutional right under Article 326. This distinction is important to keep in mind because too much is said about the burden of proof being shifted onto citizens under the SIR. The right to vote, being a constitutional right, is subject to scrutiny from time to time for the eligibility of a given individual. In the Representation of the People Act clearly stipulates several disqualifications with respect to the right to vote. They include non-citizenship, being of unsound mind, convictions for certain offences, non-residency, and being in prison.

It is in exercise of these provisions that

the ECI sought to undertake this SIR. It concluded the first phase of door-to-door verification with the help of thousands of Block Level Officers (BLOs) and other officials. Setting aside criticisms, the ECI declared that 99 per cent of electors had been covered through this exercise and that it had helped the ECI identify 3.16 million voters who were dead. Another 3.15 million were found to have permanently migrated while one lakh people were untraceable. This number constitutes around 8 per cent of the total 72.1 million voters in Bihar. There shouldn't be any controversy over those who are deceased or have migrated. Less than 1 per cent of voters failed to submit their forms about whom both the political parties and the ECI should seriously bother.

This is not the end of the process anyway. The revised lists of voters will be supplied to the 12 registered parties by August 1. Parties will have one full month to challenge any of the deletions since the petitioners in the Supreme Court argued that the BLOs didn't do their job "given the impossible deadlines". The BLOs had one month to complete this exercise during which time they were expected to visit around 300-400 households. This accounts for less than 15 houses on a given working day, a task the petitioners think is "impossible". They even accused those BLOs, who often belong to poor and lower-middle-class sections, of harassing, cheating, and even seeking bribes from voters.

Electoral reforms are never easy. It took four decades and an officer like T N Seshan to attend to booth capturing, bogus voting and impersonation. Seshan, a courageous officer, faced innumerable challenges when he attempted to clean up electoral rolls, introduce voter ID cards and force leaders to religiously follow the Model Code of Conduct, which was otherwise considered just a piece of paper by them. Attempts were made to impeach him in Parliament at least twice. Two additional election commissioners with equal powers were added, making the Commission a three-member body to curtail Seshan's authority. Seshan determinedly fought back and took the matter to the Supreme Court. "I have politicians for breakfast," he once exclaimed.

Seshan's efforts resulted in major reforms. More importantly, they gave teeth to the Commission, which was until then seen by the political class as a paper tiger. Subsequent election commissioners upheld the majestic and independent role of the Commission in conducting elections in a fair and transparent manner. Over the past few decades, India's electoral system, despite being of homogeneous size with 960 million voters and one million polling stations, has proved to be one of the most successful and efficient systems, one that several countries wish to emulate.

The occasional revision of electoral rolls is a mandatory practice in any country. Given the large-scale migration happening in our country, the Commission's decision to undertake an intensive revision of the rolls in the entire country, starting with Bihar, must be welcomed by all parties.

The writer, president, India Foundation, is with the BJP. Views are personal



VAMSEE JULURI

TINTIN FANS WILL never forget the funny exchange between General Alcazar and his rival, the just-deposed General Tapioca, in *Tintin and the Picaros*. After Tapioca has surrendered, his ADC asks Alcazar what should be done with the old fellow; whether he should be executed promptly by firing squad. Alcazar refuses to do so, having promised Tintin that there would be no bloodshed in the coup. A seemingly disappointed Tapioca and a grouchy determined Alcazar then talk like a couple of serious elder figures about the youngsters like Tintin have no respect for traditions like firing squads these days!

The bitter brawl in America between the Democrats and Republicans, or between the pro-Trump and anti-Trump forces, has acquired all the twists and turns of a "Picaronesque" adventure. Critics of President Donald Trump had a triumphant run for a while watching the growing split among his supporters over his seeming backtracking on the long-running saga of the notorious " Epstein files". However, Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard's announcement that former president Barack Obama's actions over allegations of Russian interference in the 2016 election were tantamount to an attempted "years-long coup" has swung the pendulum once again.

But unlike a pendulum that eventually seeks a position of quiet rest in the middle after having expended its energies at the ex-

Two many Americas

Is the news all about Epstein? It depends on the reality you live in

extremes, the experience of living in American democracy continues to feel frantic, frenzied, and fragmented for all camps concerned. It is not just political opinion, but one's sense of reality itself that seems polarised. Since the rise of social media, friends, family members, neighbours, students, everyone seems to be living in a different silo now as far as their knowledge, or even impression, of what is happening in the world is concerned.

For those who consume National Public Radio and *The New York Times*, the news is still about the alleged troubles in the MCA world over Epstein. Few of my friends in the Bay Area, for example, had even come across news of Gabbard's statements on Obama. But for those who follow a different set of sources, the news, and its implications for their sense of faith in the Trump presidency, will be very different indeed.

Two differing tales will now unfold, much as they have these past 15-odd years. Critics of Trump will perceive what they see as a witch-hunt being unleashed against Obama, Trump's supporters, in turn, will see, or hope to see, their faith vindicated that "Russiagate" was a hoax, and Obama-Biden-era officials who persecuted Trump and his supporters will be called out now for their actions. In one silo, the Democrats will wonder aloud at how their record of fair play and decency all these years has not been reciprocated at all by the Republicans. They will say that Hillary Clinton

had the grace to concede in 2016, while Trump refused to do so in 2020. In the other silo, Trump's supporters will argue the opposite: they will point out that the Democrats relentlessly sought to deny legitimacy to Trump and his voters from all the way back in 2016, and that the Biden administration unleashed a witch-hunt on a former president and tried every nasty trick it could to keep him from running again in 2024.

The real divide in America, as one of my old students once pointed out, isn't just between political loyalties, but simply a function of whether one is consuming editorialised news from "legacy media" or long-form, direct, videos in the form of podcasts, campaign speeches, and interviews. For people who do both, the contradictions between these two worlds are astounding as is the possibility of a change, a halt to the onto-epistemological hostilities, a reality-reconciliation, if you will. Forced, or incentivised into performing their opinions on social media constantly, people have become incapable of humility of a pause in their belief-torrents, of an opportunity to consider they may have been lied to, or at least misled in their understanding of things by partial pictures and frames in their news and social media feeds. And the institutions that might have played a role in helping to elevate real-life interactions and conversations over virtual reality-traps, schools, colleges, media

education in particular, have themselves lost the plot, or at least a sense of memory about how we got here in just a few decades.

Was it the victory of attention-seeking communication tactics over the soporific calm of political platitudes that marked the end of not just civility, but a shared sense of political reality? Was it the technology that came so fast no one had anything to work around it except for technocratic (pseudo) solutions of the "Ministry of Truth" kind? It is fascinating to recall that even the complicated 2000 presidential election result did not end with supporters of Al Gore and George W Bush marching off into different sunsets. But by 2016, everything was different. Now, as the second decade of the Trump era unfolds, and the possibility of an ex-presidential inquisition once again lurks around the corner, the idea of how winners and losers, leaders and followers, can live together once again after the fall that was digital media remains a mystery.

To conclude with a lesson from *Tintin* and the *Picaros*, let's remember that in the end, whether the sign over the slum says "Viva Tapioca" or "Viva Alcazar", the reality of the mess there will still remain. But so will the hope that truth and loyalty, whether in *Tintin* or in real life, will win the day, too.

The writer is professor of Media Studies, University of San Francisco

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

STOP ISRAEL

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Starving Gaza' (IE, July 25). The continued suffering of Gazans must stop. Nothing in the world can justify such a brutal oppression of civilians. We all must raise our voice in support of the besieged Palestinian people. How can the conscience of world leaders allow any of this? Not just Gaza, there is human suffering every day or another in every corner of our planet because of the power plays of a few old men. Have we shut our eyes completely? Or do we see terms like international law and rules-based order selectively? We must re-centre empathy and common sense and show our leaders that we value these virtues. We cannot allow them to push us back into the stone age.

Sanjeev Raina, Greater Noida

A DANGEROUS BILL

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Spell out LWE' (IE, July 2025). There have been many instances due to which the scope of desert in India has come into question. India has very poor ranking on the World Press Freedom Index. The Vice President of India just resigned. Then there are numerous cases of unlawful preventive detentions. It is no surprise then that the Maharashtra Assembly has passed a law with unambiguous terms and unclear definitions pertaining to "left wing extremism". Although its use and importance is yet to be seen, passing

such bills with no significant opposition raises serious questions.

Daksh Solanki, New Delhi

GOOD DEAL

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Closing the Deal' (IE, July 25). The India-UK trade deal, between two large economies of different systems, is a rare gem. It stands as an ideal plank for developed nations to follow to make a deal with India as it offers the most attractive market with an expanding economy and rising disposable incomes. India, however, must be careful to ensure that trade directly benefits both partners, and not just the developed world. The "rules of origin" ensure that only genuine goods get preferential access and no third player sidesteps these and exploits the terms of the deal.

Ashwin Shah, Lucknow

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Closing the Deal' (IE, July 25). The India-UK trade deal has finally come into effect. This will help Indian products become more competitive in the British markets, as the tariff barriers have been lifted. Even India will become a more open economy, with the facilitated ease of doing business. In this era, we need to diversify our trade even further and make our economy resilient. All-in-all, this is a welcome step amid increasing geopolitical and economic uncertainties.

Prachi Didi, Jodhpur

9 BIG PICTURE

KNOW YOUR SALT

TABLE/COMMON SALT

The most commonly used cooking salt. In India, common salt is made by evaporating sea water in shallow pond-like structures. The resulting salt crystals are then harvested and processed, including fortification with iodine, before being packaged and sold in the market

ROCK SALT

Popularly known as *sendha namak* and consumed largely during fasting seasons, this salt is harvested by mining salt rock deposits in the mountains. The salt rocks, after being cleaned to remove impurities, are broken into smaller granules, before being packaged and distributed

HIMALAYAN PINK SALT

Like *sendha namak* it is mined from salt deposits on rocks, primarily in Pakistan's Khewra salt range — the world's second largest salt mine. However, following a ban on imports from Pakistan India is looking at other markets such as the UAE, Iran and Malaysia

BLACK SALT

Also a form of rock salt, it is made by mixing the mined rock salt with a blend of spices and herbs, including Babul bark and triphala. It is then heated in a kiln under high temperatures causing a chemical reaction that lends it a very distinct smell

LOW-SODIUM SALT

The low-sodium salts that are available in the market are essentially table salt, where a part of the sodium chloride is replaced with potassium chloride

ONE of Hindi cinema's most iconic scenes, Kalida in *Sholay* swears by a pinch of salt — “*Sardaar, maine apka namak khaya hai*” — as he pledges his loyalty to Gabbar. The ubiquitous grainy white condiment failed to save his life and in the 50 years since, a shift in consumption patterns in lifestyles has seen salt slowly eating away at Indians' health.

While the permissible amount of salt consumption, as prescribed by the World Health Organisation, is 5 gm a day per person (2,000 mg of sodium or about a teaspoon of salt), several studies have pointed to how Indians consume more than double the amount, posing risks of hypertension, stroke and heart diseases.

According to the Indian Council of Medical Research-National Institute of Nutrition's (ICMR-NIN) 2024 Dietary Guidelines for Indians, existing evidence reveals a “deleterious impact of high salt intake on blood vessels and blood pressure”, which in turn can cause heart attack, stroke and/or kidney problems. High amounts of salt in the body results in water retention, which further increases the pressure on the heart to pump larger volumes of fluid, causing hypertension.

The primary culprit, experts agree, is ultra-processed food. According to the NIN's Dietary Guidelines, processed foods such as “snacks, soups, sauces, ketchup, salted butter, cheese, canned foods, papads, and salted dry fish, salted nuts/dry fruits contribute to higher intake of salt. Preserved meats/vegetables and ready-to-eat foods contain a lot of sodium”.

Prompted by the “alarming” salt consumption patterns, earlier this month, ICMR-NIE (the National Institute of Epidemiology) launched Project Namak, a three-year-long community-led programme that focuses on salt reduction in individuals with hypertension.

Sharan Murali, senior scientist at ICMR-NIE and the principal investigator of Project Namak, says, “Our research team evaluated the hypertension component of the NP-NCDC (National Programme for Control and Prevention of Non-Communicable Diseases) programme in 21 districts in the country and understood that 78 per cent of the individuals with hypertension who come for follow-up receive some counselling for behavioural change in the OPD. This opportunity may be used to counsel the individuals with hypertension on dietary salt reduction as an add-on along with the medications.”

Over the last two decades, there have been several such studies, including those published in the *Journal of Hypertension*, *Journal of the American Heart Association* and *Nutrients*, among others, that point to high salt intake among Indians.

According to India Salt Market Report and Forecast 2025-2034 by Claitor Corporation published this year, the India salt market reached around USD 2.32 billion in 2024. The market is projected to grow at a compounded annual growth rate of 6.20% between 2025 and 2034, reaching almost USD 4.23 billion by 2034.

With experts also warning against too little salt — Dr Vivekananda Jha of the George Institute of Global Health says “physiologically, at least 500 mg of sodium is compatible with good health” — how does one strike a balance with something as ubiquitous as salt?

The search for salt

Historians say that the earliest evidence of salt production in India can be traced to the Indus Valley Civilization, although consumption would date even further back, “particularly 11,000 years ago or a little later when they realised that they need to add salt to their diet,” notes Kurush Datta, archaeologist and culinary anthropologist.

“Salt is indispensable to all mammals. As a rule, hunter-gatherers used to get all the salt they needed from the food they ate. They didn't need to add anything at all. It's only when we became farmers that we started adding salt,” he says.

“On every continent,” notes Mark Kurliansky in his book *Salt: A World History*, “once human beings began cultivating crops, they began to look for salt to add to their diet. How they learned of this need is a mystery... however, most people choose to eat far more salt than they need, and perhaps this urge — the simple fact that we like the taste of salt — is a natural defense.”

With that, salt became one of the most valuable commodities of trade. Kurliansky notes, “Where people ate a diet consisting largely of grains and vegetables, supplemented by the meat of slaughtered domestic farm animals, procuring salt became a necessity of life, giving it great symbolic importance and economic value. Salt was one of the first international commodities of trade; its production was one of the first industries and, inevitably, the first state monopoly.”

In India, salt holds a deeply symbolic value given how Mahatma Gandhi shook an empire with his Salt Satyagraha.

While the origins of salt consumption are global, Indians took to salt more organically.

In the absence of any recorded evidence, Subba Rao M Gavaravarapu, scientist and Head of Nutrition Information, Communication and Health Education at NIN, cites “traditional knowledge” to explain Indians' tendency to consume higher amounts of salt. “We are a tropical nation and many of our people would work outdoors and perhaps to compensate for the sodium loss through sweat, sodium was incorporated through food,” he says.

To understand the detrimental effect of this condiment, however, it is important to know that salt (NaCl, with sodium and chloride ions in a 1:1 ratio) is only as harmful as its sodium content. And that, given our shifting eating patterns, sodium is more harmful than more than just the salt we consume.

While, as the NIN guidelines say, “a major amount of sodium does come from the visible addition of salt”, there are also innocuous ways sodium makes its way into our bloodstream.

For instance, there is sodium bicarbonate or baking soda, the indispensable ingredient in bakery products. There's also monosodium glutamate or MSG which gives food its umami or savoury flavour and is commonly present in canned food. Then there's sodium nitrite, which is commonly used by commercial meat processing units to preserve meat, and sodium benzoate, which gives acidic foods and beverages such as colas, soft drinks, pickles, salad dressings and jams and preserves their shelf life. And for those into carbonated drinks such as diet soda, there's sodium saccharin to reckon with — all of which add to our sodium intake without any real addition of salt itself or table salt as we know it.

Food critic and historian Pushpesh Pant reiterates the need for broadening the understanding of salt to manage one's sodium consumption. “In Sanskrit, the word for salt is *lavana*, which does not necessarily mean sodium chloride, which we know as table salt. It could mean potassium chloride, sodium bicarbonate. It could be anything which is alkali,” he says. *Khar*, the alkali ash that is commonly used in food in the Northeast, is sodium carbonate, he explains.

Experts broadly agree that among the easiest ways to combat this excessive supply of sodium to our bodies is to consume less table salt — and achieve a better balance of flavours.



With Indians consuming salt far in excess of the WHO-mandated limit of 5 gm a day, TRISHA MUKHERJEE speaks to epidemiologists, researchers and food historians to trace the cultural pull of the condiment — and why it comes at a cost to public health

THE FAULT IN OUR SALT

In his seminal 1998 work, *A Historical Dictionary of Indian Food*, the late food historian KT Acharya notes that there are six “pure” tastes: *madhura* (sweet), *aml* (sour), *lavana* (salty), *katu* (pungent), *tikta* (bitter) and *kashaya* (astringent). “Every meal was expected to include all the six tastes, and in the order just listed, according to Sushruta (ancient Indian physician and doctor),” the book says.

Traditionally, the use of salt in cooking has been in tandem with the other five tastes, Pant explains, while saying that different regional cuisines in India have their own equation with salt. “If you are a coastal person, most of your salt would come from sea water fish. The pungency of mustard oil, which is used generously in Bengali cuisine, ensures a limited requirement of salt... Now, if you are a Muthia living away from the coast line, and you are eating millets, which are not very palatable on their own, you will increase the levels of salt and chillies. Or if you are having preserved foods like *papad* or *bari*, salt content is higher,” Pant says.

Low-sodium way

Concerns of excessive salt intake and its detrimental effects on public health have prompted a host of studies and small-scale interventions to produce “low-sodium” salt. This involves replacing a part of the sodium in sodium chloride with other additives, primarily potassium. But so far, these experiments haven't achieved the required scale in India.

“The concern in salt is the sodium. To reduce sodium, other kinds of salts are added. Mostly, it is replaced with potassium but there are issues with low-sodium salts — it is expensive and its supply is short,” says NIN's Gavaravarapu.

The practice of adding potassium to packaged common salt, however, is yet to take off on a mass scale in the country given the lack of India-specific studies and with little clarity around its potential benefits or perceived risks.

Dr K Srinath Reddy, founder president of the Public Health Foundation of India (PHFI) who formerly headed the Department of Cardiology at AIIMS, says that following initial trials across the world, where part of the sodium in salt was replaced with either potassium or magnesium, there were concerns over whether it could “cause harm to people with reduced renal and kidney function”.

“Potassium is a bit corrosive, so we would have to use it in concentrations that won't damage the lining of the stomach and intestines. There were also concerns over whether low-sodium salt would cause hyperkalemia (excess potassium levels in the blood) in the elderly with renal function though there were successful trials in the US that said it was safe for them. But the findings weren't accepted because the trials were small,” Reddy says, while pointing to a study conducted in China by the George Institute for Global Health.

With a “fairly large” sample size of over 20,000 participants from 600 rural villages in five provinces in the country, the China Salt Substitute and Stroke Study (SSA5), published in 2023 and conducted over five years, found that “replacing salt with a reduced-sodium added-potassium salt substitute” significantly lowers the risk of stroke, heart disease, and death.”

The institute has submitted a funding request to ICMR to conduct a similar study in India, said Dr Vivekananda Jha, Executive Director at The George Institute for Global Health, India.

“The study in China proves the point that lower than usual levels of dietary sodium can be tolerated without ill-effects, and a certain amount of potassium is required to balance the sodium. But whether that's going to become public policy in India, where people are going to accept the altered tastes, we will have to see,” says Dr Reddy, emphasising that “ideally”, potassium, which negates the effects of sodium, should be consumed in the form

of fruits and vegetables rich in the mineral.

“One can consume bananas and coconut water. But every body may not be able to take all of it all through the year. So introducing a salt substitute like in the China trial is something we should maybe consider... Do some pilots to see what the response is, what the safety is, and what the popular acceptance is,” he adds.

The last time a population-level health intervention in salt was carried out was in 1962, when common salt was fortified with iodine under the National Goitre Control Programme. Presently, all packaged salt sold in India, from common salt to rock salt, is iodised.

NIN's Gavaravarapu flags another, largely behavioural, concern regarding low-sodium substitutes not being “salty enough.” “People think that because it is low-sodium, they can have more of it. Ideally, you should use it even less than usual so that the benefit of replacing it with potassium is passed on,” he says.

The writing on the package

While we wait for more research and consensus on reducing the sodium component in common salt, experts advocate the need to create awareness among consumers.

Dr Reddy and NIN's Gavaravarapu reveal that the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), a statutory body under the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, is looking at the feasibility of “front of the package” labeling that would explicitly warn customers of high levels of sugar, salt and trans fat, among others.

“If a package notes that it has so many grams per cent of fat or carbohydrate or trans fats, unless I have studied nutrition, I wouldn't understand any of it. That's why you require warning labels that communicate clearly and help people recognise there's a problem with the salt or sugar in the product,” says Dr Reddy. The UK and Ireland, for instance, follow a “traffic light” packaging model, where red, amber and green colours are used to indicate the levels of fat, saturated fat, sugar, and salt in food products.

Public health scientist and epidemiologist Dr Monika Arora says the country needs a behavioural change in terms of salt consumption. “Salt can be reduced in the food served in schools, hospitals and government canteens, which are regulated places. The tongue and palate get adjusted to a gradual reduction. Midday meal is an excellent way of going about it. Another way is to tax high-salt products, making it an incentive for the industry to start reformulating their products,” she says.

Celebrity chef and entrepreneur Sanjeev Kapoor says he realised the dangers of excess salt much before it became a talking point.

“When I dived deeper into healthier food options, I realised that it is not only salty but it is the culprit, but also salt,” he says.

He also joined hands with the government to raise awareness about healthy food habits through FSSAI's “Eat Right Movement” that focussed on “reduction of high fat, sugar and salt foods in the diet”.

“We have to understand that taste is something that you get used to. Your palate gets trained. Salt is a flavour enhancer. If there is low salt in a dish, other flavours may also seem muted. But it also hides flavours. Which means if you add too much salt in a dish, the top note is of salt and you never experience the real flavour of other ingredients. If you want to use less salt, you can start by enhancing the flavour with other ingredients. Lemon works really well as do herbs like mint, coriander, basil and tulsi,” he says.

While cutting down on salt may seem like hard work, Kapoor's new catchphrase may hold the key — around 20 years ago, while he started with *Namak Swad Anusar* (salt as per health),

Three times the price of other oils: Why coconut oil is on fire

HARISH DAMODARAN
NEW DELHI, JULY 25

INDIA'S ANNUAL retail food inflation rate fell to minus 1.06% in June, the lowest since January 2019. But consumers continue to feel the pinch from high prices on some items.

Among them are vegetable oils, where the year-on-year price increase reached 17.75% in June, according to the National Statistics Office.

The all-India average modal (most quoted) retail price of palm oil is currently Rs 132 per kg, compared with Rs 95 a year ago, data from the Department of Consumer Affairs show. The prices of soybean, sunflower, and mustard oils have risen from Rs 120 to Rs 154, Rs 115 to Rs 159, and Rs 150 to Rs 176 respectively over the same period. However, the increase in prices of these oils is nothing compared to what coconut oil has seen.

Since the beginning of this year, the wholesale price of coconut oil at Kerala's Kochi market has zoomed from Rs 22,500 per quintal to Rs 39,000 per quintal. At the retail level, the oil is selling for around Rs 460 per kg, close to double its early-January price of Rs 240-250.

This makes coconut oil more expensive now than even sesame (or gingelly) oil, a traditionally premium oil that is retelling for about Rs 425 per kg.

"Not only are coconut oil prices at all-time highs, I haven't in my 50 years of trading seen these go up so much in such a short time," Thilath Mahmood, president of the Cochin Oil Merchants' Association (COMA), said.

Global factors

Tom Jose, chairman of the Irinjalakuda (Kerala)-based KSE Limited, India's largest solvent-extracted coconut oil producer, attributes the unprecedented price rise mainly to output in the Philippines and Indonesia falling due to El Niño-induced drought.

These two countries are the world's top producers-cum-exporters of the oil that is extracted from the dried white flesh or kernel of coconut (Table 1).

The El Niño event, which lasted from July 2023 to June 2024, affected the growth of coconut flowers and fruit development during the 2024-25 marketing year that began in October. The impact is being felt now, as it takes roughly a year for a single coconut to go from flowering on the tree to a fully mature fruit that is ready for harvesting.

"The weather disturbances, on top of ag-

Table 1
COCONUT OIL PRODUCTION IN TOP 3 COUNTRIES

	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26
Philippines	18.50 (14.90)	16.30 (11.30)	16.65 (11.30)
Indonesia	10.30 (7.06)	9.90 (6.50)	10.00 (6.80)
India	5.70 (0.19)	5.70 (0.15)	5.73 (0.15)

Numbers in lakh tonnes; figures in brackets are exports; data are for marketing year (October-September). Source: US Department of Agriculture

Table 2
INDIA'S EDIBLE OIL CONSUMPTION IN 2023-24

Palm oil	97.54
Soyabean oil	52.8
Mustard oil	37.81
Sunflower oil	35.85
Rice bran oil	11
Cottonseed oil	9.42
Groundnut oil	6.98
Coconut oil	3.9
TOTAL*	58.66

*Numbers in lakh tonnes; *includes sesame, safflower & other minor oils. Source: The Solvent Extractors' Association of India*

Explained Economics

Explained Science

Explained Climate

#ARSENICLIFE: STORY OF A VIRAL STUDY & A CONTENTIOUS RETRACTION

FIFTEEN YEARS ago, a group of scientists made the bold claim of having discovered a microorganism that could survive using chemistry different from any known life-form. On Thursday, the journal *Science*, where these findings were reported, formally retracted the 2010 paper, saying it was fundamentally flawed.

While there is broad scientific consensus against the study's findings, the retraction nonetheless is contentious, and potentially opens a Pandora's box for academic publishing.

Why study went viral

Living beings typically rely on a number of common elements, including carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, oxygen, phosphorus and sulfur, to build biomolecules such as DNA, proteins and lipids.

In 2009, researchers collected a microbe from Mono Lake, a salty and alkaline body of water in California. In the lab, they claimed to have found that this microbe could replace phosphorus with arsenic, an element that is typically toxic. Phosphorus is essential to the structure of DNA and RNA and to the function of the energy-transporter molecule ATP.

If confirmed, the discovery would change scientists' fundamental conceptions about life on Earth, and possibly beyond. Naturally, the study received a lot of attention, and travelled well beyond the typical terrain of academic conferences and scientific journals.


Many scientists around the world expressed serious concerns with the study's methodology and conclusions. Most notably, the discovery was picked up by the Internet. On the then nascent Twitter, it trended with the hashtag #arseniclife. The study's authors also faced extreme scrutiny into their personal lives.

Why retraction is contentious

Science has not accused the paper's authors of misconduct or fraud, and in-

Why renewables alone can't help

In recent years, the world has witnessed a boom in the growth of renewable energy capacity. However, this has not reduced the use of fossil fuels, which has led to an unabated rise of greenhouse gas emissions



AMITABH SINHA

THE WORLD added about 582 gigawatts (GW) of renewable energy capacity in 2024, representing an increase of 15% over the previous year, according to a new report by the International Renewable Energy Association (IRENA). This was the largest annual increase in renewable energy capacity in any single year.

Currently, the installed capacity of renewable energy across the globe stands at more than 4,442 GW, and around 30% of the world's electricity is produced from renewable sources.

The new report by IRENA, which was released on July 10, also said that at the current rate of growth, the world would come close to achieving its target of tripling renewable energy installed capacity by 2030. This target is considered crucial for limiting global warming, and was part of the agreement made at the COP28 meeting in Dubai in 2023.

The rapid growth of renewable energy might give the impression that the world has made good progress on meeting its climate objectives. However, renewable energy has not even begun to replace fossil fuels at the global level.

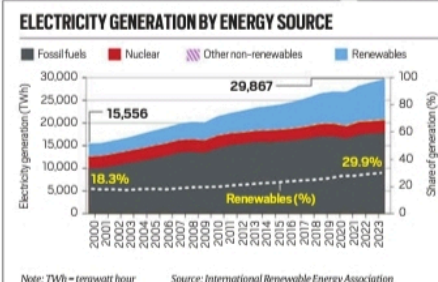
As of now, it is catering mainly to the rising electricity demand, which has increased three times since 1990 and is projected to grow even higher.

Unabated use of fossil fuels across the world

While only around 10% of new electricity installed capacity in 2024 was fossil fuel-based, the use of fossil fuels, in absolute terms, is still growing, according to the IRENA report.

Between 2012 and 2023, global electricity generation grew by 25% every year on average, and renewable energy expanded at a rate of about 6% during the same time. This has led to a steady rise in the share of renewables in the electricity generation mix. However, fos-

ELECTRICITY GENERATION BY ENERGY SOURCE



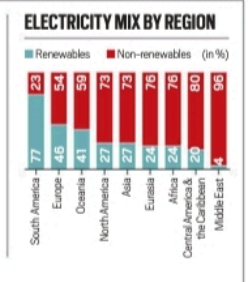
Electricity generation (TWh)

2000 2001 2002 2003 2004 2005 2006 2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014 2015 2016 2017 2018 2019 2020 2021 2022 2023

15,556 29,867 29.9%

Note: TWh = terawatt hour Source: International Renewable Energy Association

ELECTRICITY MIX BY REGION



Renewables Non-renewables (in %)

South America 23 77

Europe 46 54

Oceania 51 49

North America 27 73


Asia 27 73

Eastern 24 76

Africa 24 76

Central America & the Caribbean 20 80

Middle East 4 96



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sil fuels currently account for more than 70% of global electricity production.

In absolute terms, more fossil fuels are being burnt today than 10 years ago to produce electricity. To make matters worse, the increase in use of fossil fuels is expected to continue for at least a few more years. As a result, greenhouse gas emissions have reached record highs in recent years.

Moreover, electricity is still only a small slice of total energy use. Just 20% to 22% of the total energy consumed in the world every year is in the form of electricity. Only 30% of electricity generation comes from renewable sources. This means that about 6% of the world's energy consumption comes from clean sources. More than 90% still comes from fossil sources.

Note that there are some countries, mainly in the Nordic region, where renewables account for a significantly higher share of total energy consumption. However, the special conditions existing in these countries are difficult to replicate elsewhere. According to projections, by 2050, even in the case scenarios, not more than 40% to 45% of the world's total energy consumption would come from clean sources.

This means that energy transition, which involves moving away from fossil fuels to towards renewable energy, on its own, is unlikely to help tackle the climate crisis. That is why carbon removal interventions, which are yet to become viable, assume great importance in the fight against global warming.

Regional imbalance in growth of renewables

There are other concerns with the manner in which the global energy transition is currently taking shape. So far, the bulk of renewable energy deployment has taken place in a handful of countries, while the others have been left behind.

The IRENA report pointed out that while renewable capacity increased by 15% globally in 2024, in India it grew by just 7%, and that too from a very low base. Africa is where the largest number of people without access live.

The IRENA report said 71% of the renewable capacity addition last year took place in Asia. This is slightly misleading as China alone accounted for more than 62% of global additions – that is, 364 GW of the 582 GW installed globally. The whole of Africa together got less than 1%.

For the last few years, China has been consistently installing more renewable energy than the rest of the world combined. Apart from developed countries, China, and some large players such as India, the renewable energy footprint has not grown at a fast pace.

It is true that these are the countries that also happen to be the biggest emitters of greenhouse gases. Effective energy transition here would be more consequential from the climate change perspective than in, for example, Africa.

However, this kind of lopsided deployment of renewable energy, coupled with the fact that China has a near monopoly on the production and supply chains of most of the renewable systems, could leave many countries and regions behind once again.

Renewable energy, such as solar and wind, might be available universally – unlike, say, petrol that is found in only limited geographies – but the technologies needed to harness this energy are getting increasingly inaccessible.

China dominates the production and manufacturing of solar PV systems, for example, and also consumes more than half of it. Large buyers such as the United States and India corner most of what is exported. There is little supply for others.

Also, manufacturing outside of China, which could have filled the gap, is struggling. This is because other countries are not able to compete with China's economies of scale, low labour costs, or state subsidies.

China's control over the renewable energy system has begun to appear similar to the OPEC countries' hold over global oil supplies. Energy security has emerged as one of the foremost concerns of countries, pushing many of them to secure whatever option is available to them, irrespective of whether it is clean or not.

The transition to clean and renewable energy systems is not as simple as it is sometimes made out to be. There are several layers of complexities which make the goal of curbing global temperatures below 2 degrees Celsius look increasingly unrealistic to achieve.

Why minimum standards for handling diagnostic samples are important

SOHINI GHOSH
NEW DELHI, JULY 25

THE UNION Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHW) last week assured the Delhi High Court that it will soon notify minimum clinical standards for collection, handling, and transport of diagnostic samples.

The MoHW said that subject experts held "detailed internal deliberations for formulating minimum standards" following which the draft minimum standards were finalised. The policy is currently being vetted by the legislative department of the Ministry of Law & Justice, the MoHW told the court.

Why this matters

Existing Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) guidelines on collection and handling of clinical samples are rudimentary and piecemeal.

For instance, the Pune-based ICMR-National Institute of Virology (NIV) has specific Guidelines for collection, packaging

and transport of specimens for testing for high risk viral pathogens," which include guidelines for handling samples containing Covid-19 virus. These guidelines, however, are not comprehensive; they only relate to handling of specific "high risk" viruses.

These are also not uniformly enforced owing to gaps in the law governing labs and sample collection centres, as well as its enforcement. Medical professionals have long been calling for reform; the MoHW's soon-to-be-notified policy seeks to answer this call.

Current loopholes

Beyond lack of comprehensive clinical guidelines, experts have pointed to a couple of significant loopholes vis-à-vis the medical testing ecosystem.

First is the continued existence of standalone collection centres.

In 2018, the Centre had notified that sample collection centres should be part of the main laboratories, and that the parent laboratories should be held accountable for their compliance of norms. But in the absence of clear-cut standards, standalone collection centres continue to be registered in various states, posing a fundamental problem when it comes to ensuring compliance with clinical standards.

In November 2020, the National Accreditation Board for Testing and Calibration Laboratories (NABL) had flagged that "there are mismatches in the declaration (of samples) made by (accredited) lab to NABL and the actual collection centres/facilities/sources of collection which are available on their websites or other documents".

At the time, it advised labs to declare all sample collection centres within 30 days, and cautioned that "any sample collection not under the responsibility of the lab and not covered under its (quality) management system is non-compliant with the accreditation norms and liable to action by NABL". The MoHW's new policy will likely address this issue.

Experts have also called for revisiting

Explained Policy

current laws governing "who" can collect samples and issue reports. In 2019, pathologist Dr Rohini Jain moved the Delhi High Court, challenging the Clinical Establishments (Central Government) Amendment Rules 2018, specifically on minimum requirements for signatory authorities in diagnostic laboratories.

He sought implementation of a 2017 order of the Supreme Court, which said that a lab report should be counter-signed only by a registered medical practitioner with a post graduate qualification in pathology. At the time, he also sought guidelines on minimum standards for medical diagnostic labs with regard to sample collection centres, sample transport, electronic signatures on pathological reports by authorised signatories, number of pathology labs a pathologist can visit in a day and daily internal quality control.

But the Centre's Clinical Establishment (Central Government) Amendment Rules 2020 did not address the issue, allowing

"unqualified and unregistered non-medical persons viz MSEs (ph) to issue reports to issue pathology reports without the signature/counter signature of a pathologist," according to Jain.

One man's fight

Jain challenged these amended rules, and in August 2021, also moved court highlighting an RT-PCR testing "scam" during the Kumbh Mela in Haridwar that year where one lakh fake tests were reportedly conducted on devotees by unqualified intermediaries.

"The accused diagnostic labs in Delhi and Haryana were able to collect samples and conduct a huge number of tests where they have no sample collection centres at Uttarakhand. It is clear that a scam of such enormity has only been possible because of the lack of essential minimum standards on the issue of sample collection/sample collection centres and sample transport policy," Jain had argued in his submission.

In 2023, the Delhi High Court directed

the Centre to consider Jain's plea as a representation and decide a solution in three months. In May 2023, the government held a meeting under the chairmanship of the Additional Director-General of Health Services, New Delhi, where Jain too was invited to make his representation.

After the meeting, the government decided to constitute four sub-committees of experts – pathology, biochemistry, hematology and microbiology – to define standards of procedures (SOPs) for sample collection, collection centres and sample transport policy.

When these guidelines were not notified even a year later, Jain in May 2024 moved the Delhi High Court again, accusing the government of wilful disobedience of the court's order. It is in this matter that the MoHW has now assured the court that a policy will be notified at the earliest.

Taking the ministry's submission on record, the court instructed that the standards be notified expeditiously, with a direction that the process "may be accelerated within the next three months".

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APPEAL TO INVESTORS

INDIA'S FDI PROMOTION POLICY NEEDS TO GO BEYOND PASSIVE FACILITATION TO A MORE PROACTIVE APPROACH

Making sense of FDI trends

NAGESH KUMAR

Director, Institute for Studies in Industrial Development, and a member of the Monetary Policy Committee, RBI



CONSIDERING THAT they bring a package of entrepreneurship, technology, and integration with the global value chains besides augmenting capital stock, foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows are welcomed by most governments which actively court MNCs to invest in their countries through promotion, facilitation, incentives, and concessions. India has progressively liberalised its FDI policy regime since 1991. Over the past decade, the Indian government has also undertaken reforms to enhance ease of doing business, lowered corporate tax rates, production-linked incentives, and has established Invest India as an investment promotion agency to attract FDI inflows.

In that context, recent reports appearing in the media suggesting that net inflows of FDI have plummeted to negligible levels have raised concerns. In this article, we make sense of the trends in FDI inflows to India. The confusion arises from 'Foreign Investment Inflows' reported in Reserve Bank of India (RBI) bulletins, which present gross inflows/gross investment to India, repatriations/disinvestments, as well as FDI by India or outward foreign direct investment (OFDI). The RBI works out net FDI by subtracting from gross FDI inflows the values of repatriations and OFDI. As both repatriations and OFDI flows have grown in recent years, the net FDI after subtracting them from gross FDI inflows of \$81 billion in 2024-25 leaves a marginal figure of \$353 million. This is what is relevant as a balance-of-payments (BoP) entry. But from the point of view of development, FDI inflows and OFDI represent two distinct phenomena, both favourable and hence promoted, but they should be kept separate, as argued below.

FDI is utilised by Indian enterprises abroad in search of markets, technology, and raw materials. An example is Tata Motors' acquisition of Jaguar Land Rover, giving it access to the latter's technology, brands, global footprints, and value chain. As the Indian companies grow in scale and ambition to become global players, they will generate more OFDI. Hence, OFDI rising from \$16.7 billion in 2023-24 to \$29.2 billion in 2024-25 is a positive trend. It should not be seen as an outflow of resources but as something extending the global reach of Indian industry. Hence, it is not appropriate to subtract it from the gross FDI inflows.

The increase in gross FDI inflows from \$71.3 billion in 2023-24 to \$81.0 billion in 2024-25 is impressive in the context of declining global flows over the past years as reported by the UN Trade and Development's World Investment Report (WIR) 2025. The 2024-25 figure, however, did not cross the peak of \$85 billion received in 2021-22 on top of \$82 billion received in 2020-21. Those years, however, were aberrations representing the 'gold rush' of over \$20 billion in Jio Platforms by tech majors including Google, Facebook, Qualcomm, and private equity (PE) players and sovereign

wealth funds like KKR, PIF, and the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority. After the 2020-22 boom, the gross FDI inflows had levelled to around \$71 billion in line with the pre-Covid trend.

What is new is the rising trend of repatriations in recent years, from around \$28 billion per annum during FY21-FY23 to \$44 billion in 2023-24 and \$51 billion in 2024-25. Arguably, repatriations are like servicing burden in the case of borrowings. Their recent rise results from a combination of factors. One is the rise of PE players like KKR and Blackstone among the FDI investors who keep an eye on the valuations of their investments and liquidate them to book profits. Secondly, as the Institute for Studies in Industrial Development Report (IISID) 2024-25 has reported, valuations of Indian subsidiaries of MNCs are much higher than their parents. For instance, the price-to-earnings ratio of Maruti-Suzuki India is 36 compared to under 12 for its parent. This has led some MNCs like Hyundai to offload some of their equity in their Indian subsidiaries for repatriation to support their global requirements.

Gross inflows, therefore, are better

indicators of a country's investment climate or the 'pull factor' and should be paid greater attention. Yet the net FDI inflows, even after offsetting the repatriations, at \$29.6 billion in 2024-25 are higher than \$26.8 billion in 2023-24.

The other positive trend is India's emergence as the most attractive destination globally for greenfield investments with 1,080 projects in 2024 (after the UAE), among developing countries, according to WIR 2025. Greenfield FDI represents fresh investments in fixed assets and hence has a more favourable development impact than acquisitions.

Leading investor surveys confirm the growing attractiveness of India as an investment destination. The 2024 IJETRO Business Conditions Survey, for instance, highlighted an outstanding improvement in India's performance, with 80% of Japanese firms expecting to expand operations in India, compared with 45% for all regions and only 22% for China. Yet, there is no room for complacency as India remains an underperformer vis-à-vis its potential, according to the simulations reported in IIDR 2024-25. Given that industrialised countries like the US are now aggressively courting FDI to revive their manufacturing sector through incentives, high tariffs, and other protectionist policies, the landscape for FDI promotion has become more competitive. India's FDI promotion policy needs to go beyond passive facilitation to a more proactive approach. This will require identifying key MNCs exporting to India but not having invested in the country and approaching them to consider investing in the country and savour the immense potential of India as a manufacturing destination.

Views are personal

Gaza's humanitarian crisis

Israel's 21 month-long conflict with Hamas is taking a huge toll of Palestinian lives

RESPECTS FOR A cessation of hostilities between Israel forces and Hamas in Gaza—mediated by the US, Qatar, and Egypt—appear elusive with US special envoy Steve Witkoff stating that Hamas showed a "lack of desire to reach a ceasefire". Israel is ready only for a temporary ceasefire to facilitate the return of 50 hostages still held in Gaza, only half of whom are alive. Hamas seeks guarantees that this ceasefire would evolve into a permanent cessation of hostilities, besides the full resumption of humanitarian aid into Gaza which Israel has blocked since March. Ceasefire or no ceasefire, these inflows must resume as starvation stalks the 2.1 million citizenry of the Strip. Around 11.5 people have so far died from hunger, including 80 children, according to the Gaza health ministry. Malnutrition is surging with 90,000 women and children in urgent need of treatment, according to the World Food Programme. As if all this were not tragic enough, Israeli forces have killed 1,026 hungry Palestinians who thronged the limited food distribution sites that is part of a contentious new aid programme since May that is overseen by the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation (GHF) backed by the US and Israel.

These dire conditions warrant sustained international pressure on Israel to allow trucks with humanitarian aid to enter Gaza immediately and allow this to be distributed through the United Nations (UN). Twenty-eight countries including Britain, Japan, and many European nations have issued a statement that the war "must end now" and condemned "the drip feeding of aid and the inhumane killing of civilians, including children, seeking to meet their most basic needs of water and food". But Israel is not heeding the international condemnation of its 21-month war with Hamas as it has US support. Currently, it is stepping up military operations in Deir al-Balah, a part of Gaza where it had earlier not deployed its ground forces.

Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is determined to keep on fighting till Hamas is destroyed, although the resistance group's top leadership has been taken out. Close to 90% of Gaza has now been declared off limits for the displaced Palestinians. Earlier this month, Israel's defence minister indicated that he wanted to establish a "humanitarian city" on the ruins of the southern city of Rafah to house 600,000 people and eventually the whole population of Gaza.

In this milieu, the UN has forcefully stated that the operations of the GHF are just a "fig-leaf" to advance Israel's military objectives in the Strip. Palestinians are forced to traverse long distances to access food from this aid distribution scheme in selected points so that they eventually relocate to southern Gaza. This appears to be the end game of Israel. Is it any wonder that the ceasefire talks are going nowhere? The limited progress in this regard is clearly a major setback to US President Donald Trump's ambitions of being a peacemaker. While he secured a three-phase ceasefire ahead of his presidential inauguration, Netanyahu broke the agreement two months later after consulting his administration. While he obliged Trump to claim bragging rights as a peacemaker, perhaps in exchange for fewer restraints to deal with the Palestinians, the ones who are suffering the most are the hapless Gazan citizenry—of whom 59,106 have been killed, mostly women and children—and facing full-blown humanitarian crisis conditions.

Will AI help or wreck your summer vacation?

ON A RECENT trip to Taiwan, I turned to ChatGPT to ask for recommendations for the best beef noodles in my area—with the very specific request that the shop had to accept credit cards, as I was running low on my stash of local currency.

The chatbot immediately recommended a place that was a short walk and featured some of the most delicious, melt-in-your-mouth beef tendon I've ever had. I was pleased to be the only foreigner in the no-frills, no air-conditioning joint that was home to a fat, orange cat taking a nap under one of the metal stools. After my meal, I panicked when the impatient woman behind the counter had to put aside the dumplings she was folding to try and communicate in English to me that it was cash only. Even a quick Google search of the hole in the wall would've saved me from this fate, and I felt foolish for blindly trusting the AI's outputs.

Talking to other travellers, I realised I was lucky that the restaurant existed at all, hearing stories of AI tools sending confused tourists to places that were closed or even not real. Still, I found the tool incredibly helpful while navigating a foreign city, using it not just to find spots to eat but also to translate menus and signs, as well as communicate with locals via voice mode. It felt like the ultimate Asia travel hack.

Back home in Tokyo, where a week in has helped make Japan a top destination for global travellers, I decided to put various AI platforms to the test. I asked DeepSeek, ChatGPT, and the agentic tool Manus to create itineraries for someone seeking the city or Japan for the first time. The results were jam-packed and impressive, but mostly featured all the same tourist spots that you'd find on the top sites like Trip Advisor.

Some of the recommendations were also a little out of date. ChatGPT advised staying in a traditional inn that has been closed for over a year. And my request for more off-the-beaten-path locations spit out areas I specifically avoid at peak times, like Shimokitazawa, because of the crowds of tourists.

The outputs made sense given that these tools are an amalgamation of data scraped from the internet. It does save travellers the step of having to scroll through hundreds of websites themselves and put together an itinerary on their own. But relying on this technology also risks a further homogenisation of travel.

Already, the tech industry is being blamed to tourist hotspots for creating feedback loops that push visitors to the same destinations—with winners and losers chosen by a powerful algorithm. Given that AI systems are predominantly trained on English-language text, this can also mean that local gems easily slip through the cracks of training data. I can't imagine the late Anthony Bourdain eating pho on a stool anywhere in Vietnam that even had a website.

AI isn't entirely to blame, even if it adds a much larger scale to the issue. Before the rise of these tools, social media was already reshaping travel in Asia—sometimes in bizarre ways. There's a railroad crossing in my neighbourhood that an influencer posted on Chinese social media platform Xiaohongshu and is now constantly inundated with people doing photoshoots. One of my favourite summer swimming spots in the outskirts of the city unexpectedly went viral on TikTok last year, and it was shocking to see how crowded the riverbanks had become with foreigners. A town near Mt. Fuji garnered international headlines last year after briefly erecting a barrier to block the view of the iconic landmark when it was overrun with tourists trying to get the same shot—behind a convenience store, of all places.

Of course, this isn't limited to Asia. As AI applications proliferate, more people are turning to them to plan vacations from Barcelona to New Orleans. Instead of just advice on local customs, online travel forums have also become popular places to share clever ways to engineer prompts for generative AI tools to make more personalised itineraries. Still, there are inherent limitations to the data they're trained on. Perhaps it wouldn't hurt to put the phone down and ask a local for their top spots.

Ultimately, AI can break down language and cultural barriers for travellers in ways that seemed unimaginable a decade ago. That's a good thing, and the convenience is undeniable. But it's good to remember that some of the best parts of travel can never be optimised by a machine.

Transforming a nation of job seekers



MADAN PADAKI ARUP ROYCHOUDHURY

Respectively co-founder and policy advisor, Global Alliance for Mass Entrepreneurship

The draft national skill policy is a comprehensive document, but it can do more on taking entrepreneurship deeper into underserved regions

DEMOGRAPHIC DIVIDEND, A term used for over two decades to denote India's biggest advantage in the global marketplace, essentially means the country has been in a sweet spot where around 50% of its population is below 25 years of age and 65% below 35, creating a 'youth bulge'.

There has been long talk of taking advantage of this burgeoning working-age population is provided with education, skills, and meaningful employment to enable them to contribute significantly to India's economic growth. Many leading economies like China, Europe, and Japan are facing ageing, shrinking workforces, creating a massive opportunity for India. But if not harnessed, the 'demographic dividend' could become a 'demographic disaster' and burden India with high unemployment and increased social conflict.

As things stand, given India's population, no number of jobs created by central and state governments, PSUs, and the private sector will be enough. In order to achieve Viskit Bharat goals, mass employment needs to be supplemented by mass entrepreneurship. This is something that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has often spoken about, and the draft national skill policy 2025, released recently, shows the government's intent.

The draft policy says that 110 million students, 220 million "not in employment, education or training" individuals, and 20 million unemployed persons are either actively seeking or poised to seek employment, illustrating the scale of the challenge in our job market. It primarily focuses on skilling job-seeking youth, especially from underprivileged communities. It rightly states that India's demo-

graphic opportunity is inspiring, but not inevitable. It needs to be harnessed through timely policy and strategic interventions that are aligned with industry and workforce needs.

While there are important proposed policy measures on entrepreneurship, further clarity is required on certain issues. The report acknowledges that the environment for entrepreneurship and self-employment needs to be strengthened. It is essential to build risk-taking appetite among the youth, ease regulatory environment, and improve access to capital.

The policy says efforts will focus on cultivating aspirations through early entrepreneurship-related skilling, in middle and high schools, and awareness campaigns, connecting aspirants with mentors and resources to address challenges and explore opportunities. It says support will be planned for entrepreneurs whose ventures have failed to help them restart sustainable businesses. It aims to equip budding entrepreneurs with essential skills like business planning, financial management, and regulatory compliance.

These proposed measures should be commended, but they may not be enough. To begin with, there needs to be a National Entrepreneurship Mission under which governments, private sector, academia, non-profits, and the start-up ecosystem can come up with solutions and policy prescriptions at a local level. This mission needs presence in every district,

especially in aspirational ones, through nodal entities.

For example, the Global Alliance for Mass Entrepreneurship recently signed a strategic collaboration with NITI Aayog to foster the creation of vibrant entrepreneurship ecosystems, starting with pilot sites in Nagpur, Visakhapatnam, and some districts in Uttar Pradesh. The partnership seeks to empower local entrepreneurs, bringing together stakeholders in that ecosystem—from government, corporates, educational and financial institutions, and community organisations—to turn it into a movement that drives economic growth and job creation.

At the grassroots, mechanisms and support systems are needed to help those at the bottom of the pyramid in their entrepreneurship journeys, be it securing financial aid, opening Jan Dhan accounts, access to schemes like Mudra loans, adding them to ONDC or other e-commerce marketplaces, access to UPI, or other digital rails.

The focus of any entrepreneurship policy should be youth from the bottom of the pyramid and underprivileged sections. Many, especially women, persons with disabilities, and other economic minorities, may be willing to try out new ideas, so their skillingshould be comprehensive. They should be trained in accounting and business management, access to capital, market behaviour, and most importantly pricing—which a micro-entrepreneur can't be expected to know. The

policy should promote rural entrepreneurship by creating a framework to identify opportunities, spot talent, and provide localised and specific literacy and knowledge bodies. There should also be a dedicated 'remote buddy/mentor system' for rural entrepreneurs.

Now is the time to shift from 'Start-up India' to 'Entrepreneurship for Bharat'—because the next wave of entrepreneurs and job creators needs to come from smaller towns, remote districts, and villages. That is where governments, venture capital funds, and the private sector need to focus. The policy needs to come up with guidelines on how to give access to capital, mentorship, and digital infrastructure to rural populations who may have great ideas but not the structure to move it to a successful venture. This will also help reduce migration to overburdened cities and create resilient local economies.

Societal thinking also needs a shift. Most parents want their children to crack entrance exams to join elite colleges and land lucrative salaried jobs. What is needed is establishing continuous skill development and career pivoting as normal practices, with robust systems supporting adult education, professional transition, and career reinvention.

Enterprise and entrepreneurship are not alien concepts. We have been practising this for centuries, from the ancient land and maritime trade routes to our current status as a global start-up and innovation hub. It is time for India to normalise entrepreneurship as a way of life, so that in every city, district, and village, people are enabled to start their own ventures and create jobs and wealth.

—RS Narula, Patiala

● Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Promising pact

APROPOS OF "A win-win deal" (FE, July 25), the India-UK free trade agreement epitomises a strategic economic realignment, designed to foster reciprocal gains through calibrated liberalisation. It aims to enhance India's export competitiveness in sectors like pharmaceuticals, textiles, and information technology services, while facilitating greater UK access to India's burgeoning consumer and

financial markets. The agreement reflects not merely trade facilitation but a broader geo-economic partnership in a post-Brexit, multipolar world. If executed with institutional clarity, regulatory parity, and sectoral sensitivity, it holds the potential to catalyse investment flows, generate employment, and entrench a mutually beneficial framework of economic interdependence grounded in long-term strategic convergence. —N Sachin Reddy, Bengaluru

Prosperity blueprint

THE INDIA-UK Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement is a landmark pact eliminating tariffs on 99% of Indian exports, including basmati rice, millet, spices, cotton, and seafood, while safeguarding sensitive sectors like dairy and vegetables. The \$5.5-billion seafood market now enjoys zero tariffs, and access is granted to British whisky and automobiles under a quota. With

bilateral trade at \$56 billion, it's set to double by 2030. India will benefit in textiles, leather, gems, and information technology services, while the UK gains in sea, seafood, and clothing. Easier visas for Indian professionals and support for start-ups ensure mutual growth while reducing dependence on the US and its coercive trade tactics. —RS Narula, Patiala

THE ASIAN AGE

26 JULY 2025

Trade deal a 'win-win' for both India, Britain

At a time when multilateralism is fading fast even as Trump tariff tantrums are triggering bizarre responses, India has staged a global trading coup in signing a forward-looking Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) with the United Kingdom. Three years of delicate negotiations are behind this landmark deal that could lead to shared prosperity if the projections play out as intended once the British Parliament gives its assent.

Seen against the background of the East India Company and then the British Crown plundering India which was once the world's largest economy, it is the sense of equity behind modern thinking, devoid of the baggage of old, that distinguishes the ties between an evolved western economy and a growing eastern one. History takes its place in the rearview mirror as an old empire and a relatively new democracy resolves to trade as equals from now.

The details are in the fine print but the fact that luxury car bookings are being cancelled or deferred while awaiting the promised reduction of duties on British SUVs is a clear indication that the buyers' market is in fast forward mode already. But even as quotas open for British cars, electric vehicle producers are to be protected as they have made huge investments to make their cars in India.

Scotch drinkers may pay progressively less in the future even as the spirit matures in casks but it's only a sub-plot which is, however, emotionally important for the British as their exports are being taxed at 150 per cent

What is of the greatest significance is that India has stood steadfast on protecting its domestic agricultural economy from international market forces while going ahead with offering vast reductions in tariffs and duties on virtually everything else and not just on cars and alcohol. The UK will eliminate tariffs on 99 per cent of Indian exports, which means Indian agricultural products and processed foods may also gain free access to the British market.

In the light of tougher negotiations with Trump's US that may not be willing to be so accommodative regarding India's concerns for its foodgrain, dairy and fruit farmers, what has been achieved may make an ideal template for deals with other economies of the first world and others too. It may have taken time and patience to keep stonewalling, but an important principle has been upheld to preserve the interest of a vast section of Indians who depend on agriculture.

The easy access that India gets to products of more advanced technological industries as in aerospace, medical devices, semiconductors and cyber security that are readily available in the UK is another reason to cheer the comprehensive deal. Ease of business is also being promised though scepticism will remain due to India's sluggish bureaucracy and notorious red tape.

The benefits to skilled Indian workers, who can take jobs in the UK and not pay for their social security for three years while also avoiding double taxation and saving money for themselves just as India starts to gain too, are more reasons why the deal is being seen to be favourable to India while the UK believes its people will gain from a vital partnership with an old ally at a time of global churning in trade. It is easy to spot a win-win situation here, provided the will to follow through in letter and spirit is seen equally in India and in the UK.

Farewell to the Incredible Hulk

In the early 1990s, as cable television quietly made its way into Indian homes, it brought with it a curious kind of drama. Amid reruns of family soaps and dubbed animation series emerged a new universe — one filled with roaring crowds, flamboyant entrances, flying elbows and muscular men grappling under bright lights. This was the World Wrestling Federation (WWF) and at its epicentre stood a larger-than-life figure, Hulk Hogan.

For a generation that grew up on a diet of Amitabh Bachchan and Rajinikanth, Hulk — real name Terry Gene Bollea — was a superhero cast in flesh and muscle. He was the first true global star of wrestling and played a major role in turning the industry into a billion-dollar business.

The journey of Hulk, whose death has evoked a wave of mourning across the world, wasn't just about fame. As a child in Florida, he was shy and often bullied. Yet, he grew into the alpha male of sports entertainment. His life mirrored the recurring presence at WrestleMania events. Hulk even endorsed Trump's presidential run.

At the height of "Hulkamania", he made a natural leap into Hollywood, most notably starring opposite Sylvester Stallone in *Rocky III* and later headlining a string of family-friendly action comedies. While his film career never reached the heights of his wrestling superstardom, it cemented his place in mainstream American pop culture. Off-screen, Hulk shared a high-profile friendship with Donald Trump, whose own flair for theatrics made him a recurring presence at WrestleMania events. Hulk even endorsed Trump's presidential run.

Over the years, Hulk's body took a heavy beating. Multiple surgeries and injuries left him with metal supports in his back and face. The man once billed at 6'7" lost a few inches, worn down by decades of physical trauma. Yet, his aura still looms large over the sports entertainment industry.

THE ASIAN AGE

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Subhani



Dhankhar Beats: Shock & awe by V-P Drona Queen!



Shobhaa's Take

Hey Deva! Hey Ganesha! Far too much gholam is going on in our beloved Bharat Desh right now, just as Ganapati Bappa is getting ready for his annual visit. I cannot wrap my head around the Jhankhar Beats, oops... sorry — Dhankhar Beats — rocking the very foundations of our parliamentary process. Is Jagdeep Dhankhar the ultimate Drama Queen in the country? Going by the shock and awe his inexplicable and sudden exit as the vice-president of India triggered, the answer is "yes".

Dilli's overcrowded corridors of power are still shaking. So many theories! Such torrid speculation! Understandably so. When was the last time our country's V-P resigned abruptly, citing health reasons, that too, on the first day of the Rajya Sabha's Monsoon Session?

Never. Dhankhar said he wanted to "abide by medical advice". Which doctor? Whose advice? What ailment, Sirji? Too bad this explanation has few takers. Why is nobody believing the man who appeared hale and hearty hours before announcing his departure from a responsibility he had shouldered for three years. He was fit enough at 9 pm to arrive unannounced at Rashtrapati Bhavan and demand an audience with President Droupadi Murmu. Who does that? Who gatecrashes a lady's residence at that hour without prior warning, a confirmed appointment?

The startled ADC went into an absolute tizzy and did what any officer well versed with presidential protocol would do — he rushed to the military secretary to inform him about the presence of an unexpected "guest" on the premises.

But what triggered the resignation? No convincing

The view from Mumbai about who is likely to fill the vacated post (D.Y. Chandrachud) is interesting, but lacks political heft. The former CJI may appeal to Mumbai's elite... but his chances appear negligible to hardcore Dilliwallas.

tering their protest and walking out.

The view from Mumbai about who is likely to fill the vacated post (D.Y. Chandrachud) is interesting, but lacks political heft. It displays naïveté and wishful thinking rather than an understanding of shrewd political math. The former CJI may appeal to Mumbai's elite as an apt choice, even though his chances appear negligible to hardcore Dilliwallas. Dhananjay is "one of us". Polished, intellectually dazzling, a humanist, idealist and a man of conviction. Maybe the very qualities that disqualify him. But does he even want the job? If anything, he's better suited to move to the Hague and head the International Court of Justice. Now that's a sexy job to aspire to, for a person of his calibre.

Meanwhile, in our seething metropolis, the most important matter under discussion revolves around the surprising acquittal by the Bombay high court of all 12 accused in the maulana 7/11 train blasts that killed 167 innocents and injured over 800 in 2006. The probe was handled by the Maharashtra Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS).

A good 19 years have passed. And now comes the acquittal of "The Dirty Dozen" (as they were dubbed), with the high court saying the prosecution utterly failed to prove the case. Former Mumbai police commissioner A.N. Roy expressed "shock" over the acquittal, saying the probe was conducted in a professional manner and the evidence was collected "honestly and truthfully". (But disclosure: A.N. Roy is a family friend.) Then he added: "It's a judicial verdict. We

LETTERS NOT ALL ROSY

The India-UK Free Trade Agreement presents a major opportunity for boosting Indian exports, MSME growth, and job creation, particularly in labour-intensive sectors. However, its full benefits may be delayed due to implementation timelines and UK parliamentary ratification. Key challenges include phased tariff reductions with undisclosed quotas and potential stress on domestic industries like luxury cars and liquor. Non-tariff barriers, the absence of a concluded investment treaty, and the UK's evolving environmental standards further complicate matters.

Amarjeet Kumar Hazaribagh

KEEP WATCH ON LAC

APROPOS "China visas: A step forward" (July 25, 2025). India reopening tourist visas for Chinese citizens is a bit like inviting a guest over while still arguing about where the fence should be. Sure, Kaishah Mansarovar is open for spiritual tourism, but it's the diplomatic soul-searching that's truly underway. Talks have happened, troops have disengaged, but the border still feels more tense than a family dinner after a property dispute. Let's welcome the Chinese tourists with open arms and tightly crossed fingers. After all, trust is good, but binoculars on the LAC are better.

K. Chidanand Kumar Bengaluru

BOEING MYSTERY

SINCE the A1-171 crash, a surge in reported defects across Boeing aircraft worldwide has raised serious concerns. While the preliminary inquiry hints at pilot error, the credibility of the final report is already under suspicion. The Pilots' Association has questioned whether Boeing, under US pressure, is scapegoating the pilots to protect its commercial interests. Could pilots, feeling unjustly blamed, be silently protesting by amplifying minor technical issues, grounding flights, or turning back mid-air — exploiting system loopholes as a form of shadow warfare? It's a troubling possibility. Investigators, potentially under corporate or political coercion, must resist compromise.

R.S. Narula Patiala

Instagram handle @ShobhaaDe; Twitter handle @DeShobhaa

Farrukh Dhondy Cabbages & Kings

Anti-Semitism row rocks Britain again: Labour axes MP for remark on blacks...

"A boast is aimed at those who would care but the bragging says his best and still there's no one there." The complaint that's intended to flatter is ignored — its target is engaged in some other matter.

They are the distilled extracts of our fears We'd rather get morals from some silly pop song..."

From Kaalee Koo Aasegy Dhaklo, by Bachchoo

Diane Abbott, the "mother" of the House of Commons, is the longest-serving female Member of Parliament representing an East London constituency as a Labour member. Last week, Sir Keir Starmer's Labour government withdrew the whip from Ms Abbott, leaving her as an independent MP for the second time under Mr Starmer's leadership of Labour.

Her first and second expulsions, or suspensions, originate from the same offence. She was first suspended from Labour when it was still in Opposition. The Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn had suffered a massive defeat when the Tories won the 2019 election. Diane, a black woman of Caribbean descent, had been a close ideological comrade of Mr Corbyn and a spokesperson in his shadow cabinet.

After Mr Corbyn's defeat the party elected Sir Keir Starmer as leader and he set about purging the party of those he defined as anti-Semites,

including Jeremy Corbyn, who was accused by the European Equality and Rights Commission (ECHR) of, at the least, failing to tackle and quash the rise of anti-Semitic sentiments and pronouncements during his leadership of Labour. His successor suspended — virtually expelled — him to try.

But not Diane Abbott, Mr Corbyn's close associate — yet!

That followed when Diane wrote a newspaper article which said that the racism that black people suffered was very different — and by implication more life-threatening — than that faced by Jews, Irish, gay people and, she added, perhaps frivolously, "redheads".

Thunder, lightning and severe climate catastrophe in the skies. The Starmer government deemed this to be anti-Semitic and Ms Abbott was, in this first instance, suspended from the Labour Party.

Diane did, in some clumsy way, scramble to explain. She publicly apologised and said the statement that she had issued had been distorted and wasn't, as published, quite what she had intended.

Nevertheless, Keir Starmer was intent on his purges and winning back the vote of the Jewish population, which had traditionally, throughout the 20th century, been always with Labour. Diane was hauled in to dry.

The tucup was then subject not to storms but to a leftist earthquake. Diane had massive support from the public and even in the left-wing and

among the old guard of the Labour Party.

One day, she even asserted that she and black people were subject to racism when they were identified by their skin colour, which was not possible really with Jews or Irish or gay people. This time she left redheads out of the content.

Oh... that tucup! Stirred by eternal illiteracy — or possibly international Foreign Office considerations — Keir Starmer suspended Diane again.

Cautious reader, I know Diane — an acquaintance rather than a friend — and was naturally surprised at this development and Keir Starmer's cowardly kowtowing to some censorious lobbies.

Nowhere had Diane said anything about Benjamin Netanyahu's assault on and genocide in Gaza. Nowhere had she even hinted that the Holocaust didn't happen or that Hitler hadn't committed one of the greatest atrocities in human history. Nowhere did Diane say anything about the Caribbean and Americans were the descendants of the slaves captured by Europeans — a historical atrocity of incalculable injustice and horror.

No, this wasn't her point. It was much simpler — blacks are identifiable by the police, who stop and search black youths for drugs and weapons. White youth are not picked on in the same way (I am say-

ing this as a corollary to Diane's argument — she does even go into specific instances).

Though all the media reported this second suspension of Ms Abbott from the Labour Party, only one journalist, Jason Okundaye of the *Guardian*, ventured to question its justice. His article began by quoting the TV confrontation between Diane and Howe, the brilliant presenter of a series called *Devil's Advocate*, and Bernie Grant, then MP for Tottenham, on Channel Four. Diane had made a speech calling on black Britons to "return to Africa" — some black nationalist fantasy of the Jamaican Marcus Garvey (1887-1940).

The *Devil's Advocate* series, which I had conceived and commissioned when I worked at Channel Four TV, was dedicated to such challenges and confrontations — debates without restraint on affairs, events and controversies in the black and new communities of Britain.

Jason Okundaye's article began with the fact that no such platform or inclination to debate or discuss these issues remained, and that was a glaring hole in the national conversation.

Without it, I contend, the distinction between anti-Semitism is not distinctly asserted and several institutions, including it, seems, Keir Starmer's Labour government, gets away with confounding one with the other.

Bring back *Devil's Advocate*! Perhaps! (Though that depended on David's genius — and no, I'm not looking for a job)

Ceta joins India's expanding trade playbook



AJAY SRIVASTAVA

A new acronym has entered India's trade vocabulary — Ceta, short for Comprehensive Economic Trade Agreement — signed with the United Kingdom (UK) on July 24 in London.

The agreement covers 26 areas, including tariffs cuts, services, government procurement, digital trade, and intellectual property. It is expected to significantly boost bilateral trade, which stood at \$54.9 billion in FY25, with India running at \$51.7 billion sur-

plus. With new openings in goods, services, and investment, two-way trade could surpass \$80 billion within the next decade.

But more than being just a trade booster, the agreement signals a shift in India's FTA (free trade agreement) strategy — softening long-held protection in areas like public procurement, auto tariffs, and pharmaceutical licensing.

Here's a look at the key concessions exchanged.

Tariff concessions: For India, \$6.5 billion, 45 per cent of exports like textiles, footwear, carpets, automobiles, seafood, and fresh fruit will now enter the UK duty-free, down from earlier tariffs of 4-16 per cent. Another \$8 billion in exports — mainly petroleum, pharmaceuticals, diamonds, and aircraft parts — already enjoyed zero tariffs under UK rules even before the deal. The UK has committed itself to eventually eliminating duties on all Indian goods, with only a few farm items like rice and sugar

excluded. The UK also secures significant access. Today, 94 per cent of its \$8.6 billion exports to India face medium to high duties. India will now remove tariffs on 90 per cent of these goods, with 64 per cent, including salmon, lamb, aircraft parts, machinery, and electronics, getting immediate duty-free entry. Another 26 per cent, including chocolates, soft drinks, cosmetics, and auto parts, will see phased reductions over 10 years.

For the first time in any FTA, India will cut duties on a set number of high-end UK cars from 100 per cent to 10 per cent over 15 years. Alcohol tariffs will also fall sharply — from 150 per cent to either 75 per cent or 40 per cent — for qualifying UK-origin spirits priced at \$6 or more per bottle. India has kept out a list of sensitive products like apples, walnuts, herbs, certain seeds, gold bars, and smart phones.

Government procurement: For the first time, around 40,000 high-value contracts from central ministries and

departments — covering transport, green energy, and infrastructure — will be open to UK suppliers. These firms will be able to bid via India's Central Public Procurement Portal and GeM (government e-marketplace) platform, and will receive national treatment for all covered procurements. Notably, UK-origin goods with just 20 per cent domestic content will qualify as "Class II" local suppliers under India's Public Procurement Order, a category earlier reserved for Indian firms with 20-50 per cent local content. While India has retained limits for sensitive areas like health, agriculture, MSMEs, and small-value contracts, the overall concession is the most expansive India has ever granted in any trade deal.

Intellectual property concession: India has accepted the language in the "Intellectual Property" chapter, which could weaken its ability to issue compulsory licences during public health or climate emergencies. For the first time in any FTA,

India has agreed to explicitly uphold the principle of "adequate remuneration" to patent holders as a binding bilateral obligation. This risks narrowing India's policy space under domestic law. The deal also promotes voluntary licensing as the preferred approach, tilting the balance toward patent holders and away from public health needs.

Services: India has opened up key sectors like telecom (100 per cent foreign direct investment), financial services (FDI in insurance capped at 74 per cent), auditing, construction, and environmental services to UK firms under the new trade deal. India has also agreed to recognise some UK professional qualifications in fields like accounting, law, and architecture.

In contrast, the UK's offer on services is far more limited. While it allows Indian investment in sectors like information technology and consultancy, it has made no binding commitments to ease visa access for Indian professionals — a key Indian demand. India has also secured a niche role as yoga teachers and classical musicians. The UK hasn't restored post-study work visas and retains its strict

points-based immigration rules. One modest gain is the Double Contribution Convention, which spares over 75,000 Indian workers on short assignments from paying UK social security tax if they've paid in India.

Change in approach: The FTA marks a major shift in how India approaches trade deals. In the past, India shielded sensitive areas like government procurement, autos, and pharmaceuticals. But under this agreement, it has started opening up these sectors. Similar steps were taken in recent deals with the United Arab Emirates and European Free Trade Association, but the UK agreement goes even further — and includes the European Union and US could push this trend deeper. India's success in sectors like autos and pharma came from years of targeted policy support and government-procurement policies. By relaxing these protections, India risks weakening the very tools that helped it compete globally and ensured economic independence.

The author is the founder of GTRI

Why hunt for the black box?



DEVANSHU DATTA

In a 1968 bestseller, *Airport*, Arthur Hailey described operations at Chicago's O'Hare Airport ("Lincoln International Airport" in the book) during a storm. Hailey lacked imagination, and his writing style would have turned a poem into a script into a gynaecological report. But precisely due to these shortcomings, his plots adhered closely to real life.

One of the subplots in *Airport* was that of a bankrupt businessman trying to pull off an insurance fraud combined with suicide and mass murder. After taking out life insurance with his wife as beneficiary, he carried a suitcase bomb onto a flight.

This mirrored a real incident. On May 22, 1962, Continental Airlines Flight 11 from Chicago to Kansas City was blown up by Thomas Doty, killing all 45 persons on board. Doty had taken out insurance policies worth \$300,000 (several million in today's currency), with his wife as beneficiary. He was due to return to Chicago for a trial for armed robbery. Investigators worked it out and insurers refused to pay Doty's claims. In an earlier incident in 1955, Jack Gilbert Graham blew up a flight with his mother on board for insurance.

In 1985, Khalistan terrorists blew up Air India's Kandahar, killing 329 people. That led to the induction of more sophisticated systems to check for explosives. The Kandahar tragedy also provided the backdrop for Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*.

In 1988, a Hercules C-130, carrying Pakistan's President-elect, General Zia-ul-Haq and the US Ambassador, crashed, killing all 30 on board. US inves-



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINGHA

tigators said it was a mechanical failure. Pakistani investigators said there were explosives in a crate of mangoes — a theme explored by Hanif Kureishi in his noir masterpiece, *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*.

After 9/11, aviation security tightened further. Chemical sniffers and X-ray machines are backed up by dogs in security checks. Cockpits can be securely locked to prevent hijackings. But pilots don't need to get past security if they decide to crash an aircraft.

This may have happened with Malaysia Airlines Flight MH 370. MH 370, a flight from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing, disappeared on March 8, 2014. Radio communication stopped. When last tracked, the plane was heading in entirely the wrong direction. Attempts to contact it by radio and satellite phone were refused. The transponder, which transmits radar signals, was switched off.

Data automatically transmitted to satellites by the plane indicated engines were fine. The plane flew out over the Southern Indian Ocean until the point when its fuel would have been exhausted. By then, it was thousands of km from the nearest land.

Despite the very expensive, high-tech searches covering millions sq km of ocean, the aircraft hasn't been found. All 239 on board are presumed dead. The most cited theory is that a pilot incapacitated the crew and the other pilot, or locked them out of the cockpit, and then flew in the general direction of Antarctica until the fuel ran out. There has been endless speculation as to

why a pilot might wish to commit mass murder in this way.

Apart from inspiring literary efforts of varying quality, there's a lot of money riding on answers to aviation mysteries. Insurers want to know the cause before they pay out. Manufacturers hope that future aircraft sales are not jeopardised. Travellers avoid the aircraft models and airlines in question. It all adds up to billions.

The cause of the Air India 171 crash is still a mystery. Many theories are being aired, including the possibility of a deliberate crash. The conclusions from the Flight 171 investigation, whatever those are, will not necessarily scotch all conspiracy theories, given the pushes and pulls, and the money and reputation riding on the investigation.

There is one relatively simple technical fix however, that may reduce the element of mystery in future aviation incidents. Aircraft are equipped with sensors and recorders, which capture everything mechanical, electrical, and record cockpit conversations. Every crash is followed by a hunt for the black box among the debris.

As the MH 370 incident indicates, aircraft also transmit data automatically to satellites. So why not also stream all that data in real time to multiple recipients to reduce the chance of tampering? This is technically feasible. Rerouting systems to do this would add somewhat to costs, but the expense would be relatively minor in terms of the billions at stake. And, it would make the investigation of aviation incidents much easier and far more transparent.

Indira's India & Modi's Bharat

As Narendra Modi becomes India's second-longest consecutively serving Prime Minister, we look at how he compares with Indira Gandhi across four key dimensions

On the day that Narendra Modi won his third term in June 2024, it was inevitable that this year he would become India's second-longest serving Prime Minister in consecutive terms, surpassing Indira Gandhi (January 24, 1966 to March 24, 1977). It also became inevitable, therefore, that around this time in 2025, the season of Modi vs Indira comparisons will begin. Let me be the first, or among the first, off the block.

First of all, we need to look at the larger political realities in which each came to power and the challenges to their authority. Then we will assess their record across four dimensions: Politics, strategic and foreign affairs, the economy, and nationalism.

Mrs Gandhi and Mr Modi took over in completely different circumstances. There was a differential in political capital between the two. Mrs Gandhi had not won an election in 1966. She was a convenient compromise after Lal Bahadur Shastri's death. She didn't help her cause by looking overawed in Parliament early on, and Socialist Ram Manohar Lohia dismissed her as a "goongi gudhni" (a doll who didn't speak). She had also inherited a broken economy. The growth rate in 1965 was 1.26 per cent, in fact. The triple blow of a war, droughts, food shortages and instability and the deaths of two prime ministers in harness within 19 months had weakened India.

The picture for Mr Modi in 2014 was the exact opposite. He won a majority, the first in India after 30 years, and was his party's chosen candidate. The economy was averaging a robust 6.5 per cent growth across the preceding 15 years. His was a peaceful, planned, predictable electoral transition. The degree of difficulty on his first day in power was lower than Mrs Gandhi's, just as his political capital was enormously higher.

It is also important to underline that Mrs Gandhi's 17th year wasn't electorally earned, but self-gifted by mauling the Constitution in a Parliament where she had a brute majority (Congress was 352 out of 518) and the Opposition in jail. In contrast, Mr Modi's third term was earned through general elections, though he fell short of a majority this time. His 11 years have seen no challenge, either within his party or from the Opposition. The global situation has also mostly remained stable and favourable — until the arrival of Trump 2.0.

Now, the comparisons across the four dimensions we listed. On domestic politics, the first question is: Who's been the strongest Prime Minister of

India, Narendra Modi or Indira Gandhi? The rest don't count.

While Mrs Gandhi redefined her politics in an ideology (deep-pink socialism) first out of compulsion and then preference, Mr Modi was born, dyed and seasoned in his (self-)fascism. Mrs Gandhi's power ebbed and peaked with the times. Mr Modi's has almost been constant, barring the few months of hard dip after the 240 seats of 2024.

Even at 240 now, one challenge he need not bother about is from within his party. He's marginalised all, replacing the state satraps with unknown lightweights. That isn't so different from Mrs Gandhi. On ruthlessness, therefore, they are equally matched. On dealing with the Opposition and free speech, the Emergency will be a hard act to match even if somebody — God forbid — wished to do so.

On respect for institutions, the competition is tough, like a dead heat. For convenience, let's limit ourselves to just one institution — the Bharat Ratna. With V V Giri, Mrs Gandhi reduced the job to that of a porcelain President — a fragile, ornamental object expected to do nothing except sign on the dotted line. The Modi-era Presidents have been of a piece with those.

Mr Modi ruled with the power of a "56-inch chest" in his first 11-year comparison. An important question is who kept India's cohesion better. Mrs Gandhi ruthlessly fought insurgencies in Mizoram and Nagaland. Her troubles on this score came post-1980. Mr Modi has made a dramatic improvement in the Kashmir Valley and continued with normalisation in the Northeast. His Manipal is an unending failure. A big positive is the near destruction of the Maoists in east-central tribal India.

This dovetails neatly into strategic and foreign affairs. Mrs Gandhi's 11 years were across the peak of the Cold War. She signed a treaty with the Soviet Union with a cleverly drafted mutual security clause, endured the Nixon-Kissinger trip to China and deftly navigated the narrow spaces still available to India. Mr Modi started out with a "friends with all" approach but Pakistan-China realities soon caught up with personalised diplomacy. Mrs Gandhi announced India's nuclear status in 1974 (Pokhran-1). Mr Modi's 11 years were across the peak of the Cold War. She signed a treaty with the Soviet Union with a cleverly drafted mutual security clause, endured the Nixon-Kissinger trip to China and deftly navigated the narrow spaces still available to India. Mr Modi started out with a "friends with all" approach but Pakistan-China realities soon caught up with personalised diplomacy. Mrs Gandhi announced India's nuclear status in 1974 (Pokhran-1).

It took Modi in 2019 (Balakot) and in 2025 (Pahalgam) to call Pakistan's nuclear bluff. That's a big plus in his corner.

As things soured in the neighbourhood, India warmed up to the US/ West and then the complexity of Ukraine arose. This gave rise to multi-alignment. The Trump bull has trampled all over this China shop, Pakistan is playing the US and China as it did in 1971. And like Mrs Gandhi then, Mr Modi has to look for alternatives, but then, the Soviet Union is long gone. The language is tougher than Mrs Gandhi's in 1971, but India is enormously stronger.

The economy is where we might have expected to see many contrasts, but surprisingly, there are many similarities too. Mr Modi came to power promising to be the exact opposite of Mrs Gandhi, asserting that it's no business of the government to be in business. But on many basic instincts, he's emulated her. From mining to manufacturing and electricity economics, are meandering. In his first and second terms, Mr Modi attempted some audacious reform — land acquisition, farm and labour reform laws, lateral entry into civil services. All have been given up now. Until Mr Trump came to power, Mr Modi seemed settled into the 6-6.5 per cent figure, which well reflects the meagre rate of growth. The India's politics driven by Hindu identity and polarisation would win elections with 6-6.5 per cent risk-free. The Trump arm-twisting and the resultant free-trade agreements have rocked that leisurely cruise. Let's see if this can force fresh reform at gunpoint.

And finally, how do we compare the two greatest purges of socialism in their politics? For Mrs Gandhi, the backdrop was multiple wars between 1962 and 1971. India was already a *jai jawan, jai kisan* nation. The liberation of Bangladesh, the Green Revolution and the non-aligned world's adulation fuelled her nationalism. Mr Modi's nationalism is more muscular, in military livery. We can't prejudice the consequences of a commitment trap in promising to respond militarily to a terror act and leave it to historians to reflect on the consequences of such a strategic predictability.

Under Mr Modi, a new Hinduised nationalism has emerged. While this has united a critical mass of Hindus to keep him secure, it has also created divisions. India's adversaries would be tempted to turn a dagger through these. We've seen the Pakistanis try that not just with our Muslims but also with the Sikhs, especially during Operation Sindoor.

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Stray concerns

EYE CULTURE

KANIKKA DATTA

Earlier this month, a two-judge Bench of the Supreme Court advised a Noida resident who had complained of being harassed for feeding stray dogs to feed them in her home or open a shelter. Predictably, responses to these passing comments — which the frenzied social media world mistakenly interpreted as a judgment — revealed the deep fault lines over the issue of stray dogs. In India, you are either a dog lover or hater, with no scope for mutual comprehension. In fact, the barrage of uninformed comments from both sides of the divide following this "advice" from the apex court highlights like nothing else the gross institutional failure to sensibly deal with a problem that is gaining momentum as growing urbanisation encroaches on spaces once inhabited by dogs and birds.

It can be assumed that Justices Vikram Nath and Sandeep Mehta are not fans of India's, the popular term for street dogs. They appear to have had bad experiences during a morning walk or cycle ride. The inconvenient truth for them, however, is the Animal Birth Control (or ABC) Rules of 2003 under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, which incorporated guidelines from Supreme Court orders. Among its provisions are rules requiring resident welfare associations or local bodies to make provisions for feeding community animals and

involve residents who feed animals.

Big-hearted as these rules may seem in favour of stray animals, their intent is actually to balance animal welfare with public safety. That's because the rules also stipulate that dogs need to be neutered and vaccinated to control the population and prevent the spread of rabies. In the appeal before the Supreme Court, the appellant was seeking directions to the local authorities to set up feeding points at strategic locations under the ABC Rules.

As Hirannay Karlekar pointed out in an incisive piece in the *Indian Express*, in 2022, a two-judge Supreme Court Bench stayed a Bombay High Court order banning public feeding of street dogs and expunged similar remarks as their lordships expressed in the apex court two weeks ago.

Why does the law mandate feeding street dogs? That is principally to ensure that they do not scavenge and are nourished enough to be neutered. Regular feeding also reduces the chances of dogs turning feral — though this factor is also a function of the gratuitous cruelty to which they are often vulnerable.

The growing number of dog bite cases — a stunning 22,000 recorded in 2024 alone, causing 48 deaths — is testimony to the asymmetrical and combative nature of the relationship between dogs and humans in India.

What this case has unwittingly revealed is the outright abdication of responsibility of municipal authorities around India towards the

Indy population. The appellant in this case pointed out that the authorities have done nothing to designate feeding spots. No less reprehensible is the absence of neutering programmes that would go a long way towards controlling the Indy population — and is also an integral part of the ABC Rules. With exceptions such as Lucknow, Mumbai, and for a while Delhi (where neutering zeal has waned) no municipal corporation has a sustained stray neutering programme, although there is no shortage of NGOs to humanely undertake this work.

So 62 to 70 million Indies crowd Indian cities today, most leading a miserable existence for survival against rampant urbanisation. This growing man-Indy conflict is compounded by uninformed opinion. Unable to comprehend why the Indy population is burgeoning, urbanites want them relocated, and many cruelly connive to do so. This was the solution Delhi Chief Minister Rekha Gupta sought as part of a "cleanliness" drive. It is a surprising suggestion coming from a former law graduate given that the Supreme Court has prohibited the relocation of dogs — with good reason. Dogs are inherently territorial; relocating them invites death-threatening attacks from occupying packs.

With their stray remarks (forgive the pun) their lordships have unintentionally muddled the Great Indy Debate. Loving or hating dogs is beside the point. For the good of man and animal, the Indy population needs to be controlled. And for that, urban administrations need to step in fast. That's the key point the Supreme Court should have underscored.

'Western vs Indian' in management

THE WISE LEADER

R GOPALAKRISHNAN



R GOPALAKRISHNAN

Several Indian thinkers (me included) place an emphasis on an "Indian" way as compared to a "Western" way of management. Our assumptions about life and work are shaped by deep and unmanifest influences of culture, for example, deference to power, authority, and age, as seen in Indian business leaders genuflecting before ministers and bureaucrats. When I saw North Atlantic Treaty Organization chief Mark Rutte, a blunt Dutchman, genuflect before Donald Trump in a servile manner, I started to rethink. Obviously, there are individual differences in the display and practice of broader cultural tendencies.

Indian spirituality, illustratively, teaches that what is important is not how long we live or how much money we make, or whether we are famous, rather whether we "multiply positive vibrations" in the culture and the life-time. Is that uniquely Indian?

German philosopher Karl Jaspers observed in 1948 that thinkers with no mutual contact across vast geographies had similar ideas and reached similar conclusions (The Origin and Goal of History). All thinkers agree that individual life should focus on community well-being, and self-awareness, exactly as Swami Vivekananda had represented to Western businessmen. In short, the essence of human wisdom (wisdom or philosophy that is distinctive but the manifestations and rituals that are culture) is not too different. Likewise, about faith in astrology, palmistry, and future-telling. I wrote a factual, light-hearted post on LinkedIn about how a company employee (leisure-time astrologer) had forecast the "marriage" of Brooke Bond Lipton in 1995 by casting the horoscope of Brooke Bond — born on September 25, 1912, at noon in Calcutta. The post chalked up over 10,000 impressions, got 45 reposts, and over 1,400 reactions! Many responded that astrology could indeed play a role in company decisions, and that they should not be too hasty to dismiss it. I was not advocating astrology!

I ran a straw poll among my acquaintances on their belief in astrology. Virtually all said "yes". None would risk an inauspicious date for their children's wedding, the inauguration date of some new building, or joining a new share trading. In 1977, Indira Gandhi ignored her astrologer's advice to sit on a particular side of the election floor, and she lost. In 1980, when she won, she took no risk and sat on the correct side as advised by her astrologer. The faith of the poster classed in astrology is well known, but are corporate

quite Indian. It is not the essence of wisdom or philosophy that is distinctive but the manifestations and rituals that are culture. It is not too different. Likewise, about faith in astrology, palmistry, and future-telling. I wrote a factual, light-hearted post on LinkedIn about how a company employee (leisure-time astrologer) had forecast the "marriage" of Brooke Bond Lipton in 1995 by casting the horoscope of Brooke Bond — born on September 25, 1912, at noon in Calcutta. The post chalked up over 10,000 impressions, got 45 reposts, and over 1,400 reactions! Many responded that astrology could indeed play a role in company decisions, and that they should not be too hasty to dismiss it. I was not advocating astrology!

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leaders far behind? In 1991, J R D Tata informed Ratan Tata about his proposed appointment as chairman of the Tata Steel, but requested temporary confidentiality till an auspicious date was found to make the news public!

There are observably different behavioural tendencies in the "West versus India" debate. Western management abhors ambiguity. Indians tolerate ambiguity. Western management tends towards efficiency and centralisation; Indians tend towards effectiveness and decentralisation. (Efficiency and effectiveness are not synonymous.) As an example, recall how Hindustan Unilever implemented the WIMI (winning in many) strategy while Unilever was centralising global markets. Third, Western management tends towards perfection whereas Indians accept imperfection (*liguad* is lauded). Last, the West tolerates and encourages individualism whereas Indians tend towards human-centricity. These are not virtues or vices, they are what they are. Younger generations in families, after a foreign education, are seen to integrate West and Indian instincts intelligently.

Do you think there is some merit in the "West versus India" way in the matter of running companies? The writer's latest book *JAM-SEETHI Tata—Powerful Learnings for Corporate Success*, has been published by TheMindWorks.net. rgopalak@themindworks.net

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

— Ramnath Goenka

BALANCE BELIEF AND CHOICE IN MATTERS OF FOOD AND FAITH

KANWAR yatra, an annual pilgrimage in north India that concluded earlier this week, evoked more fervour over food than passion for piety this year. Most kanwaris went about their rituals peacefully. But a minority of them exhibited aggressive behaviour, imposing majoritarian choices on food. State administrations faced criticism for giving preferential treatment to the pilgrims, with critics claiming they went to great lengths to enforce bans on non-vegetarian food. Things came to such a pass that the Supreme Court was involved in balancing sentiments even on the last day of the yatra.

The court's observation about transparency in food choices finds resonance far beyond the yatra. It emphasised the comfort zone of the consumer-devotee, stating that if a non-vegetarian eatery switches to vegetarian only during the yatra for better business, there should be a way to inform consumers that it had previously served non-vegetarian fare. The court underlined the importance of telling the devotees about the past practices of such eateries.

The eateries view their actions as strategic and lucrative opportunities to generate more revenue in the yatra season, appeal to devotees, or circumvent administrative restrictions. The question is whether the practice flirts with consumer deception. In a pluralistic society such as ours, where 'pure vegetarian' restaurants make special mention of dishes without onions or garlic, food is a deeply cultural and religious matter. The court's backing of the public disclosure of eateries' past practices enhances consumer autonomy—not only for devotees, but also for others with, say, allergies or other medical restrictions, and their right to informed decision-making.

Interestingly, it is common knowledge that restaurants in several cities stop serving non-vegetarian food during some festive seasons, reverting to their old menus thereafter. However, only the small eateries along the kanwar yatra route seem to be the focus of attention. That leads us to the root cause behind the controversy—the sudden mushrooming of ideological battles over dietary choices that have politicised food in the country in general, with their tempo getting more shrill on religious occasions. Religious and consumer freedoms must coexist and be accessible universally without discrimination. Full disclosure of restaurant practices is essential. But legal protection is equally important against stigmatising certain foods and their vendors in the name of religious sensitivity.

STATE ACTION NOT ENOUGH TO CURB SUPERSTITIONS

Aspate of bizarre spectacles emerging from the tribal regions of Odisha hit the headlines in the last few weeks. In two separate incidents, couples were yoked to ploughs to till land in the full view of villagers. A third incident preceding these two involved about 40 members of two families shaving their heads at a community event. The shocking visuals of what are presumed to be acts of purification as well as punishment went viral on social media platforms. A common thread running through the incidents reported from Rayagada and Koraput districts was of marriages that had defied social norms. A probe by a divisional commissioner-ranked officer has been initiated, while the police are investigating the circumstances under which the couples were forced to haul ploughs. These episodes are likely to be forgotten soon, but the dehumanising acts are a serious violation of the right to live with dignity guaranteed by the Constitution and must be viewed so.

Such corporal punishments have rarely been reported in the past. One can only attribute these incidents' wider airing to the increased use of mobile phones in the tribal hinterlands. However, they must not be ignored as isolated incidents. They speak of the kangaroo courts steeped in a primitive legal system that dish out quick justice in these areas. Tribal groups constitute about 23 percent of Odisha's population, and across the vast swathes of their habitations, ancient customs and practices continue to rule the roost. The widespread prevalence of superstition, quackery, sorcery and witchcraft has been perpetuated by decades of backwardness, low levels of literacy and absence of governance. Many of the tribal groups continue to remain unexposed to the modern rights-based legal system, however imperfect it is.

While it is important to protect the cultural integrity of tribal communities from urban invasion, the state government must ensure that the fundamental rights of individuals enshrined in the Constitution are safeguarded irrespective of where they live. The experience with laws to tackle sorcery and witchcraft in tribal-dominated states reveals that administrations have struggled to effectively implement them. State and police actions can only instil a sense of fear. The long-term solution should be through focused initiatives based on nuanced understanding of the cultural complexities of the communities and the socio-political dynamics of the region.

QUICK TAKE

NOT TO BE TRUMPED

N yet another pullback from a multilateral agency, the US this week withdrew from Unesco. China's sharp reaction—calling the decision 'irresponsible'—shows how the move may cede more ground to what the Trump administration considers its most formidable geopolitical enemy. But there's something this UN organisation has done in recent years that others can emulate. Since 2018, it has pointedly solicited and received so much more funds from other members and private donors that the US's contribution to Unesco's budget had whittled down to 8 percent; so it wouldn't affect the agency's work the way Trump's decision to quit WHO did to global health initiatives. The writing on Trump's wall is clear—those who don't read it do so at their own peril.

VICE President Jagdeep Dhankhar's resignation was a kind of cold play. He left for home on Monday evening in control of his keys, but could not enter his office the next day. They must have sent his personal stuff home, but he may not have had access to all his papers.

One doesn't know if Dhankhar kept a diary and made notes after chairing Raja Sabha sessions. One wonders if he recorded his spats with all their provocation and rancour, and after meeting colleagues and dignitaries, bending his tall figure to make hushed conversations. He is a trained lawyer, but one is not sure if he was so clinically organised like Richard Nixon in these matters. If he did keep a diary and had kept it in his office, it may have suddenly become State property.

Dhankhar was left with no time to secure anything, least of all his legacy. There was such swiftness in the operation that the dismissal was instantly made to wear the cloak of voluntary exit. Although as per the book he could not be sacked by the government, it appears a threat of impeachment was enough to secure his signature on a rather politically-correct draft where everybody was thanked and a health contingency was invoked.

Dhankhar was domineering, confrontational and articulate, qualities that did not sit well in either his earlier role as West Bengal governor or as vice president. Both by the Constitution and convention, they are conceived as elderly mentoring roles. They are not meant to hold the steering wheel of government, but are thought of as permanent standby roles in the event of a constitutional crisis. They do not put a final seal on anything, only step in temporarily. However, their placement in ceremony and protocol tends to create a grand delusion that they are important.

It appears Dhankhar had bought into this delusion. While he should have enjoyed being sandwiched between the President and the Prime Minister as VP, he attempted to create a distinct grandeur for his chair, often with vanity. While his role allowed him to philosophise at times, he bellowed all the time.

If that was not mistake enough, he was perhaps the only VP who asserted his caste denomination and its traditional profession of farming. K R Narayan, as VP and later President, never played his Dalit identity. Dhankhar, it seems, was attempting to create a constituency of his own. This portended not

Vice presidents have openly spoken their mind in the past, too. But as a constitutional figurehead, Jagdeep Dhankhar's regular contributions to political chatter crossed a line

HIGH WALLS THAT SURROUND HIGH OFFICES

SUGATA SRINIVASARAJU

Senior journalist and author of *The Consensus Network: A Chronicle of Resistance to the Establishment*



just a challenge to the executive, but exposed his ambition and an infinite capacity for mischief small and big.

Dhankhar's compulsive articulation had become a threat to not just himself, but to the government's views on the law, people and the judiciary. He spoke much more than what Manmohan Singh spoke as the executive head for a decade. Since Dhankhar's exalted position could not be countered or fact-checked, he had slowly started giving an impression that he was an alternative voice of the government. He loved to play the oracle.

It is unsettling when a person meant to be a constitutional figurehead begins contributing to political commentary and chatter on a daily basis. The quiet mentoring he was expected to do by the virtue of his position was defeated by this. His words also complicated the

perception of the Modi government's commitment to democratic processes and larger policy.

For instance, when it came to the Constitution, in early 2023, Dhankhar waded unprovoked into the issue of the basic structure doctrine. He argued for the supremacy of parliament, and said its amending powers could not be curtailed. He almost sounded like Indira Gandhi during the Emergency. He said this when the opposition was building a perception about the constitutional fidelity of the Modi government in the build-up to the 2024 general elections. It is now history how the opposition's campaign fared.

The VP's office should have operated in dignified isolation, but Dhankhar was the busiest man in the chair. His frequent travels across the country, his speeches, his pro-active networking

with different sections of the political and business classes, and his protocol fetish could not have missed the scrutiny of people who had put him in the chair. He thought he was number two in the role. But Nehru was the one who had clearly his delusion asserting.

The first VP, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, spoke his mind freely too. But he had a very different intellectual energy, stature and sense of humour to go with it. His context and political circumstances were entirely different. Plus, he had a trusting and warm relationship with the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. It was Nehru who had coaxed him to take the VP's chair. Radhakrishnan always maintained that he belonged to the 'decorative side' of the government. For him, it was a 'caged and honorific office'.

Radhakrishnan's biographer, S Gopal, wrote: 'It did not seem to him worthwhile to give up the chair at Oxford and his work outside India for such a limited role. But Nehru assured him that he hoped to develop conventions which would expand the role of the vice president, particularly on the political and diplomatic sides.'

Radhakrishnan helped Nehru navigate politically piquant moments, he handled for Nehru some of his difficult colleagues and always with the singular interest to strengthen Nehru. He never opened an independent channel with Nehru's critics to weaken him. Is Dhankhar guilty of this?

In a public speech in September 1962, Radhakrishnan warned the Congress against complacency, he deplored their 'pampered living and confused thinking which had taken the place of idealism and tenacity of purpose'. Urging Congressmen to carry through the unfinished task of social revolution, he said, 'Hurry up, otherwise it will be too late.'

This speech caused a stir. Maulana Azad told Radhakrishnan that Nehru had remained silent when some Congressmen had criticised him. The VP offered to resign the next day when Nehru met him. Nehru assured him that no one had criticised him in his presence and the matter ended there.

This trusting relationship between the Prime Minister and his constitutional mentors changed over the decades, and the first to diminish such institutions was Indira Gandhi. Dhankhar, with his loud stint in office, has made it difficult for the next VP to be his or her own person.

(Views are personal)

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DEATH OF THE DICTIONARY

THE Gutenberg revolution appears to be waning as the written word, the defining mark of civilisation—whether on Babylonian steles or in racy detective novels—recedes in the face of the ever-compelling power of images and voice. The written word is shaking off the grip of regimentation, which had tightened over the centuries since printing caught on in Europe and later, dictionaries formalised language.

Young people no longer read editorials to learn hermetic language. Instead, they are at ease with creoles, pidgins, slang and memes. But ironically, high feelings persist about language as a political and cultural marker of identity, purity and authenticity. Notable exception: at the press conference after signing the India-UK free trade agreement, a struggling Hindi translator was told to free to use English words.

Meanwhile, Maharashtra is upset about the three-language formula. Governor C P Radhakrishnan has weighed in on the problem of 'linguistic hatred', and recalled seeing a north Indian man in his home state of Tamil Nadu being beaten up for not knowing Tamil. Language politics in Tamil Nadu, an element of the Self-Respect Movement, was a bulwark against the Union government's promotion of Hindi, which sought to flatten cultural diversity and make the states politically accessible to Delhi. Many states in the east, west and south didn't enjoy being pushed around, and Tamil Nadu made it an enduring political issue. But it is rare for someone from the state to admit that linguistic assertion has an unpleasant side. An extreme example: the Second World War was triggered by Hitler's determination to connect German-speaking populations in East Prussia and Austria with the German nation—'Ein Volk, ein Reich, eine Sprache', to rip off a Nazi slogan concerning the Führer.

That was over 80 years ago. In the mean time, the world has globalised at a speed not seen since classical times. This could have been an era of bridge languages like Urdu. Instead, machines, the internet and their users are beating down the formalisms of language, and what was unthinkable is now doable. When Kemal Atatürk switched Turkish from the Arabic-based Ottoman script to the Roman alphabet in 1928, it was a radical act. The measure, intended to bring Turkey closer to the West, was denounced by critics as a 'cultural rupture', as older texts became inaccessible to younger people. Perhaps it worked only because 6 percent of Muslims were literate at the time.



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SPEAKEASY

But ever since Usenet launched group communications over the internet, before most languages had digital fonts, phonetic communications in the Roman alphabet have been commonplace.

And now, AI-powered translation is the norm. When Tony Blair's Britain asserted multiculturalism in the late 1990s, the road sign of Bangladeshi-intense Brick Lane in London was rewritten in two languages, English and Bangla. When Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane* became a bestseller, it felt like borders were dissolving.



The written word is no longer the most efficient way to store knowledge. Thanks to a glut of enabling software and hardware, mankind is turning back to its earliest mode of encoding culture: audiovisual media. Dictionaries Dr Johnson would've tutted at how we treat language today

Decades later, in the US, which has become multicultural without quite preparing for it, machine translation is creating weirdness. Public institutions like hospitals and transport have signs in multiple languages including Hindi and Bangla, but what they say sounds inhuman. Naturally, because this language is machine-made.

Across borders, there is concern that young people do not read these days; but let's focus on what they do read. YouTube localists read closed captions generated by a machine. These are frequently incorrect, but it doesn't bother anyone because the world's

language purists have either given up the ghost or the struggle. The dictionary is just another book and books are archival legacy media. If Samuel Johnson were around, the dictionaryist who said that language is the dress of thought would have dismissed us as ragtags, with bootbells barely concealing our modesty in scanty hashtags.

Why is this happening? Information storage and retrieval began with visual and auditory media—cave paintings, dance performances, oral epics and songs. But why are they regaining salience? Because the written word was the most efficient storage medium for about five millennia, from the clay tablet libraries of Babylon to Dewey Decimal via the Gutenberg press. But over the last three decades, magnetic and optical data storage has scaled up so rapidly that the contents of a refrigerator-sized magnetic tape bank of the 1970s now fit on a microSD card. With AI, it is normal for data processing to use as much power as small towns.

The written word is no longer essential for storage, and the human race is again embracing the audiovisual media with which it had begun to encode culture millenniums ago. Ironically, it's a step back—there is now room enough for all the misbegotten utterances that the race can dream up.

In a strange case in bilingual Belgium, an attendant in a train running through Dutch-speaking territory greeted a passenger in French and faced proceedings right away. The proceedings have just ended, and the harassed attendant has turned language activist—he is selling coffee mugs bearing greetings in both languages to promote linguistic amity.

The resurgence of audiovisual media at the expense of text is starkly visible in politics. From West Bengal to Washington, visual media personalities are prominent in legislatures, and few of their most important associates can be accused of learning, or even literacy. Win some, lose some, say the Americans, who are postmodernists—in the sense that they have never respected linguistic formalisms very much.

(Views are personal)

(Tweets @ipratik_k)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Thespian maestro

Ref: Manipur, his tortured, mesmerising muse (Jul 25). I appreciate the author sharing the anecdote of him working on a translation with the theatre director who was an excellent painter and designer in his own right. Ratan Thiyam's views on the hills and valleys of Manipur were par excellence.

S Kanthimathinathan, Kovilpatti

Capital opportunity

Ref: UK free trade deal (Jul 25). The landmark trade deal between India and the UK, promotes bilateral capital investment in both the countries. It's the trump card facilitating the promising economic future of India and ensuring warm relations with the UK, and possibly the EU.

B Veerakumaran Thampi, email

Marital privacy

Ref: Imbalance in tech access may cloud divorce cases (Jul 25). The Supreme Court's decision allowing secretly recorded spousal conversations as evidence in divorce cases strikes a careful balance between privacy and justice. Clearly, when one spouse resorts to recording, the marriage is already on thin ice.

Veda Chidnand, Bengaluru

Tariff yo-yo

Ref: The brutality of sanctions (Jul 25). What we are witnessing is the US presidency being seen solely through the lens of trade. The principal weapon being tariffs. The tariff yo-yo has been dangling on the heads of innocents, varying on the whims and fancies of its principal applier—Donald Trump.

Srinivas Kamat, Mysore

Stretching tongues

Ref: Language, longing and belonging in Maharashtra (Jul 25). If a language is not utilised in daily conversations at home and workplaces, and if intentional measures are not implemented to enhance its importance by those advocating for its preservation, then arguments aimed at safeguarding it are futile.

Vinod Vetraday, Palakkad

Power abuse

Ref: The police line we need to cross (Jul 24). The massive statistics of custodial death in India is undoubtedly a menacing one. Stringent laws with non-bailable arrests should be formulated for such abuse of power. In a democratic country, no one should be allowed to bend the rules.

Chandran Mekummu, email

