



Key partnership

India and Kuwait are trying to deepen ties during a crucial period

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Kuwait, the first by an Indian Prime Minister since 1981, and nearly 12 years since a visit by the Kuwaiti Prime Minister to India, completed the loop in India's outreach to the Gulf countries. Kuwait is a key Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member. Half a million Indians work there, making them the largest expatriate community. This community has grown on the foundations laid by historical trade and travel ties — few would remember that Kuwait was an entrepôt for India's trading routes across West Asia, courtesy the British East India company; the Kuwaiti elite had homes in Mumbai and until 1961, when Kuwait won its independence, the Indian rupee was legal tender. Bilateral trade even today tops \$10 billion, which is considerable given Kuwait's smaller size. Kuwait is India's sixth largest crude supplier and fourth largest LPG supplier, meeting 3% of its energy needs. However, while people-to-people links and trade have continued, ties have lagged in strategic areas and defence cooperation, with some residual misgivings due to India's close ties with Saddam Hussein's Iraq. This is a gap that Mr. Modi's visit sought to bridge, with the announcement of a Kuwait partnership, the latest in India's strategic partnerships in the region. After talks with the Kuwaiti Emir, Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the two sides signed an MoU to institutionalise defence cooperation. Kuwait's highest honour, the Order of Mubarak Al-Kabeer, was conferred on Mr. Modi, cementing the importance of the visit.

The visit came at an important moment in the broader region. The continuing bombardment of Gaza by Israel, and attacks on Lebanon and Yemen are making West Asia peace a more fragile and distant proposition. The ouster of the Assad regime from Syria has also empowered Islamist radicals and could spell more violence. In addition, key Indian infrastructure and connectivity initiatives such as the I2U2 and IMEC may not see any further progress until the situation calms. The incoming Trump administration's domestic priorities in the U.S. and Europe's preoccupation with the Russia-Ukraine conflict will leave a possible vacuum of support and leadership for many of the world's other trouble spots. This is an important moment for India to strengthen bilateral ties with each of the countries in the region, and secure energy and connectivity lines, while ensuring the welfare and rights of over eight million Indians living and working there. Despite the Opposition's criticism of Mr. Modi's frequent visits abroad, New Delhi may find it needs to plan more such international standalone forums for the Prime Minister in the near future.

No panacea

Benefits cannot be a substitute to comprehensive welfare

Ever since the use of direct cash transfers to eligible beneficiaries as a welfare measure gained prominence following the Congress party's ploy of announcing "election guarantees", other parties and ruling governments have sought to adopt this as a way of retaining their support among constituents. The 'Ladki Bahin' and 'Ladki Behna' schemes in Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh have been seen as reasons for the success of the ruling fronts/parties in retaining power, while the regime in Tamil Nadu instituted the 'Kalaigalr Magalir Urimai Thogai' to shore up support beyond traditional adherents of the ruling party. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in Delhi has never shied away from comprehensive welfare benefits to retain support, now promising ₹2,100 a month to women under the proposed 'Mukhyamantri Mahila Samman Yojana'. There is a case for direct cash transfers to the needy and women from indigent families — they are in a way a recompense for the unpaid nature of work done by women as family members. While these amounts may not be high in an era characterised by inflation, that women can utilise the money without having to depend upon the family "head" in a largely patriarchal society, provides them with a disposable sum that is also fungible in the way it can be used for essentials or for savings. The benefits also accord a certain dignity to the women who are generally unemployed in the market, but who still provide labour — as domestic work or informal labour. It is no wonder that such schemes are popular in the States where they are being implemented.

Yet, these cash transfers are not a substitute for comprehensive welfare, where the state plays a role in creating employment and supports demand-driven growth. In Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, there has been a stagnation in employment generation, albeit of different orders. Maharashtra, one of India's most industrialised and urbanised States, has been experiencing a relative stagnation in economic growth and employment creation compared to previous decades. There is also a clear regional and economic inequality while Madhya Pradesh remains one of India's relatively poor States and lacks in diversity of employment options. While the ruling parties reaped the benefit of support over populist schemes, the reality is that they are little more than a balm as compared to effective economic policies that will generate employment, diversify the economy and provide greater opportunities. As for AAP, it did a far better job in focusing on primary health and education in its earlier terms. The fact that it is trying to emulate the BJP's and its allies' benefit schemes for women suggests that it is running out of ideas to provide a better vision for the Delhi metropolis.

On the 20th anniversary of the Indian Ocean tsunami, a time to reflect on the progress made, and also the gaps, in shaping response and strategy

Nagapattinam's journey of resilience

Disasters have always served as harsh reminders of nature's overwhelming power and humanity's vulnerability. On December 26, 2004, the Indian Ocean tsunami delivered an unparalleled wave of destruction. Among the hardest-hit areas was Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu, yet the disaster also marked a turning point, becoming a case study in how tragedy can inspire systemic reforms and lay the groundwork for more resilient societies.

Two decades later, India has made substantial strides in disaster preparedness, response, mitigation. However, evolving risks, fuelled by urbanisation, climate change, and the growing complexity of disasters and increasing frequency of extreme weather events, require continuous innovation and vigilance. Revisiting Nagapattinam's experience offers valuable lessons for shaping future strategies.

A watershed moment

When the tsunami struck the Indian coast, Nagapattinam's 187.9-kilometre-long coastline, dotted with 73 habitations, bore the brunt. Early warning systems for a tsunami were non-existent in the Indian Ocean region, and infrastructure was ill-equipped to withstand such a calamity.

After overcoming the initial chaos, rescue operations were spearheaded by self-constituted area-specific teams, led by experienced officers drawn from unaffected districts and supported by personnel from critical departments such as revenue, local bodies, health, police, public works, and fisheries. Further additional resources, including the Indian Army, Indian Navy, police and fire services were mobilised. Local volunteers also played a critical role.

The quick and dignified disposal of bodies was prioritised to prevent disease outbreaks, with coastal areas disinfected using microbial inoculants and chemicals. Infrastructure restoration efforts focused on re-establishing electricity, water supply, and road connectivity. Over 13,000 temporary shelters were constructed across 50 locations to house displaced families, providing essential shelter and safety. Additionally, the government issued dynamic, field-based orders that went beyond standard permitted categories to address the diverse needs of all affected sectors.

The rehabilitation and recovery efforts provided a holistic and scalable model for disaster recovery by incorporating Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) measures applicable to various disasters. These efforts emphasised building resilient communities through the construction of over 55,000 multi-hazard-resistant homes, supported by integrated risk transfer via comprehensive insurance. Disaster-ready health-care facilities were established, and anganwadi centres, schools, and community halls were transformed into multi-hazard shelters. Livelihoods were revived and economic growth propelled by empowering coastal communities



J. Radhakrishnan

a 1992 AS officer - Tamil Nadu cadre - played pivotal roles during the Nagapattinam tsunami, the Kumbakonam school fire, the Chennai floods, and COVID-19 pandemic. He has served as Health Secretary, the Commissioner of Chennai, and the Collector of four districts. He is posted now as Additional Chief Secretary, Cooperation, Food and Consumer Protection Department

Revisiting Nagapattinam's experience spotlights the importance of ensuring long-term preparedness

with strengthened infrastructure, including modern ports, fishing harbours, and improved agricultural practices. Alternative livelihoods were fostered by supporting women's self-help groups and improving market access, while educational facilities were upgraded to serve as disaster-safe environments. Enhanced mobility and safety were ensured through the rebuilding of roads, bridges, and critical escape routes. Coastal defences were fortified with seawalls, shelter belt plantations, and multi-hazard shelters, complemented by collaborative DRR initiatives such as vulnerability reduction projects supported by World Bank assistance. Additionally, comprehensive psychosocial support was provided through counselling services.

In Nagapattinam, over 400 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) provided essential services such as medical aid, trauma counselling, sanitation, and livelihood restoration. By involving local communities in these efforts, they empowered individuals to take ownership of their recovery. The government maintained oversight, ensuring that resources were allocated efficiently and aligned with the district's needs. Institutionalising such frameworks for NGO-government collaboration can serve as a force multiplier, enabling swift and effective responses to future disasters.

Disasters disproportionately affect the most vulnerable — children, women, the elderly, differently-abled individuals, and marginalised communities. For children, facilities such as Anna Sathya Home provided essential education, counselling, and emotional support to those orphaned. Women, particularly widows and single mothers, were empowered through vocational training programmes. Differently-abled individuals benefited from special medical camps and skill development initiatives aimed at fostering economic independence.

Building long-term resilience

The Nagapattinam experience underscored the critical importance of planning for long-term resilience beyond immediate recovery.

Infrastructure upgrades, such as strengthened health-care facilities, schools, and transportation networks, enhanced the region's preparedness for future disasters. Coastal defence measures, including sea walls, shelter belt plantations, and multi-hazard shelters, provided vital protection for vulnerable coastal areas. Additionally, the growing relevance of risk insurance, extending beyond crops to assets such as housing, marked a step toward comprehensive disaster risk management, though much progress remains to be made.

The 2004 tsunami exposed critical gaps in India's disaster management framework, catalysing the enactment of the Disaster

Management Act, 2005. Key institutional developments included setting up of the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA). State and district authorities were empowered to implement disaster management plans tailored to local needs and covering all phases of the disaster management cycle. Resilience measures were embedded in urban planning, infrastructure projects, and development policies.

Since the tsunami, advancements in technology have revolutionised disaster management in India. The establishment of the Indian Tsunami Early Warning Centre (ITEWC) in 2007 ensures real-time monitoring and alerts. GIS mapping, AI-driven risk assessments, and mobile applications have enhanced preparedness. Also providing their worth during recent cyclones. Moreover, post-disaster focus has shifted from mere damage assessment to Post-Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA), ensuring more targeted recovery efforts.

Contrasting global experiences

The contrasting experiences of Haiti and Chile in disaster recovery underline the critical importance of comprehensive disaster management systems. In Haiti, the lack of insurance and an underdeveloped disaster response framework led to a prolonged recovery process following the 2010 earthquake.

Conversely, Chile's effective national and local disaster management plans, coupled with robust insurance coverage, enabled faster recovery. Japan further demonstrates the value of preemptive measures, including investments in risk reduction, enforcement of building codes, and robust early warning systems. For India, these examples underline the need for proactive investments in risk reduction, stricter building codes, and comprehensive insurance mechanisms.

Despite progress, millions in India, in coastal villages, floodplains, and urban slums remain particularly vulnerable. Empowering at-risk communities through education and guidance is essential to prepare them for potential disasters. Embedding risk reduction into development plans is critical for creating resilient communities with shared ownership. Repetition builds readiness, and workshops, training, and consultative sessions focused on generational recall, such as those conducted post-tsunami, can ensure sustained preparedness. Leveraging local knowledge and sharing regional expertise on disaster risk reduction can enhance community-level resilience.

Ultimately, disaster management is no longer just about survival. It is about ensuring that tragedies lead to learning and transformation. By honouring the memory of those lost, we can build a future where resilience and preparedness are the cornerstones of every community.

The lessons from a spectrum of areas

The 2004 tsunami affected a number of countries, making it a truly global disaster. There are six critical lessons we must consider.

First, the importance of mangroves in providing natural protection to coastal areas — they serve as vital buffers against waves. Unfortunately, the significant destruction of mangroves in India and other countries — to promote shrimp farming, meet basic wood and fuel needs, and for tourism — has disrupted the natural ecosystem. In many cases, the construction of artificial barriers (brick and mortar walls), may actually increase people's susceptibility to the damaging effects of waves.

Social changes

Second, keeping common resources such as beaches in the public domain is crucial. In Thailand, the privatisation of coastlines during the 1980s and 1990s allowed private interests to develop hotels and leisure activities, displacing local communities. This led to significant changes in labour, including the rise of the sex industry. Additionally, a large section of the population transitioned to informal sector jobs. Thailand's economy became highly vulnerable to global fluctuations, and is a lesson for India.

Third, the tsunami created winners and losers in the market. Rents, the price of land, goods, and services all rose, benefiting only asset owners and service providers. The disruption of local markets led to the replacement of local products with externally sourced goods, disrupting interdependent local economies. A number of people transitioned from traditional livelihoods to casual, low-paid labour. The push for mechanised fishing became particularly noticeable, displacing traditional artisanal fishing practices using catamarans. The degradation of natural resources intensified, leading to over-fishing, waste accumulation, loss of fish



Pushpendra Kumar

a former professor at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. He worked in tsunami relief and rehabilitation in affected countries

A response system needs to be well-rounded, looking at every aspect from natural systems to social structures

breeding areas, and further erosion of beaches and soil. Addressing these economic processes of production, consumption, and exchange — aggravated by privatisation and liberalisation — is a challenge. Unfortunately, no studies exist to measure these patterns.

A worsening of inequalities

Fourth, there are lessons to be learned about relief efforts and long-term rehabilitation. It is not surprising that the social structures that create and sustain discrimination, injustice, and exclusion in society continue doing so during and after disasters. In a highly stratified society such as India, relief and rehabilitation efforts can often reinforce and even exacerbate pre-existing inequalities, discrimination, and marginalisation.

Evidence from tsunami-affected countries suggests that social divisions significantly affected access to relief and rehabilitation services. There was a notable tendency to overlook the needs of vulnerable groups, including labourers, Dalits, tribes, immigrants, ethnic minorities, widows, and single women, in the distribution of relief and rehabilitation unless some vocal groups advocated their cause. In Thailand, undocumented Burmese or Lao migrants, many of whom suffered serious injuries and required urgent medical attention, had to go into hiding to avoid arrest. In Sri Lanka, Tamil minorities in the east and northern regions received significantly less assistance despite suffering much greater devastation.

Furthermore, asset-based damage assessment tended to favour better-off segments of the affected. Within India's fishing community, labourers engaged in fishing, retail businesses, and ancillary activities continued to suffer until fishing activity resumed but received little compensation. In some communities, the relief

provided barely met basic subsistence needs, while others experienced excessive aid.

Fifth, gender-insensitive relief and rehabilitation policies often accentuated the vulnerability of women. In Indian fishing communities, women are typically involved in activities related to the processing and marketing of fish or in non-fishing jobs such as collecting shells or running food stalls. They rarely own property or assets in their name. During the relief and rehabilitation, in many cases, their livelihood needs were overlooked.

Relief and rehabilitation packages were distributed based on lists of affected persons prepared by the fish worker panchayats, leading to women lacking access to relief measures. Widows from fish worker communities faced difficulties in receiving assistance, as they did not possess identity cards issued by the Fisheries Department. The important takeaway is that social divisions must be carefully addressed at every stage of relief and rehabilitation.

Engagement with local structures

Sixth, it is crucial for relief agencies to respect community-based local institutions, especially in coastal communities where organisation revolves around the concept of commons. Unlike agrarian or urban areas, democratic practices in fishing communities, such as *kappans*, rely on active debate rather than elections. The tsunami revealed that outside agencies often imposed their own notions of democracy, which undermined local capacities and resilience by fostering individualism and dependence. While issues such as gender insensitivity exist within these communities, a critical and long-term engagement with local structures would be more effective in addressing these concerns rather than demonising them.



Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Fatalities due to Pakistani airstrikes in eastern Afghanistan

46 Pakistan's airstrikes on eastern Afghanistan killed 46 people, mostly women and children, a Taliban government official said Wednesday. Hamdullah Fitrat, the deputy spokesman for the Afghan government, said that six people were wounded in the Paktika province bordering Pakistan. **AP**

Allu Arjun's financial aid for stampede victim

2 crore. Actor Allu Arjun (₹1 crore) and makers of the film — Myrri Movie Makers (₹50 lakh) and the film's director Sukumar (₹50 lakh) — 'Pushpa' announced financial assistance of ₹2 crore for the family of the woman who died in a stampede during the film's screening at a theatre on December 4. **IN**

Wholesale liquefied petroleum gas prices in Russia

140 5 per metric ton. Domestic prices of LPG in Russia halved in December from the previous month due to an influx of the fuel, exports of which have been curbed by European sanctions. The EU's sanctions against Russia's LPG took effect on December 20. **AP**

Ukrainian drones destroyed in the last 24 hours

119 Falling debris from a Ukrainian drone that was shot down caused an explosion and a fatal fire in a shopping centre in the city of Vladikavkaz in Russia, the local governor said on Wednesday. One woman was reported to have been killed inside the shopping centre. **AP**

Survivors of the Azerbaijani airliner crash

32 An Azerbaijani airliner with 67 people onboard crashed Wednesday in the Kazakhstani city of Aktau, leaving at least 32 survivors, according to officials. More than 30 people are likely dead. At least 29 have been hospitalised, the Ministry said. **AP**
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

Follow us [facebook.com/thehindu](https://www.facebook.com/thehindu) twitter.com/the_hindu [instagram.com/the_hindu](https://www.instagram.com/the_hindu)

U.S. and China renew S&T Agreement

What new measures were added to the Agreement in 2024? What does this indicate about the evolving relationship between the U.S. and China?
How has the U.S. benefited from its collaboration with China under this Agreement?

EXPLAINER

Krishna Ravi Srinivas

The story so far:

On December 13, China and the U.S. agreed to extend their Agreement on Co-operation in Science and Technology for an additional five years, effective from August 27, 2024, and also signed a protocol to amend it. Observers have welcomed the development as an affirmation of science and technology cooperation between the two major powers. The Agreement was first signed on January 31, 1979, by Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping and U.S. president Jimmy Carter at a time when both countries had established diplomatic relations and agreed to cooperate on agricultural research and technology. Since then, the Agreement has been renewed every five years while expanding in scope. The Agreement is governed by the U.S.-PRC Joint Commission on Scientific and Technological Cooperation. The U.S. and China each appoint co-chairs and an agency from each country is nominated as the 'executive agent'. There are also additional protocols between agencies and 40 sub-agreements in different areas, from agriculture to nuclear fusion.

Why do bilateral S&T agreements matter?

Bilateral science and technology agreements have been key to promote cooperation in these fields. Often there are specific agreements or cooperation pacts as part of a larger engagement framework. While these agreements don't mention specific investments in science and technology, they often pave the way for forms of cooperation that aren't confined to state institutions. They also facilitate joint research, mobility between the countries for students and scientists, encourage institutional cooperation, and set up bilateral research centers. India has



GETTY IMAGES

such agreements with 83 countries.

But while countries sign such agreements as part of routine engagements, both countries need to have the capacity and intentions to pursue the cooperation earnestly for the instruments to succeed. Token initiatives have never cut it. In this regard, the Agreement between China and the U.S. is probably the most successful of its kind.

What does the renewed agreement stipulate?

Conflicts between the U.S. and China, particularly over technology exports to China and concerns about China overtaking the U.S. in science and technology indicators, have become sticking points of late. To address them, the newly amended Agreement has measures to enhance provisions for researcher safety and data reciprocity.

The collaboration will henceforth be confined to the intergovernmental level, to basic research, and to previously identified themes of mutual benefit. The instrument will also exclude cooperation in critical and emerging technologies to assuage stakeholders that China won't extract disproportionate benefits, allegedly at the U.S.'s expense.

Indeed, experts who reviewed the Agreement have flagged China's ability to make better use of the research ecosystem and concerns about intellectual property rights. One report by the Congressional Research Service stated: "In 2017, U.S. patent and trademark officials identified over 400 [Chinese] patents tied to [Agreement] projects that [China] commercialised without U.S. commercial benefit".

So, before the Agreement was renewed this year, the U.S. was faced with three options: to renew it as usual for five years, to rescind it or to renew it with new measures to restrict the scope and add additional conditions. The U.S. opted for the third, implying that while there are deep concerns about the Agreement's continued usefulness to the U.S., the outgoing administration would rather not allow it to altogether expire or rescind it.

What has the U.S. gained?

China expanded its cooperation in science and technology in the 1970s by signing agreements with the U.S. and the European Union. Until then these deals had been restricted to some east European countries and the erstwhile Soviet Union. Between then and now, the

country has emerged as a strong contender for the leadership of global science.

According to one February 2024 paper, China's research and development (R&D) spending increased from \$375 million in 1979 to \$442 billion in 2021, second only to the U.S. In 1985, there were 2,770 Chinese undergraduate students in the U.S. and 109,525 in 2000. Both the number of papers coauthored by Chinese and U.S. authors and the variety of fields in which this has happened have increased. On the back of these data, Deborah Seligsohn of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, has argued that the U.S. wasn't poorly served by the Agreement and has received significant value as well.

For the same reasons, the incoming Trump administration isn't likely to rescind the new agreement, although it might attach more conditions and further limit its scope. It will still be valuable to China for keeping the door to nonzero cooperation in science and technology, including to promote the mobility of its researchers, open. Likewise, the U.S. could maintain a handle on China's rise vis-à-vis science and technology rather than lose all leverage.

In all, the Agreement teaches us that while bilateral science and technology agreements are important, making the best use of them demands capacity-building and sustained investment in R&D. Otherwise the participating countries won't be able to absorb the principal advantages such agreements generate. The Agreement catalysed China's transformation from a 'junior partner' in 1979 to a formidable competitor in 2024. Even if the U.S. deems its success to be 'extreme', the Agreement forces the two countries to respond to each other's concerns using the language of science and technology and cooperation.

Krishna Ravi Srinivas is adjunct professor of law, NALSAR University of Law, Hyderabad, and consultant, RIS New Delhi

THE GIST

▼ The U.S. and China renewed their Agreement on Co-operation in Science and Technology for five years with new amendments addressing researcher safety and data reciprocity.

▼ The Agreement catalysed China's rise from a junior partner in 1979 to a formidable global competitor in science and technology, marked by massive growth in R&D spending, student exchanges, and research output.

▼ While Trump's administration might scrutinise the Agreement more closely, it recognises the importance of maintaining cooperation with China, particularly to monitor and manage China's technological advancements.

What is Australia's Online Safety Amendment about?

How will ARSMPs ensure compliance with the new age restrictions?

R.K. Vij

The story so far:

Australia's House of Representatives recently passed the "Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill, 2024" which imposes obligation on certain social media platforms to take reasonable steps to prevent children under 16 years of age from having an account.

What is the new law about?

The object of the amendment (a new Part 4A—social media minimum age inserted in Australia's existing the Online Safety Act of 2021) is to 'reduce the risk of harm to age-restricted users from certain kinds of social media platforms'. The age-restricted user shall mean 'an Australian child who has not reached 16 years'.

The age-restricted social media platforms (ARSMP) affected by the proposed amendment would cover (with

some exclusions) an electronic service which enables online social interaction between two or more end-users, and allows end-users to post material on the service.

The Australian Minister of Communication clarified that the government expects the ARSMP will, at minimum, include 'TikTok, Facebook, Snapchat, Reddit, Instagram, X, among others.

How will the ban be implemented?

The law proposes that the providers of ARSMPs 'must take reasonable steps to prevent age-restricted users having accounts with the age-restricted social media platforms'. Failing to meet this requirement may result in a maximum civil penalty of \$49.5 millions. However, what is meant by 'reasonable steps' is not defined within the Bill.

It shall be the duty of the eSafety Commissioner to formulate, in writing, guidelines for taking reasonable steps to prevent age-restricted users having

accounts with age-restricted social media platforms and to promote those guidelines.

The proposed restriction will not take place earlier than 12 months after the proposed day of enforcement. The affected stakeholders shall be consulted and government's age assurance trial will guide the industry on which age assurance technologies would be considered 'reasonable' and consistent with minimum age obligation. However, it was confirmed that all account holders on ARSMPs will have to verify their age.

The law does not otherwise place any obligation on ARSMPs to prohibit people under the age of 16 from accessing content on their platforms. There is no civil penalty for parents who provide access to ARSMPs for children under 16.

What are privacy concerns?

It has been observed that 'age assurance technologies can pose privacy risks due to the type and amount of data they collect, store, use, and share'. With regard to

privacy concerns, the proposed law will establish privacy obligations where an 'entity' holds personal information about an individual that was collected for the purpose of taking reasonable steps to establish identity. Penalties may be imposed under the Privacy Act, 1988 if the entity uses or discloses information, without falling within one of the exceptions under the Act.

There will also be an obligation on entities to destroy the collected information 'after using or disclosing it for the purposes for which it was collected. The government also announced its intention to legislate a 'Digital Duty of Care' to 'place the onus on digital platforms to proactively keep Australians safe and better prevent online harms.'

Is social media harmful to children?

Emerging research indicates that social media may impact children's mental health. Despite various benefits, the risks of social media are also well acknowledged.

However, a blanket ban to prohibit children from using social media is not considered to be the most advantageous solution. Some researchers and academics expressed concern 'that a ban is too blunt an instrument to address risks effectively'. The Australian Greens criticised saying that the legislation was 'rushed, reckless and goes against the evidence'.

R.K. Vij, a former Indian Police Service officer

THE GIST

▼ Australia's Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill, 2024, mandates that platforms take reasonable steps to prevent children under 16 from creating accounts, with penalties for non-compliance reaching \$49.5 million.

▼ While aimed at reducing harm to children, the law raises privacy concerns over data collection for age verification, with safeguards requiring the destruction of personal data after use and penalties for misuse under the Privacy Act, 1988.

The lapses in the disaster management Bill

The Disaster Management (Amendment) Bill, 2024, raises serious concerns. Instead of filling in the gaps in the Disaster Management Act (DMA), 2005, the Bill has removed scope for participatory governance, accountability, and efficiency from the Act.

The lapses
First, the semantics. The Bill uses top-down guarded terminology such as 'monitor' and 'guidelines'. Instead, terms such as 'supervision' and 'direction' could have established greater trust and bonding with communities and local governments. On the other hand, in global legal research documents, such as the Yokohama Strategy, the Hyogo Framework for Action, and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, local communities are known as the 'first responders' to disasters. It is imperative to build on the capacities and wisdom of local communities.

Second, even though the Bill defines a 'hazard', 'resilience', and 'vulnerability', these definitions are mere mechanical words or inconsequential without acknowledging the substantive roles of local communities, panchayats, wards and NGOs in disaster management. Whether during Cyclone Aila in 2009 in the Sundarbans, the Kedarnath glacial lake outburst flood of 2013, or the floods in Kerala in 2018, villagers and fisherfolk began rescuing people before the National Disaster Response Force or Coast Guards could reach the victims.

The Bill is silent on intersectional discrimination. Whenever authorities are open to a just approach to discrimination and vulnerability, the datasets change phenomenally. Ignoring intersectional vulnerability even after 20 years of the Act weakens the Bill's claim to be holistic and inclusive. Women, the disabled, "lower" castes, and LGBTQIA communities may not show the several layers of discrimination



Amita Singh
Founder Chairperson,
Special Centre for
Disaster Research,
and former Professor,
Centre for Law and
Governance, JNU

Instead of filling in the gaps in the Disaster Management Act, 2005, the Bill has removed scope for participatory governance, accountability, and efficiency from the Act

they suffer.
There is also nothing in the Bill on the performance evaluation of district authorities. If the authorities had failed to be prepared for a disaster and then a disaster strikes, sometimes they try to take attention away from their dereliction of duty and bring focus to individual philanthropy efforts. This makes the ground fertile for political poaching of the electorate.

The Bill excludes 'law and order' from the Act. It clarifies that, 'the expression "man made causes" does not include any law and order related matter'. Why then does it bring the State Director Generals of Police into the State Executive Committees (SECs)?

Accountability is the next casualty. Sections 12 and 13 of the DMA, which covered the minimum standards of relief for disaster victims and the possibility of loan repayment relief, have been omitted. Similarly, Section 19, which demanded that State governments follow guidelines on minimum standards of relief, has also been dropped. These Sections also carried special provisions for widows, orphans, the homeless, and provided ex gratia assistance on account of loss of life as also assistance on account of damage to houses and for restoration of means of livelihood. There is no replacement for this in the Bill.

The DMA had made some mandatory requirements for better enforcement of disaster management provisions by various departments and ministries under the Government of India. Section 35(2b) and Section 35(2d) that ensured integration and preparedness in the plans have been dropped in the Bill. At another place, the SEC no longer has to do basic homework for preparedness; sub clauses (2a) and (2b) of Section 22 are deleted in the Bill. There is little in terms of good governance in the Bill as most of its

measurable indices for performance assessment of officials in the field are fuzzy or inaccurately mentioned.

The Bill also suffers from speciesism. The thousands of animals which die after every disaster are not even mentioned.

The District Disaster Management Authorities (DDMA) seem to have little responsibility in implementing the Animal Birth Control (ABC) Rules, 2023,

brought out by the same government. This gap fails the Rules as well as the preparedness for a disaster.

The Bill suggests an Urban Disaster Management Authority (UDMA) under Section of 41A. What brought the need for this additional authority? It is unclear. The Municipal Corporation is the highest revenue generator for any city as it controls land, buildings, builders, and property taxation. But in what way can a Municipal Corporation improve disaster management if it encourages urban flooding by allowing encroachments over aquifers, water bodies, city forests, river beds and markets?

Regional collaboration

Finally, the world is grappling with zoonotic and epizootic diseases. Given this scenario, a regional plan of action through increased trust, collaboration, and emergency strategies was awaited. The Bill could have mentioned regional groupings such as SAARC, BIMSTEC, and BRICS, to be approached in the event of a disaster. The Bill was expected to encourage international collaboration, democratisation, and decentralisation of the role and responsibilities of the National Disaster Management Authority. It could have at least referred to the 2011 SAARC Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters. Given the porous boundaries of South Asian countries, to ignore regional collaboration is a serious lapse.

Memories of the tsunami

Officials recall the day of the disaster



STATE OF PLAY

T. Ramakrishnan
ramakrishnan.t@thehindu.co.in

It was a close shave with death for Gagandeep Singh Bedi on December 26, 2004, when the Indian Ocean tsunami struck Tamil Nadu. The Cuddalore District Collector was at Hotel Tamil Nadu on the sea front of Mammallapuram to attend an AIDS workshop when he got a call at around 9 a.m. A fisherman at Cuddalore told him that the sea had "flooded" and destroyed his village. When Mr. Bedi was about to end the call, he saw a huge wave in front of his hotel and ran out of the room. It was only then that he realised the magnitude of the disaster.

Mr. Bedi rushed to Cuddalore. He travelled through Tindivanam, as it was not safe to travel on Chennai's East Coast Road. "I first visited the government hospital, where I saw a large number of bodies," recalls Mr. Bedi, who is now Additional Chief Secretary, Rural Development and Panchayat Raj. Thanks to his team of officers in the district which included Rajendra Ratnoo, who is now Executive Director of the National Institute of Disaster Management, D. Jagannathan, who is Commissioner of Commercial Taxes in the Tamil Nadu government, and Anu George, who is one of the Secretaries to Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin, he initiated the process of emergency relief. "Within [a] few hours after the tsunami, the district administration had swung into action to rescue the affected people and taken up rehabilitation measures to bring [back] the normalcy of life," states the Cuddalore District Disaster Management

Plan, 2024.
One of the key decisions Mr. Bedi had to take pertained to the disposal of bodies. Considering the gravity of the situation, the State government acceded to the proposal of the Cuddalore administration for relaxing the stipulation of post mortem before disposing the bodies. "The then Commissioner of Revenue Administration and State Relief Commissioner, R. Santhanam, got the clearance for my request in no time," recalls Mr. Bedi. After discussions with senior members of the fishing community, mass burials were arranged on the evening of December 26.

The scale of destruction was unprecedented. Mr. Bedi says the loss of lives and cattle was "quite significant": 610 people died in Cuddalore and 38 people went missing. Public infrastructure was affected. Thirty-one coastal villages were affected and some 5,000 fishing vessels were damaged.

Cuddalore got a lot of attention nationally and internationally. Film actors such as Vike Oberoi, Smriti Irani, and Poonam Dhillon, Swiss tennis player Roger Federer, and former U.S. President Bill Clinton either came down to Tamil Nadu or were involved in relief work. Mr. Oberoi was criticised though — the then Chief Minister, Jayalalithaa, later blamed him for doing

nothing and trying to get publicity. "But celebrities have the potential of generating goodwill. We, the authorities, sought to do that and succeeded to a large extent. At the same time, we maintained a respectable distance from them," Mr. Bedi says.

The southernmost district of Kanniyakumari suffered the largest death toll (799) after Nagapattinam (6,065). "There were 72 people who could never be traced. As many as 44,000 families in 33 coastal villages were affected," says Sunil Paliwal, who is Chairman of the Chennai Port Trust. He was transferred from Theni to Kanniyakumari as Collector nearly two weeks after the tsunami.

Given its location, the district was not in the limelight of the Nagapattinam and Cuddalore were. However, that was not a problem for Mr. Paliwal and his team. "The district administration took up several measures on its own. Mr. Santhanam was extremely responsive and supported us."

What he remembers the most is that the delicately balanced religious mix of people in the district (Hindus constitute around 48%, Christians 46% and Muslims 4%, as per the 2011 Census) was no barrier to the district administration for undertaking relief and rehabilitation measures. "I would call Kanniyakumari a place of perfect communal harmony," Mr. Paliwal says, adding that he could see a sense of unity among the people in times of adversity.

Both Mr. Bedi and Mr. Paliwal continue to be in touch with the people of the two districts. In their assessment, the people have left behind the trauma of the tsunami.

Republicans and Trump's team diverge on immigration

30% Republicans favour a decrease in legal immigration compared to only 14% of Democrats

DATA POINT

The Hindu Data Team

A series of events has shone a spotlight on the U.S.' H1B visa programme, which mostly benefits Indian workers. The programme allows U.S. employers to hire skilled foreign professionals for specialised roles.

Recently, a month-old post on X by Chennai-born techie, Sriram Krishnan, who was appointed as AI advisor to the U.S. government by President-elect Donald Trump, went viral. Mr. Krishnan urged Elon Musk, who will also be advising the Trump administration on cutting unnecessary regulations, to eliminate country caps for green cards and "unlock skilled immigration." This sparked debates, with pro- and anti-immigration voices weighing in on the H1B visa programme. Far-right activist Laura Loomer was among the critics of Mr. Krishnan's appointment and the H1B programme.

Earlier this month, Bloomberg published a detailed report featuring former U.S.-born employees of India-based IT firm Cognizant Technology Solutions, who alleged that "H1B workers were favoured over U.S. employees." In October, a U.S. jury found the IT major guilty of discriminatory practices against non-Indian workers. Earlier this year, several Tata Consultancy Services employees in the U.S. filed a complaint with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, accusing it of racial discrimination and favouring individuals on H1B visas for jobs.

Amid the ongoing criticism of the H1B programme, the Joe Biden administration introduced new rules last week to simplify the hiring of foreign workers by U.S. companies. The changes also made it easier for individuals to transition from F-1 student visas to H1B visas.

In this context, a recent survey by the Pew Research Center is important. It reveals that 30% of U.S.

adults support an increase in legal immigration, 46% prefer maintaining the current levels, and 22% advocate for a decrease.

Chart 1 illustrates the share of U.S. adults who want legal immigration to increase, decrease, or stay at the current level. Americans aged 18 to 29 showed stronger support for increased legal immigration, with 50% favouring it and 10% advocating a decrease. But among those aged 50 and older, only 20% supported an increase; nearly 30% favoured a decrease. The responses were also divided along political lines, with 30% of Republicans favouring a decrease in legal immigration, compared to only 14% of Democratic-leaning respondents. White Americans showed the lowest support for increasing legal immigration.

The survey also shows that about four in 10 Americans believe that high-skilled workers should be prioritised when determining who should be allowed to stay in the U.S. legally (**Chart 2**). Significantly, Mr. Musk recently responded with "I agree" on X to a post by a U.S.-based firm's CEO advocating for an increase in the H1B visa cap to attract more "top talent".

Amid calls to increase temporary worker visa limits, the number of immigrants granted lawful permanent residency through green cards returned to pre-pandemic levels in 2023 (**Chart 3**). In 2023, approximately 1.2 million immigrants received green cards, an increase of about 1,55,000 compared to 2022. Since 2007, over 1 million immigrants have been granted green cards annually, except during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2023, 1,97,000 were given employment-based green cards, typically issued to highly skilled foreign workers or those filling labour shortages.

While a significant share of Republican voters supports reducing legal immigration, Mr. Trump's team and the tech industry advocate for increasing it to address the demand for skilled workers.

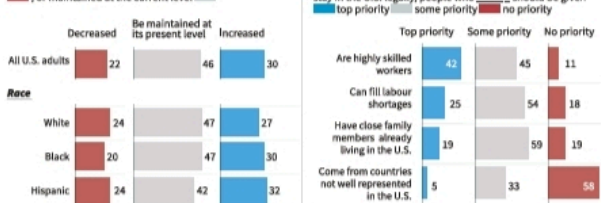
Which way will the H1B needle swing?

The data for the charts were sourced from a recent article published by the Pew Research Center based on their The American Trends Panel survey



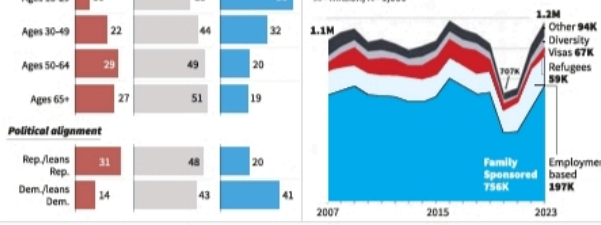
Chart 1: The chart illustrates the share of U.S. adults who believe that legal immigration should increase, decrease, or, or maintained at the current level

Chart 2: Share of U.S. adults who say that when deciding whether people from other countries should be allowed to stay in the U.S. legally, people who... should be given



The pew survey of U.S. adults was conducted in the August month this year and results were published in December

Chart 3: The chart shows the admission categories for U.S. lawful permanent residents between 2007 and 2023.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO DECEMBER 26, 1974

U.S. bypasses U.N. fund in \$200 m aid pledge

New York, Dec. 25: The United States has pledged \$200 million to aid poor countries hit by the world economic crisis, but said it would be distributed through American channels and not through a United Nations Emergency Fund. The U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, John Scali, in a letter to the U.N. Secretary-General, Mr. Kurt Waldheim, said half of the money, which is subject to Congressional approval, would go to 32 countries identified by the U.N. as the most seriously affected. The remainder was for other unlisted countries which the U.S. considered to be among the most needy, Mr. Scali said. At the same time, Mr. Scali acknowledged in his letter that the U.N. fund represented "appropriate channels for the rapid disbursement of assistance from those donor countries which do not have programmes already in operation". Last week, the U.S. refused to contribute to a second U.N. special fund to help the poorest countries, or to serve on its governing board. West Germany also declined to give to that fund. The U.S. Government's refusal to channel aid through the two special funds, which grew out of last April's special U.N. General Assembly session on economic questions, was attributed in some quarters here to its disenchantment with the current political trends in the U.N. In a widely-reported speech to the General Assembly earlier this month, Mr. Scali strongly criticised the third world majority for forcing through "one-sided, unrealistic resolutions which cannot be implemented." The U.S. is also known to believe that the oil-producing States, which have benefited from increased prices, could contribute much more to relieve the plight of developing countries suffering severe balance-of-payments problems because of the soaring costs of essential imports.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO DECEMBER 26, 1924

Canada's attitude

Ottawa, Dec. 24: The Cabinet is considering an invitation for a Special Imperial Conference. Canada's reply will probably signify that every means to exchange opinion by cable should be exhausted before the necessity arises for the presence of Canadian Ministers in London which is most inconvenient as the Canadian Parliament will be in session in March.

FROM THE ARCHIVES

Surveillance reform is the need of the hour

The proposed legislation related to the personal data protection of citizens fails to consider surveillance

Anushka Jain
Tanmay Singh

On December 20, a U.S. court ruled that Israel's NSO Group was liable for installing Pegasus, a spyware suite, on the phones of targeted individuals through WhatsApp. In an article dated July 20, 2021, Anushka Jain and Tanmay Singh argue the growing need for surveillance reform, stressing the importance of privacy protections and the risks of unchecked surveillance practices.

It is worth asking why the government would need to hack phones and install spyware when existing laws already offer impunity for surveillance. This unsettling query arises on the basis of reports emerging from a collaborative investigation by journalists from around the world, including from India's *The Wire*, titled the 'Pegasus Project'. Reports say that over 300 verified Indian mobile telephone numbers, including those used by Ministers, Opposition leaders, journalists, the legal community, businessmen, government officials, scientists, rights activists and others, were targeted using spyware made by the Israeli firm, NSO Group.

Threat to press freedom

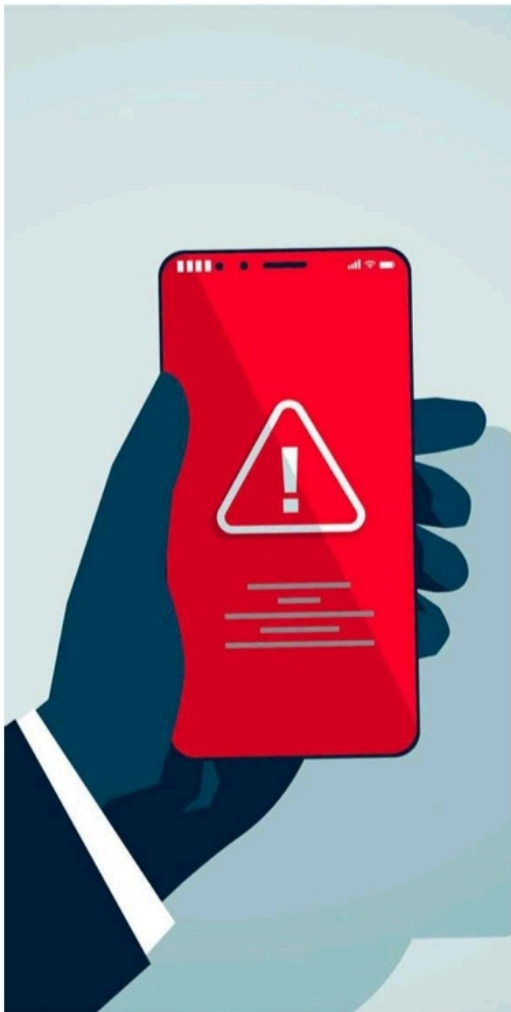
Subsequent reporting showed that the Pegasus spyware had been used to target 37 phones, of which 10 belonged to Indians. Amnesty International's Security Lab was then able to confirm that Pegasus was used to compromise the phones of former journalist of *The Indian Express* Sushant Singh, former editor of the *Economic and Political Weekly* Paranjay Guha Thakurta, former Outlook journalist S.N.M. Abdi, and *The Wire*'s two founding editors Siddharth Varadarajan and M.K. Venu.

These revelations highlight a disturbing trend with regard to the use of hacking software against dissidents and adversaries. In 2019, similar allegations were made about the use of Pegasus against journalists and human rights activists. Most of them were situated in Maharashtra and Chhattisgarh as the hack targeted lawyers related to the Bhima Koregaon case and Dalit activists, respectively. However, despite repeated calls for investigations, the relevant State governments failed to do so.

A significant number of Indians reportedly affected by Pegasus this time are again journalists. This is not surprising since the World Press Freedom Index produced by Reporters Without Borders has ranked India 142 out of 180 countries in 2021. What is shocking, however, is that the press requires (and in democracies is afforded) greater protections on speech and privacy. Privacy and free speech are what enable good reporting. They protect journalists against threats of private and governmental reprisals against legitimate reporting. This has been recognised in Supreme Court decisions. In the absence of privacy, the safety of journalists, especially those whose work criticises the government, and the personal safety of their sources is jeopardised. Such a lack of privacy, therefore, creates an aura of distrust around these journalists and effectively buries their credibility.

Problematic provisions

The government, in its purported undated and unsigned response, relied on existing provisions of law under the Indian Telegraph Act of 1885 and the Information Technology (IT) Act of 2000. Even without the use of Pegasus or any



GETTY IMAGES

other hacking software and surveillance, these provisions are problematic and offer the government total opacity in respect of its interception and monitoring activities. While the provisions of the Telegraph Act relate to telephone conversations, the IT Act relates to all communications undertaken using a computer resource. Section 69 of the IT Act and the Interception Rules of 2009 are even more opaque than the Telegraph Act, and offer even weaker protections to the surveilled. No provision, however, allows the government to hack the phones of any individual since hacking of computer resources, including mobile phones and apps, is a criminal offence under the IT Act. Nonetheless, surveillance itself, whether under a provision of law or without it, is a gross violation of the fundamental rights of citizens.

The very existence of a surveillance system impacts the right to privacy and the exercise of freedom of speech and personal liberty under Articles 19 and 21 of the Constitution, respectively. It prevents people from reading and exchanging unorthodox, controversial or provocative ideas. Regardless of whether a citizen knows that their email is being read by the government, the perceived danger, founded on reasonable suspicion that this may happen, itself impacts their ability to express, receive and discuss such ideas.

There is also no scope for an individual subjected to surveillance to approach a court of law prior to or during or subsequent to acts of surveillance since the system itself is covert. In the absence of parliamentary or judicial oversight, electronic surveillance gives the executive the power to influence both the subject of

surveillance and all classes of individuals, resulting in a chilling effect on free speech. Constitutional functionaries such as a sitting judge of the Supreme Court have reportedly been surveilled under Pegasus without any checks outside the executive wing of government. Vesting such disproportionate power with one wing of the government threatens the separation of powers of the government. In response to a Right to Information (RTI) request in 2013, the Central government had revealed that 7,500 to 9,000 orders for interception of telephones are issued by it every month. However, RTI requests for such information are now denied citing threats to national security and to the physical safety of persons.

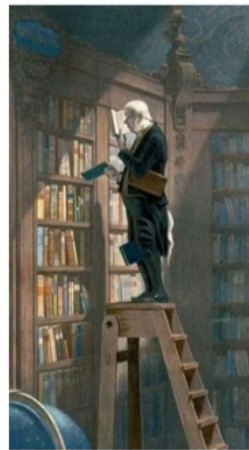
The government, in its purported response, stated that any surveillance which takes place happens through a "due process of law". However, the existing provisions are insufficient to protect against the spread of authoritarianism since they allow the executive to exercise a disproportionate amount of power. Such surveillance, when carried out entirely by the executive, curtails Articles 32 and 226 of the Constitution (empowering the Supreme Court and High Courts, respectively, to issue certain writs) as it happens in secret. Thus, the affected person is unable to show a breach of their rights. This violates not only the ideals of due process and the separation of powers but also goes against the requirement of procedural safeguards as mandated in *K.S. Puttaswamy (Retd) v. Union of India* (2017).

Role of judiciary

Thus, in order to satisfy the ideal of "due process of law", to maintain an effective separation of powers and to fulfill the requirements of procedural safeguards and natural justice, there needs to be oversight from another branch of the government. Only the judiciary can be competent to decide whether specific instances of surveillance are proportionate, whether less onerous alternatives are available, and to balance the necessity of the government's objectives with the rights of the impacted individuals. The need for judicial oversight over surveillance systems in general, and judicial investigation into the Pegasus hacking in particular, is also essential because the leaked database of targeted numbers contained the phone number of a sitting Supreme Court judge, which further calls into question the independence of the judiciary in India.

Surveillance reform is the need of the hour in India. Not only are existing protections weak but the proposed legislation related to the personal data protection of Indian citizens fails to consider surveillance while also providing wide exemptions to government authorities. When spyware is expensive and interception is inefficient, the individuals surveilled will be shortlisted by priority and perceived threat level to the existing regime. But as spyware becomes more affordable and interception becomes more efficient, there will no longer be a need to shortlist individuals. Everyone will be potentially subject to state-sponsored mass surveillance. The only solution is immediate and far-reaching surveillance reform.

Anushka Jain is the Associate Counsel (Surveillance and Transparency) and Tanmay Singh is the Litigation Counsel at Internet Freedom Foundation



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian
S. Upendran

"... and in the end, the client kills the lawyer."

"The lawyer certainly deserved it. But tell me, what's the difference between a 'client' and a 'customer'?"

"A client is someone who makes use of the services of a professional. For example, if you require the services of a lawyer or a chartered accountant, then you would be his/her client. A 'customer', on the other hand, is someone who buys things."

"So if I buy things from a shop, I would be a customer."

"Yes."

"... When you refer to someone as being an 'awkward/cool customer', you mean that you think he/she is behaving in an awkward or cool manner. For example, Mohan is a real cool customer under pressure."

"So here the word 'customer' does not mean someone who buys things?"

"No, it doesn't. It can refer to any person: a cool customer, an ugly customer, a queer customer. 'Customer' here just means a person."

"I see. Can I say, the bank manager avoids all awkward customers?"

"I suppose you could. But how does the manager do it? Does he hide in the bathroom?"

"That's not funny. Anyway, while we're on the subject of bathrooms, why is the lavatory called the 'loo'?"

"It's the shortened form of the French 'gardez l'eau'; 'Teau' is pronounced like 'loo'."

"O.K. But what does it mean?"

"'Gardez l'eau' means 'beware of the water.'"

"Water? What water?"

"You see, in Europe, before indoor plumbing and sewers, human waste was thrown out of the window. People were warned beforehand. In France, for example, the person throwing out the human waste used to shout 'gardez l'eau', meaning..."

"... beware of the water."

"That's right. As soon as the people on the street heard it, they used to run away from the window."

"But tell me, how did the 'Teau' which is pronounced 'loo' become 'loo' as in 'blue'?"

"We have to thank the Scots for that. You see the Scots borrowed the French 'gardez l'eau'. But they changed the pronunciation to 'gardy loo'. And when indoor plumbing became common, people didn't have to shout 'gardy loo' any more."

"Instead they passed water in the 'loo'!"

"Waterloo!"

Published in *The Hindu* on July 12, 1994

THE DAILY QUIZ

Here is a quiz on fun Christmas traditions followed across the world

Sindhu Nagaraj

QUESTION 1

Many people use Advent calendars to count the days until Christmas. In which country did this tradition originate?

QUESTION 2

Noche de las Velitas (Day of the Little Candles) is a widely observed religious holiday in which country? It is celebrated on December 7 on the eve of the Immaculate Conception. It is the unofficial start of the Christmas season in the country.

QUESTION 3

In which country, Christmas is celebrated on January 7 as the day of Jesus' birth, alongside the Russian, Greek, Eritrean and Serbian Orthodox Churches?

QUESTION 4

In Mexico, this flower, which bloom in winter, are given to people, during Christmas. Name the flower.

QUESTION 5

In France, Réveillon de Noël is celebrated. Traditionally when is this celebrated?



Visual Question:

Identify this tradition. In which country this is celebrated?

Questions and Answers to the previous day's

daily quiz: 1. Name the book Newton published in 1687 that laid the foundations of classical mechanics.

Ans: *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica*

2. In his book, Newton described a way to predict the exact locations of two bodies orbiting each other with no other forces acting on them. Once he had solved it, Newton introduced this next version. Ans: Three-body problem

3. In 1666, Newton resolved a longstanding debate until then as to whether _____ were an intrinsic property of light or if they were an addition using a combination of prisms and lenses. Ans: Colours

4. Newton was a member of the Parliament of England from this district that was created in 1603 and abolished in 1950. Ans: 'Cambridge University'

5. For the last three decades of his life, Newton was _____ of the _____, a role he took quite seriously even though it was a sinecure. Fill in the blanks. Ans: Master of the Mint

5. While Newton and X are believed to have independently developed calculus, Newton is credited with starting earlier and X with developing a more convenient notation. Ans: Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz

Early Birds: K.N. Viswanathan | Arvind Tilkay | ViswanadhaRao Batches | Sudhir Gurjar

Please send in your answers to
dailyquiz@thehindu.co.in

Word of the day

Wistful:

thinking sadly about something that you would like to have

Synonyms: regretful, yearning, longing

Usage: She felt wistful as she looked at the old photographs.

Pronunciation: newsth.live/wɪstfʊlpro

International Phonetic

Alphabet: /wɪstfʊl/

How the 2004 Indian Ocean quake transformed tsunami science

The transoceanic reach of the 2004 tsunami was a big surprise. With no recorded history of any event of such magnitude, researchers had not anticipated it occurring along India's eastern seaboard. But in the two decades since, their understanding of tsunamis has leapt forward

Kusala Rajendran
C. P. Rajendran

December 26, 2004, marks the 20th year since the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami. The tsunami generated by the quake of magnitude 9.1 was sourced off the Sumatran coast and was the third largest (by magnitude) in the world since 1900. The source was 30 km below the ocean floor, in the Sunda trench, where part of the Indo-Australian plate subducts beneath the Burma microplate, which is a part of the Eurasian plate.

The 2004 earthquake ripped through 1,300 km of the plate boundary, the fault tearing from Sumatra in the south to Coco Islands in the north. The quake was felt in Indonesia, Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, the Maldives, Myanmar, Singapore, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. It caused severe damage and killed hundreds in Northern Sumatra and in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The tsunami was most impactful on distant shores, affecting 17 countries lining the Indian Ocean.

In all, with an astounding death toll of around 227,000 plus 1.7 million more displaced, the 2004 tsunami is the deadliest in recorded history.

Unprecedented magnitude

In less than six years, on March 11, 2011, a magnitude 9.1 earthquake hit the east coast of Japan, the largest ever recorded in that country. It generated a tsunami that reached as high as 39 metres and travelled up to 8 km inland. The twin disasters killed more than 18,000 people, displaced more than 500,000, and resulted in the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant accident.

Although devastating tsunamis have occurred in the past – 1960 Chile and 1964 Alaska, for example – the two 21st century events taught us important lessons. Particularly, the 2004 tsunami highlighted how vulnerable the world was to natural hazards. It landed like a bolt from the sky, hitting the most unexpected locations, and placed a premium on the importance of tackling disaster risk through preparedness and resilience.

As Margareta Wahlström, head of the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR), observed in a panel discussion: "Ten years after the Indian Ocean tsunami, the world has taken significant measures to make the world a safer place against disasters."

The 2004 tsunami surprised researchers and hazard managers alike with its transoceanic reach. With no recorded history of any event of such magnitude, the research community hadn't anticipated it occurring along India's eastern seaboard. The only previous tsunamis had occurred in 1881, caused by a large earthquake (magnitude -8) off Car Nicobar island, and another in 1883 due to the explosion of Krakatoa. These events produced only small sea surges as recorded by tide gauges at different points on the east coast.

However, in the two decades since 2004, researchers have made tremendous leaps in the scientific understanding of tsunami generation and the technical aspects of earthquake monitoring. The Indian Tsunami Early Warning Centre (ITEWC), established in 2007 by the Union Ministry of the Earth Sciences of the Government of India, is perhaps the most significant step in this direction.

Operating from the Indian National Centre for Ocean Information Services (INCOIS) at Hyderabad, ITEWC operates seismological stations as well as bottom pressure recorders and tidal stations across the Indian Ocean basin – all 24/7. These systems can transmit offshore and deep ocean tsunami observations that enable early warnings. Earthquake data from the stations operated by the India Meteorological Department (IMD) and 350 global stations are also available at INCOIS.

Ocean monitoring systems also pass data in real-time. In about 10 minutes, for example, the system can identify a potential tsunami-producing earthquake and issue tsunami alerts or warnings – depending on the expected severity – for countries bordering the Indian Ocean. India is the fifth country in the world, after the U.S., Japan, Chile, and Australia, to have an advanced tsunami warning system of this kind.

A new practice

The 2004 incident also spurred important new developments in research. The work of tsunami geology, pioneered by Brian Atwater of the U.S. Geological Survey, prompted researchers in Asian countries



Coastal devastation on Katchal Island, part of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, in 2005. The island lost some 90% of its population in the December 26, 2004, tragedy. AP/GETTY IMAGES

including India to search for evidence of tsunamis in history. Atwater's work along the Washington coast of the western U.S. had revealed evidence of an earthquake and tsunami in 1700, plus their predecessors. One fascinating part of this work was the use of land elevation changes caused by the earthquake, which left trees stressed or just killed them. Atwater had used the imprints of these effects to determine when some piece of land had been deformed and thus when it was suffering the effects of a tsunamigenic earthquake.

Inspections of subsided mangrove swamps revealed how the 2004 earthquake had rendered changes in elevation of up to 3.5 metres at some places along the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Scientists also wondered if there could have been past events that also caused the mangroves to subside. As it turned out the 2004 earthquake had reopened the coffins of the past and exposed their skeletons, in the form of dead roots sticking out from tidal platforms during a low tide. Such roots exposed near Port Blair were used to infer that the last earthquake had occurred about a thousand years ago.

Excavations at Mahabalipuram, a port of the Pallava dynasty, unearthed evidence of a tsunami of the same vintage. It was the first proof of a pre-2004 tsunami reported by an Indian team. Researchers also sifted through sedimentary deposits along the islands and coastal areas of the mainland to find evidence of other ancient tsunamis, while learning to distinguish between tsunami and storm deposits.

This effort is a good example of how the 2004 tsunami prompted the science of tsunami geology to become a new practice, leading to many new research papers and doctoral theses. The demand for more knowledge about tsunamis also facilitated quantum leaps in the use of GPS systems and earthquake instrumentation. With funding from the Ministry of Earth Sciences, research institutes established several new stations

along the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, strengthening seismic observations and geodetic studies.

In another important step, the tsunami modelling using mathematical tools helped researchers determine inundation limits. In particular, the disaster provided a stark reminder that nuclear power plants established along Indian coasts could be vulnerable to a hitherto underestimated risk. While the Kalpakkam nuclear power plant withstood the giant waves, it also shut down automatically after the rising water levels tripped the detectors. There was no release of radioactive material and the reactor was restarted six days later.

But the 2011 Tohoku earthquake reminded the world, and India, how quickly a nuclear disaster can happen in the absence of a failsafe. It was clear the radiation from the Fukushima facility had entered the human food chain. Researchers even found radioactive caesium in the breast milk of some women tested near Fukushima prefecture three months after the disaster. What if the waves in 2004 had been high enough to damage the reactors at Kalpakkam?

This question continues to resonate as the government has been pursuing large developmental projects in Great Car Nicobar, including the construction of an international transshipment terminal. Some experts have also argued that the last great earthquake that affected the region before 2004 was a millennium ago, so there is no imminent danger. But this question hinges on how much we still don't know. What if an unbroken patch of the subduction zone between Myanmar and India gives way? A still-unexamined portion of the crust between Great Nicobar and Car Nicobar suddenly breaking into a powerful earthquake and a tsunami can't be ruled out.

Experts and policymakers must also focus on other problem spots, like the Makran Coast in the northern Arabian Sea and the Myanmar coast adjoining the Northern Indian Ocean. Both of them have the potential to produce large

Excavations at Mahabalipuram, a port of the Pallava dynasty, unearthed evidence of a tsunami of the same vintage. Researchers also sifted through sedimentary deposits along coastal areas of the mainland to find evidence of other ancient tsunamis

tsunamis. The Makran Coast, cutting through Iran and Pakistan, could direct a tsunami's energy towards India's west coast, which also hosts nuclear reactors and the city of Mumbai.

A major milestone

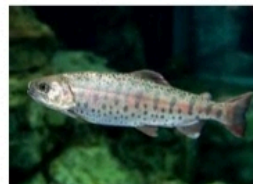
Science tells us that stress builds between tectonic plates until it reaches a critical strain, at which point the accumulated potential energy is released as an earthquake. Subduction zones like the Andaman-Sumatra region are becoming significant as they provide clues to earthquake generation. The discovery of slow slips – tectonic faults that move many orders of magnitude slower and generally just a bit deeper – has also added a new dimension to this picture.

Of late, researchers have been studying seismic slips at plate boundaries to understand the processes that occur before and after major earthquakes. They have elucidated the occurrence of premonitory and post-seismic slip transients using laboratory experiments and numerical simulations. Some of these studies have implications for earthquake prediction: they indicate a creative process that initially involves stable, slow rupture growth within a confined zone on a fault just before unstable, high-speed rupture.

One paper published in 2015 (coauthored by one of the authors of this article) indicated a perceptible downward ground movement in South Andaman between 2003 and 2004, before the earthquake – a silent event with a moment magnitude of 6.3. This event could have been the precursor to the megathrust earthquake. Analyses of geodetic data on a wider set of global earthquakes published in *Science* also confirmed short-term precursory fault slips before large earthquakes.

After it happened, the 2004 Andaman-Sumatra earthquake became a major milestone in modern seismological research, providing science with a treasure trove of data to help glean new insights about earthquake generation and related hazards.

(Kusala Rajendran is a former professor at the Centre for Earth Sciences, Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru. CP Rajendran is an adjunct professor at the National Institute of Advanced Sciences, Bengaluru. They are authors of the book *The Rumbling Earth - The Story of Indian Earthquakes*. kusalaraj@gmail.com, cprajendran@gmail.com)



Bacteria, it appears, can breach the blood-brain barrier and thrive. CREDIT: ISAA

Scientists find bacteria living on fish brains

Arkatapa Basu

For decades, scientists have believed the human brain is a sterile fortress, protected from microbial invaders by the robust blood-brain barrier. But a new study, published in *Science Advances*, challenges this assumption by showing bacteria can't just make their way to the brain, they can thrive there.

Researchers from the University of New Mexico, led by biologist Irene Salinas, made this startling revelation when studying salmon and trout. Using DNA extraction and microscopic imaging, they identified living bacteria in the fishes' olfactory bulbs and other brain regions. The results showed the olfactory bulb, which is directly connected to the nasal cavity, harboured bacteria as did deeper-lying brain tissue.

"Our findings demonstrate that microorganisms ... redefine the boundaries between microbiota and the healthy vertebrate brain," the researchers wrote in their paper.

The presence of bacteria in fish brains raised several questions. The foremost was about how they managed to cross the blood-brain barrier. Salinas & co. discovered that many of these microbes possessed unique adaptations that helped them breach the barrier. Some produced molecules called polyamines that can open tight junctions in the barrier fluid; others were able to evade immune responses or outcompete their rivals, ensuring their survival in the brain's delicate environs.

The group also explored the origins of these brain-dwelling microbes. Some bacteria seemed to have colonised the brain much before the blood-brain barrier had evolved to its present form. Others likely travelled up from the gut or the bloodstream, continuously infiltrating the brain throughout the fishes' lives. The researchers said the presence of more than one pathway suggests the brain's

Many microbes had adaptations that helped breach the barrier. Some produced polyamines that can open tight junctions in the barrier fluid; others evaded immune responses, ensuring survival in the brain's delicate environs

microbial community is dynamic, shaped by both early colonisation and ongoing interaction with other bodily systems.

A particularly striking finding was the image of a bacterium caught mid-transit across the barrier, offering direct visual evidence. Some researchers have hypothesised that these microbes might be engulfed by immune cells while others have suggested they could play active roles in physiological processes – just like the human gut microbiome does in regulating digestion, immunity, and mood.

"Microorganisms shape the vertebrate brain via complex biological processes, the best characterised being the gut-brain axis," to quote from the paper. "This bidirectional communication involves molecular mediators released by microorganisms but not direct microbial colonisation of the brain. Our findings uncover remarkable associations between the salmonid brain and bacteria during healthy physiological states. Whether this is a hallmark of other teleosts or a universal symbiotic relationship found in all vertebrates remains to be investigated." Teleosts refers to a group of more than 26,000 fish species, making up the vast majority of all known fish.

Fish are very different from humans yet the study also opens the door to rethinking the brain's microbiome in vertebrates, including humans. If bacteria can thrive on fish brains, it's possible they may do so on human brains as well.



The no. 3 nuclear reactor of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant burning after the earthquake and tsunami triggered an explosion. Satellite image taken March 14, 2011. DIGITALGLOBE



THE EDITORIAL PAGE

WORDLY WISE

LET US REMEMBER: ONE BOOK, ONE PEN, ONE CHILD, AND ONE TEACHER CAN CHANGE THE WORLD.

— MALALA YOUSAFZAI

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

THE HASINA FACTOR

She can be a bargaining chip on diplomatic table. Dhaka needs to dial down; Bangladesh has home in Delhi, not veto on future ties

ON TUESDAY, THE Muhammad Yunus-led government made a formal request of extradition to India, which has hosted Sheikh Hasina, the former prime minister of Bangladesh, since she was ousted by a student-led uprising. Delhi has so far declined to comment on the matter and Dhaka has reportedly affirmed that it will follow up on its request. The two countries have an extradition treaty but its clauses do not oblige Delhi to hand over Hasina. The reasons for India to stand its ground while continuing to engage diplomatically with its eastern neighbour, though, go beyond the letter of the treaty. There is no doubt that Bangladesh's standing as a democracy has suffered because of Hasina's authoritarian ways and the country is in urgent need of political reform. However, that endeavour cannot be reduced to the persecution of one person. Meaningful changes require a representative government. Yunus leads an interim regime comprising student leaders, academics, NGO and civil society activists. It does not have the imprimatur of the country's voters and does not represent Bangladesh's entire political spectrum. The demand for Hasina's extradition, in fact, seems of a piece with the recent demonising of her father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the interim government's moves to diminish the Awami League's presence in Bangladesh's politics.

It would be extremely unfortunate if India-Bangladesh ties are soured by Dhaka's excessive focus on Hasina. The former prime minister had played an important role in taking the political and economic ties between the two countries to a new high. Her ouster seems to have been followed by a concerted pushback against several of Hasina's initiatives, including jettisoning a project that would have made Bangladesh a transit point in providing internet services to India's northeast. Narratives that undermine India's role in Bangladesh's liberation movement have reportedly gained currency in post-Hasina Bangladesh as has growing insecurity among minorities. The focus of Delhi's diplomatic initiative should be to impress on Dhaka the arc of India-Bangladesh ties, pre and post-1971, the shared economic and cultural bonds between the people of the two countries, and their common concern in ensuring stability in the Subcontinent. The imperative should be to underline that the ties are meant to serve the people of the two countries who share a more than 4,000 km-long border — not ideologies or personalities.

That's why Delhi should also impress upon Hasina that while it respects the historical connections with her party and family, and the former Bangladesh PM has a home in India, the ties between the two countries cannot be hostage to her personal grievances and aspirations. As it navigates the diplomatic complexities with a post-Hasina Bangladesh, Delhi's message to her, and those who have succeeded her in Bangladesh, should be that India's stakes in its eastern neighbour go far beyond one person or one political party. Dhaka, too, must recognise the necessity of making bilateral ties politics-proof.

ELIMINATE, DEMOTIVATE

Scrapping of no-detention policy undermines Right To Education, goes against vision of NEP 2020

THE WORDS, ELIMINATION and examination, are almost always intertwined, especially in India, where examinations are primarily elimination tests. The Right to Education Act, 2009, underlined a different approach. It scrapped out the humiliation of elimination from the body politic of examination. It came out with the No Detention Policy (NDP) for students up to Class VIII. That was innovative in a country where success is often measured in terms of examination scores.

After 15 years, much of the radical approach has been diluted. From the next academic year, Class V and Class VIII students in government schools will be held back or eliminated according to their performance. The move is an extension of the amendment introduced by the Centre to the RTE in 2019, when it left the issue of detention to the discretion of state governments. NDP was premised on the theory that detention led to school dropouts. The RTE was passed when the dropout rate for students between Classes I to VIII was 42.5 per cent. Notably, for the SCs and STs, the percentage was much higher — 51.2 and 56.8, respectively. In 2024, as the central government annuls the NDP, the dropout rate has already come down to 12.6 per cent, according to the latest data from UDISE. If the decreasing dropout rate stands in favour of NDP, a 2023 report by ASER, which showed that only a fourth of the enrolled students in the age group of 14 to 18 can fluently read a Class II-level text, vouches for the contrary.

However, the RTE was not all about NDP. It was envisioned that the students who failed to pass the exams would be given "special care" by teachers to achieve the required level of learning. But do the teachers have enough infrastructure to take "special care"? The overburdened teachers in primary and secondary schools rarely have time to even look into the students' basic needs. According to the reports of the Ministry of Education, the government schools, both at the primary and elementary levels, are grappling with a shortage of 8.4 lakh teachers. Responding to a question in the Rajya Sabha in the just-concluded Winter Session, Minister of State in the Ministry of Education, Jayant Chowdhury, cited a few reasons for dropout, including students' lack of interest and their inability to "cope up with studies". Will detention not aggravate the problem? It is bound to affect the interest of the students, mostly of those who belong to marginalised communities. The imagination of innovative education and universal access, as proposed by the National Education Policy (NEP), doesn't go with the narrative of elimination/detention.

THERE'S NO PARTY TONIGHT

Whether it's a trip out of town or just sitting at home, everyone should have their own version of a holiday

FOR MOST GROWN-UPS — or at least the adults who are supposed to pretend they are — the "holiday season" is a bit of a fraud. Homes, parents, children and bills, and not least the looming spectre of the drudgery of work that will resume in the new year — it's difficult to completely switch off. To top it all is the slew of expectations and the unavoidable social obligations that mark the calendar as the year ends. No time to put the feet up, catch up on the book, or binge-watch the show that sits invitingly on the streaming platform's homepage. The beleaguered working person, eager to just relax, forced to socialise, may well ask: What holiday?

For the extroverts and the party lovers, none of this may be a problem. Bingeing on good food, moving to decent music and loudly arguing with friends and family — for many, that's a recharge in itself. Then there's the fact that excess and inebriation can have their merits. To paraphrase Ernest Hemingway, for those who find life a mechanical oppression, a couple of glasses of wine (or more) provide a mechanical relief. But, as introverts have contended in rare moments of vociferous protest, why should they be pressured into socialising and hedonism? The answer is simple.

Forget the Instagram reels and the pressure to have photos to share on WhatsApp groups. Those who need to should ignore the requests to party, to catch up, to eat, drink and be merry. They should curl up with a book, get lost in a movie or do whatever they need to recharge, relax and revel in the little time afforded in the space between the constant dring. "Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year" is a greeting that is now *pro forma*, said casually without thought to its meaning. So, whether it's a party, a trip out of town or just sitting at home — it's important that everyone has their very own version of a great holiday.



SYED ATA HASNAIN

TWENTY YEARS AGO, on December 26, 2004, people rushed to their dictionaries. Google Search was not yet sufficiently popular, no one wanted to express ignorance of the word "tsunami". As the oceans erupted with a 9.1 magnitude earthquake below the seabed off the coastline of Indonesia, more than 2,30,000 people lost their lives as a result of the wall of water that travelled to the Aceh area of Indonesia, to the resorts along the Thailand coast, the Andaman and Nicobar (A&N) Islands and then the Indian and Sri Lankan coastlines. The destruction of lives and livelihoods was enormous. The lack of any warning system or proper education about tsunamis was evident as people were caught by surprise when the high waves flooded coastlines around the Indian Ocean basin, making it one of the worst natural disasters in recent memory.

Twenty years later, to pay homage to those who lost their lives and others who suffered some of the worst privations, I travelled to the A&N Islands at the invitation of the Headquarters, Andaman and Nicobar Command (HQANC), the only Joint Forces Command of the Indian Armed Forces. HQ ANC observed the tragedy of the tsunami in what I considered the most appropriate way — conducting a knowledge exchange event over two days. It optimally combined three aspects: First, it devoted almost half the event to the exchange of technical knowledge on disaster management and the status of disaster warning systems as related to tsunamis and other potential disasters for a general build-up of knowledge. Second, it called in a few tsunami survivors and experienced hands who escaped its ravages. Third, it devoted some time to the geopolitical and geostrategic aspects of the security environment in the Indian Ocean Region. Senior officers from 10 Indian Ocean Region (IOR) countries also attended the event. They, too, received an all-round education on humanitarian assistance and disaster response (HADR) operations along with strategic security.

The emotions flowed as Meghana Rajashekar, daughter of a late Air Force offi-

Twenty years after the Indian Ocean tsunami ravaged many countries, India is more disaster-ready

The tsunami struck the A&N Islands within 20 minutes of the undersea earthquake and travelled 1,200 km to Chennai and Sri Lanka in just two hours. An early warning (EW) system could have warned the Indian and Sri Lankan coastlines of the approaching waves. At that time, India's seismic monitoring network was limited, and the country relied heavily on international seismic data. This led to a delay in detecting the earthquake and issuing a tsunami warning.

cer, spoke of her harrowing experience as a 12-year-old who lost both her parents in Car Nicobar Island on that fateful morning. She was carried into the sea by the giant waves and managed to remain afloat atop some debris for two days before being swept onto an island from where she was finally rescued as a traumatised child.

The tsunami struck the A&N Islands within 20 minutes of the undersea earthquake and travelled 1,200 km to Chennai and Sri Lanka in just two hours. An early warning (EW) system could have warned the Indian and Sri Lankan coastlines of the approaching waves. At that time, India's seismic monitoring network was limited, and the country relied heavily on international seismic data. This led to a delay in detecting the earthquake and issuing a tsunami warning.

Although the Indian National Centre for Ocean Information Services (INCOIS) Hyderabad had a tsunami detection system in place, it was not designed to detect tsunamis triggered by distant earthquakes. The system relied on seismic data and could not detect tsunami waves in real time. Along with the communication gaps, there were knowledge and information gaps as well. Little was known about how a tsunami manifests along a coastline. It is this failure of detection and of EW that led to the finalisation of the ongoing process that had commenced during NDA-1 after the super cyclone Paradip and reinforced by the Bhuj earthquake.

The Disaster Management Act of India was finally enacted a year after the tsunami. The government then established the Indian Tsunami Early Warning Centre (ITEWC) at (INCOIS), Hyderabad and it has been operational since October 2007. It comprises a real-time seismic monitoring and sea-level network. The ITEWC is capable of detecting tsunamigenic earthquakes occurring in the Indian Ocean as well as in global oceans within 10 minutes of their occurrence and disseminates advisories to the concerned authorities. The Indian system provides tsunami-related and sea surge-based infor-

mation to 26 countries as part of the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission of UNESCO (IOC-UNESCO) framework.

Odisha has made significant progress in preparing its coastal villages for tsunami threats. Currently, 24 coastal villages in Odisha have been recognised as "tsunami ready". The latter implies a certain threshold in preparedness to include response and evacuation plans, mock exercises, and community awareness with signages indicating escape routes. Odisha is working towards extending this to all coastal villages.

The NDMA's intent is similar and goes along with the mantra spell out in the Prime Minister's Ten Point Agenda on DRR. In it, EW forms a significant part now that the dissemination system is maturing with the Common Alerting Protocol (CAP). Information received from ITEWC can be appropriately drafted into warnings and advisories and disseminated to millions of mobile phones whose numbers are captured through a polygon drawn on a GIS map. This necessitates an effective prediction system based on risk mapping, which too is a part of the Ten Point Agenda. In due course, a modern cell broadcast system will be fielded with far greater reliability and speed of delivery of messages. This will go well beyond tsunamis and cyclones, to include hazards such as lightning and Glacial Lake Outburst Flood (GLOF), of the type that affected Sikkim in October 2023.

All of the above and more, related to the current and future state of DRR in India, were highlighted during the technical sessions of the HQ ANC event, titled Deep Dive Diksha Dialogue. It is now an annual feature. That DRR is being discussed professionally and more often by India's armed forces is one of the most heartening developments since the disaster. For this, both the political and military leadership need to be credited. The National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) is supporting this knowledge quest in earnest for a disaster-resilient India.

The writer is a member of the National Disaster Management Authority



D RAJA

THE CPI'S HISTORY in the last 100 years is a saga of struggle and sacrifice for our country. The CPI's foundation day, December 26, 1925, is etched in the history of India. India's independence struggle and the drafting of our Constitution is intertwined with diverse ideological movements, among which the Communist movement played a significant role. There were concerted efforts to form an all-India level organisation to voice the issues of workers, peasants, women and other marginalised sections from the late 1920s. Even before the Kanpur Conference (1925), the British were intolerant of Communist ideology. However, hardships like the Kanpur, Meerut and Peshawar conspiracy cases failed as Communists upheld people's causes.

Early Communists focused on the plight of workers, peasants, and the oppressed classes, condemning British colonial rule as an exploitative force. At the same time, they targeted the oppressive social structures of caste and patriarchy. In the Kanpur Conference, the Chair, M Singaravelu, condemned the practice of untouchability. The CPI was the first organisation to refuse membership to members of any communal organisation. One of the central contributions of Communists to the independence movement was their early, steadfast demand for Poorna Swaraj. Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose adopted this demand later. Communists demanded the formation of a Constituent Assembly that would represent the will of the people. They argued that no new political order should be based on the sovereignty of the people, reflected

FOR FREEDOM AND BEYOND

CPI was critical to Independence, helped shape new nation's values

later in the Preamble's invocation of "We, the People of India".

Communists' influence can be seen in the Constituent Assembly debates over land reforms, workers' rights, and the protection of backward classes. The Telangana Rebellion, a major peasant uprising in the Nizam's Hyderabad state, exemplified the CPI's commitment to land reforms and social justice. Communists took the lead in mobilising people through organisations like the All India Trade Union Congress, All India Kisan Sabha, All India Students' Federation, the Progressive Writers' Association, etc. These revolutionary movements, coupled with the CPI's ideological commitment to liberty, equality, fraternity, and justice helped reshape the post-independence political discourse. The experience of popular uprisings and workers' resistance underscored the need for a constitution that would guarantee social and economic rights alongside political freedoms.

The RSS also founded in 1925, played a dubious role during India's freedom struggle. It maintained an ambivalent, and at times, openly hostile stance towards the struggle. It was primarily focused on promoting a vision of Hindu nationalism and, unlike the Congress and the Communist Party, did not participate in the anti-colonial movement. In fact, its ideological position aligned with elements of the British colonial state, as they shared a common contempt for the secular, inclusive vision of an independent India. Instead, the RSS focused on consolidating a narrow majoritarian identity and found a friend in British colonialism. It still advocates a divide-and-rule policy.

Communists took an uncompromising stance against both colonial rule and the communal tendencies of the RSS. They recognised that imperialism was not the only challenge facing India: the struggle for justice, equality, and social liberation was just as critical.

As the CPI observes its centenary, the ongoing attack on the values enshrined in the Constitution by the RSS is a matter of deep concern. The RSS and its affiliates consistently called for a reimagining of India's identity as a Hindu Rashtra, which B R Ambedkar called a calamity for the nation. Efforts to alter or dilute provisions related to reservation for Dalits, backward classes, and minorities as well as attempts to rewrite history, redefine Indian nationalism and reinterpret constitutional values, reflect the RSS's broader agenda.

In response to these attacks, a broad-based resistance movement has emerged, with various groups, including Communists, playing a role in defending the Constitution's values. The Communists are amongst those at the forefront. The Left has been particularly vocal in opposing attempts to erode the constitutional protections, emphasising the need for social and economic justice in a nation still grappling with deep inequalities. This ongoing battle remains critical in preserving the democratic fabric of India against the forces of communal fascism and crony capitalism. It is our task — to protect and expand the legacy of a hundred years and to play a glorious role in fighting for a new India: Classless, casteless and socialist.

The writer is general secretary, CPI

DECEMBER 26, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

REPOLL IN FOUR STATES

REPOLLING WILL BE held in 62 polling stations in 15 parliamentary constituencies in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, and Haryana on December 27, the Election Commission announced. The secretary to the Election Commission R P Bhatta, said that the repoll, in parts of four states, has been ordered following receipt of complaints of booth-capturing.

CAMPAIGNING ENDS

THE THREE-WEEK campaign for the second phase of the Lok Sabha election came to a

peaceful end. In the second round of polling, voters in 117 constituencies spread over six states and two Union territories will elect their representatives on December 27. Three constituencies — two in Meghalaya and one in Nagaland — will go to the polls at the end of the week, completing the election process for the eighth Lok Sabha.

INDIAN OIL TANKER HIT

THE INDIAN oil tanker was carrying 2,00,000 tonnes of oil from the Saudi port of Ras Tanura to the Vadinar port in Gujarat when it was hit by Iranian planes about 100 km off Qatar. In the area, called the Shah Alam Shoals, the

Iranians have hit about a dozen ships. The super-tanker Kanchenjunga belonged to the Shipping Corporation of India (SCI).

KAPIL DEV RETURNS

KAPIL DEV will be reinstated in the Indian team for the third Test starting at Eden Gardens, Kolkata, on December 31. The decision will be made known when the selection committee meets in Kolkata on December 28. Kapil Dev, who had flown to Nagpur, explained to N K P Salve, president of the Board, that he had never deliberately thrown away his wicket nor acted in a manner detrimental to the interests of the team.



THE IDEAS PAGE

The Valley of innovation

School students from J&K have taken the lead in framing solutions to a range of problems that affect the daily lives of people



CHINTAN VAISHNAV AND SUMAN PANDIT

WHAT WOULD YOUR reaction be if you found out that this year, young innovators from the Union Territory of Jammu & Kashmir are leading one of India's largest and most representative innovation contests for schools, the Atal Tinkering Marathon, by a significant margin. By several indicators, J&K schools are exhibiting creativity that is off the charts.

Last year, 1,627 student teams from the UT participated in the Marathon, which attracted 20,000 innovative projects, accounting for around 10 per cent of the total participation across the country.

These numbers cannot be discarded as a statistical anomaly. Participation in the Atal Tinkering Marathon is open to all schools of India. What fraction of schools from a state/UT participated in this competition last year? The national average across states and UTs was 3.18 per cent. In J&K this number was an astounding 36 per cent — 10 times the national average. The runner-up, Karnataka — the number one state on NITI Aayog's India Innovation Index — was at 16 per cent.

J&K hasn't just participated in large numbers, it also produced quality. With 20 teams featuring in the Top 500 Innovations of the competition (and receiving prestigious internships at various organisations), J&K's winning rate is higher than the national average. If India's 35 states/UTs were to equally contribute to the top 500 innovations, each would have contributed 14 winners.

Arguably, the most exciting dimension of this rise is in the problems students are choosing to address. Often, these are local, critical to the lives or livelihoods in the region and yet unknown to or inconsequential for the rest of the nation.

For instance, a team from Government Higher Secondary School (GHSS) Fatehgarh, Baramulla has picked the problem of silent deaths during winter months, resulting from inhaling the carbon monoxide (CO) emissions from wood or coal-fired hearths. They have built a mechanism to sense dangerously high levels of CO and opening a motorised window for the gas to escape, thus saving lives.

We must appreciate such innovations in at least two ways. First, such problems are not known to the rest of our nation because in most other regions people don't have to endure low temperatures like in Kashmir. Second, while such problems are hyperlocal, their solutions can have global applications, as demonstrated by the recent fire in an apartment complex in Kuwait that claimed close to 200 lives due to inhalation of smoke.

Another example: A team of two girls from GHSS Amirakadal, Srinagar, looked at the problem of flash floods caused by the melting of snow on the mountains when spring arrives. They decided to simulate the situation by taking a square piece of cardboard, a few feet in length and height, mounting a stick on it to represent an electrical pole, placing a pile of cotton around the pole to simulate the snow, and affixing infrared sensors on top of the pole to measure the height of the cotton pile (accumulation). They then took the parameters representing this setting such as the snow condition (from the cotton pile), and gradient of the



C R Sasikumar

mountain (from the cardboard that can be used as an inclined plane) and combined them with assumptions about a few more parameters such as the ambient temperature and the distance to the village downstream and fed it all to a mobile application that calculated the probability of a flash flood.

Notice how beautiful this problem is! One can explore geometry by playing around with the inclined plane. One can explore physics and chemistry by understanding the formation of snow, its structure, its behaviour around the melting point, and so on. One can explore meteorology by simulating the amount, rate and length of a snowfall. One can explore how water basins work by understanding the water flows. And, all of this is in addition to learning about electronic sensors, circuits, and software programming.

In a similar example, but one that demonstrates the different needs of Jammu versus Kashmir, students from Air Force School Jammu have developed Bhujal Nirdharak, an innovative groundwater detection system that helps farmers and communities accurately locate and assess groundwater sources. Using the Wenner and Schlumberger Array methods with electrodes to measure soil resistivity, along with sensors for soil moisture and pH, the system provides vital data on soil and water conditions. It is complemented by an app that provides the results in local languages like Dogri.

One final example: In the Baramulla district, three students from GHSS Kreeni picked the problem of improving markets for apple farmers. They have developed a cost-effective Apple Grader that cleans and sorts apples, enabling local farmers to market their harvest more profitably. What is most exciting here is that their work did not end with a prototype design! Upon building a desktop prototype, they went in search of a local "garage" that would help them build a real-life product. In pockets of the world like Silicon Valley, where startup ecosystems have thrived over decades, isn't this interconnection of schools, labs, garages, and factories that has made it possible for nascent ideas to become global startups like Cisco, Google, or Facebook? Delightfully, this is beginning to happen in India's Valley too.

What is transforming this land renowned for its picturesque landscapes and vibrant culture into a hub of innovation and creativity? It is the efforts of the governments, schools and community organisations. In recent years, J&K has undertaken ambitious initiatives to revolutionise the education sector, providing quality schooling closer to students' homes, and focusing on skill-based education and hands-on learning. At the forefront of this endeavour is the Atal Tinkering Labs (ATL) initiative of the Atal Innovation Mission (AIM) under NITI Aayog.

In recent years, J&K has undertaken ambi-

What is transforming this land renowned for its picturesque landscapes and vibrant culture into a hub of innovation and creativity? It is the efforts of the governments, schools and community organisations. In recent years, J&K has undertaken ambitious initiatives to revolutionise the education sector, providing quality schooling closer to students' homes, and focusing on skill-based education and hands-on learning. At the forefront of this endeavour is the Atal Tinkering Labs (ATL) initiative of the Atal Innovation Mission (AIM) under NITI Aayog.

tious initiatives to revolutionise the education sector, providing quality schooling closer to students' homes, and focusing on skill-based education and hands-on learning. At the forefront of this endeavour is the Atal Tinkering Labs (ATL) initiative of the Atal Innovation Mission (AIM) under NITI Aayog.

ATLs are maker spaces in schools where young minds can bring their ideas to life through hands-on, do-it-yourself projects, design thinking, rapid prototyping, and entrepreneurship skills. In J&K, 127 ATLs have been established. The UT has also become the first among states and UTs to establish 500 ATLs in partnership with NITI Aayog.

The Atal Innovation Mission, in collaboration with the State Education Department, has implemented several special measures to elevate the performance of ATLs in J&K. AIM has organised training sessions for school teachers and district officials across the UT, with support from various partners. Given the difficult terrain, J&K is the first state where labs of smaller size have been allowed. Moreover, this is the first region where up to three schools within geographical proximity are allowed to jointly apply and establish one ATL open to all. These measures have created a more customised template appropriate to the needs of this region.

At the community level, too, effective measures have been taken. J&K is one of the first regions where labs are organised in clusters of 10-30, called ATL Sarthi. These are designed to enable peer-to-peer learning and monitoring of these labs. The ATL Sarthi initiative has been launched in collaboration with the State Council of Educational Research & Training, J&K and JKBOSE.

Additionally, organisations engaged in ecosystem building such as P Jam, and the National Institute of Technology Srinagar have organised events to connect stakeholders further. For example, in November 2023, Pragaash, an ATL Innovation Showcase and Ecosystem Strengthening Conclave, united participants from all 10 districts of the Valley. What J&K has shown us is that if we were prepared to build innovation ecosystems conducive to their context, then they have both the hunger and capability to lead the nation. This, then, is our approach for building similar ecosystems across the remote, hilly, tribal regions of our nation for their future innovators to harness the opportunity available to them.

The writers work at Atal Innovation Mission, NITI Aayog. Views are personal

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Though the KP government has hammered out a seemingly comprehensive 'roadmap' to bring peace to Kurram district, the barbaric murder of two men on Monday underscores the fact that implementing these measures will require the state's full commitment."

— DAWN, PAKISTAN

Why MSP matters

Guaranteeing it is not only essential to prevent farmer distress but also to conserve water, protect public health, and preserve national wealth



JAGJIT SINGH DALLEWAL

FIRST, IT IS important to understand what MSP is and when and why it was introduced. The term MSP stands for Minimum Support Price. The term itself reveals much about MSP because "minimum" means the lowest possible, "support" means assistance, and "price" refers to the price that is meant to provide minimal support. This scheme started about 60 years ago when the country was unable to feed its growing population as a safety net for farmers. Its promise was that if their crops didn't sell in the market, the government would buy them at least at this minimum price. However, at that time, the costs of production for the farmers were not factored in. Instead, the government pushed for increased agricultural production by providing free fertilisers, subsidies, and chemicals. This created a situation where farmers, who were never dependent on the market before, became dependent on it. Traders took advantage of this, and the farmers were exploited. Slowly, the cost of production increased, but the MSP remained far behind. This could be one of the reasons for the rise in farmer suicides. A recent report by a Supreme Court committee revealed that 4,00,000 farmers have committed suicide in the last three decades. However, if we look beyond the records, the number is closer to 7,00,000.

Now, let's consider the argument by some that farmers in Punjab do not need MSP. The intellectual class and the Punjab government express concern about the depleting groundwater, but no concrete solution has been offered. It is even cited that it takes 3,000 to 3,500 litres of water to produce just one kilogram of rice. This information has been repeated so much that people are fed up. Some claim that the groundwater will only last for another 15 to 20 years for drinking purposes. Therefore, farmer unions have started demanding a guaranteed MSP law for 23 crops, hoping it will lead to the promotion of crop diversification. With guaranteed MSP for these 23 crops, farmers in Punjab and Haryana will be encouraged to grow crops that provide better profits than wheat and paddy. This will not only address the groundwater issue but also offer a permanent solution to the problem.

In addition to the MSP guarantee law, promoting crop diversification will significantly reduce electricity consumption in agriculture, potentially cutting it by 60 per cent. This will allow for cheaper electricity for household consumers in Punjab. Furthermore, it will help save groundwater, which is crucial for everyone, including farmers, workers, officials, and citizens. Moreover, the country will save its foreign exchange by reducing the need to import

oil and pulses, as India spends nearly Rs 1 lakh crore annually on these imports.

Punjab, on the other hand, is capable of producing not just oilseeds and pulses but a wide variety of crops that can make the country self-sufficient. This has already been proven as Punjab's farmers have helped the country overcome food shortages in the past. If the money spent on MSP guarantees were invested wisely, it could ensure a better life for farmers and contribute to the nation's development.

Apart from this, some economists and intellectuals suggest that the amount needed to guarantee MSP for crops would be much lower than the sum India spends on oil and pulses imports. Experts have even stated that MSP can be guaranteed without any additional expenditure of Rs 100 crore. This amount would be a small price to pay compared to the benefits of ensuring a stable agricultural system and reducing the country's dependency on foreign goods.

Furthermore, guaranteeing MSP will help address the growing concerns about health hazards. Reports suggest that palm oil, commonly used in many food products, is processed using dangerous chemicals, which can lead to health issues. Therefore, guaranteeing MSP will not only protect the livelihood of farmers but also safeguard public health and the country's wealth.

The government continues to claim that it is providing MSP to farmers, but in states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, despite the MSP for paddy being set at Rs 2,325 per quintal, farmers are forced to sell it at prices as low as Rs 1,800 to Rs 1,400 per quintal. Similarly, in Rajasthan, the government places a cap on how much paddy is bought above the MSP, forcing farmers to sell the remaining crop at much lower prices.

This is not just a problem in Rajasthan; similar issues exist in Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, and other states. Reports from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have shown that by offering farmers Market Price Support (MPS) that is lower than the required rate, the government has effectively caused a loss of nearly Rs 60 lakh crore to farmers.

This situation is a major cause of farmer suicides. The OECD report reveals that in 2023 alone, the country lost Rs 14.72 lakh crore due to the low rates offered to farmers under MSP. This ongoing financial loss has led to farmers being heavily indebted.

The fact remains that the real reason behind the rising debt among farmers is the failure to offer them a fair MSP. It is essential for the government to guarantee MSP for crops in order to prevent further harm to the agricultural sector and reduce the growing distress among farmers.

Guaranteeing MSP through law is not only necessary to prevent farmer suicides and reduce the impact of inflation but also to conserve water, protect public health, and preserve national wealth. The government must take urgent action in this regard.

The writer is coordinator of Samyukt Kisan Morcha (non-political). He is on a hunger strike demanding legal guarantee for MSP

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A TIMELESS ICON

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'The colour yellow' (IE, December 24). Kolkata's beloved yellow Ambassador cabs, an iconic part of the city's landscape for decades, are slowly fading away. For many of us, these yellow taxis were more than just a means of transport. They were part of our everyday lives. While it's clear that the old Ambassadors don't meet modern safety standards, perhaps there's a way to honour their legacy. Why not reimagine the yellow taxi? A new, sleek fleet, still painted in that iconic yellow, could blend nostalgia with innovation.

Nirat Daga, Howrah

CHOOSING A PATH

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Arrest the decay' (IE, December 24). PM Fadnis, in his second term, has many issues to resolve as the Mahayuti coalition government consists of many ambitious regional political satraps who would like to steer the boat of power in their directions. This Mahayuti government would have to make all possible efforts to make Mumbai regain its title of "economic capital of India," both in spirit and substance. One way of doing this could be implementing the Dhavari redevelopment project which will empower less fortunate communities. This could decide which way the Mahayuti government would like to tread to achieve national economic leadership and attract new and bigger investments in Maharashtra.

Devendra Awasthi, Lucknow

AN INDELIBLE MARK

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'The Shyam babu I new' (IE, December 25). Shyam Benegal epitomised the values of New Wave cinema and broke many boundaries. He passes in the year the first of his best-selling films, *Ankur*, completes 50 years. Unlike some of his contemporaries, whose careers took a backseat when the parallel cinema movement lost steam, Shyam Benegal continued to push the envelope. He found a pan-Indian audience and international distributors. His tremendous contributions to the art form, marked by thought-provoking storytelling and a commitment to social issues, leave an indelible mark.

Sankar Paul, Nadia

THE DIVISIVE WAY

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Leave the kids alone' (IE, December 25). The recent circular issued by the Delhi government, demanding that schools implement strict admission procedures to prevent illegal Bangladeshi migrants' enrolment, is a disturbing trend that undermines the fabric of our education system. Instead of addressing the issue of illegal immigration through a comprehensive policy response, the AAP government is opting for a simplistic, divisive solution. This approach not only undermines the party's "governance model" but also raises questions about its commitment to upholding the rights of all individuals, regardless of their background or religion.

Arpita Bora, Assam



RUCHI GUPTA

The paradox of politics

Bureaucratisation of welfare initiatives blunts politics of representation

WE HAVE TOO much politics and too little politics in India. Politics seems omnipresent, permeating our daily interactions, discussions, culture and entertainment. Multiple times a day, we are pulled, willingly or unwillingly, into political affections, often when they are irrelevant. Yet paradoxically, in actual governance — where political leadership is crucial to coalesce and exercise power in service of desired outcomes — politics is notably absent. What we encounter instead is a landscape dominated by bureaucracy and technocracy.

The first phenomenon — the hyper-visibility of politics — is actually a politics of depoliticisation. Political engagement has become disconnected from actual power structures, transforming instead into empty performance and signalling. This performative politics may create an illusion of participation but lacks political agency — the ability to meaningfully harness or redistribute power.

True politics is not about performative conflict but about deliberation, compromise, and collective problem-solving. Yet, in India, politics has been systematically hollowed out from governance through two distinct waves.

The first wave was bureaucratisation and NGOisation. We took critical areas of state responsibility for welfare and systematically excluded political functionaries by converting them into bureaucratic schemes. This well-

intentioned approach aimed to reduce political discretion and corruption. However, it severed the accountability link between elected representatives and their constituents.

The rights-based framework attempted to convert schemes into rights, but democratic rights were conceptualised bureaucratically, not politically. The Right to Food, Right to Education, and MGNREGA are remarkable achievements, yet their administrative architecture excluded the elected representative and paradoxically depoliticised the very demands they were meant to democratise.

The rise of technology has further centralised governance, sidelining local political agencies. The first wave bureaucratised governance by removing local political discretion from implementation. Governance in elite circles and increasingly popular imagination became framed as a top-down process designed to maximise efficiency. Instead of strengthening political accountability by improving the capacity of citizens to mobilise and demand responsiveness from elected representatives, governance transformed into a technocratic project to bypass intermediaries, spanning education, welfare, employment and all manner of service delivery, even infrastructure.

Where the issue is too complex for centralised, top-down delivery, state responsibilities are now being replaced by direct cash

transfers. The route to fixing youth unemployment is cash transfer, as are women empowerment, making farming remunerative and addressing inequality.

Elected representatives are meant to be critical interpreters of community needs. Their understanding of the local is supposed to feed into the state and national discourse on policy and the overall development paradigm. The elected representative is thus a conduit in the national dialectic, and an essential aspect of their role is to create spaces where citizens can coalesce, deliberate, understand their collective power and articulate shared demands. However, we have systematically divested elected representatives of their larger political role, reducing them to act as mediators of individual petitions, negotiating discrete requests for ration, police intervention, and other specific individual services. By dismantling their discretionary power, we have not only diminished their stature within parties, thus centralising power but have made local political accountability irrelevant.

The mode of technological governance represents the risk of soft authoritarianism — centralising power under the guise of efficiency while removing the messy local political negotiations that build democratic resilience.

The hollowing out of politics from governance would be problematic in any democ-

racy, but it is particularly problematic given India's extraordinary size, diversity and complexity. In India, informal power sources rival formal institutions, and the state is only partially institutionalised. In this bewildering landscape, elected representatives — regardless of their personal integrity — have remained highly accessible, often serving as crucial arbiters between the state and citizenry.

The impulse to institutionalise power is fundamentally correct in a democracy. Yet the approach should be focused on finding ways to institutionalise representation and enhance political judgment instead of shuffling discretion in procedural minutiae. In a democratic framework, political accountability would not be about removing discretion but about collective action based on community needs, understanding and democratic deliberation.

This approach may not be geared for efficiency. However, the lifeblood of democracy is not efficiency but representation. If we care about democracy, we must restore the rightful role of political representation — not as a technocratic intermediary for top-down imperatives but as a dynamic conduit for the dialectic of collective democratic imagination.

The writer is the executive director, The Future of India Foundation

Key questions of religion, society, law

The year 2024 saw a significant departure from alleged 'judicial evasion'. In 2025, the Supreme Court, under three Chief Justices of India, will take up several important issues, impacting the personal lives and religious beliefs of citizens, as well as their relationship with the state and laws. Some very consequential new legislation are in the pipeline, even as multiple existing laws face challenges in court



APURVA VISHWANATH

LOOKING AT 2025

LAW

POLITICAL BATTLES outside the courtroom often defined the legal landscape in 2024.

Over the last few years, the Supreme Court has been criticised for "judicial evasion" and giving the executive the benefit of doubt in key cases. Legal experts say this has been the court's record whenever there is a government with a strong majority at the Centre, except when the independence of the judiciary itself is threatened.

However, 2024 saw a quiet but significant departure from this apparent trend.

The Supreme Court gave verdicts and made interventions in several politically significant cases: it struck down the electoral bonds scheme as unconstitutional; barred trial courts from taking up mandir-masjid cases; issued guidelines to curb illegal bulldozer demolitions; granted bail to jailed opposition leaders; reined in the Enforcement Directorate's (ED's) vast powers to arrest; and reversed the Gujarat government's remission to convicts in the Bilka Bano gangrape case. Some of these interventions were long overdue.

As part of efforts to prioritise long-pending issues, Constitution Benches took up cases such as those of Aligarh Muslim University's minority institution status, and the policy on taxing industrial alcohol.

This effort, made in part to address the "judicial evasion" criticism, was initiated during the 45-day tenure of former Chief Justice of India (CJI) U.U. Lalit in 2022. It was carried forward by former CJI D.Y. Chandrachud who retired in November after two years as India's top judge.

Within a month of assuming charge, CJI Sanjiv Khanna took up the mandir-masjid disputes that have emerged in various places over the last two years. Two weeks after four people were killed in violence triggered by a court-ordered survey of a medieval mosque in Sambhal, Uttar Pradesh, a Bench led by CJI Khanna barred district courts from registering any fresh challenge to the ownership and title of any place of worship, or ordering surveys of disputed religious places.

So, as 2024 winds down, what does 2025 look like for India's top court?

One year, three CJIs

Three judges will occupy the office of CJI in 2025. CJI Khanna is due to retire on May 13, and Justice Bhushan Ramkrishna Gavai will take over for 194 days. He will be succeeded by Justice Surya Kant in November, who will remain CJI until February 2027.

Short tenures of CJIs mean the composition of the Collegium, which makes recommendations for the appointment of judges, sees frequent changes. The CJI is also the administrative head of the court, and shorter tenures can limit a CJI's ability to take up important institutional issues — from pendancy to other reforms.

The relatively long tenure of the last CJI, Justice Chandrachud, saw an overhaul in the digital infrastructure of the court. Virtual courts are now common, including in several High Courts. Because of this, courts will have to adapt to greater public scrutiny of judges and their conduct in the coming years.

Before the SC: Religion...

PLACES OF WORSHIP ACT: Given that a larger constitutional challenge to the 1991 law that froze the religious character of all

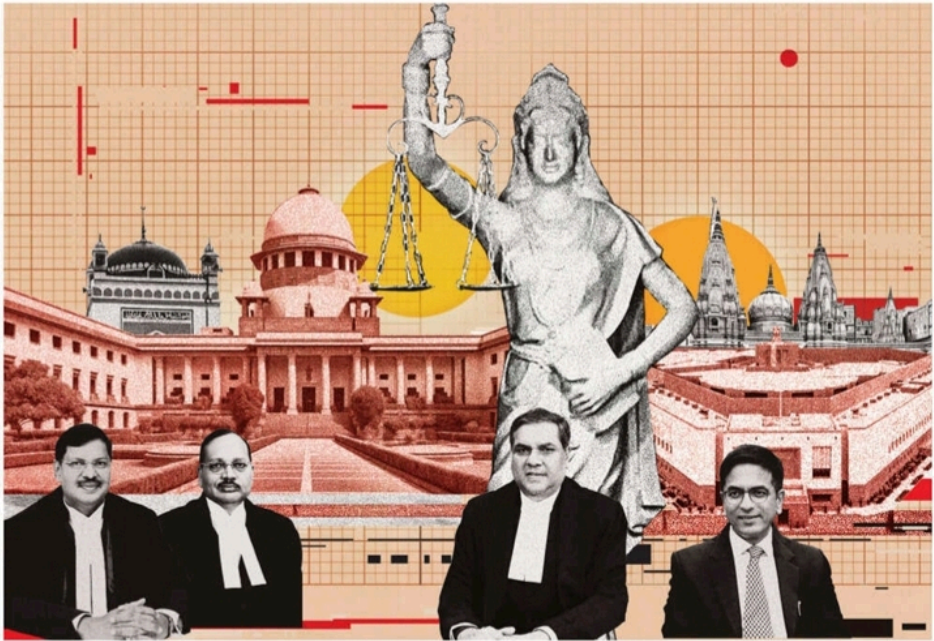


Illustration: Savajit Day

places of worship except the (then) disputed structure in Ayodhya as they stood at the dawn of Independence is pending before the court, disputes over the title and religious character of certain mosques, allegedly built by razzing Hindu temples, will continue to play out in 2025.

The 1991 law has been challenged on the grounds that it takes away the power of judicial review by abating claims that existed at the time of its enactment and prohibiting fresh claims, and that it is arbitrary in retrospectively picking August 15, 1947 as the cut-off date for determining the religious character of a place of worship. The other side has argued that the law fortifies the principles of secularism and non-retrogression, which are held to be part of the basic structure of the Constitution.

HIBAB BAN: In 2023, a two-judge Bench of the SC delivered a split verdict on the legality of the Karnataka government's order restricting female students from wearing a headscarf in educational institutions. Justice Sudhanshu Dhulia quashed the ban, framing the issue as a "matter of choice" and personal liberty. Justice Hemant Gupta held that wearing a headscarf is not an "essential religious practice" that ought to be protected by law. The case will now be heard afresh by a three-judge Bench.

ESSENTIAL RELIGIOUS PRACTICE TEST: In 2020, the SC had decided to review its 2018 verdict that had held the practice of excluding women from the Sabarimala temple unconstitutional. The ruling that caused a furore, was sought to be reviewed by a larger Bench, expanding the premise of the case to how religious practices are to be reviewed judicially.

The premise of the pending appeal is to re-evaluate the so-called "essential religious practice test", a contentious doctrine evolved by the court to protect only those religious practices that are essential to the religion.

This case will also have an impact on a decade-old challenge by two Parsi women who married outside the community to enter the Tower of Silence and other religious places, and a separate plea seeking the entry

of Muslim women to mosques.

...State, individual, society

CITIZENSHIP ACT: The challenge to The Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 is pending before the SC. The law, introduced as Section 6B of The Citizenship Act, 1955, seeks to grant citizenship to a class of migrants belonging to the Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, and Christian communities — but not Muslims — who entered India before December 31, 2014 from three Muslim-majority neighbouring countries: Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh.

The challenge argues that by excluding Muslims, the amendment violates the right to equal protection before law, and the principles of secularism. In October, the SC upheld the validity of the Assam Accord, and consequently, Parliament's power to specify a cut-off date for regular circumstances. However, the SC also framed the idea of citizenship in terms of fraternity and plurality, which will be key to the challenge to the 2019 law.

MARTIAL RAPE: In 2022, the Delhi High Court delivered a split verdict on the legality of the marital rape exception in criminal law. Section 63(2) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) — Section 375 of the Indian Penal Code — defines rape and lists seven notions of consent which, if vitiated, would constitute the offence of rape by a man. But there is a crucial exemption: "Sexual intercourse or sexual acts by a man with his own wife, the wife not being under eighteen years of age, is not rape."

This exemption essentially gives legal sanction to a "husband" to exercise the right to consensual or non-consensual sex with his "wife". In October, the Centre said that while a husband certainly does not have a fundamental right to violate the consent of the wife, terminating such violation as "rape" is "excessively harsh and therefore, disproportionate".

REVIEW OF ED'S POWERS: While granting bail to former Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal in the money laundering case in the alleged excise policy scam, the SC raised questions on the Enforcement Directorate's vast powers to arrest. It referred

a key issue — on when an arrest is legally necessitated — to a larger Bench. After the landmark ruling in *Vijay Madanlal Choudhary v Union of India* (2022), in which the SC upheld virtually all powers of the ED, this reference was a setback to the central agency.

In a series of separate rulings since the 2022 verdict, the SC has also mandated key procedural safeguards in ED cases — the grounds of arrest must be informed in writing, and the stringent "twin-conditions" for bail can now be "relaxed" if the accused has undergone a long period of incarceration. A review of *Vijay Madanlal Choudhary* itself is pending, and is seen as an opportunity to circumscribe the agency's powers.

Important new legislation

Among key legislative reforms in the pipeline, the Bills to hold simultaneous elections to Lok Sabha, and state and Union Territory Assemblies — "One Nation, One Election" — will likely be most significant.

A set of laws on sub-classification of the Scheduled Caste quota could be in the offing as a seven-judge Bench of the SC, in August, cleared the decks for states to create sub-classifications within the SC and Scheduled Tribes quotas in public jobs. Some states within the "Schedule" can now be accorded wider protections than others through a fixed sub-quota.

For the first time since the Constitution came into being in 1950, the operation of these quotas could be reframed. The Constitution and its promise of equality through affirmative action is now an increasingly fraught area of political rhetoric and action — how states exercise this power will be very important.

Challenge to existing laws

Some legislation are likely to be subject to judicial review.

NEW CRIMINAL LAWS: The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023, and the Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam, 2023, have replaced the Indian Penal Code, 1860, the Criminal Procedure Code, 1973, and the Indian Evidence Act, 1872, respectively as part of the

government's declared intention to "decolonise" the criminal justice system.

The new laws have several progressive elements — introducing community service as an alternative form of punishment, making summary trial mandatory for petty offences, allowing trials by video-conference and prescribing timelines for speedy trials, including offences for "mob lynching" and child marital rape. However, questions have been raised about several provisions.

For example, the colonial law on sedition (previously "insulting" in Hindi has simply been rechristened "deshdroh"). There are other aspects — allowing a police officer 14 days for a preliminary investigation before registering an FIR, the total exclusion of Section 377 of the IPC (which offered protection to men and LGBTQIA+ individuals from non-consensual sexual intercourse), and extension of the period of detention to up to 90 days.

These aspects have been challenged before the SC. As the mammoth task of adapting to the new laws progresses, more issues will likely come to the fore.

UNIFORM CIVIL CODE: Home Minister Amit Shah told Rajya Sabha last week that like Uttarakhand, every BJP-ruled state will have a Uniform Civil Code (UCC).

The Uttarakhand UCC will be implemented from January 2025. The law has some contentious provisions — it requires compulsory registration with the state while starting or ending a live-in relationship for heterosexual couples, provides for maintenance to a woman who is "deserted" by her partner, and prescribes a jail term of up to six months for not producing a "certificate" of the relationship.

The Constitution prescribes UCC as a goal of the state. The SC has long been a votary of the state. But UCC laws will be subject to judicial scrutiny — the extent of the state's encroachment on individuals' personal lives, and their right to choose religious law, will be tested.

Apurva Vishwanath is Legal Editor, The Indian Express

NEXT: HEALTH

EXPLAINED SPORTS

December 26: How Boxing Day became important in the sporting calendar

SANDIP
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 25

BOXING DAY, the day after Christmas, is one of the most important fixtures in the sporting calendar. For cricket fans, the day is synonymous with the Boxing Day Test held at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG). In football, the day often boasts marquee English Premier League (EPL) fixtures.

Origins of Boxing Day

Boxing Day has several origin stories. One popular belief is that in Victorian England, the money collected by the church from churchgoers throughout the year was handed over to the poor the day after Christmas in "boxes".

Another story pertains to how servants in England would return home to their families the day after Christmas. Their masters would notably send them home with gift

"boxes". According to historian Neil Armstrong, Boxing Day dates back to the 17th century when the employers would tip their employees with coins in a "box".

In 1871, December 26 was classed as a bank holiday in England — making it a day of fun and relaxation. "For the working class, whose residences were often uncomfortable, overcrowded and unappealing, a rare day free from work was a reason to take to the streets, not relax at home," Martin Johnson wrote in *Christmas and the British: A Modern History* (2016).

This was also the time when sport was becoming more organised and codified, and a popular pastime among the masses. It is in this context that Boxing Day became important in the newly emerging sporting calendar.

Boxing Day in football

The first recorded Boxing Day game, between Sheffield FC and Hallam FC, was held in 1860. When the Football League was

formed in 1888 — which would become the First Division in 1892, and the Premier League in 1992 — the practice continued.

Matches were scheduled on both December 25 and 26 till the 1950s, with the Football Association and clubs eager to squeeze in as many games as possible in the festive week to rake in profit. Games on

Christmas Day were eventually scrapped as players wanted to spend Christmas with their families. The last Christmas Day match took place in 1965.

But Boxing Day games endured, in large part due to the blockbuster sequence of games on the date in 1963, when a staggering 66 goals were scored across 10 matches.

DRISHTI JUDICIARY
JUDICIARY FOUNDATION COURSE
Online (Hybrid) & Live Online (24x7)

Delhi
English Medium
16 Jan 10 AM - 16 Jan 10 AM
16 Jan 10 AM - 16 Jan 10 AM

Prayagraj
English Medium
24 Dec 10 AM - 24 Dec 10 AM
24 Dec 10 AM - 24 Dec 10 AM

87501 87501

FIRST COLUMN

THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF MANTRAS

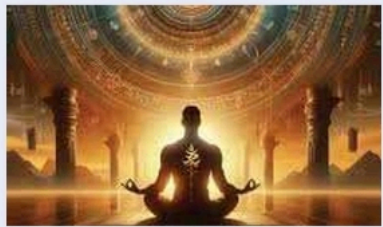
The Divya Chikitsa Mantras stand out as a remarkable system for channelising divine energy



ASHWANI GURUJI

You might have heard of Sanjeevani Vidya given by Guru Shukracharya, which could bring back the dead to life, or of a certain herb called Sanjeevani buti, which brought back Lakshman to life. You may have also heard of the Madhu Vidya or Brahnavidya as possessed by Sage Dadhichi which could enable one to attain immortality, or the Chyawanprasha prepared by the Ashvini Kumars to restore the youth of Sage Chyawan.

These are not tales or works of fiction, the Vedic rishis were masters of Creation, the human body being a microscopic part of that. The proof that these were not fiction lies in the fact that most of the modern scientific discoveries have come from the Vedic shastras. You may visit www.dhyanfoundation.com to know which scientific discovery has come from which shastra. While most of the ancient Vedic healing sciences are lost in the dust of kaliyuga and most herbs have become extinct, a fraction of them still can be accessed and even that fraction is enough



to achieve amazing results. Divya Chikitsa Mantras as detailed in Sanatan Kriya is one such gem from the treasure trove of Vedic gyan. Divya Chikitsa Mantras use sound and vibrations to bring about the desired effect and changes in your body.

When done right their healing and transformational effects are apparent for all to see. A combination of 7 mantras they work to unclog certain nadis (energy channels) and awaken specific centres, to channelise the force of divine energies for a practitioner. It is said that the body of a deva resides in the mantra. This has been practically experienced by each one who has attended a yajna at Dhyan Ashram where complete forms of the deities were invoked through specific chants manifested in the Yajna Agni. For the mantra to bear fruit, it has to be received from a Guru who is Siddha in the mantra, in line with the ancient Guru Shishya Parampara. Guru channelises the force of the respective deity in the mantra and also imparts the dhawan (correct pronunciation) of the mantra. The efficacy of a Vedic mantra depends on the correctness of its chant; faulty pronunciation of even a single syllable changes the entire meaning.

Taittiriya Samhita narrates the story of Tvashta in this regard. Tvashta performed a sacrifice to destroy Indra. He used the mantra, 'indrashatrū' to manifest his thought. However, he placed a lofty note on the word 'Indra' instead of 'shatrū' because of which the meaning of the word changed from 'slayer of Indra' to 'the one who will be slain by Indra' and thus the son, Vrutra, so born to him was defeated by Indra, just because of a pronunciation defect. To quote from Panini Shiksha, a mantra devoid of the correct vowels (svar) and consonants (varna) is faulty and does not convey its intended meaning. It is like a verbal thunderbolt that harms the one who is chanting, as had happened in the case of erroneous pronunciation of the word, Indrashatrū. The Vedic seers had mastered this incredible science of sound in the form of mantras, they were well aware of the high degree of specificity and precision that is required to harness the power of sound.

Shiksha, one of the six vendangas, deals with the science of proper pronunciation of words and laws of euphony. Volumes have been written on Shiksha by Panini, Yagyavalkya and Vasishtha. Shatapatha Brahman states that every alphabet of a word possesses some kind of strength and explains the secret of every alphabet. Therefore it is important that one partakes the vidya of mantras from a Guru. Reading from books /internet or hearing on television/social media and starting self-practice may have detrimental effects if the chant is not proper.

(The writer is a spiritual Guru; views are personal)

State budgets on the brink: RBI sounds alarm



UTTAM GUPTA

With outstanding debts exceeding the prudential threshold, the RBI urges states to adopt "next-generation" fiscal rules to ensure sustainable financial management

According to a report on "State Finances: A Study of Budgets of 2024-25" released by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on December 19, 2024, the consolidated gross fiscal deficit (GFD) of all State governments was contained within 3 per cent of their gross domestic product (GDP) during the financial years (FY) 2022-23 and 2023-24. For 2024-25, their GFD has been budgeted at 3.2 per cent of GDP. They have complied with the stipulation under the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Act, 2003 which requires them to keep it within the 3 per cent cap. But, the good news ends here. The report reveals that the total outstanding liabilities of States were 28.5 per cent of the GDP in March 2024. Though lower than the peak of 31 per cent reached as of March-end 2021, it remained significantly above the prudential debt-GDP ratio of 20 per cent mandated for the states under the Act.

Another measure of how a State government is managing its budget is its revenue expenditure (RE) about capital outlay (CO). While, the RE being on items such as salaries, wages, pension bills, subsidies etc essentially goes towards non-asset creating spending, CO results in the generation of capital assets thereby providing a foundation for income stream over some time. Greater emphasis on the latter is considered fiscally prudent whereas more of the former can lead to fiscal destabilisation. The record of many states on this crucial parameter is disconcerting. For all states, the total expenditure increased from around Rs 3428,000 crore in 2020-21 to Rs 5760,000 crore during 2024-25 (budget estimate). As regards RE, it increased from Rs 3018,000 crore in 2020-21 to Rs 4840,000 crore in 2024-25. The CO increased from Rs 410,000 crore during 2020-21 to Rs 920,000 crore during 2024-25. These numbers yield a ratio of RE to CO or RECO of 5.2 (4840,000/920,000).

In several states, the RECO is much higher than even this national average. For instance, in Punjab, at 17.1 it is more than the three times followed by Puducherry (14.1), Kerala (10.6) and Delhi (10.3). There are some better-performing states too such as Manipur having the best ratio (2.4), followed by Gujarat (2.9) and Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh (3.1). However, the abnormally high RECO of other states pushes up the national average. How does it compare with the Centre? The total expenditure of the Central Government increased from Rs 3042,000 crore during 2020-21 to Rs 4820,000 crore during 2024-25. Of this, the RE increased from Rs 2603,000 crore during 2020-21 to Rs 3709,000 crore during 2024-25. On the other hand, its CO increased from Rs 439,000 crore during 2020-21 to Rs 1111,000 crore during 2024-25. So, RECO for the Centre is 3.3. In 2024-25 (3709,000/1111000) against 5.2 for the States.

Barring a couple of good performers like Gujarat which is doing even better than the Centre, most of the states have been reckless in their revenue



BARRING A COUPLE OF GOOD PERFORMERS LIKE GUJARAT WHICH IS DOING EVEN BETTER THAN THE CENTRE, MOST OF THE STATES HAVE BEEN RECKLESS IN THEIR REVENUE SPENDING AND THAT INCLUDES A SHARP RISE IN EXPENDITURE ON SUBSIDIES

spending and that includes a sharp rise in expenditure on subsidies. Since 2018-19, subsidies given by the states have grown 2.5 times to over Rs 470,000 crore being the budget estimate for FY 2024-25). The RBI cites farm loan waivers, free or subsidised services like electricity, transport, gas cylinders, and cash transfers to farmers, youth and women as key areas of incipient stress. It suggests that states need to adopt next-generation fiscal rules, time-bound glide paths for fiscal consolidation, and rein in subsidies and freebies so that it doesn't crowd out more productive expenditures. Such exhortations have been made unmet times in the past not just by the RBI but also by several committees set by the government on 'expenditure reforms' from time to time. Now, we have more jargon like "next-generation" fiscal rules to convey the same message with greater intensity.

The RBI posits these rules as "combining the medium-term fiscal sustainability objective with short-term flexibility allowing state governments more manoeuvrability in dealing with exogenous economic shocks". The banking regulator goes on "these will involve inter alia, the use of data analytics, including machine learning (ML) and artificial intelligence (AI); improved data transparency and disclosure practices; and strengthening the institution of State Finance Commissions to deliver public services more effectively and scale up social and physical infrastructure." Put simply, the RBI expects the State governments to not just bring about policy reforms and refinements to better target welfare schemes – focusing primarily on the poor

sections of the society but also to galvanise the administrative machinery and institutions to deliver benefits efficiently and prevent misuse/diversion by making the best use of technology interventions.

Do the States understand?

The answer is a categorical 'no'. Forget a finely crafted system desired by the RBI and government committees, most of the states have put in place crude and non-transparent subsidy regimes call them 'freebies' – a jargon for "something given free of charge" – all aimed at alluring voters and winning elections. The political parties have sought to cover under 'something' literally everything that touches the life of a person.

It includes free food, free health, free education, free LPG cylinder, free laptops, free transport, state support for marriage, and pilgrimage for the elderly; it's an unending list. In the last couple of years, the freebies promised by them have become more brazen with parties coming out with 'cash transfers' to the account of voters. Such schemes mostly directed at women have won elections for the concerned parties in elections held during 2023 and 2024 in Madhya Pradesh (MP), Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Jharkhand and Haryana. The parties compete with each other in offering more.

A common refrain is 'Who will promise more?' Look at this. In the budget for 2024-25, Delhi finance minister Atishi announced the Mukhyamantri Mahila Samman Yojana (MMSY) under which, the AAP government will give Rs 1000 per month to all the women

above the age of 18 in the national capital. Now, ex-Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal has increased the amount to Rs 2100 per month. In response, the BJP has reportedly promised a still higher cash transfer of Rs 2500 per month. Let us be clear. Unlike 'normal' budget expenses which are planned and backed by well-orchestrated efforts to garner revenue, additional financial liabilities imposed by the freebies promised in the election manifesto affect the budgetary position of the State in a totally 'uncontrolled' and 'unplanned' manner. Moreover, these freebies don't have a sunset date meaning they will continue to be given 'eternally' – no matter which party rules. This is the surest invitation to fiscal catastrophe. Take the case of Delhi.

Already, without the MMSY, the financial position of the Delhi government has come to such a pass that CM Atishi has recently forwarded a request to the Centre seeking a loan of Rs 10,000 crore from the National Small Savings Fund (NSSF). Now, if AAP were to come to power yet again, MMSY @Rs 2100 a month would cost the exchequer an additional Rs 17,000 crore per annum. Since 2018-19, state subsidies have grown 2.5 times to over Rs 470,000 crore (2024-25), courtesy freebies cult. This will increase exponentially, destabilising State budgets, and making a mockery of the much-touted fiscal consolidation drive. The Supreme Court has on several occasions observed that 'freebies are bad'. Will it force parliamentarians to enact a law to curb them?

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

Festive cheer meets smart choices: Navigating the real estate boom of 2024

By evaluating long-term financial goals, buyers can turn festive opportunities into lasting investments

With the festive season ongoing in full swing, there is a surge in consumer spending. This time is often marked by a flurry of purchases fuelled by tradition and sentiment. While the allure of buying a home can be particularly enticing during this festive period, buyers must approach such decisions with careful consideration. They must look beyond the festive fervour and reflect on key aspects that can guide them to make informed decisions.

Decoding Festive Demand

As per a report Unravelling the 'Trends' Shaping India's Real Estate Market in 2024 by CBRE, from January to September, the luxury housing category collectively constituted 16 per cent of the overall



RAHUL MEHROTRA

housing demand.

This growth has spurred developers to launch new projects, resulting in the category representing 19 per cent of the total new launches during the first nine months of 2024. This trend is only going to grow further spurred by the festive season as buyers are investing in end-products that

offer better amenities such as club-house, larger living spaces, and modern facilities. Metro cities, in particular, have seen a wave of new project launches by developers this year, catering to various buyer segments.

While luxury properties grab headlines, the affordable housing sector remains the backbone of India's real estate market as this is where buyers purchasing their first home find the most value.

Having said that, many first-time homebuyers are compelled to buy a property given the abundant promotional offers and incentives provided by realtors. It is so because the festive season spurs confidence as it often coincides with salary increments, bonuses, and a general uptick in eco-

nomics activity. However, buyers must before they scout for a property, should evaluate the long-term aspects. Questions such as "Can I support paying the EMI?" or "Is it the right approach?" may seem overwhelming at first, but assessing one's worth is very crucial at this stage.

Interest Rate Matters

The interest rate set by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) is a huge factor in deciding other crucial interest rates. The repo rate is unchanged for the 10th consecutive time, and this implies that the Equated Monthly Installments (EMIs) are likely to remain manageable. Further to this, I believe there would be a pickup in demand for housing loans as the festive season progresses. Recent data from the RBI



reveals a remarkable 40 per cent increase in home loan deployment, highlighting the diminishing gap between monthly rents and EMIs. Additionally, 80 per cent of aspiring homeowners preferred home loans as the top choice for property acquisition this year.

Typically, possessions and property deliveries are scheduled in the latter half of November, aligning perfectly with the festive momentum. In addition to stable interest rates and EMIs, the array of offers and discounts available during the festive season can be another key factor of consid-

eration. However, it's essential to look for transparent offers that can help avoid hidden fees and unexpected costs. One should seek out reduced processing fees, flexible repayment plans, cashback schemes, and opportunities for negotiation that can make the festive season an advantageous time to invest.

What Should Buyers and Investors Do?

Investors and buyers must focus on long-term value by evaluating their income and cash flows to ensure manageable EMIs. The festive season can be an opportunity to reduce upfront costs and select properties in developing areas with strong amenities and connectivity for better appreciation. The predictability in EMI

outflows coupled with festive discounts can make the dream of homeownership more achievable. First-time buyers, particularly in the affordable housing segment, must rely on loans to bridge the financial gap as well as look for special offers and discounts.

While festive discounts are great, buyers should align their decisions with pragmatic goals rather than being swayed by just sentiment. Buying a property during a festive season is certainly the start of a prosperous journey, but to truly benefit, one needs to have a solid financial plan – whether it's the first home or adding to one's portfolio.

(The writer is MD & CEO, RHDICI; views are personal)

www.dailypioneer.com

facebook.com/dailypioneer | @TheDailyPioneer | instagram.com/dailypioneer/

PAPER WITH PASSION

Extradition dilemma

Bangladesh's request to extradite Sheikh Hasina raises critical questions about India's role as a key player in South Asian politics

Bangladesh has formally requested India to extradite former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who fled to India following her ouster on August 5, 2024. The request, conveyed through a diplomatic "note verbale," places India in a delicate position, requiring a careful balancing of international law, bilateral relations, and regional stability. This article explores the background of the situation, the implications of such an extradition, and the options available to India. Sheikh Hasina, a towering figure in Bangladeshi politics and leader of the Awami League, was ousted from power after a student-led movement erupted into nationwide protests. Despite the government meeting the protesters' demands, unrest persisted, which Hasina claims was orchestrated by Muhammad Yunus, Chief Adviser to Bangladesh's interim government. The protests culminated in her removal from power, prompting her to flee to India. The diplomatic note issued by Bangladesh's interim government reflects its intention to bring Sheikh Hasina back to face accountability or to address the political turmoil she left behind.



India and Bangladesh share a complex relationship shaped by historical ties, mutual interests, and occasional tensions. Extraditing Sheikh Hasina could be seen as India's support for the interim government, potentially straining ties with the Awami League, one of Bangladesh's major political forces. The political crisis in Bangladesh has already created ripples in South Asia. Any decision by India regarding the extradition could influence the region's political dynamics, including relations with other South Asian nations. Sheikh Hasina's safety and the fairness of any trial

are also suspect as she might face attrition upon her return. India would need to weigh these concerns against its international obligations under extradition treaties and agreements. How India handles this case may affect India's stance as a regional power and its commitment to democratic principles. India could provide asylum to Sheikh Hasina, citing humanitarian grounds or concerns about the fairness of legal proceedings in Bangladesh. This would align with India's historical role as a refuge for political exiles but might antagonise the interim Bangladeshi government. India could agree to extradite Hasina with conditions ensuring her safety, fair trial, and adherence to international legal norms. Such a move might help India maintain its relations with both the interim government and Hasina's supporters. India can also delay the extradition while engaging diplomatically with Bangladesh to seek a mutually acceptable solution. This would allow India to assess the evolving political situation and minimize potential fallout. While India's decision will undoubtedly influence India-Bangladesh relations, its impact will also resonate across the region. India must weigh its options carefully, prioritising both the immediate political implications and its long-term vision for South Asian stability.

PICTALK



The Jakhu Temple and its premises covered with snow after fresh snowfall, in Shimla

ON OP: A bold reform or a political gamble?

As Prime Minister Narendra Modi pushes forward with his vision of 'One Nation, One Poll' the nation waits to see whether this proposal will unite or divide

The introduction of a controversial bill, 'One Nation One Poll', has created more controversy than acceptance. The BJP has been talking about it but introduced it, which has been sent to the joint select committee of the Parliament. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is in a hurry to fulfil the BJP's unfinished agenda. He had already opened the Ayodhya temple and got the revocation of Article 370 of the Constitution, which gave special status to Jammu and Kashmir. This long-awaited bill aims to streamline the electoral process for 28 states and eight union territories, with an electorate of nearly a billion voters. The bill has triggered widespread debate, significant interest, and Opposition from various parties.

Though momentum is building for simultaneous elections, some questions need answers. They include whether Modi has the required two-thirds majority to pass the bill in Parliament. Is there a political consensus? Will the Opposition come on board? Is the timing of the bill right? Most Opposition parties reject the idea of simultaneous polls. They include the Congress, the Left parties, the Trinamool Congress, and regional and smaller parties. They reject it mainly to settle political scores and apprehension that they may benefit the BJP. Former President Ram Nath Kovind chaired a nine-member committee recommending simultaneous polls last year, labelling it a 'game changer'. Thirty-two parties supported the concept, and 15 rejected it. The panel also advised that the Centre form a panel to oversee the implementation of this proposal. Also, there should be a joint electoral roll for all elections so that voters will use the same list for national, state, and local polls. Over the years, elections have become a standard feature, but the 'One Nation, One Poll' bill has the potential to reshape our election process. Proponents of the bill argue that it could

significantly reduce campaign costs, alleviate the strain on administrative resources, and streamline governance. This could ultimately benefit the public by reducing the frequency of elections, a prospect that should inspire optimism. Elections in India are held at different levels. The first is panchayat, followed by the district level, the state assembly level, and finally, the national level. They happen at different times, and the government wants to streamline the system. Interestingly, the idea of simultaneous polls is not new. Historically, it was a synchronised poll from 1952 to 1967. The premature dismissal of various governments and the consequential dissolution of Assemblies led to staggered polls. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi dismissed many Opposition-led state governments. The most important thing is that the BJP needs the support of the allies and friendly parties. In the recent 2024 polls, the BJP was 40 short of a majority in the house and could form the government only with the help of JD (U) and Telugu Desam. Most opposition parties reject simultaneous polls, including Congress, the Left parties,

HISTORICALLY, IT WAS A SYNCHRONISED POLL FROM 1952 TO 1967. THE PREMATURE DISMISSAL OF VARIOUS GOVERNMENTS AND THE CONSEQUENTIAL DISSOLUTION OF ASSEMBLIES LED TO STAGGARD POLLS

the Trinamool Congress, and regional and smaller parties. Even in the BJP, 20 MPs were absent while the bill was introduced. The Kovind panel also suggested having the votes in two parts. The first will be for Lok Sabha and Assembly votes, and the second for local groups. The bill faces significant constitutional, legal, and political challenges. The Kovind panel suggests amending Articles 83 and 172 to allow simultaneous elections.

However, the BJP lacks the two-thirds majority for this amendment, and the Constitution needs clarification on concurrent polls. The potential impact on the federal structure of the country and the logistical challenges of conducting simultaneous elections for a billion voters are critical factors to consider. Prime Minister Modi's main challenge is to gather enough support in Parliament. At the same time, the government must build political consensus and persuade the Opposition to agree.

The Opposition has rejected simultaneous polls, fearing it might benefit the BJP. The 15 opposing parties hold 205 MPs, while Modi needs 362 votes to proceed.

A legal framework for simultaneous elections is essential to address mid-term government collapses and central political manoeuvring. The one nation, one poll approach reduces waste and election frequency, so the Opposition should consider it carefully and present any alternative proposals for public discussion. The One Nation One Poll has been one of the poll promises of the BJP. Some core issues have already been addressed, such as the revocation of Article 370 and the building of the Ram temple in Ayodhya.

In his third term, Modi wants to finish the unfinished agenda. Modi presents this legislation with a clear strategy: Whether he succeeds or not, he benefits. If the bill gets passed, it will be an advantage for the BJP government. If it fails, he can claim that he tried to enact reform but faced Opposition obstruction. Despite potential delays, it's important to debate the bill, as election spending ultimately comes from taxpayers' money. Now that the bill has been sent to a joint select committee, we must wait for its report. (The writer is a popular columnist; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

TRUMP'S ACQUISITION PLANS

Madam — Trump is on a shopping spree to buy Canada, the Panama Canal and Greenland, desiring to make Canada its 51st state with Trudeau as its governor. He wants the gifted Panama Canal back to his country. The Panama president has, however, expressed his disagreement with both his conditions, thereby creating another contentious issue ready to be dealt with in the near future. He is also eyeing Greenland to gain its strategic advantage for monitoring the missiles launched from Russia and China on the US and alternatively using it as a launching pad for the US missiles on them. Greenland being rich in minerals like uranium is another factor for its advantage to the US. More so, the greatest island on this planet is not green but mostly ice-filled, comprising glaciers that create many new waterways on its melting due to global warming each year, giving a wider area for its exploration.

He is also creating a powerful force by enriching it with the recruitment of capitalists like Elon Musk and AI experts in his cabinet to act as resources for implementing his future plans. Indian brain drain forms a substantial part of his team, like Sriram Ramakrishnan, the AI expert, and such other talents that India has lost to another country at its cost for its inability to identify and hold them at the appropriate time. If this happens, the demography will start taking a new shape, and interrelation equations of friends and foes will change. India needs to withhold its talent by stopping its brain drain at any cost by providing them better than what they get abroad to discourage their move to foreign lands. However, the unpredictable nature of Donald Trump will keep the world guessing with fingers crossed till it actually happens in reality after he takes over as president, as for all you know, he may suddenly say one day "I was just joking."

R S Narula | Patiala

Shyam Benegal passes away at 90



The sad demise of legendary filmmaker and stalwart of Indian cinema Shyam Benegal at the age of 90 is an irreparable loss for both the cinema and the society. His historic contribution to parallel cinema will be written in golden words in the history of Indian cinema. He was the vanguard of the movement

of realistic and issue-based filmmaking, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s. His directorial debut movie, 'Ankur,' in 1974 itself was a landmark in Indian cinema. Along with his timeless movies, he launched the careers of many highly accomplished actors, including Smriti Patil, Naseeruddin Shah and Shabana Azmi.

Besides his contribution to cinema, Shyam Benegal was a man of great values who never hesitated to speak his mind. Despite his ideological differences with the right wing and the Modi government, he opposed returning national awards as a mark of protest against the alleged increase in intolerance in India. He, himself a two-time chairman of FTII, did not support the strike of students of the institute against the appointment of TV actor Gajendra Chauhan as its chairman.

Manoj Parashar | Ghaziabad

office bearer of the Mumbai Cricket Association, "Shaw is his own enemy." Ganapathi Bhat | Akola

CONCERN OVER SHAW'S FITNESS

Madam — The team India has been endeavouring for over a period to gain the ground, where it's seen the bowlers and batters are totally at sea. Then, everyone wishing for Shami's comeback, which can drastically strengthen the tie of the team, especially the bowling attack, as he showcased his back-to-back top-notch performance in the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy, leading bowling length effectively.

But once again, BCCI's update about his fitness, that he has been deemed not fit for selection in the remaining two tests due to concern over left knee swelling, has ruined countless hopes. Our wishes for his speedy recovery and the team's unparalleled persistence to heal up the millions' fresh wounded hearts.

Jakir Hussain | Kanpur

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Lessons from yesterday: Reflections that shape a lifetime

The past is a treasure trove of memories and lessons, each shaping who we are and guiding us into the future

The past shapes our present. The present is just the next moment, to make way for the future. We are left with fond memories. These memories also teach us invaluable lessons. I was prone to my share of mischief as a child for which I would get scolded by my parents. At such times, I was assured of a haven hiding behind my grandmother. She was impartial to both sides as she counselled my parents to be more indulgent and taught us to be well-behaved. I remember another afternoon, I returned from school excited about my outstanding results in the examinations. Unmindful of my mother's much-needed siesta, I woke her up. Still groggy, she hugged and blessed me, before continuing with her interrupted sleep. That one spontaneous gesture was my reward which would continue to inspire me throughout my life. My father usually rested and slept on Sunday afternoons.

We tried not to disturb his sleep. One day, we might have been noisier than usual and ended up soundly thrashed by our father. I wit-



needed a different facet of my father's personality later in the evening, as he gently expressed his regret for the outburst. I would remember in times to come that there was no shame in accepting if I was wrong. I remember the day I met the young girl who became my wife and life partner in the next few months. After the initial heady days, we buckled up to the serious business of making a life together. We have been married for 40 years. These have not been easy decades faced with the harsh realities of life. We never give up, whatever the setbacks. We continue to strive towards the common goal of leading a happy and contented life together. It is easier to face challenges and find solutions as a team. Another nostalgic memory is

from a long-ago holiday to the beach town of Puri. Our guest house was a couple of hundred meters from the beach. Our daughters were much younger. I was, and continue to be, a protective father, worrying about their safety. That one day, I sat on the veranda, fondly looking at the two children playing with sand on the beach. Their innocent efforts, many of which were unsuccessful, to mould a work of art out of the slippery sand, taught me not to give up. My mother kept a copy of Ramcharitmanas in her prayer corner. I read something where that you could find a solution to any problem in the epic. All you had to do was open any page, and the top line would help you find ways to tackle your most pressing



SANJAY CHANDRA

issue. I also tried it sometimes. I remember that a simple reading of the lines was not enough. What mattered was the action plan that I arrived at based on my interpretation, and the determination with which I pursued. Fair play, guiding the team members, impartiality, giving undivided time to team members however busy one might be, empathy, working for the team, pride in the performance of the team members, and out-of-box thinking, were only a few of the invaluable lessons that my experiences taught me. They have stood me in good stead through the rough and tumble of life. The words of psychiatrist, Abraham Twerski would resonate with many. "Ruminating about the past will get you nowhere. So go ahead and learn from the past whatever you can, and then put it behind you. Remember, there is nothing you can do to change it, but you can use its lessons to improve your future."

(The author is an electrical engineer with the Indian Railways and conducts classes in creative writing; views are personal)



Opinion

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 26, 2024



● VAJPAYEE'S LEGACY

Prime Minister Narendra Modi

One can see the long-term impact of Atalji's leadership in so many sectors around us. His era marked a gigantic leap in the world of information technology, telecom, and communications

Incremental gains

Growth in area under green cover is encouraging, but the threat of forest degradation must be averted

THE KEY FINDINGS of the latest biennial India State of Forest Report (2023) offer reasons for optimism. A quarter of the country's geographical area, spread over 8.27 sq km, is today under forest and tree cover, about 1,445 sq km more than the data from 2021 revealed. However, the fine print suggests these are only incremental gains. The net forest cover has seen only a minuscule 0.5% growth since 2021. Moreover, this transpired largely outside the recorded forest areas or RFAs, which are reserved or protected forests. Of the 156.41 sq km increase in net forest cover, only about 7.28 sq km was found to be inside RFAs. Areas under moderately dense and open forests have shrunk though the area covered by dense forests saw an increase. The northeastern states, known for being rich in biodiversity, continued to suffer a decline in forest cover, with only Mizoram recording an increase. Again, worryingly, as many as eight mountain states, including Uttarakhand, have reported dwindling forest cover.

Given that forests are critical to preserve the environment as they act as natural barriers to landslides and soil erosion, this trend must be reversed. Recurring incidence of natural and man-made disasters such as landslides in recent years — resulting from a mix of climate change and rapid urbanisation — betray the fragility of ecologically sensitive regions like the Himalayas and the Western Ghats. The latest report also assessed forest cover across the Western Ghats for the first time, and found that the mountain range lost 58.22 sq km since 2013. India's national forest policy targets two-thirds of the geographical area in the hills to be forested, and for one-third of the country's land to be covered by forests and trees. Over time though, the dilution of laws has contributed to the shrinking greenery in the hills.

The government's data has been criticised on the grounds that the definition of forests is somewhat broad. The environment ministry defines "forest cover" as "all lands, more than or equal to one hectare in area, with a tree canopy of more than or equal to 10%, regardless of its ownership, legal status and includes orchards, bamboo and palm". Studies by other agencies have not painted as rosy a picture. The Global Forest Watch, which maps changes using satellite data and other sources, pointed out that India has lost 2.33 million hectares of tree cover since 2000, a 6% decrease. The Northeast alone accounted for over 75% of loss of tree cover between 2001 and 2023.

Another worrying aspect is forest degradation, with nearly 93,000 sq km of dense forests lost between 2011 and 2021; half of this, the India State of Forest Report shows, degraded into non-forest land. The cleaning up of forests is a serious threat, much like deforestation. They harm biodiversity, add to pollution, and lower capacity as carbon sinks. It is important to ensure forest conservation laws are not weakened or bypassed and that infrastructure is not built at the cost of the environment. As a part of its climate action or nationally determined contributions, which are at the heart of the Paris Agreement goals, India had committed to create an additional carbon sink of 2.5-4 billion tonnes by 2030. The good news, as the government's report points out, is that India already reached 2.29 billion tonnes of additional carbon sink in 2023. This progress is very encouraging in the context of the war against climate change.

● LABOUR PARTICIPATION

WOMEN'S ACCESS TO PAID WORK CAN ONLY IMPROVE WHEN THE ECONOMY IS CREATING ADEQUATE JOBS

Gender gaps persist

ASHWINI DESHPANDE

Professor of economics, Ashoka University



Women's work on family enterprises (farms, dairy, poultry, livestock, kirana shops, etc.) has typically been undercounted. In other words, women contribute to the earnings of the family through their labour such as by performing economic work similar to the men in the households, but while the men are counted as being part of the workforce, women are often not.

concerted policies aimed at significantly improving women's access to formal employment in India through several targeted strategies.

Creating more non-farm job opportunities in rural areas is crucial. Paid work has to be created closer to homes in rural areas in the absence of reliable transport networks. This can be achieved by promoting small and medium enterprises, enhancing vocational training programmes, and supporting entrepreneurship among women.

Addressing infrastructure barriers such as transportation and childcare facilities is essential. Reliable and safe transportation options can help women commute to work, while accessible childcare services can alleviate the burden of household responsibilities, enabling them to pursue formal employment.

Establishing mechanisms to monitor women's labour force participation and the effectiveness of policies can help identify gaps

There are a number of initiatives to bring women into meaningful self-employment that enhances their economic independence. Providing targeted training programmes that equip

women with skills relevant to self-employment, such as entrepreneurship, financial literacy, and specific vocational skills, can help them establish and manage their own businesses more effectively.

Establishing microfinance initiatives and providing access to low-interest loans can empower women to start or expand their self-employed ventures. Financial literacy programmes can also help them manage their finances better.

Facilitating access to markets for women entrepreneurs through platforms that connect them with buyers can improve their sales opportunities. This could include online marketplaces, local fairs, and cooperatives that promote women's products. In addition to transportation, other elements of infrastructure, such as access to reliable utilities (electricity, internet, etc.) can significantly enhance the ability of women to operate their businesses efficiently.

While the trend of rising FLFPR indicates some progress on a key dimension, we need to examine several other dimensions of women's participation in paid work to gauge women's advance towards economic independence and empowerment. Just as important as participation is the quality of work, as many women engage in unpaid or low-earning self-employment rather than formal salaried positions. The overarching challenge remains the persistently low job opportunities, accessing which remains a challenge due to a particular societal norm that places the responsibility for domestic chores (cooking, cleaning, washing, child and elderly care) almost exclusively on women. Finally, women's access to paid work can only improve in a scenario when the economy is creating jobs in adequate numbers for the working age population as a whole.

Views are personal

A baseline scenario for global economy in 2025



MOHAMED A. EL-ERIAN

President, Queens' College, University of Cambridge, and professor, Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania

Economic fragmentation will continue, pushing some countries to diversify their reserves further away from the US dollar and explore alternative payment systems

IT IS SOMETHING of a tradition every December to take stock of the year that is ending and consider what might lie ahead. This is true on a personal level. In my family, we tend to do this around the dinner table. But it is also true more broadly, with the time of year inviting an examination of the intersection of economics, national politics, and global geopolitics.

You would be forgiven if, as a starting point, you expected these three areas to be in alignment. After all, they are deeply interconnected, which suggests self-reinforcing dynamics. But 2024 brought some unusual dispersion in this relationship that actually widened, rather than narrowed, over the course of the year.

Begin with geopolitics. In 2024, Russia secured a greater advantage in the Ukraine war than the consensus forecasts of a year ago anticipated. Similarly, the human suffering and physical destruction resulting from the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza exceeded most observers' already-high expectations, and spread to other countries, such as Lebanon. The apparent impunity of the strong, together with the absence of effective means of preventing dire humanitarian crises, has deepened the sense for many that the global order is fundamentally imbalanced, and lacks any enforceable guardrails.

As for domestic politics, upheaval has been the order of the day in many countries. Governments have collapsed in both France and Germany —

Europe's largest economies — leaving the European Union without political leadership. And, following Donald Trump's victory in last month's presidential election, the United States is preparing for a political transition that is likely to bring a significant increase in the political influence of a new "counter-elite".

Meanwhile, an "axis of convenience" — comprising China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia — is seeking to challenge the Western-dominated international order. Other recent developments — from the now-impeached South Korean president's abrupt declaration of martial law (which was quickly reversed) to the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria — have reinforced the impression that we are living at a time of exceptional geopolitical and political volatility.

The last year also brought some worrisome macroeconomic developments. Europe's malaise has deepened, as countries grapple with low growth and large budget deficits. And China has failed to respond credibly to the collapse and present danger of "japanification", with unfavourable demographics, a debt overhang, and a prolonged property-market downturn

undermining growth, economic efficiency, and consumer confidence.

And yet, stock markets have remained relatively stable and delivered high returns, including almost 60 record-high closes for the S&P 500. The US economy's exceptional performance is a major reason why. Far from weakening, as most economists expected, the US pulled even further ahead. Given the amount of foreign capital the US is attracting, and the scale of its investment in the future drivers of productivity, competitiveness, and growth, it is likely to continue outperforming other major economies in 2025.

One consequence of this success is that the US Federal Reserve did not deliver the soothing 1.75-2-percentage-point interest-rate cuts that markets were pricing in a year ago. This trend, too, is set to continue: at December's policy meeting, the Fed signalled fewer cuts in 2025, and a higher terminal rate (long-run rate). But political and geopolitical upheaval — and the limited prospects for significant improvements — does pose a risk to the endurance of US economic exceptionalism. Even if the US continues outperforming its peers, as expected, the range of possible outcomes, in terms of both growth and inflation, has

widened. In fact, global economic and policy outcomes as a whole are now subject to a larger possibility set, both because the downside risks have grown and because upside innovations — such as in artificial intelligence, life sciences, food security, health care, and defence — could transform sectors and accelerate productivity gains.

Absent a major policy reset, my baseline scenario for the US includes a somewhat lower immediate growth rate, even as the economy outperforms its peers, and sticky inflation. This will present the Fed with a choice: accept above-target inflation or attempt to bring it down and risk tipping the economy into recession.

Globally, economic fragmentation will continue, pushing some countries to diversify their reserves further away from the US dollar and explore alternatives to Western payment systems. Yields on US 10-year government bonds — a global benchmark — will edge higher, trading mostly in the 4.75-5% range. As for financial markets, they might find it more challenging to maintain their status as the "good house" in a challenging geo-economic neighbourhood.

This is how things appear now. But, beyond recognising the wider dispersion of possible economic outcomes in 2025, it will be crucial regularly to test whichever baseline one embraces against actual developments.

Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2024. www.project-syndicate.org

Wegovy & Zepbound's next lap harder than acceptance

THIS TIME LAST year, people were still bickering about whether Novo Nordisk's Wegovy and Eli Lilly & Co's Zepbound represented a shortcut to losing weight or a medical breakthrough. But with reams of data on the drugs' health benefits beyond reducing obesity — including mitigating heart disease, diabetes, chronic kidney disease, and sleep apnea — most seem to have finally accepted their potentially immense societal value.

Now comes the hard part. These highly effective drugs — GLP-1s — are changing the way obesity is viewed and treated. The changes are coming so fast and could benefit so many that they've created new questions and ethical quandaries for medical professionals, including who should get them.

The theoretical market for Wegovy and Zepbound is massive: The Food and Drug Administration approved them for anyone with a body-mass index of 30 or more — 27 or higher for individuals with a weight-related condition like high blood pressure or sleep apnea. Some 57 million working-age Americans with private insurance match those criteria, as do nearly 14 million retirement-age Americans. The expectation is that once started, the drugs will need to be taken for life to maintain the results.

But does everybody who fits that broad description need the drugs? Opinions among physicians vary. Some feel strongly that everyone deserves treatment, while others draw a distinction between people at risk of or already experiencing weight-related health complications and those who are perfectly healthy at a BMI that would make them eligible for the drugs.

Within both camps, shortages and the drugs' high prices are forcing doctors to come up with ways of prioritising which patients should get them. That's both a necessary response to an ongoing problem and forward-thinking, says Robert Kushner, who specialises in obesity medicine at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine.

The field needs an evidence-backed approach to help better define who the right candidate is for GLP-1s. To that end, an international committee of obesity experts will release an interim report in early 2025 that lays out criteria for diagnosing "clinical" obesity or where excess weight is causing or raising the risk of other health issues. Ideally, that will help doctors more easily distinguish between who has the true disease of obesity, who we need to treat early, and the people who gained 10 or 20 pounds and crossed the BMI threshold into obesity yet are still healthy. Says Kushner, who led the commission, "Obesity specialists have countless infuriating stories of patients losing coverage for GLP-1s once their BMI drops below a certain number. The reality is without ongoing treatment, the weight will come back — and with it, so will their patients' risks of conditions like diabetes and high blood pressure. Coming up with a way to define obesity that centres on the risk of disease might clarify the need for long-term treatment."

That could also help doctors as they try to answer another important question: When is someone's weight loss enough? Not long ago, obesity doctors spent most of their time urging their patients to keep going — that if they could stick with their lifestyle changes, health benefits were within reach. The worry is that these drugs not only cause someone to lose fat but muscle, too, and that they can affect nutrient intake. All of that must factor into the patient's weight loss journey.

But doctors still lack a consensus on the right way to manage a patient's obesity using drugs. Should they aim for a specific BMI range (widely considered a problematic metric) or look at waist-to-height ratio (an assessment of body fat distribution, which is linked to heart disease risk)? Or should they aim for specific health markers? Complicating all of this is the question of GLP-1's broader health benefits, some of which accrue regardless of the magnitude of weight loss.

The need to establish goals isn't unusual. Transformative treatments for chronic disease have a way of setting standards for what doctors consider healthy. The advent of drugs for lowering cholesterol and blood pressure and treating diabetes enabled doctors to define watermarks for treatment. The difference with obesity drugs, though, is patients tend to have strong opinions on those goals, and they might not match what the data (or their doctor) says is best.



LISA JARVIS

Bloomberg

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Free-falling rupee

Apropos of "Downward drift" (FE, December 25), an artificially propped-up rupee is a very bad idea and the Reserve Bank of India's attempts to stem the rupee slide by selling dollars has only led to a depletion in the dollar reserves. Financial markets are impossible to control, and like water they will find their own levels. The Prime Minister's remarks equating the rupee's fall with the nation's prestige,

when he was the chief minister of Gujarat, are now coming back to bite him. Indications are that the policies of US President-elect Donald Trump are likely to make the dollar stronger and adversely affect the Indian economy. Students may find it hard to fund their studies abroad and industries dependent on imports may find it impossible to price their products competitively. The government seems to be blissfully unaware of the damage the falling rupee could cause

and is only satisfied that other currencies are performing as badly. —Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra

Master storyteller who inspired generations

The curtain has come down on one of Indian cinema's most illustrious chapters with the passing of Shyam Benegal on December 23 at the age of 90. Known for his groundbreaking contribution to the Indian New Wave

movement, Benegal's films like *Ankur*, *Nishant*, *Manthan*, and *Bhumika* redefined storytelling, blending realism with social commentary. Even in his later years, Benegal's legacy endured with *Meri Khushi* recently screened at Cannes. A master storyteller, his films transcended entertainment, sparking dialogue and inspiring generations of filmmakers. —Amarjeet Kumar, Hazaribagh

● Write to us at letters@expressindia.com

Trade thrust

Export promotion requires consistent and open trade policy

It has been reported in this newspaper that the Union commerce ministry is in the process of having a meeting that will examine how six particular product categories can have their export value increased, in particular to 20 focus markets — most of which are advanced Western nations, and also Russia, China, and Indonesia. The energy and interest being displayed by policymakers and administrators on increasing Indian exports is welcome. It is also good news that diplomats in this country, including ambassadors, have been invited to discuss this strategy — too often, the senior-most members of the Indian diplomatic corps think that trade promotion must take a back seat to other aspects of their duties. The context for this effort, it is assumed, is the recent cratering of India's merchandise exports, which reached their lowest point in more than two years last month. Thus, a targeted export strategy is being considered necessary.

It is already amply clear what is needed to increase Indian exports; the government has to move forward on this reform agenda and take cognisance of the nature of modern trade. Several of the countries on this list of 20 are, for example, members of the European Union. The appropriate way to increase exports to that region is obvious: An early conclusion of the free-trade agreement (FTA) that has been long in negotiation. The idea that exports can be increased without a tradeoff in terms of domestic-market access for potential trading partners is completely outdated. Other regions, such as the United States, are unlikely to sign FTAs, particularly under the impending administration of Donald Trump. Given that, increasing exports to such regions become a question of efficiency, competitiveness, and cost reduction. To increase competitiveness, India must become part of global value chains. That requires, in turn, stable trade and tax policy. Variability in India's approach to taxes and tariffs and the implementation of arbitrary quality-control orders to check imports have hindered India's entry into global value chains and thus its ability to increase exports to high-end markets like the US.

Of course, on-the-ground reforms to business friendliness — from administrative to judicial reforms — are also important. But, for trade specifically, the government's policy towards new agreements and even to international arbitration has to be clear. It is the basics that need to be fixed, not any detailed new strategy. It is thus to be hoped that the meeting, when it occurs, will also provide this feedback to the government. Reform of trade policy has been long in the making. Too much recent work in this direction has simply set targets, or focused on wooing particular companies such as Apple Inc. This may or may not pay off in a sustainable manner. The only way to persistently increase export value is by ensuring that any company, large or small, has access to global inputs and global markets with the minimum of regulatory and administrative intervention. This understanding would change the foundations of India's trade policy, and increase exports to a permanently higher level.

Senior security

India needs an affordable elder care ecosystem

Celebrations over India's demographic dividend a decade ago have metamorphosed into concerns at the ageing of India's population. The current elderly population of India (those aged 60 and above) is about 153 million. By 2050, just 25 years from now, this cohort is expected to grow to a staggering 347 million. India's population growth is slowing, with total fertility rates falling below replacement levels in several states, which means that the elderly will account for a larger share of the Indian population by then; estimates suggest a range of 15 to 20 per cent. There are many policy implications to this demographic transition, chief among them being the creation of an adequate elder care ecosystem. So far, however, this critical socio-economic dynamic appears to be acquiring a K-shaped structure.

A recent four-part series in *Business Standard* captured the rise of the "silver economy", demonstrating how insurance companies, construction majors, medical conglomerates, and even software startups are devising schemes and products for India's ageing middle and upper-middle class. This suggests a shrewd reading of the future consumer market. But the sobering reality is that these entrepreneurs address a relatively small proportion of the population that has the financial wherewithal to afford such products and services. But as much as 40 per cent of the country's elderly are in the lowest wealth quintile and about 20 per cent have no income at all. For the bulk of India's elderly and ageing population, the principal problem remains the loss of income and financial security and the concomitant lack of access to health care and elder care that follows. Poor and low-income families struggle to cope with elderly relatives suffering a range of age-related illnesses from heart and kidney problems, limited mobility, Alzheimer's, and dementia, to name a few. An expanding lifespan and lifestyle changes such as growing nuclear families and urbanisation are imposing new pressures on elder care in India, resulting in a distressing rise in cases of outright abandonment of sick or disabled elderly relatives. There is, to be sure, no shortage of laws and schemes for the elderly.

Indeed, India was considered a frontrunner in terms of addressing the issue by coming up with its National Policy on Older Persons in 1999, three years ahead of an international plan. Among other signature programmes are the National Programme for Health Care of the Elderly (NPHECE), launched in 2010 to provide dedicated health care for the elderly, and the Maintenance and Welfare of Senior Citizens Act, 2007, which made it a legal obligation for children and heirs to provide maintenance to senior citizens and parents with a monthly allowance. The latter, a law ahead of its time, also provides for a fast-tracked and inexpensive mechanism for the protection of life and property of the elderly, and the setting up of old-age homes to provide maintenance to indigent senior citizens. Most of these forward-thinking policies on elder care have foundered on poor implementation. More recently, the Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana extended health-insurance coverage to all senior citizens aged 70 and above, irrespective of income. Being a relatively successful scheme, this extension could well be a game-changer. But it should be seen as the starting point of a robust system of humane, affordable elder care that offers India's ageing population a degree of security.

Let's not miss the CPTPP bus

In Trump 2.0's uncertain trade landscape, India must act now to secure its place in the open, rules-based, and potentially largest trade bloc in the world



The recent statements by President-elect Donald Trump about imposing higher tariffs on imports from Mexico and Canada cast a shadow over two important aspects of global trade — friend-shoring and the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA). The former has clear implications for all US allies that may have assumed they would get an easier pass through the transactional bilateralism characteristic of Mr Trump's tariff hikes. The latter reveals a review and perhaps even an unravelling of institutions and legislation under Trump 2.0, even if they have been crafted to serve US interests in the past.

Higher tariffs on US and Mexico would violate the USMCA, which is a preferential trade agreement among the three North American economies that substituted the North American Free Trade Agreement in 2020. The Inflation Reduction Act of 2022, which offered preferential rules of origin to Mexico and Canada to promote regional supply chains, particularly in the electric vehicles (EVs) sector, too would stand challenged with this tariff hike.

Clearly, therefore, under Trump 2.0, uncertainty will loom large over the global trade environment. From an Indian trade policy perspective, this necessitates a risk-diversification trade strategy through participation in stable, alternative institutional arrangements and/or agreements.

In the present context, India's options are from among the three mega-regional trade arrangements that is, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). Participation in all three would, of course, be the most optimal path for risk diversification and ensuring access to greater possibilities of trade and global value chain (GVC) integration.

In the case of the IPEF, India is a member of three pillars of the IPEF — supply chain, clean energy, and tax and anti-corruption — while opting out

of the fourth pillar on trade. Although, given the trade-investment nexus underlying GVCs, there is sufficient economic ground to push for India's participation in the trade pillar, this may not be the most appropriate time to do so.

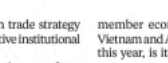
The absence of specific tangible outcomes and the non-binding and non-commendatory nature of the IPEF agreements make it a potentially weaker instrument of economic integration compared to an FTA or a mega regional trade agreement. More importantly, the IPEF is an executive agreement and Mr Trump, in the course of his campaign, has indicated his dislike for the Indo-Pacific arrangement, declaring that he would "knock out" the IPEF when elected. The survivability of the IPEF itself, therefore, remains uncertain.

As for the RCEP and the CPTPP, India has been rather emphatic about not joining the former after withdrawing from the agreement in 2019. This is notwithstanding the RCEP being open for India's accession and the potential advantages emanating from its cumulative and common rules of origin, fostering deeper GVC integration. The CPTPP, on the other hand, has thus far received little, if any, policy attention in India.

The CPTPP was established in 2018 as an Asia-Pacific trade bloc with 11 member economies, including Japan, Singapore, Vietnam and Australia. The UK, having acceded earlier this year, is its 12th member. Seven members of the agreement overlap with the RCEP. China is not a member at present, though it applied for membership in 2020. There is a long queue of formal applicants and several other economies, including South Korea, Thailand and Indonesia, have informally expressed their interest to join the agreement. The constituent provisions are World Trade Organization (WTO)-plus, and apart from providing a tariff-free market for almost all goods and services and investment liberalisation among member economies, they mean high standards and enforcement of, inter alia, investor protection rules, intellectual property rights, broad e-commerce commitments and a dispute settlement mechanism.

STRAIGHT TALK

AMITA BATRA



A return to trend growth

After a blistering 8.2 per cent growth in gross domestic product (GDP) last financial year, India is now returning to its trend growth rate of 6.5-7 per cent. Some moderation was anticipated for three reasons: A lower fiscal impulse, interest rates remaining elevated for 21 months, and tighter lending norms.

The sharp deceleration in the second quarter of 2024-25 is a blip caused by slower-than-expected capital expenditure by central and state governments due to the prolonged elections and the impact of weather vagaries.

While the economy is expected to recover in the second half, growth for this full financial year will be slower than initially projected. The Reserve Bank of India now forecasts 6.6 per cent, compared with 7.2 per cent earlier. CRISIL has cut its 2024-25 growth forecast to 6.8 per cent from 7.2 per cent.

Nevertheless, medium-term prospects for India remain healthy. CRISIL estimates average annual growth through the end of this decade at 6.7 per cent. Typically, there are three drivers of long-term growth: Capital, labour and productivity. Higher productivity means more output with the same inputs.

We see the bulk of the growth coming from capital investments, which are currently driven by government infrastructure projects and household investments. Infrastructure development is critical for a developing economy, as it not only drives short-term growth through higher multiplier effects but also enhances the economy's long-term growth potential. Notably, the government's infrastructure push has led to positive growth surprises following the Covid-19 pandemic. However, India's private corporate sector has yet to fully engage in investment activity, despite favourable conditions such as low leverage, reduced corporate taxes, and benefits from government infrastructure investments.

We anticipate a measured increase in private corporate investments as sectors such as steel and cement benefit from ongoing infrastructure projects. The full potential of the production-linked incentive (PLI) scheme will manifest as it shifts to higher value-added

industries, which, by nature, are capital-intensive.

Additionally, CRISIL Research predicts new investments in semiconductors and energy transition/electrical vehicles will grow, reducing reliance on government spending over time. However, this shift will be gradual due to uncertainties from US tariff actions and uneven domestic demand.

Labour's contribution to growth is expected to be relatively low in the base case due to inadequate workforce quality and low female labour force participation. While India's female labour force participation improved to 42 per cent in 2023-24, it remains low compared to 60 per cent in China and Vietnam. Improving education and job opportunities in labour-intensive sectors could enhance growth prospects.

Productivity, the third growth driver, will play an increasing role throughout the decade. Improvements in physical infrastructure, digitalisation, and ongoing economic reforms such as goods and services tax (GST) will drive efficiency.

Among these, digitalisation has progressed the fastest since the pandemic, followed by infrastructure development and economic reforms. To accelerate growth further and remain competitive, India must continue its infrastructure development and propel the PLI scheme. Digitalisation, being less capital-intensive, in an enabling environment will foster innovation and efficiency. The advent of generative artificial intelligence promises productivity gains, especially in repetitive tasks. GST measures further refinement, including the inclusion of petroleum products and alcohol. Labour and land reforms will boost private corporate investments and enhance growth potential when fully implemented.

Other challenges loom as well. Climate change and geopolitical uncertainties, including tariff wars and insular policies, will test our mettle. Incidentally, many of the developed economies did not have to worry about this during their transit to high-growth phase.

India's pursuit of higher growth will crank up its carbon footprint, as fossil fuels remain a key component of its energy supply. Adoption of green energy to shift its growth composition in favour of industry

While membership is open to all, formal applications are considered only after existing members arrive at a consensus to form a working group for the initiation of the accession process. Furthermore, the applicant nation has to be willing and prepared to abide by the higher standards of the agreement as well as demonstrated success in upholding commitments of past trade agreements.

The fact that in the last six years there have been only one new member while many other interested economies have been left waiting has led many to question the long-drawn out entry process. Given the increasingly uncertain global context, there are already suggestions for a review of the entry process, and proposals for a "one-time" collective entry for all applicants are in the air.

It would be worthwhile, therefore, for India to put in its application at this time. In case of a change in process, India will not be left out of the potentially largest, open, rules-based trade bloc. In case of no change in the entry process, the present geopolitical circumstances may actually favour India's early entry as against some other regional economies.

A formal expression of interest in joining the CPTPP would, in addition, be a signal of India's intent and commitment to undertake necessary reforms and upgrade its domestic regulations in alignment with the highest global standards. An expression of intent to join the CPTPP would be a positive factor in India's pursuit of attracting relocating multinational company investments away from China. This has been evident in the case of Vietnam, which, being a member of the CPTPP and having an FTA with the EU, is a lead beneficiary in the Chinese EVs strategy of EV diversification.

Finally, while it is true that the trade rules under the CPTPP are already set and India will not be a rule-maker in the agreement, it is worth pointing out that the CPTPP provides sufficient flexibility for each country to negotiate its path and time period for attaining the necessary standards in different trade-related domains.

So, there is flexibility, as well as scope for domestic reforms for new members of the agreement. In the case of the UK, for example, where there was internal diversity of opinion on the consequences of accepting certain investment-related provisions, side letters have been signed with some existing members, keeping in view the provisions of their existing bilateral FTAs and investment relations. A careful study of the UK's negotiations for CPTPP membership will be helpful in this context.

Overall, in the increasingly uncertain global trade context of Trump 2.0, a formal application for CPTPP membership by India at this point has the potential to offer access to a stable, rules-based trade order and opportunities for increased economic integration with a trade and GVC dynamic trade bloc.

The author is senior fellow, CSEEP professor of economics, School of International Studies, JNU, and author of India's Trade Policy in the 21st Century, Routledge, London, 2022. The views are personal.



DHARMAKIRTI JOSHI

India as a peaceful great power



BOOK REVIEW

DAMMU RAVI

Historically, aspirational countries had always aimed at elevating themselves to great power status through war, but that is not an option anymore in the 21st century, according to TV Paul, who in *The Unfinished Quest* charts India's checkered path towards higher regional and global status.

Dr Paul is a distinguished James McGill Professor whose body of scholarly work focuses on the need to understand peaceful change as an urgent necessity. His book sheds important light on India's

significance as the "swing power" that can mitigate China's aggressive rise in the Indo-Pacific region. To this end, he espouses the use of both soft power and hard power resources.

Joseph Nye Jr coined soft power as one's ability to get what one wants through attraction rather than coercion. The book elaborates on India's soft power strengths, stating that its cultural and civilisational depth lend it a favourable reception — for example, yoga, Bollywood, spirituality, inclusiveness, tolerance — but its caste system and religious divisiveness are its countervailing factors. The economic growth rate is said to be a major marker of hard power and the complementing hard tools are indigenous military strength, nuclear potential, space applications and technological advances, while poverty, inequality and corruption are its downsides.

There were supposedly two pivotal moments for India post-World War II when

the status hierarchy was institutionalised, and on both occasions, India is said to have missed the boat, the author contends. The first was in 1945 when India was still a British colony and the second was in 1968 when India opposed the unequal Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). However, the true perceptual shift about India is said to have happened since the economic liberalisation in 1991, a trigger for India's acceptance as a rising power.

The book informs us of the importance of dependency relationships for status hierarchy, and the lack of it causing status depreciation. It draws attention to how India's insufficient economic integration with the South Asian countries — evident in trade comprising less than 5 per cent of its global trade and low investment levels — has created a vacuum that China has effectively filled. Such a lapse, the author underscores, could be deleterious to regional hegemonic status as smaller states in the region get manoeuvring space to

play one against the other.

The coverage of the India-Pakistan rivalry in the backdrop of the Cold War seems like an analogous game of chess, with India's status often checkedmate by the big powers. The US strategy to prop up Pakistan to counter Russia, particularly during the tenures of President Reagan and President Carter, is said to have emboldened Pakistan to develop nuclear capability to neutralise India. The simplistic assessment that the Kashmir conflict is being partially driven by status and identity concerns exposes the author's feeble understanding of the painful Partition with all its serious repercussions for India.

The book explains how India has astutely leveraged international status symbols, such as its G20 presidency, membership in regional forums like the Quad and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity, and strong bilateral relations, to advance its interests

and enhance its global profile. Its ongoing strategic partnership with Russia gives it a bridge-builder role. In Africa, too, India could do a lot more, given the strong presence of its diaspora, being less capital-intensive, in an enabling environment will foster innovation and efficiency. The advent of generative artificial intelligence promises productivity gains, especially in repetitive tasks. GST measures further refinement, including the inclusion of petroleum products and alcohol. Labour and land reforms will boost private corporate investments and enhance growth potential when fully implemented.

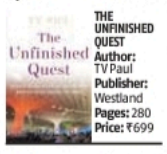
Other challenges loom as well. Climate change and geopolitical uncertainties, including tariff wars and insular policies, will test our mettle. Incidentally, many of the developed economies did not have to worry about this during their transit to high-growth phase.

India's pursuit of higher growth will crank up its carbon footprint, as fossil fuels remain a key component of its energy supply. Adoption of green energy to shift its growth composition in favour of industry

of world-class infrastructure through a reoriented, futuristic bureaucracy. However, his constructive criticism fails to take into account India's decade-long progress towards achieving about 250 million people were lifted out of multidimensional poverty, as recognised by the UN. India's progress was as silver lining in the otherwise gloomy scenario surrounding the Sustainable Development Goals. Further, he reinforces the importance of promoting multicultural, multiethnic, and secular credentials to earn respect for Hindu values. The necessity of liberal education is key to changing attitudes, he observes.

India's democratic system, despite its flaws, is attractive for trade, investment and economic partnerships. The author supposes that more democracy, not less, is the way forward for India's peaceful ascent to a high status nation, challenging the dominant narrative that war is the way to great power status. If India gets its act right through leadership foresight and collective resolve, Dr Paul believes, India will hold a vital place in the world order.

The reviewer is a serving foreign service officer



THE UNFINISHED QUEST
Author: TV Paul
Publisher: Westland
Pages: 280
Price: ₹699