

CACHE

Why are crypto withdrawals being restricted for investors?

Cryptocurrency exchanges operating in India can block or suddenly restrict crypto withdrawals for users in India, leading to confusion, fear, and a loss of trust in Indian fintech companies

Sahana Venugopal

The story so far:

Mudrex, a crypto platform that is "U.S.-headquartered and Bengaluru-based" made headlines this month when it announced it was temporarily pausing crypto withdrawals until January 28, to "enhance the security of our platform and safeguard against bad actors," said the company in an official blog post on January 12. This comes soon after another crypto exchange popular with Indians – CoinDCX – also confused customers with conflicting information regarding its crypto withdrawal policy. Indian crypto investors want to deposit, withdraw, and trade crypto just like their international peers, but this is easier said than done. Crypto traders in the country face several barriers when transacting through centralised exchanges due to unclear domestic laws and vaguely defined risks. Crypto companies often cite these factors to justify restricting crypto withdrawals for customers, thus sparking alarm amongst investors.

What problems are crypto investors in India facing?

A crypto trader in India who signs up with a popular centralised exchange must undergo a detailed registration process and Know-Your-Customer (KYC) procedures in order to comply with India's Anti-Money Laundering (AML) and Combating the Financing of Terrorism (CFT) regulations.

Customers submit their national identity documents and verify themselves so they can use the company's platform without hurdles, ensuring seamless service in a market where asset prices can soar and crash in a matter of seconds.

It is no wonder that many users experience anger or panic when they make profits by trading in crypto through the centralised exchange but then learn to their shock that they cannot withdraw their crypto through the same company.

The social media platform X is filled with complaints from crypto exchange customers who claim that crypto withdrawal policies have changed without warning or that they were not flagged clearly in the first place. This naturally leads to fear as crypto investors wonder if their exchanges are trying to hold on to user assets or are experiencing liquidity shortages.

Why are cryptocurrency exchanges restricting withdrawals?

Different crypto exchanges in India have different policies governing crypto withdrawals. While some allow crypto withdrawals, and others allow it for select users or under special circumstances, there are also companies that block crypto withdrawals for all users without exception.

The most common reasons cited include fears that the Indian authorities could penalise the crypto exchange as a whole if it is discovered that users have been withdrawing their assets in crypto. There are also fears that the withdrawn crypto could be used to carry out illicit acts or buy banned products through dark markets.

CoinDCX did not respond to *The Hindu's* emails regarding its crypto withdrawal policy for this report, but co-founder Sumit Gupta published a



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thread on X outlining the company's approach in this area.

Mr. Gupta on January 15 acknowledged that while users wanted unrestricted crypto withdrawals, the company had to comply with India's "strict capital controls." He noted the risks of expert criminals escaping detection.

"But once law enforcement agencies get to know about any such cases, they freeze the entire exchange bank accounts indefinitely while they investigate. These exchange bank accounts hold funds from both bad actors and genuine users, directly impacting liquidity of INR funds of our genuine users," said Mr. Gupta in his post on X, when justifying the block on crypto withdrawals.

Another platform, CoinSwitch, followed a similar policy. "We do not allow crypto withdrawals on our platform, however, users can withdraw

their investments by converting their crypto into INR on an exchange like ours, and receive the money in their bank accounts," said Balaji Srihari, vice president, CoinSwitch, in response to *The Hindu's* query.

Meanwhile, crypto exchange Zebpay, which has its headquarters in Singapore apart from other international offices, offers two customer experience modes. One allows crypto withdrawals, while the other does not.

In response to *The Hindu's* query, Raj Karkara, COO, ZebPay, confirmed that crypto withdrawals were allowed for manual transfers, but not for instant deposits.

"The Instant Deposit feature allows users to add INR funds instantly to their ZebPay accounts, enabling full access to trading and fiat withdrawals. However, crypto withdrawals are disabled while

crypto deposits are fully available. This feature requires a one-time virtual account setup and supports transfers through IMPS, NEFT, and RTGS, following standard banking procedures," said Mr. Karkara.

UPI will not be supported in this case.

Meanwhile, manual transfers will have users add Zebpay's bank details to their net banking apps, deposit funds from their registered bank accounts, and upload the image of the transaction receipt or bank statement for proof.

On the other hand, Binance – though not an Indian crypto exchange – registered as a reporting entity with FIU-IND in 2024 after previously being hit with legal action by the Indian authorities.

"Users based in India can withdraw crypto from their Binance accounts," a Binance spokesperson said in response to *The Hindu's* query and did not note any restrictions.

Why is there such a difference? One reason is that Indian law enforcement authorities take a serious view of turning Indian rupees into other currencies, especially when an easily traced asset (like INR) is converted to a harder to trace asset (like Bitcoin) that can be more easily laundered, sent to militants, or channelled into private wallets.

However, users should keep in mind that Binance and WazirX are locked in a legal dispute over whether or not Binance owns the Indian exchange. The legal situation is murky, with a lack of transparency from both sides and is expected to continue for some time.

What options do crypto users in India have?

When crypto withdrawals are no longer an option for traders in India using centralised exchanges in the country, they often have to wait for policies to change with time or pursue less desirable options.

For example, in the face of crypto withdrawal restrictions, many investors might resort to workarounds such as selling off their crypto and withdrawing their assets in rupees, even if this does not align with their investment plan.

Others may be driven to international crypto exchanges that do not comply with Indian tax laws.

Some traders may even avoid this hassle entirely by investing their funds through unregulated/decentralised exchanges with poor safeguards, or relying on platforms actively run by malicious actors.

What needs to happen to enable crypto withdrawals?

The most glaring issue is the absence of clear regulations and laws governing the flow of crypto in India. While the government taxes crypto gains and transactions, the existing legislation does not protect Indian investors and does not encourage Indian crypto businesses either.

In the meantime, several crypto exchanges that support INR trading pairs are upgrading their security and KYC protocols.

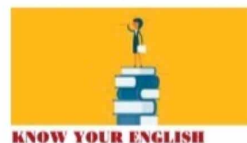
CoinDCX's Mr. Gupta said on X the exchange was working on an "enhanced due diligence framework" that would let eligible users withdraw their crypto in the future.

Mudrex also noted that it was working on security, but did not respond to *The Hindu's* email.

CoinSwitch's Mr. Srihari called for regulations so that crypto withdrawals could be opened.

"To officially enable crypto withdrawals for all customers in India, the introduction of clear regulations and a well-defined policy framework for VDA is essential," he said.

"Proper regulatory guidelines would provide clarity and address concerns around security, compliance, and the prevention of misuse, creating a safe and transparent environment for crypto transactions," he added.



His speech was peppered with anecdotes

His salty comments made the meeting uncomfortable

S. Upendran

"You were supposed to have been here an hour ago!"

"I know! But our Society meeting went on longer than expected."

"I forgot about that! Was there any of the usual shouting and screaming? Did any of..."

"Surprisingly not! One or two people, however, got salty with our President because..."

"They got salty with him? Did they abuse him? Did they call him names?"

"Of course, not! Why would they abuse the poor man? He's doing..."

"Some time ago, you told me that one of the meanings of the word 'salty' is to use abusive language. We talk about salty language. I was shocked to hear the salty language that the old woman was using."

"You must remember, however, that the word 'salty' has several other meanings as well. In informal contexts, it's frequently used to mean angry or upset."

"So, someone who is annoyed is salty?"

"I guess you could say that. Here's an example. I prefer not to play with someone like Dilip. Every time he loses, he becomes salty."

"Meaning he gets very upset when he loses. How about this example? My cousin Mala gets salty whenever I refuse to go shopping with her."

"Doesn't she know you hate shopping?"

"She chooses to conveniently ignore that fact."

"That definitely sounds like Mala! So, tell me, did a lot of people ask questions at the meeting?"

"The poor President was peppered with questions. He just..."

"Peppered with questions? Does it mean to ask someone a lot of questions?"

"Like the word 'salt', 'pepper' has many different meanings. When you pepper someone, it usually suggests that you're hitting him repeatedly with your fists."

"Only with the fists? Can it be with a rod or a stick?"

"Yes, it can be any object. The old boxer peppered with his young opponent with jabs."

"The teacher peppered the student stinging blows with his cane."

"The expression 'pepper with' can be used figuratively as well. The fast bowlers peppered the batsmen with bouncers."

"Does the expression have any other meaning?"

"Yes, it does. When you pepper something, you use it or include it in many different places. For example, as expected, Rajesh peppered his presentation with jokes and anecdotes."

"In other words, there was a liberal sprinkling of jokes in the presentation."

"In school, whenever we were asked to write an essay, my friend always tried to impress the teacher by peppering his essay with big words."

"That's something that all students wish to do – use big words. Now, thanks to ChatGPT, it's become easy to do."

"Students pepper their essay with words they don't even know the meaning of."

"Here's another example. The film was great. It was peppered with salty dialogue."

"Sounds like your kind of movie." upendrankey@gmail.com

THE DAILY QUIZ

The Constitution of India came in effect on January 26, 1950. A quiz on the most important legal document

Radhika Santhanam

QUESTION 1

This country's Constitution was adopted in 1937. India's Constitution borrows X from this country's Constitution. X are the ideals that a state must keep in mind while framing policies or enacting laws. Name X. Also name the country from which X was borrowed; it also fought Britain.

QUESTION 2

This student of Abanindranath Tagore was influenced by the murals in the Ajanta caves. He was among the first fellows of Lalit Kala Akademi. Name this artist who illustrated the Constitution.

QUESTION 3

Both Nehru and Ambedkar opposed the inclusion of this word in the Constitution

as they believed that the way in which it is used and understood in the Western context would not fit into India's multireligious landscape. It was in 1976 that this word was finally added in the Preamble. What is this word that we hear all the time in political discourse?

QUESTION 4

He is often known as the architect of modern Bihar. Who is this man, who was the first chairman of the Constituent Assembly?

QUESTION 5

On January 26, 1950, India was declared a Sovereign Democratic Republic in the Government House's Darbar Hall. This last Governor-General of India was present at the ceremony. He was one of the Chief Ministers of the Madras Presidency and leader of the Indian National Congress. Name him.



Visual Question:

This is the original Preamble of the Indian Constitution. Who was the calligrapher who wrote in English?

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz:

1. Before becoming an actor, Ghai acted in some films. In which superhero flick did he play the role of Flight Lieutenant Prakash? **Ans: Adharaan**
 2. Name the two Shatruughan Sinha stars, bearing the names of two popular cricketers of that era, that were the first films of Ghai as a director. **Ans: Kalicharan and Vishwanath**
 3. Name the production company that he formed in 1982. **Ans: Mukta Arts**
 4. Which Ghai film had the controversial song "Choli Ke Peeche Kya Hai"? **Ans: Khalnayak**
 5. Which actress made her first appearance in "Pardes"? **Ans: Mahima Chaudhry**
 6. Name the film institute set up by Ghai in 2006. **Ans: Whistling Woods International**
 7. Which film of his received the National Film Award for Best Film on Other Social Issues? **Ans: Iqbal**
- Visual: This is a still from which Ghai film. **Ans: Saudagar**
- Early Birds: Piyali Tuli | Tamal Biswas | Tito Shiladitya | Rajmohan Velayudhan | Sonali Das

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

Word of the day

Fastidious:

giving careful attention to detail; hard to please

Synonyms: Perfectionist, critical, particular

Usage: She is very fastidious about keeping her room clean.

Pronunciation: /ˌfæstɪdiəs/

International Phonetic Alphabet: /ˌfæstɪdiəs/

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the hindu businessline.

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Questionable rationale

Proposed 8th Pay panel could skew economy, fisc

The Centre has cleared the setting up of the eighth Central Pay Commission (CPC) for its government employees, whose proposals are expected to come into effect from January 1, 2026. The 10-year term of the seventh pay panel ends in December this year. The exercise can be evaluated from two standpoints: the *raison d'être* for a pay panel (which is not a statutory body) when salaries are periodically revised, anyway; and its economic and fiscal impacts. If the pay panel is indeed to raise salaries, it could do so without drastically disturbing the fiscal balance.



At the outset there are logistical challenges. The seventh CPC was set up in February 2014 and submitted its report in November 2015. Its implementation began about six months after the due date of January 1, 2016. In the present case, the panel is yet to be actually constituted, and there is less than a year to go. This could increase the arrears to be paid. But above all, it is worth asking why the basic salary structure would be subject to big revisions (a multiple or 'fitment factor' of 2.57-2.8 was applicable to the basic pay of salaries and pensioners under the seventh CPC), when an assured rise in pay as well as DA adjustment for inflation is built into the salary structure. It would be safe to assume an annual increase of at least ₹1 lakh crore in the salary bill of the Centre on account of ongoing CPC. Of the total annual salary and pension outgo of about ₹4 lakh crore towards central government employees, this is not a small sum. The impact on the fiscal deficit cannot be under-estimated. The annual additional sum can increase under a new pay panel unless the fitment factor is reduced. There would be second-order effects in terms of salary scales of bank employees and teaching staff, besides the State government employees – widening the gap between the organised sector and the rest of the workforce.

Indeed, there can be no rationale for such sharp increases for less than 10 per cent of the organised workforce (estimated at 50 lakh staff and about 65 lakh pensioners). In fact, valid, even if stereotypical, questions can be asked about the performance and accountability of the bureaucracy. The argument of parity with private sector to retain talent does not hold, as a government job promises an assured income stream with pension and non-monetary benefits.

The fitment factor should be moderate and constant across the hierarchy, rather than rising with it. For that matter, even a merger of DA and basic pay when the former crosses a certain threshold will result in a handsome increase in allowances, without its denting the finances as much as an onerous multiple would. Modest raises will allow the Centre more fiscal room to fill vacancies in critical departments, estimated at one in every five posts. Finally, large salary increases could be more inflationary than growth-enhancing, if the supply of goods and services does not keep pace.

OTHER VOICES.

The Guardian

Trump's first days: the overload is intentional

Waiting for Donald Trump's inauguration on Monday was like watching a tsunami gather force. Everyone could see the threat approaching. But its scale was still shocking as it loomed, and what damage it wreaks will ultimately take months and years to determine. The deluge is intentional. For supporters, there is a sense of unleashed chaos, almost messianic energy – setting the US on a path to national destiny which might take in Greenland, Panama and ultimately Mars. This time Mr Trump has an electoral mandate, a compliant team with a ready agenda, the obsequiousness of billionaires who command the attention economy, and a compliant supreme court which has already granted the president extraordinary power. He aspires to the role of a monarch. The flood of executive orders, pardons and pronouncements is intended to overwhelm and intimidate, but also to disorientate opponents.

言實新聞
THE YOMIURI SHIMBUN

Rate Hike: Central Bank Should Examine Impact

With the additional interest rate hike by the Bank of Japan, the Japanese economy is set to reach a level of interest rates that the nation has not seen for a long time. It is crucial for the BOJ to proceed with the operation of its future monetary policy by thoroughly scrutinizing the impact of rate hikes on households and companies. The BOJ has decided to raise its key policy interest rate by 0.25 percentage points to around 0.5%. This is the first rate hike since July last year and takes the rate to its highest level in about 17 years. Despite signs of weakness in consumer spending, the Japanese economy has continued to recover moderately. There is also a growing possibility that high-level wage increases will be realized in this year's shunto spring wage negotiations.



GURBACHAN SINGH

We have seen a correction of more than 10 per cent in the stock market in India in the last four months. However, overall, in the last 4-5 years, there has been a big pull factor in the stock market. There has also been a long-term pull of the debt and liquid funds that are available.

But the story does not end there. There is also a somewhat ongoing push factor from banks. It is interesting that both the pull-factor and the push factor are, in part, policy-induced. And, it all contributes to the making of a K-shaped economy; some parts of the economy grow fast while the growth rate for others comes down.

It is all not just about shifting asset preferences. The overall high returns in the stock market over the last few years are partly cyclical and overdone but there is more to the story. The economic policies have favoured the corporations and the stock market.

These policies include, *inter alia*, reduction in the corporate tax rate, higher tariff and non-tariff barriers that protect the domestic industry, and considerable public spending which tends to favour the corporate sector rather than the small businesses.

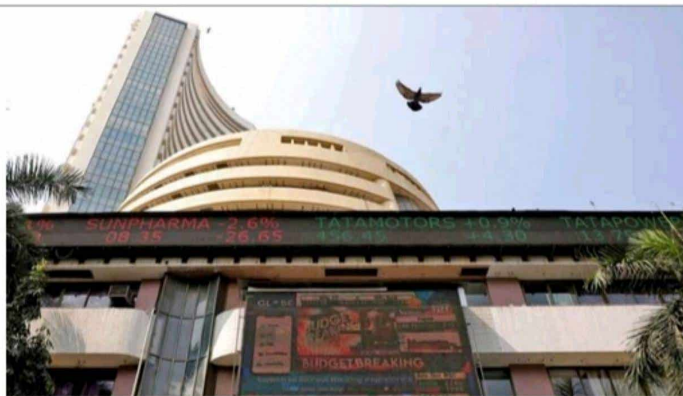
STOCK MARKET PULL

The pull of the stock market is "naturally" strong. Consider next the push factor from banks. With more than 5 per cent inflation, the real returns on savings accounts are less than minus 1-2 per cent. The real returns on current accounts are less than minus 5 per cent in India!

The real interest rates on fixed deposits are better but only relatively so. The post-tax returns become unpalatable — more so as the tax is imposed on the entire nominal gains, and not just on the real gains.

Even after accounting for the "free" services that banks provide, the post-tax and inflation-adjusted returns are extremely low. An important reason for the low returns on money in banks is that the public sector banks (PSBs) are often inefficient. Though their non-performing assets (NPAs) seem to be under control in the last few years, the long-term record is very different. In any case, their long-term operational costs are high. And, even though they get recapitalised now and then, they charge high interest from borrowers and pay low interest on deposits.

Given this "competition" from PSBs, and hardly any new licenses for new banks, the existing private banks are complacent but they are relatively



Why banks are losing out to stock market

REAL CONCERNS. Low growth of new bank deposits impacts MSME credit, consumption

efficient. However, the benefit of this relative efficiency is passed on mainly as sustained high profits; that benefit hardly goes to depositors of the private banks (or their borrowers)! This is true even after adjusting for the relatively better services.

So, there is a push factor for depositors even from private banks. This operates alongside the pull factor from the stock market.

LOW DEPOSIT GROWTH

Consequently, the rate of growth of new bank deposits is well below the rate of growth of fund inflows into the stock market. Given the relatively low growth of deposits, the long-term growth rate of bank credit is, in the final analysis, relatively low — in the banking sector as a whole. This does not affect big businesses much; in fact, the push factor and the pull factor makes financing easier for them.

But the micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) are affected. The relatively low credit from banks to MSMEs affects their business as well as their employment. There is also an

The taxes that work against bank deposits need to be amended. PSBs need to be privatised appropriately.

adverse effect of low credit on consumption smoothing, housing finance, student loans, farm loans, etc; all this is particularly true as the well-off get less loans.

Ironically, the PSBs are an important part of the problem in banking — more so as they are the reason for "profits on a platter" for the private banks and even non-bank finance companies. This is not a statement on the bankers involved. But the PSBs do need to be privatised.

Of course, the privatisation needs to be at the right price, and to the right buyers. Also, the sale proceeds need to be reinvested and not consumed.

Finally, the "social regulation" (besides the prudential regulation) of banks needs to be improved. All this can reduce the push factor. The push factor from banks is also because banks need to invest at least 18 per cent of their deposits in approved (read, government) securities under the statutory liquidity "regulation" (SLR). The return on these securities is significantly less than that on bank loans.

Also, banks need to observe a 4 per cent cash reserve ratio (CRR). The return on these reserves is zero! Accordingly, returns for depositors get reduced and interest costs for borrowers get higher.

Some observers feel that the shift from bank deposits to the stock market will not last long, given the high

valuations in, say, the Nifty 50 and other indices. But it is all relative. The future returns on stocks can get lower but they may still beat the returns on bank deposits in the long term and even the medium term; this is particularly true after considering taxation.

This is not defending valuations in the stock market; it is highlighting the far-reaching implications of the policy towards banking.

Overall, we need several changes in policy. The bias in, among others, taxation, trade policy, and public spending that favours of the corporate sector needs to go.

The taxes that work against bank deposits need to be amended. PSBs need to be privatised appropriately. Bank licensing needs to be liberalised gradually. Charges for services that banks provide need to be explicit.

The high CRR and SLR need to be phased out. Changes have been suggested here for some policies that have come up after a change in the central government in 2014, and for some policies that have been around for a long time. These policy changes will pave the way to reducing both the pull of the stock market and the push from banks. This will, in turn, contribute to reducing the tendency towards a K-shaped economy.

The writer is an independent economist. He taught previously at Ashoka University, ISI (Delhi) and JNU

Trump fires immigration salvo, as expected

New Delhi will have to carefully verify that the illegals returning from US are bonafide Indians

Sridhar Krishnaswami

The speed with which US President Donald Trump is going about fulfilling his promises on the immigration front should come as no surprise. And it goes much beyond humoring his Make America Great Again (MAGA) crowd. He has stuck to his promise of ridding the Birthright Citizenship even if temporarily halted by a federal judge as being "blatantly unconstitutional". And sooner or later he will set his sights on the H-1B visas under the guise of reforming the high skills programme.

The 47th President does not care what friends, allies and adversaries have to say. And the more one protests on immigration, the tougher the response will be like sending additional troops to the border or speeding up deportation orders of those granted temporary relief by the Biden administration. Various studies have shown that there are about 12 million illegals in America; but Trump puts the figure closer to 25 million.

Mexico may account for about one-third of the illegals in America with about four million and heads the pack. India is not too far behind with about a

6.5 per cent share or in the range of 725,000 to 750,000. It is believed that about 50 per cent of Asian descent illegals in the US are from India.

INDIAN ILLEGALS

In the immediate context it is reported that some 18,000 illegal Indian migrants have been identified and steps are underway to send them back home even as Washington has demurred of India being uncooperative.

New Delhi has maintained that it has always been open to the "legitimate return" of undocumented Indians, a point that was reiterated during the recent visit of the External Affairs Minister to Washington for the Presidential inauguration.

The point that the US would have to understand is that the return of 18,000 may be a first step but India will have to be doubly careful in making sure that the returnees are indeed Indian citizens without any room for undesirables and terrorists getting travel papers waving bogus documents procured in India or elsewhere looking for legitimate entry.

Ending birthright citizenship as Trump has vowed is a far more difficult process than issuing an Executive order as the President has just seen. As many



US President Donald Trump holds a graph on illegal immigration (file photo) REUTERS

as 22 States have challenged the order, an issue that may well work its way up to the Supreme Court.

Or it remains to be seen if Trump has the legislative wherewithal to change the constitution to undo the 14th amendment. Essentially Trump has been making the point that he wants to end "birth tourism" for an American passport or illegals finding a pathway to permanent residency and citizenship through their children born in America.

THE BACKLOG

The impending crisis on birthright citizenship is not just confined to the

illegals; also those on temporary visas. The backlog for permanent residency being what it is (at times upwards of 100 years), the categorization as parents of "immediate relatives" which would have accelerated the process will now perhaps not be available if Trump has his way.

Indian American law makers and civil rights activists have been sharply critical of efforts to get rid of birthright citizenship; but the far right within the MAGA and outside are equally determined to see the passage of this measure.

Trump has consistently supported the H-1B high skills visa not because his "best" friend Elon Musk is behind it; but because he understands the value of such visas and the benefits they bring to America.

But one can safely expect reforms to the H-1B with quality of skill flow and on the salaries front as well. And in the overhaul of the immigration system, the L-1 (Intra-Company transfer) and the B-1 (for business trips combined with tourism as a B-1/B-2) visas will also merit attention.

The writer is a senior journalist who has reported from Washington DC on North America and United Nations

● BELOW THE LINE



Bollywood actor Saif Ali Khan REUTERS

Less than equal

Bollywood actor Saif Ali Khan's health insurance claim just did what Bollywood does best — drama, suspense, and a big twist! The actor claimed ₹35.95 lakh for his medical treatment, but his insurer, Niva Bupa, approved only ₹26 lakh. Netizens saw

the script unfolding and went full masala mode, slamming insurers for their "celebs vs common man" disparity.

While Saif's claim mostly got through, the middle class gets stuck in rejections, delays, and frustrating fee print. Add skyrocketing premiums for senior citizens, and you have a perfect recipe for financial heartburn.

Patras: Sankalp vs Juma

Election season is here, and so is the battle of manifestos — or should we say marketing brochures! The BJP's "Sankalp Patra" has landed, promising a cleaner Yamuna, land rights for unauthorized colonies, and welfare for gig workers. But AAP has

given it a new name: "Juma Patra" — claiming it's nothing more than a repackaged version of their own policies. With two weeks to go, the political punches are flying. AAP's Manish Sisodia argues that BJP promises signal a preemptive surrender, while BJP insists they're a roadmap for progress. But Delhi voters know the drill — manifestos make headlines, but execution wins elections.

Digestion problems

A tongue-in-cheek campaign by the Telangana Congress triggered an animated social media battle between the ruling party and the Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS). The Congress ad campaign

mimicked an 'Eno' indigestion relief advertisement, featuring images of BRS President Chandrashekar Rao and his son, KT Rama Rao, the party's working president.

The ad suggested the two were experiencing indigestion after witnessing the success of Telangana Congress chief Revanth Reddy at the recent World Economic Forum (WEF) meeting in Davos. Reddy's team secured deals worth ₹1.78 lakh crore at the annual WEF conference.

Aromatic brand

SRIL, Ltd, parent to India Gate Basmati Rice, announced its partnership with legendary actor Amitabh Bachchan as the brand ambassador. According to KRBL,

"This iconic collaboration brings together two household names, both synonymous with excellence, trust, and a legacy of authenticity." Bachchan shared, "India Gate Basmati Rice is not just a brand; it's a legacy that has been a part of Indian households for generations. I am delighted to be associated with KRBL, a company that has consistently upheld the highest standards of quality and innovation. I look forward to being part of this journey, celebrating the authenticity and traditions that make every meal so special." But earlier he was endorsing LT Foods flagship rice brand, Daawat.

Our Bureaus



The Free Press Journal

Founder Editor: S Sadanand

Deny impunity

Tahawwur Rana, the Pakistan-origin Canadian citizen who stands accused of involvement in the 2008 terror attack in Mumbai, the 26/11 atrocity, is finally bound for India, with the United States Supreme Court rejecting a final appeal against his extradition. It has been a long saga, though. The legal and diplomatic process of bringing Rana to India to finally be tried for his role in organising and facilitating the Mumbai terrorist attack has been protracted. It was in 2010 that the Indian government approached the US authorities for the extradition. After a number of legal challenges, the extradition came after Rana had to face legal proceedings in the United States as well. Rana, let us recall, was a key conspirator who worked with David Coleman Headley, a US citizen who travelled frequently to Pakistan, becoming a cog in the Lashkar-e-Taiba terror machine, beginning his illegal activities by involving himself in narcotics smuggling. Headley, who had a Pakistan-origin father, was prosecuted both by the US authorities and, remotely, by India, was sentenced in 2013 to 35 years in prison. Indian authorities will be buoyed by this extradition, not only because Rana will be available to face the consequences of his actions, but also because this creates a precedent that will help New Delhi pursue other individuals who pursue activities inimical to India's security. Of late, of course, we have seen several skirmishes between India and both Washington and Ottawa in connection with malcontents of several shades, who endanger Indian security interests. Indian authorities are adamant that the United States and Canada, especially, have a duty to prevent groups from engaging in anti-Indian activities on their territory.

It's not a question of inimical activities of the violent kind that requires diplomatic and legal cooperation. In other words, the US, Canada and other countries ought to take much more seriously India's interests and sensitivities as far as economic offences are concerned. There is a long list of people accused of serious financial crimes who are held up outside India and are, thus, unavailable for prosecution. The who's who includes Vijay Malviya, Nisar Modi, and Mehul Choksi. Alongside them are gangsters of various hues: Anmol Bishnoi, brother of incarcerated public enemy Lawrence Bishnoi, Goldy Brar, and Arshdeep Singh Gill. Rana's extradition will encourage New Delhi to pursue more vigorously either the extradition or prosecution of those who have harmed or are harming India's security interests, including in the financial arena. Until India gets eminently greater satisfaction from the West in this regard, we are left to mull the irony of terrorists enjoying their liberty in the bastions of democracy, secure in the belief that they enjoy impenetrable impunity.

States of exception

The Madhya Pradesh High Court issued a welcome warning to the state authorities last week, asking the chief secretary to let district officers know the 'meaning and intent' of the National Security Act (NSA) so that they don't issue orders 'under political pressure and without application of mind'. It quashed an extorted order passed by the collector of Burhanpur district and imposed costs, while noting that the order was against the letter and spirit of the NSA, which is a preventive-detention law meant to be used in 'states of exception'. In other words, it allows the central government and its counterparts in the states to act against a person, usually by means of detention, with the object of preventing him or her from carrying out actions that would be prejudicial to public order. It belongs broadly to the class of laws that are meant to deal with exceptional situations, which includes the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act and Section 152 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, which provides governments the power to act against individuals who threaten the sovereignty, unity and integrity of India. Though these legislative weapons are usually used to apprehend individuals who have committed acts threatening the sovereignty of the nation-state, they can also be used perversely. Which means that their use creates a state of exception to the normal functioning of the political system, much like the use of the Emergency provisions of the Constitution. Given that, as the Madhya Pradesh High Court has indicated, extreme caution must be exercised before pulling these arrows out of the executive quiver. Since untrammelled power is a perfect recipe for misuse and arbitrariness, it is the duty of the judiciary to keep even the hint of excess on the part of the executive in check. We must locate this discussion in a historical context. The circumstances in which India became independent - we must remember the savage violence of the Partition and the chaos attendant on what amounted almost to a 'transfer of populations' - encouraged the drafters of the Constitution to provide for many provisions that were potentially draconian.

R.R. Ambedkar himself expressed the conviction that wielders of executive authority would act in good faith in respect of exceptional laws. This good faith has frequently been abused, at no time more than during the two odd years of Mrs. Gandhi's Emergency and in the past decade or so, when we have been labouring under what amounts to an undeclared Emergency. In this situation, it is up to the judiciary, especially at the higher levels, to check the executive. Whenever there is a conflict between the fundamental rights of citizens and the exigencies of the state, it must examine thoroughly the exceptionality of the situation.

The Road Ahead

JAYAPRAKASH NARAYAN

January 26, 2025 marks the completion of 75 years of our Republic. By the time this column is published, we would have celebrated the Republic Day with customary pomp and ceremony. In the life of a nation of 5000 years of continuing civilisation, 75 years is not very long. However, this is a good occasion to reflect on our Republic, rejoice in our strengths and successes, and resolve to overcome our weaknesses.

By any standards, India is an extraordinary republic. Never before was a republic created with such diversity of language, religion, region and caste. That we have 22 officially recognised languages, each with rich history, culture and literature, and yet we harmoniously forged a republic is nothing short of a miracle. Until our audacious, no nation introduced universal adult franchise since the inception of a republic. Britain, after centuries of democratic practice, finally had universal franchise only in 1928. The U.S., the first republic with a written Constitution and separation of powers, introduced universal franchise in 1920, 131 years after the founding of the

republic, and the Black people could exercise the right to vote only in 1964, 175 years after the Constitution came into effect. Our leaders welded a most unlikely nation and a republic and trusted future generations to exercise our freedoms wisely despite our diversity, mass poverty, illiteracy, and lack of any kind of democratic experience for about 1000 years of the village self-government during the Chola period.

In many ways, our republican democracy triumphed against all odds, proving many sceptics wrong. We endured as a united, strong nation despite our diversity. With all flaws, our freedoms are intact, and we conduct periodic elections and power is transferred peacefully. Our key institutions withstood vicissitudes of our democracy and, despite occasional lapses, served us well. The nation achieved moderate progress. Our states are stronger than ever before, and federalism has become more real and robust over the years. The nation is slowly regaining its self-confidence and is making valiant attempts to end poverty and promote prosperity.

However, in the course of these 75 years, we have seen many distor-

tions and failings. Our political parties have mostly become personal fiefdoms and family estates undermining democracy. Our elections, while free and fair, and noisy and competitive, have increasingly become auctions for public office. Vast amount of money is distributed to induce voters during elections, and reckless promises are made for short-term individual welfare at the cost of long-term public good, largely condemning people to perpetual poverty, instead of promoting real opportunities for upward mobility. Our rule of law is in shambles. Justice is delayed and denied, and might has become right. Abuse of public office for private gain has become endemic, and corruption has become integral to our daily lives. Power is highly centralised, and local governments are mostly ceremonial and inconsequential. People are not allowed to perceive the links between votes and public good and between taxes and services and, therefore, are induced to vote for money or short-term welfare promises. Our successes should make us proud and give us confidence in the future. Our failing should wake us out of our compla-

cency and strengthen our resolve to make our republic stronger and our democracy more robust.

Dr. Ambedkar, in his final speech in the Constituent Assembly on November 25, 1949, cautioned us about the pitfalls. This is a good time to reflect on his admonitions and take corrective action as a nation. Ambedkar wisely admonished us to be blind in loyalty to political parties ignoring national interest and public good: "The factors on which the working of the organs of the State depends are the people and the political parties they will set up as their instruments to carry out their wishes and their politics. ... if the parties place (political) creed above country, our independence will be in jeopardy."

Our parties largely function as warring tribes, and often long-term public good and collective national interest are in jeopardy at the altar of short-term electoral gain.

Second, Ambedkar argued that we need to maintain democracy not merely in form but also in fact: "... we must hold fast to constitutional methods of achieving our social and economic objectives... it means we must abandon the methods of civil disobedience, non-

cooperation and satyagraha. ... Where constitutional methods are open, there can be no justification for unconstitutional methods. These methods are nothing but the Grammar of Anarchy and the sooner they are abandoned, the better for us."

Our methods of organisation and protest have not improved, and we continue to be addicted to the "Grammar of Anarchy". Dr. Ambedkar cautioned against hero-worship and slavish loyalty in politics:

"... hero-worship plays a part in our politics, unequalled in magnitude by the part it plays in the politics of any other country in the world. Bhakti in religion may be a road to the salvation of the soul. But in politics, ... hero-worship is a sure road to degradation and to eventual dictatorship."

Finally, Ambedkar reminded us that political democracy cannot last unless there is social democracy, a recognition that all human beings are equal and are entitled to dignity and opportunity.

The author is the founder of Lak Satta movement and Foundation for Democratic Reforms. Email: dipikaakatta@gmail.com / Twitter @jp_sakatta



Guest Column

K.S. TOMAR

Trump's decision to deport illegal immigrants will have serious implications for India and other nations

While many Latin American immigrants are associated with illegal border crossings, majority of undocumented Indians have overstayed their visas

Donald Trump's presidency reignited a deeply polarised debate on illegal immigration, with deportation of millions of undocumented immigrants at its core. Among these, around 500,000 Indian nationals, who entered the U.S. legally but overstayed their visas, represent a significant group. This distinction sets them apart from other immigrant populations, particularly those from Latin America, who are often associated with illegal border crossings. The mass deportation policy proposed by Trump's administration, which targets millions of undocumented immigrants, social, and diplomatic implications for both the U.S. and India.

The Complex Nature of Undocumented Immigration: The undocumented immigrant population in the U.S. is diverse, including individuals from Mexico, Central America, India, China, and the Philippines. While many Latin American immigrants are associated with illegal border crossings, the majority of undocumented Indians have overstayed their visas. This distinction complicates the broader immigration debate, emphasizing the need for nuanced discussions about the different ways people arrive in the U.S. without documentation. Indian nationals are not part of the same narrative as migrants crossing the U.S.-Mexico border, and this complexity must be considered in policy-making.

India's Response and Preparedness: India must prepare for the challenges posed by the sudden return of a large number of deportees. The Indian government needs to focus on reintegration programs to help returning migrants find employment in a strained labor market. Without these programs, deported individuals may face economic marginalization, leading to long-term social issues.

States in India with high migration rates, such as Punjab, Gujarat, and Kerala, would be most impacted by the loss of remittance income. In 2022, Indian immigrants in the U.S. sent home approximately \$12 billion in remittances, a crucial source of income for families and local economies. The deportation of a significant portion of this population would strain rural economies, which are highly dependent on these funds.

Economic Impact on India: The economic consequences of mass deportations would be immediate and severe. In addition to the loss of remittance income, undocumented Indians are highly skilled professionals, including engineers, doctors, and IT experts. These individuals, who have contributed to the U.S. economy, would return to India, potentially exacerbating issues of unemployment and underemployment in sectors like information technology (IT), where India already faces workforce saturation.

India's labor market may struggle to absorb these skilled workers, leading to increased competition for jobs and a pool of underutilized talent. This could impede India's economic growth and technological advancement. The IT sector, which has long been a global leader, could be particularly affected by the return of these skilled workers, limiting India's ability to maintain its competitive edge in the global economy.

Social and Humanitarian Challenges: Beyond economic consequences, the social impact of mass deportations would be profound. Many deported individuals have U.S.-born children who are citizens. These children would face complex legal and social situations, as they may be left behind or forced to return to India. The disruption to their lives could be devastating, particularly for children who have grown up in the U.S. and have little to no connection with India.

Moreover, deported individuals would face significant challenges reintegrating into Indian society. The deportations would also disproportionately affect women and children, who may lack support networks in India, deepening gender inequalities and social tensions in already marginalized communities.

Diplomatic Strain and U.S.-India Relations: The mass depor-

ation of Indian nationals could strain U.S.-India relations, which have traditionally been strong due to shared economic, strategic, and defense interests. India would likely engage in high-level diplomatic talks, seeking to adopt a more measured and phased approach to deportations. India could push for reforms that would allow undocumented individuals to regularize their immigration status, rather than face deportation.

Additionally, India could advocate for more flexible visa policies, particularly for skilled workers in sectors like technology and healthcare, to protect its economic interests and ensure that the U.S. remains an attractive destination for Indian labor. If the U.S. becomes less welcoming to skilled Indian professionals, they may seek opportunities elsewhere, redirecting global talent flows to countries like Canada, the U.K., or Australia. This shift could have long-term consequences on the U.S.'s ability to attract and retain high-quality human capital, undermining its global competitive position.

Challenges in Policy Implementation: Although the Trump administration's immigration policies are aggressive, they face significant challenges in implementation. One major obstacle is the backlog of immigration cases in U.S. courts, which currently stands at over 1.8 million cases. This

backlog could delay deportations and lead to legal complications, prolonging uncertainty for undocumented immigrants.

Moreover, the financial cost of mass deportations is substantial. Each deportation is estimated to cost the U.S. government around \$10,854 per individual.

States and cities that support sanctuary policies may resist federal enforcement, leading to jurisdictional conflicts and escalating legal challenges.

Economic Consequences for the U.S.: The U.S. economy relies heavily on immigrant labor, particularly in sectors like agriculture, construction, and hospitality. Undocumented workers fill essential roles in these industries, and their removal could result in labor shortages, disrupting productivity and straining supply chains. According to the Congressional Budget Office, the U.S. economy could lose up to \$16 trillion in GDP over the next two decades if mass deportations occur.

The Trump administration's approach to immigration includes several key elements:

Mass Deportations: The U.S. would target millions of undocumented immigrants, regardless of how they arrived, including those who overstayed their visas.

(Writer is strategic affairs columnist and senior political analyst)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A clarification call

Effective January 22, 2025, USCIS waives any and all requirements that applicants for adjustment of status to that of a lawful permanent resident present documentation on their Form I-485. Report of Immigration Medical Examination and Vaccination Record, that they received the COVID-19 vaccination. There was no scientific basis for such requirements.

CK Ramani, Trichy

Credibility

Judicial interventions transferring major cases like the Kallakurichi tragedy and Anna University assault to the CBI expose a trust deficit in Nadi's police. Repeated setbacks in court highlight systemic flaws. The government must urgently reform law enforcement, enhance professionalism, and rebuild public trust to restore the credibility of the state's policing and governance.

Gopalaswamy J, Mysore Chennai

Rana's extradition

Rana's extradition is a significant win for India. The US SC has rightfully cleared the way for his deportation after years of persistent efforts. Tahawwur Rana, who holds crucial knowledge about the terror conspiracy, will now face justice. This is a game-changing victory for India in its fight against terrorism.

P.V. Prakash, Mumbai

Trump is right

It is wrong for Trump to bring in laws denying birth right to children of non-Americans born in the US? Is he wrong in deporting illegal immigrants? Do we allow such things to happen in our country? Allowing asylum seekers to naturalise in America is a disservice, mainly on humanitarian grounds is totally a different story.

Tharicus S.Fernando, Virugabakkam, Chennai

Attack on Saif

There are conflicting reports in the newspapers every day about the knife attack on Saif and the incidents that occurred in connection

with it. This topic is also being discussed a lot on social media. While reading this, it seems that there are many confusing aspects of the information disseminated in the media.

Ravindra Bhagwat, Kalyan (W)

Waqf Aet

The JPC on the Waqf Amendment Bill seeks to take the freedom to give its views on it. The discretionary power proposed in the bill to the collector to decide on any waqf land as government land, is seen as unreasonable by the opposition MPs. The bill needs to be put through thorough discussions and debates by the JPC.

Ravindra P.R., Hyderabad

Spicy news

Following a directive from the FSSAI, 'Patanjali' has recalled four tonnes of 200 gm red chilli powder packs from the market. On testing, the product samples were found to have contained pesticide residue far above the permissible limit. During the launch of the product, Baba Ramdev had claimed that the com-

pany used only natural ingredients, unlike his competitors.

P.G. Menon, Chennai

R-Day motto

The real Republic Day motto should be: Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan, Jai Aam, Jai Jan, Jai Sam, Jai All. Jai Jawan, via only satellite patrolling of the border areas. Have pacts with Pak and China on this. Jai Kisan, through a dialogue between farmers and the government; and Jai Aam, that is, peace, prosperity and progress for all.

PV Madhu Nirviti, Secunderabad

Davos meet

The team that attended the Davos WEF needs to be investigated. Suspicions that these are foreign jaunts at the taxpayers' expense cannot be ignored. The opposition is right in calling them mere optics, as Mantrala is just a stone's throw away from the corporate offices of the entities the government has signed the agreements with!

Anthony Henriquez, Mumbai

Subianto visit

The recent visit of Indonesian President Prabowo Su-



Respect to the tricolour

It is the duty of every citizen of India to show respect to the national flag. Streamers made out of small national flags are often used for decorative purposes on Independence Day and Republic Day. But over the celebrations get once, one finds

these flags being trampled upon on the streets or thrown into dustbins. This is an insult to the tricolour. Any display of the national flag must be in strict adherence to the flag code of India. The Centre and the State administrations should ensure this.

Jubel D'Cruz, Mumbai

lanto to India raises critical questions. Can this visit catalyse a substantial increase in bilateral trade? How will both nations address the geopolitical pressures from China while enhancing their

strategic partnership? Also, what steps will be taken to deepen defence cooperation and maritime security in the Indo-Pacific?

Anshu Bharti, Begusar, Bihar

WHAT IT INVESTORS CAN LEARN FROM REAL MADRID

Results from the December quarter suggest that a 'buy-at-any-price' strategy can result only in dismay

Abhishek Mukherjee
abhishek.mukherjee@livermint.com
NEW DELHI

Waiting is one of life's hardships.
—Lemony Snicket
9 March 2006.
Arsenal Stadium,
Highbury, north London.

The home crowd erupted in ecstasy as the referee blew the full-time whistle. The 30,000-odd Arsenal supporters, as well as millions of football fans across the world, had just witnessed an astounding denouement in global football.

The mighty Real Madrid had been sent packing out of Champions League's Round of 16 for the second straight year. And not just any Real Madrid team. It was the 'Galacticos'—a shining lineup of football's global superstars—Zinedine Zidane, David Beckham, Roberto Carlos, Ronaldo and Raul.

Few years back, Real Madrid's larger-than-life president Florentino Pérez had embarked on his audacious Galacticos project—sign the world's best (and most expensive) players for eye-popping fees. No questions asked.

Pérez bought Portuguese star Luis Figo in July 2000 for €62 million, a world-record transfer fee at that time. Pérez broke the record the very next year by signing Zidane for an astounding €73.5 million. Ronaldo, Beckham, Robinho and others too were recruited for head-spinning amounts over the following years.

However, the results of this policy were far from spectacular.

From the 2003-04 season to 2005-06, Real Madrid did not win a single trophy. The players and team management were regularly hounded by the press. The fans spiralled into existential anguish.

After a string of humiliating defeats, Pérez resigned in 2006. And not for the last time, the 'buy-at-any-price' strategy came to an ignominious end.

Does the Galacticos era hold any lessons for the millions of investors in India's IT services giants?

EARNINGS VS EXPECTATIONS

The December quarter (Q3) is a traditionally weak quarter for the country's IT services providers due to seasonal furloughs and lower number of working days in their bread-and-butter markets of the US and Europe. Even then, the Q3 showing by the large-cap IT companies have collectively sent out a warning plume of smoke.

The largest IT services company, Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), posted its worst Q3 revenue decline since December 2015. Q3 FY25 revenue of \$7.54 billion was down 1.7% from the September quarter. This was also its worst quarterly revenue performance since K. Krithivasan took over as chief executive officer (CEO) in June 2023.

The key reason was weakness in its two major geographies—US and Europe—which account for around 78% of its top line. Revenue from its largest market US shrank 1.5% sequentially (and 2.4% year-on-year). Nearly all verticals posted a decline, led by healthcare, manufacturing and BFSI.

Its Bengaluru-based peer, Infosys, clocked a revenue growth of 0.9% in dollar terms, beating analyst estimates. However, it was optically a bit misleading.

"The entire beat was led by higher revenue from sale of third-party items bought for service delivery to clients that contributed incremental USD 78 mn to revenue versus reported incremental revenue for the quarter of USD 45 mn," analysts at Kotak Institutional Equities said in a note.

On similar lines, HCL Technologies reported a 2.5% sequential growth in revenue at \$3.53 billion, but this was boosted by one-month inorganic contribution from its acquisition of the assets of Communications Technology Group (CTG) from Hewlett Packard Enterprise (HPE), completed in December 2024.

Wipro's Q3 revenue dropped 1.2% to \$2.6 billion, while Tech Mahindra saw its top line decline 1.3% sequentially to \$1.56 billion.

"While large-cap IT firms' top line growth continued to be lacklustre, commentary on technology spends has improved in key geographies and verticals such as BFSI banking, financial services and insurance," Christy Mathai, fund manager—equity Quantum Mutual Fund, told *Mint*. "Deal total contract values (TCV) have seen an uptick in some cases and there is a possibility of better revenue conversion, going forward. Margins have

Trump's pro-business policies could stimulate US corporate spending, benefiting Indian IT companies. But any tightening of the H-1B visa regime may pose challenges.



A file photo of an Infosys Development Centre, Kolkata.

improved for the majority of players on expected lines driven by utilization improvement and employee base optimizations," he added.

Net profits too were healthy across the board, propelled by the strong margins. TCS's earnings before interest and taxes (Ebit) margin increased 40 basis points (bps) quarter-on-quarter to 24.5%, but was still below its aspirational range of 26%—28%, while that of HCL Tech climbed 90 bps to 19.5%.

One basis point is one-hundredth of a percentage point.

Wipro's Ebit margin improvement of 70 bps to 17.5% was particularly impressive as it had rolled out salary hikes effective 1 September 2024. The company highlighted that margins in Q4 may be in a similar range as in Q3.

That said, one of the key growth levers of IT companies was a mixed bag at best.

DEAL WITH IT

While companies reported robust deal wins, the lack of mega deals combined with client-specific ramp downs have spooked the market.

TCS's deal TCV at \$10.2 billion, up 25% year-on-year, was impressive, though there was an absence of "mega deals". The management said deal cycle reduction indicates improved decision-making by clients.

But since its mega-deal with BSNL (TCS signed a US\$5,000-crore deal with BSNL in 2023 to set up 4G sites and data centers across India) in the domestic market is 70% completed, analysts expect the impact to be felt from the March quarter (Q4) onwards.

On the other hand, Infosys' TCV tumbled 22% on-year to \$2.5 billion.

"Number of large deals declined to 17, lower than the average in the past 4-5 years. New deal TCV increased sharply, up 57% q-o-q. However, we do note that renewal TCV of USD 2.5 mn declined 36% q-o-q and 2% y-o-y. It is difficult to assess the reason for moderation in renewal TCV," Kotak Institutional Equities stated.

The company increased its FY25 guid-

dance by 50 bps at the higher end and 75 bps at the lower end.

"This suggests that recovery is still away in the medium term. The North America market has shown some improvement in Q3, but we need to see sustained long-term growth here.

Large deal wins were steady in Q3 but annual guidance suggests that there would be a dip in revenue in Q4 due to continued furlough impact. Despite a rise in revenue guidance, no change in the margin band suggests incremental cost pressure, especially for employees with AI skillset (comes at a premium pay scale)," Elara Capital said in a note dated 17 January.

Wipro's deal TCV at \$3.5 billion was down 7.3% year-on-year. It has guided for (-)1% to 1% sequential revenue growth for Q4, disappointing some analysts as the upper end of the guidance implies a modest 0.6% on-year growth in constant currency terms for the March 2025 quarter.

That said, most companies said they are seeing early signs of a revival in discretionary spending in key verticals like BFSI and retail. Also, there is an increased demand for offerings related to application modernization, cloud, and data, driven by the adoption of generative AI by clients.

"From a vertical perspective...deal wins have been good in BFSI, consumer business. And in fact, in almost all verticals, there is an increase in deal wins compared to the previous quarter. From a geography perspective, Europe has one of the best deal wins," TCS CEO Krithivasan said at the company's post-earnings conference call.

The management of other companies too exuded confidence of 2025 being a better year than 2024.

But despite the multi-billion-dollar deal pipeline, early signs of demand recovery and uniformly positive management commentary, why is the market treating large-cap IT stocks with so much disdain?

VFOR VALUATION

Mispricing is often the first casualty of a raging bull market, but those who have been around for long, fondly remember a time when large-cap IT stocks used to trade at 15-20 times earnings.

WHAT

The December quarter show by large-cap IT exporters have collectively sent out a warning—three of the five top tier companies reported sequential revenue decline.

AND

In the last one year, IT stocks had rallied on the expectation of improving client environments in key geographies. Investors will now reassess lofty valuations.

NOW

Going forward, earnings growth has to pick up to justify current valuations. Investors who bought at the peak of the post-covid hype can expect correction in their portfolios.

The inflection point came at the onset of the covid-19 pandemic, when the sudden seismic shift towards digitalization turbocharged sentiment towards technology stocks the world over, including in India. The subsequent exhilaration around generative AI, machine learning and other technologies of the future led to the price-to-earnings (P/E) multiples of these IT stocks doubling compared to their pre-covid levels.

The situation was even more extreme in the mid- and small-cap IT universe, where some counters are currently priced at nose-bleed levels.

A high P/E is invisible when the party is in full swing, but when all the good news is already priced in, even a hint of trouble on the execution front can lead to a cascade of pain. Which is what happened in the aftermath of the Q3 results.

"Elevated valuations are indeed influ-

Q3 REPORT CARD

IT majors saw headwinds in revenue growth, though robust margins led to healthy profit numbers.

Key financials of IT majors

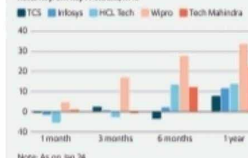
	Revenue (in \$ mn)	QoQ (% change)	Ebit margin (in %)
TCS	7,539	-1.7	24.5
Infosys	4,939	0.9	21.3
HCL Tech	3,533	2.6	19.5
Wipro	2,629	-1.2	17.5
Tech Mahindra	1,567	-1.3	10.2

Consolidated figures

Stock performance

Recent showing of the large-cap IT pack makes for a sober reading, except Wipro which is on a turnaround trajectory.

Returns from key IT stocks, in %



Note: As on Jan 24

Tech talk

The IT sector has outperformed the benchmark in the post-covid period, in tandem with tech stocks in other global markets.

Daily closing price, indexed to 100



Source: Company filings, Mint research, Bloomberg

encing the performance of large-cap IT stocks. The increase in valuations reflects heightened expectations for growth, partly due to accelerated digital adoption during the pandemic. However, as global economic conditions stabilize, the disparity between high valuations and actual earnings growth has become more pronounced," Anirudh Garg, partner and fund manager at Invasset PMS, told *Mint*.

"This misalignment has led to subdued stock performance, as investors reassess the sustainability of such valuations. The recent decline in Infosys' share price, despite an upward revision in revenue forecasts, underscores market sensitivity to earnings quality and growth prospects. Therefore, while the sector's long-term outlook remains pos-

itive, current rich valuations may continue to weigh on stock returns in the near term," he added.

Even the broader Nifty IT index may be flashing signs that the party is nearing its end.

"Nifty IT has outperformed Nifty 50 by more than 10% since our overweight stance in July/August 2024. Going into 3Q earnings, Nifty IT outperformance was -15% in December 2024 and suggests many of the positives were getting priced in," Abhishek Shindadkar, research analyst (IT), InCred Capital, told *Mint*.

The swelling of the P/E ratios of large-cap IT stocks is concerning news in itself. But combined with challenges on

TURN TO PAGE 11



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If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to explained@indianexpress.com

THIS WORD MEANS

PARAQUAT

A 24-year-old woman in Kerala has been sentenced to death for poisoning her boyfriend with paraquat

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 26

A SESSIONS court in Kerala's Thiruvananthapuram district last week awarded the death sentence to 24-year-old Greshma for murdering Sharon Raj, with whom she was in a relationship, in 2022. Greshma poisoned Sharon with a chemical herbicide called paraquat.

What is paraquat?

Paraquat, also known as paraquat dichloride or methyl viologen, is one of the most commonly used herbicides in the world. It is primarily used to control the growth of weeds and desiccate crops like cotton before harvest. Paraquat's use is banned or regulated in many countries as it is extremely toxic for humans.

How does paraquat poisoning occur?

While most poisonings occur via oral ingestion, the chemical may also be toxic upon prolonged skin contact or inhalation. According to the US Centers for Disease Control, paraquat causes direct damage when it comes into contact with the lining of the mouth, stomach, or intestines. It spreads rapidly through the body, and causes adverse reactions in the lungs, liver, and kidneys. Consuming just 1 teaspoon of paraquat can cause death, according to the website of the Cleveland Clinic.

What are the symptoms?

According to the CDC, the severity of paraquat poisoning depends on the amount consumed, the mode of consumption, and the length of exposure. Effects may be compounded further by pre-existing medical conditions. Abdominal pain, swelling and pain in the mouth, nausea, and bloody diarrhoea are immediate symptoms after consumption.

diate symptoms after consumption.

Are there treatments for paraquat poisoning?

While there are no known antidotes for paraquat poisoning, an article published in the *National Medical Journal of India* (NMJI) in 2021 suggests the use of immunosuppression or charcoal haemoperfusion as experimental treatments. The CDC suggests immediately swallowing activated charcoal or Fuller's earth (*multani mitti*), to which the chemical would stick and thus not be absorbed by the body. Hospitalisation is a must.

What are some restrictions on the use of paraquat?

In India, paraquat's use is governed by the Central Insecticides Board and Registration Committee (CIBRC), under the Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare. A 2021 notification by the Agriculture Ministry restricts its use to the following crops: wheat, rice, tea, coffee, potato, grapes, maize, rubber and apple. Paraquat may also be sprayed in certain water bodies to combat bulrush (*Typha latifolia*), water hyacinth (*Hydrilla verticillata*) and water hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*).

However, various studies and news reports have found that these regulations are not strictly followed, and farmers are often untrained on how to use the chemical safely. Many farmers, in fact, disperse the herbicide by hand, without using appropriate protective equipment. In the US, the sale of paraquat is restricted only to commercially licensed users, with a ban on personal use or use in residential areas. The chemical must be sold with a number of protections in place, such as the use of a blue dye to distinguish it from other liquids, a sharp smell, and a vomiting agent.

WHERE DID DINOSAURS FIRST APPEAR? NEW STUDY HAS SURPRISING ANSWER

DINOSAURS LONG dominated Earth's land ecosystems but their origin — precisely when and where they first appeared — remains a bit of a puzzle.

Researchers are now proposing a surprising location for the birthplace of dinosaurs. Their findings are based on the locations of the currently oldest-known dinosaur fossils, the evolutionary relationships among early forms of dinosaurs, and Earth's geography during the Triassic Period.

This locale spans the modern-day Sahara desert and Amazon rainforest regions, now separated by thousands of miles and an ocean.

"When dinosaurs first appeared in the fossil record, all the Earth's continents were

part of the giant supercontinent Pangaea. Dinosaurs emerged in the southern portion of this landmass, known as Gondwana," said Joel Heath, a researcher at University College London and lead author of the study published on Thursday in the journal *Current Biology*.

"Our research suggests they likely

originated in the low-latitude regions of Gondwana near the equator, an area that today includes northern South America and northern Africa," Heath added.

The earliest-known dinosaur fossils date to roughly 230 million years ago, including *Eoraptor* and *Herrerasaurus* from Argentina, *Saturnalia* from southern Brazil and *Milesaurus* from Zimbabwe. While sharing certain traits defining them as dinosaurs, they had sufficient differences to suggest that millions of years of dinosaur evolution had already occurred.

The researchers said dinosaurs probably emerged approximately 245-230 million years ago, when these equatorial regions were extremely hot and dry.

"Dinosaurs evolved gradually over millions of years from older, more primitive reptiles. However, we haven't yet found the transitional fossils that show how these changes happened, leaving parts of their evolutionary history a mystery," Heath said.

REUTERS



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Why Trump wants Greenland

Trump has said Denmark would be committing a 'very unfriendly act' if it did not allow the US to take over Greenland. What's behind the US President's increasingly aggressive bid for a snow-covered island?

AMITABH SINHA & YASHEE
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 26

IN HIS first remarks on Greenland after taking office, US President Donald Trump Saturday said he was sure America was "going to have it". He also said Denmark would be committing a "very unfriendly act" if it decided to not let that happen. Trump said he wanted Greenland "for the protection of the free world".

Greenland was once a Danish colony and is now an autonomous province of Denmark. It has also emerged that Trump's conversation with Denmark's Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen on this issue earlier in January turned very cold.

Frederiksen's office had then said she reiterated to Trump that Greenland was not for sale, and that it was up to the Greenlanders to decide their future. However, several European media organisations had reported that Trump had used threats during that conversation, including imposing tariffs on Danish goods coming into the US. On Saturday, the *Financial Times*, quoting sources, said Trump was aggressive and confrontational during that 45-minute conversation.

Greenland is the world's largest but sparsely populated island. Abundant in natural resources, particularly minerals critical to many future technologies, and located strategically near the emerging shipping lanes around the Arctic, it had been leading an inconspicuous existence till Trump brought it under global spotlight shortly after his election last year, saying he would like to make it a part of America, by force, if necessary.

Buying or annexing a foreign territory by force might seem like an idea totally out of place in a 21st-century world. But Trump is not exactly a conventional leader. Besides, the Greenland offer has a history that goes beyond Trump.

Trump's earlier offer

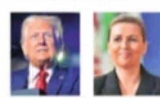
This is not the first time that Trump has expressed his desire for Greenland. He had done so during his first term as well.

In August 2019, he had cancelled a scheduled visit to Denmark apparently because Frederiksen, who was Prime Minister of Denmark then too, had turned down his offer to buy Greenland, calling it "absurd".

Trump was well into the third year of his Presidency at that time, and within a few

RED FLAG OVER GREENLAND

Trump has had a tense call with Denmark's PM



Donald Trump Mette Frederiksen

- Critical Raw Material (CRM) deposit
- Non-Critical Raw Material (CRM) deposit
- Important Occurrence

Source: Geological Survey of Denmark and Greenland, Government of Greenland, CRM as defined by EC2023.



months, the Covid-19 pandemic had pushed everything else to the back burner.

This time Trump began early, even before taking office. Within days of his public statement, his son Donald Trump Jr made a visit to Greenland earlier this month, ostensibly on a leisure trip.

In his latest remarks on the issue on Saturday, Trump said he knew the people of Greenland were in favour of joining America.

"I don't know what claim Denmark has to (the island), but it would be engaging in a very unfriendly act if they didn't allow that to happen (let America take Greenland)," he said, insisting that he wanted the island not for America but for the "free world".

"It really has to do with the freedom of the world. It has nothing to do with the United States, other than that we are the one that can provide the freedom, they (Denmark) can't," he said.

US wanted it in 1940s also

The American interest in Greenland goes much longer back in history. Way back in 1946, American officials put forward a proposal to buy Greenland from Denmark. That offer followed a 1941 agreement between the United States and Denmark over the defence of Greenland, which allowed US troops

to be based on Greenland for the first time. At that time, German forces had already taken over Denmark and there was the threat of Greenland being attacked as well.

Denmark had rejected the 1946 offer. "While we owe much to America, I do not feel that we owe them the whole island of Greenland," the then Danish foreign minister Gustav Rasmussen, to whom the offer had been made, had said.

Denmark, however, did allow the US much greater access to Greenland through several subsequent agreements. The US, thus, is not a complete outsider to Greenland. It has stakes and interests in Greenland as well as the wider Arctic region.

Renewed attempt

The 1946 offer was based on security considerations. The United States had entered Greenland in 1941 to counter potential German aggression. After the second World War, however, it wanted control of Greenland to neutralise Soviet Union influence in the Arctic region. It had mentioned the emergence of "modern weapons" to push for its case in the 1946 proposal.

Through subsequent agreements, the US not just set up military bases — including the Pituffik Space Base, earlier the Thule Air Base

— but also built a nuclear reactor and a facility to dispose of nuclear waste.

The competition with the Soviet Union, and its successor state Russia, is no longer that keen. The renewed attempt to acquire Greenland under Trump is now being seen as prompted by the desire to counter the rising influence of China in the region.

Greenland is mineral-rich, having large deposits of traditional resources like gold, nickel and cobalt, but also some of the biggest reserves of rare earth minerals like dysprosium, praseodymium, neodymium, and terbium. Of the 34 classified rare earth minerals, Greenland has about 23. It is at these that have brought the island a lot of attention, along with several prospecting mining companies.

The rare earth minerals have suddenly gained prominence because of their use in critical emerging technologies in the renewable energy sector, new military applications, and consumer electronics.

Outside of Greenland, these critical minerals are heavily concentrated in China, which controls the bulk of the global production and supply.

Crucially, China too has entered Greenland in a big way. Chinese companies are very actively involved in prospecting, mining and processing these mineral resources. Chinese companies now account for 11 per cent of the investments in the mineral sector in Greenland, just behind Australia and the United States, data from the island's mineral department shows.

The China shadow

The Chinese presence is not limited to the mineral sector in Greenland. It has also been involved in creation of new infrastructure in Greenland, aimed at facilitating greater usage of Arctic sea routes. In 2018, it released a white paper on its Arctic policy, in which it unveiled plans of creating a 'Polar Silk Road', an extension of its Belt and Road Initiative in Asia and Europe.

The United States, with its defence assets in Greenland, is of course unnerved by these developments, and has even tried to dissuade Denmark from allowing too many Chinese companies in the island.

Trump acknowledged the Chinese incursions in the area in his remarks on Saturday. "Right now, you have Russian ships, you have Chinese ships, you have ships from various countries (in the area). It is not a good situation," he said.

Why J&K is issuing 'Aadhaar' to each chinar tree

BASHAARAT MASOOD
SRINAGAR, JANUARY 26

THE JAMMU & KASHMIR government has launched an initiative for the conservation of the region's chinar trees, which have been dwindling in number over the years. The initiative involves conducting a census of chinar trees and assigning each one of them a "Tree Aadhaar" number.

What is a chinar tree?

Chinar, also known as Oriental plane tree (*Platanus orientalis*), is a maple-like tree with a huge canopy. It is found in cool climate regions with sufficient water. It takes 30 to 50 years for a chinar tree to mature and 150 years for it to reach its full size. The tree can grow up to a height of 30 metres while its girth ranges between 10 and 15 metres.

How did the tree get its name?

The name 'chinar' was given to the tree by Mughals — some suggest it was Mughal emperor Jahangir who coined the name. It is said that the term 'chinar' came into use after



Chinar trees in Srinagar. The tree's leaves turn red-gold in autumn. Shuaib Masoodi

someone witnessed crimson red chinar tree leaves from a distance during the autumn season, and shouted "Che naar ast" — a Persian phrase meaning "what flame is that?"

Why is the chinar significant?

Chinar trees, called *Buen* or *Boomin* in Kashmiri, are a major tourist attraction in the Kashmir valley during the autumn season,

when their green leaves slowly change into crimson red and gold. They also find a special place in the art, literature and craft of Kashmir — local paper mache and embroidery work, hand-woven carpets, and walnut wood carvings often feature chinar motifs.

What is the chinar conservation project?

To cut a chinar tree, the government's nod

is needed, even if the tree is on someone's private property. However, often, the trees are cut anyway. The new project aims to make sure the government can track the status of each tree.

Thus, the new initiative involves conducting a census of chinar trees across the Kashmir valley and the Chenab region. As part of the process, the government has not only enumerated chinar trees but also given a unique identity — called Tree Aadhaar — to each chinar tree. The census has been done district-wise. Each tree has been geo-tagged.

According to Dr Syed Tariq, the coordinator of the project, 28,560 chinar trees have been enumerated and geo-tagged so far. "We think the total number of chinar trees in Jammu and Kashmir is somewhere between 32,000 to 33,000. Out of these, we have tagged 28,560 trees, which are accessible," he told *The Indian Express*.

Tariq also said the authorities have started putting a metallic QR code on chinar trees. The code when scanned will provide information about the particular tree on 25 parameters. These include the longitude and latitude, age, height, girth, health, etc.

What is US birthright citizenship, how has it evolved, what is the law in India

AJOY SINHA KARPURAM
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 26

A FEDERAL judge last week temporarily blocked US President Donald Trump's executive order aimed at curtailing the right to birthright citizenship in the United States.

The development came while Seattle-based US District Judge John Coughenour was hearing a suit filed by four Democratic-led states — Washington, Arizona, Illinois, and Oregon — which had sought to block the order before it could take effect in late February. The states argued that the order was a blatant violation of the Constitution's 14th Amendment, which guarantees citizenship to all children born in US soil "and subject to the jurisdiction thereof".

Origin of birthright citizenship in the US

In 1776, when the US gained independence, citizenship was largely governed by

the laws of individual states. However, there was a common understanding that citizenship should be extended to all born within US territory.

The original US Constitution (ratified in 1788) recognised the concept of "natural born citizens" in Article 2. Although this term was not defined, the Constitution framers likely meant it to include both "jus soli" — for persons born within the country — and "jus sanguinis" — for persons born outside the country to American fathers, according to Thomas H Lee, professor at Fordham Law School (US) ("Natural Born Citizen", 2017).

However, this right was not available equally to everyone. In *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857), the US Supreme Court (SCOTUS) ruled that slaves brought to the US and their descendants could not be considered citizens. The *Dred Scott* decision was rectified in 1866 when Congress passed the 14th Amendment to the Constitution, after the American Civil War (1861-1865) ended. The

Amendment said, "All persons born or naturalised in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside." However, the Amendment did not end the debate on birthright citizenship as the phrase "subject to the jurisdiction" of the US led to some uncertainty. The SCOTUS stepped in to address this in *United States v. Wong Kim Ark* (1898).

Interpretations of the 14th Amendment

The case involved Wong Kim Ark, who was born in the US to Chinese parents and visited China on occasion. However, upon his return from one of these visits in 1890, he was denied entry under the Chinese Exclusion Act, 1882, which prohibited Chinese immigration into the US.

In its ruling, SCOTUS held that laws passed by Congress, such as the Chinese

Exclusion Act, "cannot exclude Chinese persons born in this country from the operation of the broad and clear words of the Constitution". The court also said regardless of the citizenship status of Wong's parents, he was "subject to the jurisdiction" of the US and qualified for citizenship as a child born in the country.

The court concluded that "the American citizenship which Wong Kim Ark acquired by birth within the United States and qualified for citizenship as a child born in the country."

This verdict has remained the law of the land in the US ever since and will likely act as the biggest obstacle for Trump in his efforts to end birthright citizenship. The verdict has also been reaffirmed by the SCOTUS in future decisions.

For instance, in *Hyler v. Doe* (1982), the court affirmed citizenship rights for children of undocumented immigrants, ruling that they have a right to education. It said

that according to the 14th Amendment, there was "no plausible distinction" between immigrants who entered lawfully and those who entered unlawfully as both were subject to the civil and criminal laws of the state they resided in.

Birthright citizenship in India

One of the main challenges that the framers of the Indian Constitution faced was deciding whether citizenship should be based on birth or descent. Some members of the Constituent Assembly, such as P S Deshmukh (Indian National Congress Member from Maharashtra), argued against birthright citizenship, stating that it would make "Indian citizenship the cheapest on earth".

However, other members such as BR Ambedkar and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel favoured birthright citizenship, and it was ultimately recognised in the Constitution. Article 5 of the Constitution states that every person who was born in the territory

before the commencement of the Constitution shall be a citizen of India.

Subsequently, Parliament enacted the Citizenship Act, 1955, which provided birthright citizenship under Section 3 to every person born in India on or after January 26, 1950.

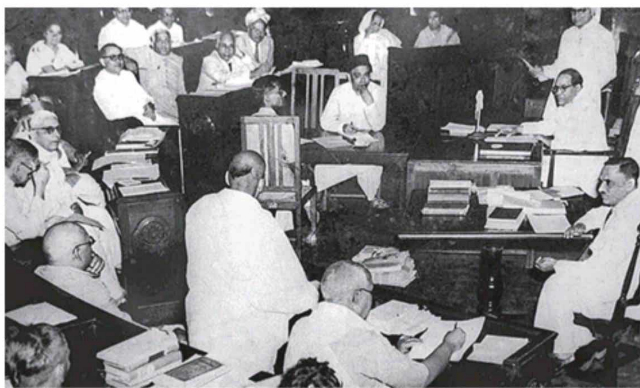
There was an exception only for children born to "an envoy of a foreign sovereign power" who is not a citizen, and children of an "enemy alien" when the birth takes place in an area under enemy occupation.

However, in 1986, Parliament amended the Act to address the entry of migrants from "Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and some African Countries". All children born after the Amendment came into force would only become citizens if either of the parents were Indian citizens, marking the end of birthright citizenship in India.

In 2003, the Act was amended again to effectively state that a child would not become a citizen at birth if one of her parents was an illegal immigrant when she was born.

OUR VIEW

MY VIEW | THE INTERSECTION



Flex reason over muscle to honour our republic

Democracy is integral to India's popular conception of itself but it's unclear if the same can be said of republican ideals. So long as we're ready to reason with ourselves, this isn't a worry

India's embrace of democracy has been affirmed many times over by the 'power of the vote' as a lived experience. That We the People live in a republic, with no hereditary right to rule, remains far more abstract in comparison. Three-quarters of a century ago, whether democracy would endure was seen as our big challenge. In his last address to the Constituent Assembly after the 'final reading' of the Constitution, on 25 November 1949, B.R. Ambedkar made a case for 'social democracy,' based on a union of liberty, equality and fraternity. If any of these were to be divorced from the other, he held, it would defeat "the very purpose of democracy." The weak link, in his view, was equality: "On the 26th of January 1950, we are going to enter a life of contradictions. In politics, we will have equality, and in social and economic life we will have inequality." Equality denied for too long in the two other spheres, he feared, would imperil our political democracy. It was India's status and credentials as a *republic*, though, that pre-occupied him in the years to follow.

In the West, the concept rode into public awareness on the back of revolutions. In France, royalty was ousted from power in a fit of hair-raising fury, but America snapped apart from the yoke of Britain's monarchy by calmly declaring itself free before it sent 'redcoats' packing. In both cases, arguably, the stage was set by the 1776 pamphlet *Common Sense*, written by Thomas Paine, a French immigrant, in the US. While its basic point was that an oppressor could not possibly protect people, the primary purpose of government, the blow his essay landed on anybody's 'divine right' to rule made it an ode to the republican ideal, as encoded in the rule of law. "For as in absolute

governments the King is law," argued Paine, "so in free countries the law ought to be King; and there ought to be no other."

Back home, it should not surprise us that Ambedkar, who had grappled with the "graded inequality" of caste heritage, sought relief from inherited authority across all of Indian society. Today, it's hard to tell if people accord republican ideals much value, even though our electoral democracy is held dear. On the right, some argue that the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's campaign against dynastic politics has driven home the idea of a republic, making it harder for descendants of well-known leaders to get far in the political arena. On the left, some reckon that political appeals drawn from olden times have stalled the idea's progress. Regardless of its explicit advance, arguments over inheritance and privilege are likely to go on. This in itself may be seen as a republican victory of sorts. Yet, in the social sphere, while caste is often used to mobilize votes, its lineage link stays in place. In our economic life, to the extent prosperity relies on market forces and the right to property, the theft of inherited wealth cannot be wished away. Nor, for practical reasons, should it. Soviet-style economic models that tried to flatten ownership saw their incentives for value-generation collapse. The rise of Communist China, notably, only followed its market pivot. The emergence of our remixed economy is a similar story. It took a rational rethink of economic policy. Whatever the ideals pursued, a republic evolves through the active exercise of reason in a contemporary context. Even the sudden rise of 'reasoning' models of artificial intelligence implies that the future may belong to countries that deploy reason well. The power India can wield might well be shaped by it.

A cabinet committee on science and technology is a must today

It's a strategic imperative for India as technology is at the core of power in today's information age



NITIN PALI
is co-founder and director of The Takshashila Institution, an independent centre for research and education in public policy

India's government must set up a Cabinet Committee on Science and Technology (CCST) to make India a global power of this century. Chaired by the Prime Minister, it should include the ministers for home affairs, finance, external affairs, defence, electronics and information technology, commerce and education. In this information age, technology is a core element of national power, the primary agent of economic transformation and an important aspect of the day-to-day life of citizens. Individual departments and states must still be responsible for governing the technological aspects of their domains in a decentralized manner, as they do now. But there is a case for a higher-level mechanism to set the overall policy direction, coordinate between ministries and oversee strategic plans in various science and technology domains. A cabinet committee is an appropriate structure in our governmental system.

There are four major reasons. *First*, we are in an era where world politics is by technology, of technology and for technology. While technology has been a source of power throughout history, it is central to global politics today. The Biden administration's moves to throttle China's semiconductor and artificial intelligence (AI) industry development implicate the rest of the world. Donald Trump's principal backers are tech leaders determined to promote their

commercial interests in the US and abroad. If the US has adopted its tech industry's interests as its national interests, China has been doing so from the other direction. For Beijing, its tech industry is a tool to further the interests of the Communist Party of China at home and abroad. Geopolitical considerations alone recommend that India respond to the unfolding circumstances by equipping our strategic establishment well to navigate these tides.

Second, India needs a better way to manage trade-offs across ministerial boundaries. A few years ago, the railway ministry decided to completely electrify the train network to achieve environmental and modernization goals. Yet, such a goal would be inconsistent with defence preparedness. Both the Indian army and central paramilitary forces depend on railways to rapidly move their forces to areas of deployment. Decentralized, self-propelled diesel locomotives are better for this than grid-supplied electric ones. We need a better way to resolve such dilemmas.

Cross-domain coordination will be much more important in the coming years. It is hard to foresee effective public policy in nuclear energy, radio spectrum, AI, autonomous vehicles, advanced military systems, biological weapons and information warfare without high-level inter-departmental negotiation.

Third, the old model of managing strategic programmes like atomic energy and space will not work in today's setting. Expertise is diffused in private industry, research institutions and public sector enterprises. Getting things done requires careful navigation across several genuine regulatory considerations. Harnessing national capabilities requires programme structures that enlist capital, human resource and knowledge residing across the country. We now have national missions to develop AI, quantum computing, genomics and aerospace. Some of these might call for speedy implementation

while others require long gestation periods. Many reports rightly argue for a whole-of-government approach without being clear on how that will be achieved. A CCST is the answer.

Finally, much like the discussion between Arjuna and Krishna on the battlefield, a lot of tech policy is about determining what is more important. Is market competition more important than scale for global competition? Should we depend on a foreign strategic partner for technology or try to develop it in-house? Can we afford the cost of waiting? Should we prioritize climate goals over building energy-intensive data centres for AI? How do we respond to export controls, sanctions and coercive steps by our geopolitical partners?

As much as a CCST can coordinate at the Union government level, much of the action is at the state level. I do not know if the way it works currently allows for state chief ministers to be invited to a Union cabinet committee meeting. It might, however, be a good idea to invite officials of the states concerned to ensure policy alignment.

Interestingly, China not only quietly set up a secretive Central Science and Technology Commission (CSTC), but seems to have replicated the set-up at the provincial level too. This commission appears to oversee the science and technology ecosystem, approve mega-projects and interface with the military establishment. While there is little public information on its mission and composition, it has been set up to provide political direction to China's scientific and tech establishment. Mixing science with politics is not a good idea, as Soviet and Chinese history has shown, but when has that stopped Xi Jinping?

It is abundantly clear that we are amid a global tech war which will intensify. With the right structures in place, India could better harness its resources, expertise and human capital to emerge as a major power. More than an administrative convenience, the establishment of a CCST is a strategic imperative.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

Diversity doesn't look like anyone. It looks like everyone.

KAREN DRAPER

MY VIEW | MODERN TIMES

Migrating to the US has long been a rite of humiliation

MANU JOSEPH



is a journalist, novelist, and the creator of the Netflix series, 'Decoupled'

Long before Donald Trump, from the time I remember, migration to the United States was a rite of humiliation. Yet, it was exactly what the finest of my generation prepared for. Even the most dignified part of the process, which was the first step to go study something in science, lacked grace. An enduring memory of my childhood in Madras is the sight of a half-mile-long queue of the city's cultural elite for their fateful visa interviews. They were top rankers, IITians and doctors and those who had got job offers, and they waited for hours in the hot sun (the consulate put up sun shades only years later). For people like me, who had no prospects and passed by Mount Road in public buses, it was the first clear sight of what prospects really looked like—a wait outside the American consulate. And my lack of prospects didn't seem so bad.

But when the bus turned a corner, a familiar fear filled all of us who chose to be artists and were apparently of no use to

America and the 'Free World'—if you were not standing in that queue with a science degree, what would become of you?

That America is a "land of immigrants" is among the nonsensical flourishes of language, on par with "spirit of Mumbai." America may have once accepted all sorts of people, but they and their descendants have no particular fondness of immigrants anymore. At most, they only want the rich and talented, and even among the talented, only those who would be of practical use.

So, generations of Indians worked hard to become useful to America. Some even fooled themselves into believing they were needed because Americans were "dumb." But one way or another, talented Indians figured that their place in the US was created because there were things Americans did not wish to do anymore, or at least not for such low pay. Visa holders found their spouses could not work and their green cards did not always convert into citizenship. And now, strategically conceived children born on US soil will not get US citizenship if Trump has his way. His order may get struck down by courts, but it is hard to miss the layers of humiliation in going to a place where too many people wish to go.

For centuries, only the poor and the per-

secuted migrated. They fled. Even the early European migrants to the US were either destitute or mistreated. The social elite had no reason to move out. Then, in the mid-20th century, the upper classes of poor nations began moving to the US. These were the cultural elite, if not the economic elite, who had an immense head start in their own society. It was yet another opportunity life gifted them—migrate to a richer nation.

They had to pay a price. From being masters in their home towns, atop the social pyramid, they became something else in America that can be captured by an expression Indians once used commonly: "second-class citizens." What they meant by this was that the American upper classes viewed them the way they viewed lower classes in India.

Everywhere, the migrant is treated badly. The poor are equipped to take it in their stride because they are used to being treated in this manner even if they are not migrants. The Indian upper class is not so suited for

poor treatment. Every little discrimination stings them.

This may explain why many of them began to love India more than Indians themselves back home. When an old elite feels slighted in a new place, it compensates with great love for what made it feel special. An unspoken history of the world is how America, to which the elite of poor nations thronged, created expat nationalism.

As another form of compensation, possibly, some of these immigrants also acquired an exaggerated swag—that they succeeded in America because they were bright and "worked very hard," compared to other groups.

It is this popular but dim analysis that American politician Vivek Ramaswamy appears to have aired in a recent tweet: "Our American culture has venerated mediocrity over excellence for way too long... A culture that celebrates the prom queen over the math olympiad champ... I know multiple sets of immigrant parents in the 90s who actively

limited how much their kids could watch those TV shows precisely because they promoted mediocrity... and their kids went on to become wildly successful STEM graduates."

The truth reveals itself if you trace the lineage of successful individuals of Indian origin who claim to have done well because they "worked hard." The first wave of Indian immigrants did well chiefly because they were the actual or metaphorical Brahmins of where they came from; they had an enormous head-start not only over other Asian immigrants, but also over most Americans. Their children, in turn, were better placed to harvest their luck. Yet, it is important for the Indian community in America to go on about "hard work." The false preening of the lucky often makes the less fortunate feel that it is all their fault, when usually it is not.

Elite Indians in the US, it seems, want Trump's America to make a distinction between Indians and Mexicans, and all the other immigrants who face his ire, including "irregular" Indian immigrants. But then, typically, the ruling class of a society does not see people through income statistics and their college degrees. It goes by appearances. And to much of the American elite, maybe all Indians look the same. In fact, all immigrants may look the same.



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

—Rammath Goenka

26/11 CO-CONSPIRATOR'S EXTRADITION TO UNEPEEL ROLE OF PAK DEEP STATE

WITH the US Supreme Court rejecting 26/11 co-conspirator Tahirawur Rana's appeal against extradition, the Canadian national of Pakistani origin will shortly face trial in India. That the verdict came a day after Donald Trump's inauguration as US president was perhaps incidental, but it marked an important milestone in the deepening Indo-US ties to combat terror. Around the same time, India sought to iron out wrinkles by announcing the recommendation of a high-level committee that went into the botched attempt to bump off Khalistani radical Gurbaj Singh Pannun, a Canadian-American lawyer who hails from Punjab, on US soil. The panel advised expeditious legal action against a RAW officer who went rogue and handled the messy operation from Delhi. The officer was subsequently sacked. With Trump back in the White House, how he would deal with elements instigating violence in India is not clear yet. India designated Pannun as a terrorist in 2020. Would Trump help expedite Pannun's extradition? Possibly as a safety valve, the rabble-rouser gategashed into Trump's inaugural ceremony but raised Khalistani slogans.

As for Rana, he had provided critical support to David Coleman Headley, who had scouted sites for the 2008 Mumbai terror attack. He also assisted terrorists who plotted the beheading of employees of a Danish newspaper from his base in the US at Lashkar-e-Taiba's behest. Headley and Rana were high school mates and later joined the Pakistan army. Rana was sentenced to 14 years in jail in America. Headley had pleaded guilty in 2010 to aiding and abetting the massacre of 166 people in Mumbai, which included six Americans. His plea deal included protection from extradition to India.

Immigration service is the easiest of the covers used by spooks worldwide. Whether or not he was part of Pakistan's sleeper cell, Rana ran the First World Immigration Services in the US and let Pakistani terror outfits use it to further their objectives. For example, Headley employed the First World business card as a cover for target scouting in Mumbai and Holland. Rana's extradition is expected to help establish the role of Pakistan's deep state in the 26/11 carnage. The US turned Headley over to get his and Rana's conviction. How India would peel off the layers of secrecy and make Rana sign remains to be seen.

FOCUS ON GROWTH TO DEAL WITH THE RUPEE DILEMMA

THE rupee poses a greater challenge for Reserve Bank of India than its perennial growth-versus-inflation dilemma. The rupee has fallen by around 3 percent in the past year. Donald Trump's victory in November only hastened the depreciation of the rupee as the dollar kept getting stronger in anticipation that the US economy would benefit from the policies of the new President. Yet, the rupee was better than most emerging market currencies thanks to RBI's interventions to protect the rupee. The Indian central bank sold dollars in the forex market to keep the rupee from hitting new lows, and in doing so, it depleted the country's foreign exchange reserve by \$80 billion. India's forex reserves fell from \$705 billion in September to \$623 billion by January 17, an 11-month low. The aggressive interventions by the RBI have now ensured that the rupee remains overvalued vis-a-vis other currencies, with experts now seeing another 5-8 percent depreciation if RBI allows the market to value the local currency correctly. On this front, it does not have much choice, as it cannot continue depleting the forex reserves to support the rupee.

A weaker currency poses several bigger problems for RBI, which is under severe pressure to cut interest rates to uplift the economy, which is worryingly slowing down. A weaker currency risks exacerbating inflation, constraining the central bank's ability to consider a potential rate cut in February. It may also deter the RBI from injecting liquidity into the system, as excess liquidity could further fuel price pressures.

Moreover, the US dollar is poised to strengthen—especially with Donald Trump's return to the White House, which could revive policies favouring a robust greenback. The Indian economy has entered a vicious cycle where high interest rates and inflation stifle growth. However, if RBI cuts the interest rates, as everyone expects, it may risk an escalation in prices, which has a high possibility for a weaker rupee. The RBI might have to throw caution to the winds and take a bold policy stance in February by leaning towards growth rather than being too wary of inflation. It will also have to stop intervening in the forex market and let the rupee settle towards its 'real' value. A boost in growth might support the currency in the long run.

QUICK TAKE

LET THE TRUTH COME OUT

HOPEFULLY, Americans will get some closure after President Donald Trump declassified files on the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy, and Martin Luther King Jr. Scropts still worry about data that never made it into the files. In India, Subhas Chandra Bose 'died' 79 years ago, and we still don't know who or what killed him. Japan has yet to give India three crucial files. Lal Bahadur Shastri's family members await closure since 1966. The Opposition terms the government's secrecy arbitrary because the Official Secrets Act of 1923 does not even define 'official secrets'. Now's the chance to bring the records to light in pursuit of transparency.

AS we celebrate the completion of 75 years of our republic, we, at the outset, pay homage to those who brought us freedom. We pay tribute to the sacrifices made by millions who resolved to fight the might of the Empire with the weapon of non-violence. Used for the first time in any freedom struggle, this weapon signified a moral authority more powerful than the threats, violence, and criminal dehumanising acts our people were subjected to.

After years of struggle under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, the unwavering commitment of leading personalities who jettisoned their personal interests to join the struggle, and the sacrifices and emotive responses of millions of ordinary people, we won the long-fought battle for freedom. Though etched in our memory, these moments of history reverberate even today. Our republic owes its very existence to this struggle.

All individuals, all societies, by the nature of their existence, are aspirational. At the same time, all governments of whatever hue think that they know best. There always exists a gap between aspirations and reality. In democratic societies, governments are brought to account after every few years. Unmet aspirations call for change, but governments seek longevity. If longevity in democratic societies is achieved by trampling freedoms, that becomes a societal concern. The seeds of the conflict lie there.

It is said that there is no present. There is only the past. It is the past through which we learn to commit once again to fight for the cause of freedom, the nature and the quality of which have changed with time. New challenges confront our republic.

We must not forget that freedoms won must never be lost; freedoms won must not be taken for granted, and freedoms won must be cherished and protected. This is the lesson we learn from history. The nature of power, in whatever form and wherever power exists, both at the level of the state and society, can infringe on our freedoms. We stand today not to denigrate or criticise but to reflect on times in the past when we stood up to the emasculation of our rights.

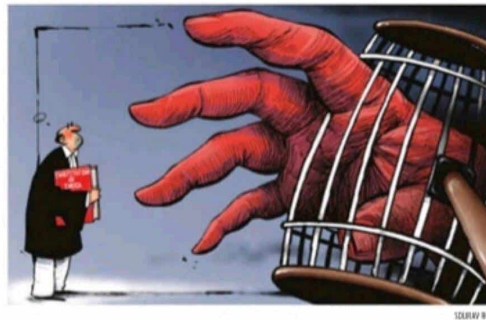
In that struggle, the role of the court and the legal fraternity will always be remembered. We cannot protect our cherished freedoms without a

This Republic Day, when we glorify our brave citizens who have upheld our republic's moral values, we must also realise there are many more battles to be fought and many more to be won

VALUE THE REPUBLIC, CHERISH FREEDOM WON AT A COST

KAPIL SIBAL

Senior lawyer and member of Rajya Sabha



strong bar and an independent, fearless judiciary.

Lately, the leaders of the bar and the legal fraternity have been silent spectators to laws and executive acts that attempt to alter the balance between state accountability and our constitutional freedoms. Voices sought to be silenced, the rule of law diminished by arbitrary executive actions, and investigating agencies misused to instil fear are all matters that are an affront to the moral underpinnings of constitutional functioning. Issues like hate speech, increasing communal divisions, and the targeting of civil society organisations have further strained our democratic values and constitutional safeguards. The state is perceived to have cap-

tured institutions constitutionally charged with the responsibility of checking executive excesses. Free and fair elections must be seen to be held. The use of the state apparatus to interfere in the electoral process is another aberration that is visible. The rampant use of money power in elections is evident. A majoritarian culture seeks to diminish entrenched constitutional freedoms. Corporate giants are recipients of government patronage, and they, in turn, are known to fund the parties in power.

The judiciary, too, seems to be losing its sheen with the waning public confidence it enjoyed in the past. A reasonably fair justice delivery system looks a far cry. In recent months, though,

CROSSING OVER FROM DARKNESS TO THE LIGHT

RENUKA NARAYANAN

FAITHLINE



THE biggest *snan* or holy dip at the ongoing Mahakumbh is on January 29, on *Mauni Amavasya*. The largest crowd is expected to gather then, approximately six crore people. Let us pray miscreants sent by known and unknown ill-wishers do not succeed in wrecking havoc on the faithful multitudes. It is evidently no different on Earth from the cosmic dimension, where *asuras* and *rakshasas* frequently attack *Devalok*.

The good news is, though it may take time and involve much struggle, the *asuras* and *rakshasas* are always sent packing. There is a palpable connection between the *Kashiragar Manthan* and the Kumbh that during the tussle between the *asuras* and *devas*, four drops of *amrita* (the nectar of immortality) fell on Earth at Prayagraj, Ujjain, Haridwar and Nashik, which sustain humanity.

But why is *Mauni Amavasya* so important? Religion is tied to nature, which defines a way of life. This year, the Indian month of *Magh* is from January 21 to February 19. By the time *Magh* begins, the cold has noticeably receded. So, it is an ideal time to bathe in the waters of holy rivers. This is encouraged by the cultural belief that while the entire month of *Magh* is perfect for bathing rituals, *Mauni Amavasya* is especially significant as the holy water is believed to transform into nectar, cleansing sins for those who bathe in it.

Mauni Amavasya translates as 'the silent moonless night'. On this day, people observe silence for spiritual growth and self-mastery and offer *Tarpan* to their ancestors. This is believed to bring peace to the souls of ancestors and eliminate *pitru dosha*. *Tarpan* apparently comes from the Sanskrit root word *trap*, which means 'satisfying'. Think of the word 'tript' or 'tripti' in the mother tongues. The souls of our ancestors are said to be satisfied by an offering of water in their remembrance. This is called *Tarpan*. By doing so, believers don't think their ancestors will actually drink the water. It is the sincere act of remembrance that is said to please them.

'*Pitru*' means forefathers, and '*dosha*' means the consequences of negative karma. So, the term '*pitru dosha*' refers to the negative karmic debts of our ancestors or any wrongdoings committed by people against their parents, which bring obsta-

cles in the lives of descendants. It also occurs when our ancestors are unhappy for reasons such as forgetfulness, disrespect, or unfulfilled desires. Adverse effects include family conflicts, money troubles, health issues and career instability. *Tarpan* is a way of saying, "Please forgive us if anything is the matter, and bless us."



Tarpan is a graceful, touching ritual, calling for peace in our lives. Instead of merely weeping, we are given physical options of symbolic closure. What modern psychiatrists charge steep fees for today is offered as a free remedy by tradition.

I personally think it's a graceful, touching ritual calling for peace in our lives. I also like that instead of merely weeping and wailing, we are given such physical options of symbolic closure. What modern psychiatrists and psychotherapists charge steep fees for today is offered as a free remedy by tradition out of love and concern for us because the mental well-being of humanity is its motive.

It is not restricted to Hindus. Anyone who finds meaning and beauty in this ritual can observe it without compromising their birth faith because while the ritual language is naturally Hindu, the nature of these rituals is universal.

Both Adi Shankara in the ancient past and Ramana Maharishi in the 20th century are known to have emphasised si-

lence as a path to self-realisation and mental peace. According to Indian tradition, performing *pind-daan* (an offering of rice balls) and *acta* (a ritual of a holy river while maintaining silence on this day is highly auspicious).

Such acts of charity on *Mauni Amavasya* are said to multiply a person's good karma many times over. The dip in holy water on this day is believed to afford more *punya* or merit than on other days. Those with planetary defects in their natal charts would like to participate in mitigating any negative effects from such placements. It is like how every religion upholds some especially holy days in its belief.

Driving these outward rituals is their philosophical basis. It is easy to say 'spiritual growth', but what exactly does that mean in our personal life? The *devas* or celestial, as per *Advaita*, are *cheta* *vidya* or knowledge through awareness, symbolised by *Ketu*. *Asuras* are *Rahu*, dragging us down. This churn between our bright and dark selves within our souls is symbolised by Mount Mandara, pulled by Vasuki in the *Kashiragar Manthan*. Each of us contains a dark side called the '*praga purusha*', which must be demolished. The river symbolises the crossing over from darkness to light. Shiva is Tarakanath, the 'Lord of the Crossing' who takes us across. We pray to be touched by his grace to bring our inner selves to a better place.

Pind-daan is thus a symbolic offering that relates our micro existence, our little lives, with the macro existence, the larger cosmic order. Hence the illustrative saying, '*Yat pinda tat brahmande*', the pinda or rice ball is like unto the universe.

But what about those who cannot attend the Mahakumbh and must miss being part of humanity's greatest gathering? As ever, tradition has an *upaya* or solution. Tulsiadas says, '*Kalyug keval naam adhara sunir sunir nar utarahi para*', meaning 'Only God's name works in Kalyug, remembering it always takes us across to the light'.

(Views are personal) (sheebab09@gmail.com)

there is a visible emerging silver lining that gives us hope.

Society, by its very nature, is not static. Relationships between institutions, between those who govern and those who are governed, and between the mighty and the weak evolve with time, and new societal structures emerge in that dialectical relationship. In that context, we have witnessed existing values in the societal order breaking away from the past since the birth of our republic. If we desire to embrace the future, we need to move along with the global community to meet the challenges that emerge both from within and outside.

As citizens and, more importantly, as members of the legal community, we are responsible for understanding the dialectics of constant change; our fundamental duty is to resolve and stand up for those who willy-nilly become victims of that change. On a day like this, when we glorify our brave judges and our brave citizens who have upheld our republic's moral values, we also realise that there are many more battles to be fought and many more battles to be won.

The Bench and the bar function within the contours of our Constitution. This Bible of ours instils in us the values that we need to cherish—the values of sovereignty of protecting the security of the state, of ensuring that our freedoms are not trampled upon, as this republic, through its democratic processes, seeks to realise the aspirations of ordinary folk at the bottom of the ladder. While the republic has done yeoman service to us in the past, we need to be vigilant in these troubling times.

Our republic represents the values of constitutional morality hidden within the cold print of the Articles of the Constitution. These are interpreted by our great judges, who truly understood, when confronted with challenges, the meaning of the constitutional values that permeate each Article of the Constitution. These values need to be preserved, and we, the members of the bar and the judges, owe our allegiance to the rule of law, the upholding of which is our solemn responsibility.

I hope, and I am sure, that we will discharge this responsibility to protect what the people of India gave us on January 26, 1950—the Constitution of India.

(Views are personal) (tweets at @KapilSibal)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Voyeuristic culture

Ref: Feasting on the lives of others (Jan 26). Our obsession with celebrities' private lives has created a toxic culture of voyeurism. The media's pursuit of sensationalism and the public's appetite for gossip have devastating consequences. It's time for a more empathetic and responsible media landscape. Adina Khadija, Bengaluru

Public scrutiny

Perhaps this is the first time we have to pay for being a celebrity. The outbreak of public scrutiny often makes routine life cumbersome. In the case of film icons, people etch a larger-than-life image and expect them to be superhumans. Sachidananda Sathpathy, Sambalpur

Unsung heroes

Ref: Padma Vibhushan for MT, Suzuki car (Jan 26). Of the 113 eminent personalities nominated for this year's Padma awards, several unsung heroes have found a place. These unsung heroes have become commonplace ever since the Modi government came to power in 2014. It's heartening that individuals who work silently in far-flung areas for society are now duly recognised. Pratap Nayak, Bhubaneswar

Ashwin award

Ref: Padma Bhushan for Sreejesh, Ashwin among 4 to get Padma Shri (Jan 26). The conferring of the Padma Shri honour on Ravichandran Ashwin is a richly deserved recognition for a man who gave his all for the Indian cricket team. For someone who never got a proper farewell from the game, this honour is befitting his status as one of the greats. CM Umashankar, Kozhikode

Strange speech

Ref: OMDC can prevent policy paralysis: Priz (Jan 26). None of the burning issues of the people was touched upon by the president in her Republic Day speech. But misplaced priorities like One Nation One Election found their place in her message. It is rather strange that there was no mention about the livelihood issues of the poor and middle class. AGRajmohan, Anantapur

Non-partisan post

It was unfortunate and unprecedented that the Tamil Nadu governor utilised the Republic Day function as a platform to level various charges against the elected government. As a matter of fact, he was the one obstructing the functioning of the government by his non-cooperation and delaying bills for years. The governor's post is a non-partisan one. Occupying it, he cannot act as a politician for the ruling party at the Centre. D Sethuraman, Chennai



Telangana Today
FOR LOCAL TO GLOBAL NEWS

06

VIEWPOINT

HYDERABAD, Monday, January 27, 2025



AKHILESH YADAV
Samajwadi Party chief

“The unique beauty of Kumbh lies in the confluence of 3 rivers & its spiritual significance. People are drawn to this sacred event purely out of faith, without the need for advertisements”



PR SREEJESH
Hockey coach

It feels like a dream. India has such a rich legacy in hockey and we have given so many great players to world hockey. Considering this, it is a big thing for me to get this award after Dhyan Chand ji



MALLIKARJUN KHARGE
Congress national President

In the past decade, a vicious, hateful agenda immersed in religious fundamentalism has sought to divide our society, and the weaker sections are being treated as 2nd class citizens”

American dream gone sour

The dreams of millions of Indians and other immigrants have gone sour with United States President Donald Trump's executive order ending automatic birthright citizenship. Though a federal judge in Seattle temporarily blocked it, putting in place a 14-day restraining order, it is going to be a long-drawn legal battle. The case may ultimately be reviewed by the Supreme Court. As many as 22 states have challenged Trump's executive order which the federal judge has dubbed as “blatantly unconstitutional”. Hailed as the Land of Opportunities, America has been a dream destination for aspiring Indians for decades. No wonder that they constitute a lion's share of work visas granted by the US every year. However, the latest order, among the first to be signed by Trump on the first day of his second term as the President, has sent shockwaves among the immigrant Indian community. This decision has far-reaching implications for those pursuing the “American dream.” Initially thought to target only undocumented immigrants, the order extends to children born to parents on temporary work visas, such as the widely used H1B, or those awaiting green cards. The concept of birthright citizenship stems from the 14th Amendment to the US Constitution, ratified in 1868. It states that anyone born on US soil, or naturalised under its jurisdiction, is a citizen of the United States. This principle was upheld by the US Supreme Court in 1898, cementing automatic citizenship for those born in the country. However, Trump's executive order challenges this long-standing interpretation.

H-1B visa, the popular path to citizenship, faces tough scrutiny under Trump's 'America First' policies

According to the new rules: At least one parent must be a US citizen; Alternatively, one parent must hold a green card; Parents serving in the US military are also eligible to pass on citizenship. Children born in the US to parents on temporary work visas, such as H1B, or those awaiting permanent residency, will no longer receive automatic citizenship. This shift marks a significant departure from more than a century of policy and legal precedent. The radical move, though challenged in various courts across America, will have life-altering implications for all those on a temporary visa status in the US — including hundreds of thousands of Indians who are on temporary work visas (H-1B and LI), on dependent visas (H-4), study visas (F1), academic visitor visas (J1), or short term business or tourist (B1 or B2) visas. This, coupled with new restrictions on the H-1B visa programme, would prove to be a nightmare for Indians, particularly in the technology sector. The H-1B visa, the popular path to citizenship, faces heightened scrutiny under Trump's “America First” policies. During his earlier term, rejection rates went up drastically as regulations tightened. Compounding these challenges, the proposed legislative amendments seek to double application fees and raise minimum wage requirements, potentially making the visa less accessible for Indian talent. The uncertainty surrounding the visa programme could disrupt India's \$254-billion—according to Grant Thornton Bharat report—IT industry.

Turn to science to reclaim focus, and re-establish connection with the offline world



VIVEK VERMA

The ping of notifications often punctuates the rhythms of our lives. The impulse to check a message or refresh a feed is as automatic as breathing. This dependency on digital devices has sparked necessary concern lately, about its impact on our mental, emotional, and even physical health. Digital detox, taking intentional breaks from screens has moved from trend to necessity, but unplugging effectively requires more than simply shutting down our devices. One can turn to science for more nuanced strategies to help reclaim focus, foster well-being, and re-establish our connection with the offline world. The constant allure of digital devices is not random. Dopamine, the brain's reward neurotransmitter, spikes whenever we anticipate social interactions, a phenomenon well-studied in relation to social media and messaging platforms. This surge keeps us returning for more, and hence we often find ourselves scrolling away time for far longer than intended. Platforms are designed with this response in mind: the endless scroll, the unpredictability of notifications, and likes to create a reward loop that keeps our attention fixated. Research in neuroscience confirms that our smartphones hijack the same reward pathways that fuel addictive behaviours. The result of this hyper-engagement isn't just wasted time but also potential long-term changes to our brains. Studies by the National Institutes of Health found that high screen time correlates with thinning of the brain's cortex, an area involved with critical thinking and decision-making. For adults, excessive digital use has been linked to reduced grey matter in the prefrontal cortex, impacting emotional regulation, empathy, and impulse control.

Constant Connectivity
Beyond brain structure, the psychological toll of digital overuse is significant. A 2018 study by the American Psycho-



STUDIES BY THE NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH FOUND THAT HIGH SCREEN TIME CORRELATES WITH THINNING OF THE BRAIN'S CORTEX, AN AREA INVOLVED WITH CRITICAL THINKING AND DECISION-MAKING

logical Association (APA) found that constant connectivity contributes to heightened stress, anxiety, and even symptoms of depression. Social media, for instance, can foster feelings of inadequacy and low self-worth, especially when exposure to carefully curated, idealised and utopic portrayals of others' lives becomes relentless. Digital detoxing can help mitigate these effects, offering a break from social comparison and the constant information influx. The rise in mental health concerns among teenagers, who spend more time on screens than any other age group, has brought a renewed urgency to this issue. Findings from a study published in The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health show that teens who engage in more than three hours of screen time daily are more likely to experience mental health issues, a trend that has prompted some schools to introduce digital hygiene programmes. While the benefits of a digital detox are clear, the challenge lies in the how. Research-backed strategies can offer structure and purpose to the process, making it easier to stick to healthier habits and see tangible results in one's health.

Digital Fasting
The easiest way to begin a detox journey would be by creating clear boundaries, like designated no-phone zones, a proven way to limit device use. A Stanford University paper suggests setting screen boundaries in specific environments, like the bedroom or dining room, to help reduce overall screen time and encourage a more mindful approach to device use. These boundaries can also extend to time, with the one-hour rule suggesting no screen usage an hour before bed. Not only does this habit reduce screen time, but it also minimises the blue light exposure known to disrupt sleep cycles. The 20-20-20 rule, recommended by op-

tometrists and supported by eye health studies, involves taking a break every 20 minutes to look at something 20 feet away for 20 seconds.

This simple technique helps combat digital eye strain, a common issue for those who work or study on screens and reduces the physical stress that prolonged screen time can place on the eyes and neck. As part of a broader digital detox, the 20-20-20 rule can serve as a gentle nudge to step away regularly. The science of green time versus screen time encourages more time spent in nature to reduce cortisol levels, lower blood pressure, and improve mood. This is commonly also termed as nature therapy. Japan's Chiba University found that individuals who spent just 15 minutes in a forest experienced measurable reductions in stress and an increase in calmness.

Nature therapy is the best antidote to digital immersion, providing a tangible, restorative experience that resets our focus and attention. The phenomenon of digital fasting is also gaining traction, particularly for those looking to reset their habits without quitting cold turkey. The University of California conducted an interesting study to show that workers who practised tech-free hours were able to improve their focus and productivity over time. Scheduling tech-free hours, quite like the no-phone zone method, can demarcate portions of time to experience digital detox in a manageable, realistic way. Popularised by author Cal Newport, digital minimalism encourages prioritising digital tools that align with our values and eliminate those that do not. Research published in Computers in Human Behaviour found that individuals who actively chose to reduce their social media presence reported lower stress and greater satisfaction with their daily routines. Engaging only in meaningful digital activities can be

transformative, shifting the focus from quantity to quality.

Social Benefits

A widespread shift toward digital mindfulness could yield broader social benefits as well. Excessive screen time does not just impact individuals but creates a social environment where people feel less present and connected, making people feel alone even in the busiest crowds. In professional settings, digital burnout impacts productivity and job satisfaction, leading to higher attrition rates. Cultivating an environment that values offline time can enrich social interactions, boost productivity, and foster a greater sense of community, especially in workplaces and schools. There is an argument that digital detoxing on a large scale could serve as a public health intervention. Just as society has embraced practices like mindfulness and exercise as pillars of health, digital wellness may be the next frontier.

As beneficial as digital detoxing may be, the goal should not be to vilify technology. Rather, it's about finding balance. Technology, after all, offers undeniable conveniences and opportunities, from connecting with loved ones to accessing vast information pools. But the key is sustainable use, harnessing technology to serve us without letting it overtake us. Digital detoxing presents a counter-narrative to our world of screens. It offers an opportunity to reconnect, not just with others but with ourselves. By embracing a mindful, balanced approach to technology, we can enjoy the best of both worlds, the vast possibilities of digital and the grounding peace of the analogue.

(The author is founder & CEO, Upsurge Global, co-founder, Global Carbon Warriors, and Adjunct Professor, ETHames College)

Letters to the

Editor

Trump decision

America was peeved at the WHO for its attitude towards China during the Covid-19 pandemic. Trump had made his displeasure known even then. Now, as the President of the USA, he has taken decisions that are bound to cripple the finances of the world body. This in turn will reduce the WHO's ability to function effectively, especially in those regions where healthcare is unaffordable for its residents. China would only be too willing to fill the void created by America and thus increase its soft power. It would be a tragedy if, while trying to make America great again, Trump ends up handing over world leadership to China!

ANTHONY HENRIQUES
Mumbai

Popularism

The beginning of the year 2025 marks the rise of a new political order known as popularism. This trend is emerging in countries like the United States, Hungary, Italy, Britain, Mexico, and other European nations, signalling a shift from traditional right-wing or left-wing ideologies. Instead, popularism is paving the way for a distinct political system worldwide. In the 21st century, as countries prioritise protectionism, hyper-nationalism, and trade-focused policies, political leaders are increasingly appealing to the masses by offering attractive schemes and benefits to win elections. This indicates that the global political landscape is transitioning into a new era defined by this rising ideology.

WHO

Taking on the World Health Organisation (WHO) is not new to Trump as he did so in 2020 as well during his first term but the move was swiftly reversed by his successor Joe Biden. 18 per cent of the WHO's 2023 budget was provided by the US. No doubt the WHO is not without flaws, but its yeoman's service in fighting many communicable and non-communicable diseases and natural disasters cannot be sidetracked.

GANAPATHI BHAT, Akola

DR JITESH MORI, Kutch Gujarat

Shocking

President Trump has left many Indians disheartened by deciding not to give citizenship based on birth only. Many Indians in aspiration of getting citizenship opt for their child delivery in America. Also Trump's two-gender policy is unwelcome move. Transgenders should be granted a third-gender status to live with dignity.

ABHILASHA GUPTA, Mohali

Mission Yamuna

As the Assembly elections of New Delhi are approaching, the various political leaders have also started singing the old choruses of cleaning the Yamuna River. The Yamuna being considered a sacred river in the Hindu religion must have been pollutant-free, but alas, the apathy and lack of will of the successive governments and people made it one of the most polluted rivers. The industrial and sewer wastes are the main factors behind the present situation of this river. Earlier, AAP supreme Kejriwal had made cleaning Yamuna an election issue, but he also failed in the mission, and the problem is getting worse day after day. Now the same promises are being made by the BJP leaders, but nobody is sure about the results. The central government should take strict measures against the industrial units causing pollution and also make the people aware of the same.

DR NAVNEET SETHI, Gurgaon

India in the

hotspot

■ China Daily

Beijing: China, India should focus on development

As two major developing countries and emerging economies, China and India should concentrate on development and cooperation, and bring bilateral relationship back on the track of healthy and stable development, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Guo Jakun said Tuesday.

■ BBC

13 passengers killed after hit by train

At least 13 people have been killed and five injured after they fled rumours of a fire on board their train in India, only to be hit by another train. Railway officials said the passengers got down from the Mumbai-bound train in western Maharashtra State after someone pulled the emergency cord, causing it to stop.

■ The Economist

Indian politicians obsessed with doling out cash

When the AAP unveiled a new programme handing out 1,000 rupees a month to most women in the capital. The opposition BJP staged a protest. What was predictable, though, was the BJP's unveiling its own scheme, one that outgunned the AAP's with a promised handout of 2,500 rupees.



FIRST COLUMN

OVERCOMING AUTOMATIC NEGATIVE THOUGHTS

Meditation and deep breathing can help reduce stress, anxiety and self-doubt



SAKSHI SETHI

Today at least one out of ten is being the victim of catastrophising (expecting the worst outcome), overgeneralising (believing that a single failure defines overall ability) and filtering (focusing solely on negatives while ignoring positives). Recent studies have proven that over 70,000 thoughts that come into an individual's mind every day consist of negative ones wherein some of them are the fuel for depression, anxiety and low self-esteem. Automatic Negative Thoughts often abbreviated as ANTs are like unwelcome guests in an individual's mind. They are a psychological phenomenon that can significantly impact mental wellbeing and performance in various aspects of life. These thoughts are spontaneous and fleeting, that arise without conscious effort. Triggered by specific situations, they even involve pessimistic thoughts that arise in response to everyday situations, often leading to increased stress, anxiety and self-doubt. It is very important for an individual to understand and address them for fostering a positive mindset and improving emotional resilience. ANTs are characterised by their automatic nature, as they occur spontaneously without conscious effort. These thoughts are often distorted and irrational, stemming from deep-seated fears or past experiences.

For instance, a student who performs poorly on one test might think, "I'm a complete failure," despite having performed well in other areas or in professional settings, after a presentation that received constructive criticism, an individual might think, "Everyone hated it," even though the feedback was largely positive and aimed at improvement. Similarly, in social situations, a person who notices someone yawning might assume, "I'm boring," disregarding the possibility that the person might simply be tired. These examples highlight how ANTs can distort per-



ceptions and negatively affect confidence and behaviour. The impact of ANTs can be profound. They contribute to a range of mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. By distorting reality and reinforcing negative beliefs, ANTs can hinder decision-making, problem-solving, and interpersonal relationships. In academic and professional settings, these thoughts can undermine confidence, reduce motivation, and impair performance. Fortunately, there are effective strategies to combat ANTs and develop a more positive thought pattern. One of the most widely used approaches is cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), which focuses on identifying, challenging, and replacing negative thoughts with constructive ones.

For instance, when faced with a thought like, "I'll never succeed," individuals can challenge its validity by reflecting on past successes and recognising their capabilities. Mindfulness practices, such as meditation and deep breathing, can also help in managing ANTs. These techniques encourage individuals to observe their thoughts without judgment and creating space to respond thoughtfully rather than react impulsively. Another useful tool is journaling, which involves writing down thoughts and analysing accuracy can help uncover patterns and triggers. Also, the act of writing helps to crystallise it and get it out of head. Building a strong support system is equally important. Sharing feelings and concerns with trusted friends, family members, or therapists can provide valuable perspectives and emotional relief. Positive affirmations and self-compassion can further counteract the negative effects of ANTs by fostering a sense of worth and capability. Remember, by recognizing its presence and implementing strategies such as CBT, mindfulness, and support-seeking, individuals can break free from the cycle of negativity and cultivate a healthier and more optimistic outlook. Addressing ANTs not only enhances mental wellbeing but also empowers individuals to navigate life's challenges with confidence and resilience.

(The writer is an educator; views are personal)

Japan's struggle for relevance amid China's rise



NILANTHA ILANGAMUWA

As China rises as a dominant force in a multipolar world, Japan must navigate the challenge of balancing its historical baggage with maintaining its relevance



In December 2024, Japan's Ministry of Defence, through its influential think tank, issued a report that presents an unflinching look at China's meteoric rise and its implications for the global balance of power. Titled *The Rising Global South* and China, the report offers a sobering analysis of how China's strategic outreach to the Global South—its diplomacy, economic investments, and military presence—poses not only a challenge to the existing international order but also to Japan's place in the world. While the report forms a key element in Japan's evolving worldview regarding its neighbour, it is but one piece of a much larger, more complex puzzle.

The evolving dynamics between China and Japan demand a deeper exploration, not just of economic rivalry, but of historical tensions, ideological shifts, and global transformations that are redefining power structures across Asia and beyond. Why, one might ask, is it crucial to understand Japan's view on China in 2025? The answer lies in the seismic shifts currently reshaping the international order, where China is positioning itself as the hegemon of a new, multipolar world, and Japan must navigate an increasingly treacherous geopolitical terrain. This is not simply about Beijing's growing economic influence through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or its dominance in trade and investment in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia.

The contest runs deeper, revealing an ideological, military and moral confrontation where Japan's historical burdens, particularly its unresolved wartime past, complicate its ability to assert leadership in the face of China's rapid expansion. "Based on field research in Cambodia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Angola, and elsewhere, the report points out that the expansion of Chinese aid under the principle of non-interference in internal affairs may reduce the effectiveness of Western 'democratisation pressure' that uses aid as leverage."

Consider, for a moment, China's overwhelming presence in the Global South. While Western powers remain preoccupied with their domestic crises, Beijing has formed vast strategic partnerships, economic dependencies, and infrastructural investments across continents.

THE STRATEGIC INTERESTS OF JAPAN AND THE US ARE NOT ALWAYS ALIGNED, ESPECIALLY WHEN IT COMES TO CHINA. WHILE THE US FOCUSES ON CONTAINING CHINA'S RISE, JAPAN IS CAUGHT IN A PRECARIOUS POSITION, BALANCING ITS NEED FOR SECURITY AND ECONOMIC COOPERATION WITH CHINA AGAINST THE DEMANDS OF ITS AMERICAN ALLY

From Africa's mineral-rich lands to West Asia's energy corridors, China has inserted itself as both a benefactor and an enforcer, using its vast financial resources to extend its influence.

It has become the world's largest creditor, with loans amounting to over \$1.3 trillion since 2000, a sum that far outstrips Japan's modest foreign assistance initiatives. In the face of this, Japan's model of development aid—praised for its transparency and sustainability—has paled in comparison. Japan's approach, while effective in certain regions, lacks the scale and sheer audacity of China's outreach. Moreover, Japan's preoccupation with economic stability and its often subdued geopolitical ambition has left it on the back foot as China has aggressively pursued its vision for a new international order.

It is not just economics at play here. There is a deepening ideological divide. The language China uses to frame its influence in the Global South is couched in the rhetoric of anti-imperialism, South-South cooperation, and solidarity with the developing world.

This resonates profoundly with nations that have long been subject to the whims of Western powers. Beijing, adept at using its soft power, positions itself as the champion of the Global South, contrasting its rise with the history of exploitation by colonial and imperial forces. By leveraging its economic might, China is building a coalition of nations willing to challenge the existing global system, one dominated by the US and its allies. This ideological appeal has found a strong foothold in parts of Africa and Asia, where many developing nations view China's rise as an opportunity to break free from the shackles of Western dominance. For Japan, the legacy of its imperial past complicates its post-war identity, which is grounded in pacifism,

democratic values, and economic growth. While China's rise is perceived as a return to national glory, Japan remains burdened by its wartime actions, which continue to fuel tensions, particularly with Beijing. This unresolved history hampers Japan's diplomacy, overshadowing its economic and diplomatic efforts, as issues of reparations, historical memory, and political reconciliation persist. And yet, Japan cannot simply be reduced to a passive recipient of China's strategic moves.

The reality is that Japan, with its robust economy and advanced technological sector, still holds significant sway in certain parts of the Global South, particularly in Southeast Asia.

Japan has long been a key player in the economic development of this region, offering not just financial assistance but a model of governance and sustainable growth. But the rise of China has shifted the balance, and Japan is now forced to reckon with the reality that its traditional model—built on the principles of mutual benefit and technical expertise—may not suffice in the face of China's far-reaching ambitions.

There are many reasons why China is winning over many countries that were once bullied by the West in different ways. China's approach is a wake-up call for those countries still under colonial hangovers. Furthermore, as the report made an interesting observation, Japan's relationship with the United States, while essential for regional stability, is becoming increasingly complicated.

The strategic interests of Japan and the US are not always aligned, especially when it comes to China. While the US focuses on containing China's rise, Japan is caught in a precarious position, balancing its need for security and economic cooperation with China against the

demands of its American ally. Japan's position in this dynamic is fraught with tension—caught between the pressure to align with the US and the reality of an increasingly powerful China on its doorstep.

The question that now looms over Japan's future is not just one of economic survival but of moral and ideological relevance. As the Global South looks increasingly to China for leadership, Japan must reimagine its role in this shifting world order. Japan's model of development, founded on transparency, democracy, and sustainability, is being overshadowed by China's strategic depth and bold vision.

Japan must not only bolster its own economic and diplomatic presence but must also confront the difficult task of reconciling its historical baggage with its aspirations for a secure and prosperous future. To do this, it may be unwise for Japan to stand as a mouthpiece or paper tiger for NATO, learning from the havoc this double-speak military alliance creates. With Trump's return, the competition for the soul of the international system intensifies—a system where shared values and principles, rather than hegemonic power, increasingly define the rules of engagement.

In these circumstances, Japan's ability to adapt, offer a compelling vision for the future of the Global South, and balance its security needs with its diplomatic and economic outreach will determine whether it remains a relevant player or becomes a relic of a past world order, or merely a puppet of a warmongering alliance intent on destabilising the Asia-Pacific.

The coming years will reveal whether Japan can rise to this challenge, or whether China's inexorable march towards global dominance will leave it in the dust.

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

ISRO's PSLV-C60 Mission and POEM-4: A game-changer for India's space exploration

This mission positions India among a select group of nations capable of space docking and sets the stage for revolutionising space experimentation

India's space exploration has reached a significant milestone with the recent launch of the PSLV-C60 mission by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO). This mission featured the Space Docking Experiment (SpaDEX) alongside the PSLV-Orbital Experiment Module (POEM-4), propelling India into an elite group of nations capable of space docking. Additionally, ISRO's collaboration with startups, researchers, and academic institutions showcases its commitment to fostering deep-tech advancements while reducing the high costs of space experimentation.



ANKIT ANAND

actively repurposed the PSLV's fourth stage into POEM, an orbital platform equipped with telemetry, command support, and a power supply. This transformation enables technical and scientific research in space while optimising resource use and lowering financial barriers for researchers, academic institutions, and businesses. POEM-4 reflects ISRO's abil-

ity to turn constraints into opportunities, providing an affordable avenue for space experimentation. This democratisation of space access marks a turning point for India's space sector, opening the doors to innovations previously hindered by high costs and limited resources.

Empowering Startups ISRO's POEM-4 has significantly benefited startups and academic institutions by enabling cost-effective in-orbit technology testing. Mumbai-based Manastu Space Technologies, for instance, is developing the Vyom 2U Green Propulsion System, which replaces toxic satellite fuels with an environmentally friendly hydrogen peroxide-based alternative. This innova-

tion challenges in space exploration—safety and sustainability— and incorporates advanced features like a high-temperature catalyst, optimised thruster design, and proprietary green propellant MS-289. With ISRO's support, Manastu is preparing for an upcoming PSLV mission to validate its technology, potentially positioning India as a global leader in sustainable satellite operations.

GalaxyEye, another innovative startup, has developed affordable synthetic aperture radar (SAR) modules. Unlike optical imaging, SAR technology penetrates clouds, providing precise and uninterrupted satellite imagery crucial for disaster management, environmental monitoring, and more. Validating its SAR modules in



space through POEM-4 positions GalaxyEye to deliver cost-effective global imaging solutions. Additionally, TakeMe2Space, a startup working on space-based data centers and processing power modules, utilised POEM-4 for initial technology validation. This achievement, despite the startup's limited funding, highlights ISRO's commitment to nurturing deep-tech innova-

tors and breaking down entry barriers for emerging players. **Driving Economic Growth** and **Innovation**

ISRO's approach with POEM-4 aligns with its broader vision of fostering public-private collaboration to stimulate economic growth. By offering advanced testing infrastructure at reduced costs, ISRO accelerates the commercialisation of innovative solutions. Manastu Space's collaboration with the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) exemplifies the power of such synergies. With funding from DRDO's Technology Development Fund, Manastu developed the iBooster system through years of intensive research. Its successful delivery underscores the potential of

partnerships between government institutions and startups to advance national defense and space capabilities. **Push for Innovations**

The PSLV-C60 mission and the POEM-4 initiative position ISRO as a leader in frugal yet impactful innovation. By repurposing resources and promoting collaboration, ISRO demonstrates that groundbreaking advancements do not require massive budgets but thrive on ingenuity and inclusivity. Dr. Pawan Goenka, Chairman of IN-SPACE, aptly summarised the initiative's significance: "POEM is a practical solution deployed by ISRO that allows Indian startups, academic institutions, and research organizations to test their space technologies with-

out the need to launch entire satellites. By making this platform accessible, we are reducing entry barriers and enabling a wider range of entities to contribute to the space sector."

Toward a Multi-Trillion-Dollar Space Economy India's ambitions of becoming a multi-trillion-dollar economy find a strong ally in ISRO's innovations. The space sector, driven by public-private partnerships, support for deep-tech startups, and inclusive access to space, is poised to play a key role in this vision. Initiatives like POEM-4 lay the groundwork for a thriving space ecosystem that fosters innovation, economic growth, and global leadership.

(The writer is a founding partner at Riceberg Ventures; views are personal)



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PAPER WITH PASSION

75 glorious years

Seventy-five years on, the Indian Republic stands resilient, ready to tread the path toward a brighter tomorrow

India stands at a monumental crossroads as it celebrated 75 glorious years of being a Republic on Sunday. resident Droupadi Murmu and Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto's presence symbolises India's robust diplomatic ties. With 10,000 special guests attending, this year's celebrations highlight the spirit of Jan Bhagidari, emphasising the people as architects of India's progress. The 76th Republic Day, marked by the theme of 'Shashakt aur Surakshit Bharat' (Empowered and Secure India), reflects the nation's aspirations. On this historic occasion, Prime Minister Narendra Modi urged countrymen to rededicate themselves to preserving the ideals of the Constitution. As the country marks this milestone, it becomes imperative to reflect on the achievements, challenges, and aspirations that define modern India. The adoption of the Constitution on January 26, 1950, was a bold assertion of India's identity as a sovereign, secular, and democratic republic. Over seven decades, the nation has weathered numerous challenges, from



political upheavals to external threats, while safeguarding its democratic fabric. India's ability to hold free and fair elections consistently remains a testament to the vision of its founding leaders. From the license-raj era to the liberalization reforms of 1991, India has evolved into the world's fifth-largest economy. Significant strides in technology, innovation, and entrepreneurship have positioned India as a global powerhouse in sectors such as information technology, pharmaceutical, and space exploration.

India's rich cultural diversity has continued to thrive amidst rapid modernisation. The promotion of regional arts, languages, and traditions, along with advancements in education and healthcare, has strengthened the social fabric. India's influence on the global stage has grown significantly, with active participation in forums like the United Nations, G20, and BRICS. Its leadership in championing climate action, digital inclusion, and south-south cooperation underscores its emergence as a responsible global leader. However, there are numerous challenges that are yet to be addressed. Despite impressive economic growth, India continues to grapple with stark inequalities. Issues like rural poverty, unemployment, and an uneven distribution of resources hinder holistic progress. Social harmony has often been tested, with caste, religious, and regional divides occasionally flaring into discord. Bridging these divides remains critical to ensuring the unity celebrated on Republic Day. While strides have been made in governance, corruption and inefficiencies in public administration still impede progress. The effective implementation of policies is often undermined by bureaucratic hurdles. As India celebrates its achievements, the path ahead demands renewed focus and commitment. Upholding the values of justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity enshrined in the Constitution must remain a collective priority. Ensuring the inclusion of marginalised communities in the democratic process is essential for a more equitable society.

PICTALK



A pair of parakeets are seen near its nest, in Jaipur

Mobile phones in jails: A growing security nightmare



SANDEEP JOSHI

The continued use of mobile phones by criminals incarcerated in jails remains a critical issue that the government has yet to address effectively

One pressing issue that the government has yet to effectively address is the continued use of mobile phones by criminals incarcerated in jails—an issue that persists even in high-security prisons. The seizure of mobile phones from inmates has become an all-too-common occurrence, posing a significant challenge to law enforcement agencies attempting to dismantle the nexus of organised crime operating from behind bars.

A primary reason for the rampant use of mobile phones inside jails lies in the unholy alliance between gang leaders within the prisons and certain jail authorities.

This collaboration, coupled with the ineffective use of modern technology to prevent unauthorised mobile phone usage, has allowed the problem to spiral out of control. The issue has reached such alarming proportions due to the lack of strategic deployment of advanced solutions that are readily available today.

The consequences of mobile phone usage within jails extend far beyond facilitating criminal activities. It poses a direct threat to national security, compromises the safety of prison staff, and jeopardises public safety.

While maintaining a robust telecommunication network within prisons is critical in today's mobile-driven world, the problem arises when authorities fail to leverage the latest technologies to either restrict or control mobile phone usage in designated areas. One technology that has been available for years is the mobile jammer, which disrupts mobile networks within a limited radius. However, this solution has proven ineffective, as it does not guarantee 100 per cent disruption of mobile services and, in some cases, hampers the network's functionality outside the prison-affecting areas like residential neighbourhoods. Despite its widespread use in jails across India, the jammer's limitations have become apparent.

In 2017, the "Tower-Harmonious Call Blocking System" (T-HCBS) was introduced, but it has yielded minimal results. Even after the installation of T-HCBS towers, the use of mobile



phones in prisons continued unabated. Telecom companies have failed to provide a mechanism for real-time monitoring of the systems' effectiveness, leaving authorities without the tools needed to measure its success or identify shortcomings.

A recent investigation by the Delhi police in connection with a shootout at a Tilak Nagar car showroom uncovered a shocking revelation. The two main suspects, who are currently incarcerated in Tihar jail, were using 5G-enabled phones to bypass mobile jammers. Although Tihar jail, which houses around 20,000 inmates, is equipped with over 15 mobile jammers, these devices are outdated, designed for 4G networks, while the current technology in use is 5G. This discrepancy highlights the urgent need for the installation of updated jammers and infrastructure in Delhi's jails—a process that can take several months.

The scale of the problem is underscored by the discovery of over 500 phones and internet dongles during surprise raids conducted across three Delhi prisons in the past two years. Despite the Delhi government and the Ministry of Home Affairs acknowledging the issue and establishing a high-powered committee two years ago to address the problem, progress has been hin-



TELECOM COMPANIES HAVE FAILED TO PROVIDE A MECHANISM FOR REAL-TIME MONITORING OF THE SYSTEM'S EFFECTIVENESS, LEAVING AUTHORITIES WITHOUT THE TOOLS NEEDED TO MEASURE ITS SUCCESS OR IDENTIFY SHORTCOMINGS

dered by red tape and slow-moving bureaucracy. The primary obstacle remains the reluctance of government officials to prioritise and implement the appropriate technologies needed to tackle the crisis. In addition to aiding organised crime syndicates, the presence of mobile phones in jails has had unforeseen consequences for residents living near prison complexes. This interference with the mobile network has caused a decline in property values in the vicinity of the jail, a stark contrast to the property booms seen in other parts of Delhi.

The lack of a reliable mobile network has created serious problems for residents, particularly in emergencies, and has significant economic consequences as businesses and daily services reliant on mobile communication are disrupted. This problem is not unique to Tihar jail or Delhi; similar issues have been reported from prisons in other metro cities. While mobile communication technologies continue to advance rapidly, there are modern solutions that can effectively address the issue of blocking mobile networks within high-security prisons. These advanced systems do not merely block mobile calls but also enable real-time detection and location tracking of illicit mobile phone usage within the facility.

For example, digitally managed systems are available that can maintain desired signal levels within a jail, granting authorities full control over the mobile network. These systems allow jail management to track, locate, and identify radio signals, pinpointing the source of illegal mobile phone use. By using such technologies, jail authorities can quickly identify and neutralise unauthorised mobile devices in the prison, making it a powerful deterrent against criminal activity.

The real question, however, is how long will it take for Indian jails to receive the necessary technological upgrades to combat the proliferation of contraband mobile phones? This problem is widespread across the country, from Tihar jail in Delhi to Yerawade jail in Pune, Kot Bhalwal jail in Jammu, and Naini jail in Allahabad—homes to some of the nation's most dangerous criminals, gangsters, terrorists, and mafias.

It is clear that timely intervention from government authorities to equip prisons with advanced technology to block unauthorised mobile networks, detect illegal phone use, and track mobile phone locations is urgently needed to restore control and curb the spread of criminal activities within our jails.

(The writer is a senior journalist; views are personal)

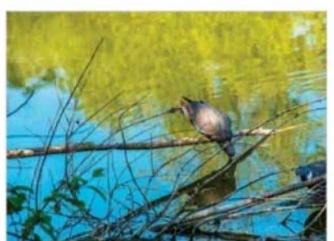
A chance encounter in Delhi: A story of hope amidst the chaos



APS MALHOTRA

Delhi, a city full of surprises, often unveils its charm in the most unexpected ways. While much has changed over the years, its enduring spirit continues to soar

Surprises never cease to crop up in my beloved Delhi, although, when I reminisce, I find this Delhi to be so very different from the place where I was born and grew up—in a few years from now, I will be touching the magical mark of sixty years—Insha-Allah!!! These are surprises that keep the passion to continue living here alive, despite the megapoles tottering on the edge of a bottomless abyss. I encountered one such surprise more than two decades ago, when I chanced upon an opportunity to care, to love—dispassionately. Then, I worked in the vicinity of Delhi's sprawling International Airport. At some distance from my office were robust pockets of greenery. As I strolled on the edge of a stagnant water body, immersed in thoughts, the shrill chirping of two birds circling overhead broke my reverie.



chirping pointed to a high level of desperation, of an impending crisis. Not the one to be blessed with Dr Do Little's prowess, instinctively, I shrugged off the noise to a behaviour anomaly that might be inherent in avians of this species. But the next moment I was proved wrong. The magnitude of the disaster struck me like a sledgehammer on the muck-infested, rotting, stagnant surface of the pond. I saw a tiny tremor, so minute that one could easily have missed it. It aroused my curiosity, and I leaned over to have a better view. Lo and behold,

trying to break free from the strangulating grip of the muck were three tiny birds, barely the size of an index finger—in all probability offspring of the panic-stricken pair hovering above. Perhaps they had fallen into the pond, carried by a dust-storm that had lashed the capital a few hours earlier. As they waged a fast-losing battle to stay afloat in the poisonous pool (symptomatic of most water bodies in the capital), the strings of my heart (already weakened by a blood pressure problem) felt a strong tug. Somehow, I managed to shrug off my indecisiveness

and moved to the edge of the pond. Tenderly, so as not to cause any harm, I scooped the first bird into my palm; the paranoid bird overhead mistook me for a predator and made some aggressive moves. But, as I delicately placed it on hard ground, they realised that I was not a foe—immediately, the chirping subsided; I finished the balance task in peace. After I had rescued the last bundle of joy and placed it on the welcoming lap of Mother Earth, I felt reassured that the worst was over. Contended, I commenced my trudge into civilised environs. Barely had I taken a few steps, when I looked behind and saw the protective parents cuddling their young ones like a mother who is human but is sadly getting diluted. The unexpected encounter lifted my spirits sky-high, as even in the fast-decaying Delhi, my beloved Delhi, hope continues to flow eternally. And where there is hope, a better future can never be far away.

(The author is a freelance writer; views are personal)

EIGHT WORKERS KILLED IN BLAST

Madam — A massive explosion at the Ordnance factory at Bhandra in Maharashtra, a key defence establishment, killed at least eight workers. The blast was so severe that it completely turned the unit into a huge pile of rubble, burying workers under the debris. Injured persons have been admitted to hospitals. The accident in a key defence factory is quite unfortunate. The Maharashtra government has announced a solatium of 5 lakh rupees each for the families of those killed in the blast. The cause of the explosion is not yet determined.

The accident has occurred at the RDX manufacturing section of the factory. The Ordnance factory at Bhandra is an important defence unit engaged in high-energy explosives like RDX and HMX, which go into the filling of a wide range of ammunition from artillery shells to rockets in the form of propellants. The present accident is not the first one in the Ordnance factory. In the past two blasts at the Central Ammunition Depot at Wardha, one in 2016 and another in 2018, at least 25 workers, including two army officers, had been killed. The Indian Ordnance Factories have not only supported India through the wars but also played an important role in building India with the achievement of technology and have ushered in the Industrial Revolution in India. Lack of safety measures in the factory should have been the reason for the huge blast.

P Victor Selvaraj | Tirunelveli

DOUBTS ON SAIF ALI KHAN'S ATTACK

Madam — Leaders like Nitish Rane, Sanjay Nirupam, and Jitendra Ahwad doubt whether actor Saif Ali Khan was really attacked, reflecting their poor mindset. One of the leaders compares Saif's stabbing as "garbage". Another leader finds the Hindu-Muslim angle and says when a Hindu actor like Shashank Singh Rajput dies, no one comes forward to say anything. It is a matter of shame that the BJP leaders find a religious angle in every

Chinar trees to be geo-tagged



It is heartening to note that the Jammu and Kashmir government has come up with a unique initiative of a 'Digital Tree Aadhaar' programme, targeting the conservation of the iconic Chinar trees, which are vital

to the region's cultural and ecological heritage. The initiative of the J and K government is laudable, especially at a time when rapid urbanisation poses threats to these trees, necessitating advanced technological interventions for their survival. Under this drive, Chinar trees are being geo-tagged and embedded with QR codes that capture detailed information, including geographical location, health status, and growth patterns. This approach allows conservationists to address potential risks effectively while creating a comprehensive Chinar tree database. Approximately 28,000 trees have reportedly been surveyed, with data continuously updated, aiming to preserve these trees.

Ranganathan Sivakumar | Chennai

issue. One thing is sure: Saif quickly recovered because our doctors have given an effective treatment. On the other side, it is still being questioned whether the person who is arrested and the CCTV footage person are not the same. The police were swift enough to confirm that the attacker was Bangladeshi. It is still suspect that the police have caught the real assailant or an innocent person. The BJP leaders are alleging that Bangladeshis are entering our country and creating trouble. If it is so, then it is the total failure of the central government in controlling them. One thing is clear: frequent unusual incidents are happening in Mumbai and it is proved that Mumbai is not a safe place.

Zakir Hussain | Kaziipet

MISUSE OF PUBLIC FUNDS

Madam — Distribution of public funds in cash (via DBT) is becoming rampant by the governments (both Union and State) under various names and schemes to various sections of society in the name of social justice. Whereas the very concept of such an award of money is unethical and

unwarranted because people believing in the workaholic system find it difficult to earn enough while those who happen to be in the list of category, caste, or section under the beneficiaries of handsome amounts of money from the state get the money without any work. Be it the cash to SC ST OBC students, to religious and linguistic minorities students, to women, to farmers, to Maulanas of Masjid, or now to Pujari of Mandir, to unemployed youth, or to any other section of society, it is being promised and more or less delivered, but it is the corruption of the worst kind! Why should anyone get money in cash, which is not easy to earn? Sadly, some sections of the society getting such benefit turn nonperforming and have a negative contribution to the national growth. This must stop forthwith along with other freebies if we really want our progress and prosperity as a developing nation.

Jai Prakash Gupta | Ambala Cantt

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Percentage growth in automobile exports from India in 2024

19 in per cent. Automobile exports from India rose 19% year-on-year in 2024 led by a robust dispatch of two-wheelers, passenger vehicles, and commercial vehicles, according to SIAM data. Overall shipments rose to 50,98,810 units last year. PTI

Migrant transfers from Italy to Albania detention centres

49 Italy's navy on Sunday was taking 49 migrants it picked up in international waters to detention facilities in Albania, the Ministry said, resuming a plan to curb sea arrivals mired in legal controversy. A further 53, who were also picked up, were in Italy awaiting verification of their status. REUTERS

People killed in gasoline tanker explosion in Nigeria

18 At least 18 people died and 10 others were injured in southern Nigeria after a gasoline tanker exploded. The accident happened along the Enugu-Onitsha expressway in the southeastern state of Enugu. Earlier this month, 98 people were killed in a gasoline tanker blast in north-central Nigeria. AP

Death toll among UN and South African peacekeepers

13 Malawi and Uruguay said four of their troops were killed in clashes in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo against Rwandan-backed rebels, bringing the death toll among United Nations and southern African peacekeepers to at least 13 by Sunday. REUTERS

Mayoral seats won by BJP in urban local polls in Uttarakhand

10 The BJP on Sunday swept the urban local body elections in Uttarakhand, winning 10 out of 11 mayoral seats to emerge as the dominant party in the municipal councils and nagar panchayats. A total of 5,405 candidates were in the fray. PTI

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Should Governors head State universities?

The Governor's role as Chancellor of State universities has become politicised, undermining university autonomy and causing governance issues, especially in States with Opposition-led governments: various reform models have been proposed to reduce political interference and improve university administration

LETTER & SPIRIT

K. Ashok Vardhan Shetty

The role of the Governor as Chancellor of State universities is a subject of intense debate. It is often misconstrued as a post-Independence measure to safeguard universities against political interference. This role has not been assigned to the Governor by the Constitution of India but by State university laws. Inherited from British colonial rule, it was designed to restrict university autonomy rather than promote it.

In 1857, the British established the first three universities in Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras, appointing Governors of the respective presidencies as their ex-officio Chancellors to maintain direct control. As Chancellor, the Governor became the head of the university and was granted powers such as appointing Vice-Chancellors, nominating members to university bodies like the Syndicate, approving delegated legislation under the university law, and presiding over convocations. Unfortunately, this model of "Governor as Chancellor" was adopted wholesale for State universities even after Independence, without reassessing its relevance in a democratic and federal context.

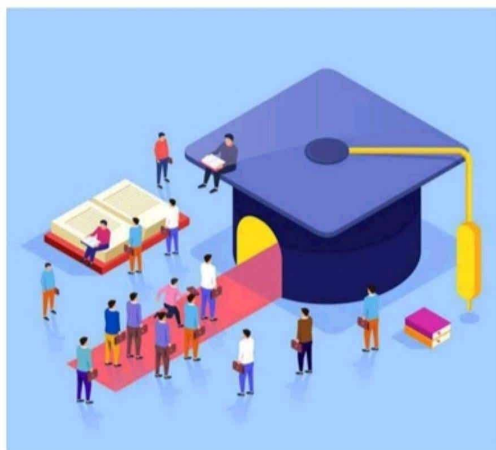
A politicised office
Initially, from 1947 to 1967, the dominance of the Congress party at both the Centre and State levels ensured that Governors remained ceremonial figures, with Chief Ministers wielding real power. Consequently, there was little impetus to amend the colonial-era provision of "Governor as Chancellor."

However, the political landscape changed after 1967 when several States were ruled by parties other than the ruling party or coalition at the Centre. Governors increasingly transformed from neutral constitutional functionaries to political instruments of the Central government. This change saw them asserting control over university affairs, which often resulted in clashes with State governments. Efforts to amend university laws for change of Chancellor faced roadblocks, as Governors either delayed approving such amendments or referred them to the President. Only a few States succeeded in getting the amendments passed.

Even the Centre's First Administrative Reforms Commission (1966-77) criticised the politicisation of the Governor's office, highlighting the appointment of defeated politicians, which eroded the office's dignity. The Sarkaria Commission (1983-88) on Centre-State Relations, revealed that over 60% of Governors had been active politicians, many of them immediately before their appointment, with quality declining steeply after the Nehru era. Professor Ashok Panikar's study (1990-2015) found that 52% of Governors were politicians, 26% were retired bureaucrats, and only 22% hailed from academia, the judiciary, or the armed forces. It highlighted a growing trend of appointing Governors based on political loyalty, undermining the office's credibility and exacerbating its misuse.

Governor's dual role

Constitutionally, a Governor's powers are divided into two categories: those exercised as Governor, where he is bound to act on the advice of the Council of Ministers as per Article 163(1), and those conferred by statutes, such as the role of Chancellor of State universities, where he can act at his discretion, independent of ministerial advice, unless the statute



GETTY IMAGES

mandates otherwise. The Supreme Court has upheld this distinction. This has enabled Governors to bypass ministerial advice in critical university matters like appointing Vice-Chancellors, nominating members to university bodies, and approving subordinate legislation, particularly in Opposition-ruled States.

Governor and the President

Despite similar legal frameworks, a stark contrast exists between the Governor's role as Chancellor of State universities and the President's role as Visitor of Central universities. The key difference is the level of consultation and legislative oversight.

The President maintains a cordial relationship with the Centre. He functions through the Ministry of Education and consults with it for appointments of Vice-Chancellors, nomination of members to university bodies, and approval of 'statutes' (a type of delegated legislation under the university law). Central university laws require the statutes, along with other types of delegated legislation called 'ordinances' and 'regulations', to be laid before the Parliament.

In contrast, the Governor acts unilaterally while performing similar functions for State universities, often bypassing the State's Ministry of Higher Education entirely, particularly in Opposition-ruled States. State University laws do not mandate laying delegated legislation – statutes, ordinances, and regulations – before the Legislature. This is a significant flaw rooted in the continuation of colonial-era practices.

Existing challenges

The persistence of the "Governor as Chancellor" model has caused numerous problems in the governance of State universities.

While State governments fund these universities, Governors wield substantial power without corresponding accountability. This creates a dual authority system, forcing university leadership to serve two masters, often with conflicting demands.

Disagreements between Governors and State governments, particularly in Opposition-ruled States, lead to delays in appointing Vice-Chancellors, causing administrative paralysis. These delays affect areas such as the appointment of staff, the implementation of projects, and

even the awarding of degrees.

Many Governors lack the academic qualifications or experience necessary to effectively guide educational institutions. They tend to rely on limited, non-transparent advice, leading to questionable decisions.

Rather than insulating universities from politics, some Governors exacerbate political interference, often prioritising the Centre's political agenda over the universities' autonomy and interests.

Allowing Governors – appointed by the Centre – to control State institutions compromises the principle of federalism. State universities should be fully accountable to elected State governments.

Insights from Commissions

Various commissions have examined the Governor's role as Chancellor and proposed reforms. The Rajamannar Committee (1969-71) on Centre-State relations, appointed by the Government of Tamil Nadu, argued that the Governor's statutory functions are included within the meaning of 'functions' under Article 163(1). So, the Governor should perform his statutory functions as Chancellor also on the advice of the State government. However, the Supreme Court has not upheld this interpretation.

The Sarkaria Commission (1983-88) on Centre-State relations, recognised that the Governor's role as Chancellor is statutory, not constitutional, and must be defined by State laws. It recommended that Governors consult with Chief Ministers while retaining independent judgment in university matters.

The National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution (2000-02), headed by Justice M.N. Venkatachaliah, advocated for political neutrality, a clearer definition of the Chancellor's functions, a supportive rather than authoritative role, and greater university autonomy.

The M.M.Punchhi Commission (2007-10) on Centre-State relations recommended that the Governor focus on constitutional responsibilities, avoiding statutory roles like that of Chancellor to preserve the dignity of the office. It suggested that States appoint eminent academics or experts as Chancellors to ensure academic independence and prevent conflicts.

Alternative models

The ideal Chancellor model, based on

global best practices, envisions the Chancellor as an eminent public figure who provides ceremonial leadership, presides over convocations, acts as an institutional ambassador, and has no executive authority. Universities in the U.K., from whom we borrowed the concept of Chancellor, exemplify this model. There are several ways to amend State university laws to implement this reform: The Governor as Ceremonial Chancellor model removes the Governor's discretionary powers, mandating him to act on the advice of the State Council of Ministers in university matters. Gujarat (1978), Karnataka (2000), and Maharashtra (2021) have adopted variations of this approach.

In the Chief Minister as Chancellor model, critics argue that a ceremonial role does not suit a powerful political figure like the Chief Minister. West Bengal and Punjab passed Bills in 2023 to adopt this system, but they await Presidential assent. In a variation, Tamil Nadu passed a Bill in 2022 substituting 'Government' for 'Chancellor'. It also awaits Presidential assent.

The State-appointed Chancellor model, implemented in Telangana in 2015, has the State government appoint a ceremonial Chancellor. A similar Bill was passed by Kerala in 2022, but it is still awaiting Presidential assent. The Kerala Bill specifies that the appointee should be an eminent academician or public figure.

The Chancellor elected by the University Bodies model empowers university bodies and alumni to elect a ceremonial Chancellor as in Oxford, Cambridge and Edinburgh universities.

In the Chancellor appointed by the University's Executive Council model, several universities in the U.K. (Birmingham), Canada (McGill) and Australia (Melbourne) appoint ceremonial Chancellors through their Executive Council or Board of Governors, following transparent selection processes.

Among these, the State-appointed Chancellor model is the most practical for India, provided the appointees are distinguished academicians or public figures, excluding politicians. The M.M.Punchhi Commission had recommended it.

Dismantling a colonial legacy

Reforming State universities in India demands a careful balance of key principles: ensuring accountability to elected State governments, minimising political interference, promoting institutional self-governance, and fostering academic freedom and excellence. The vital first step is divesting the Governor of his colonial-era role as Chancellor.

While States like Gujarat, Karnataka, Telangana, and Maharashtra have implemented reforms, others such as Tamil Nadu, Kerala, West Bengal, and Punjab face indefinite delays in obtaining Presidential assent for their proposed changes. This disparity underscores the need for impartial treatment by the President and Government of India. There is no valid reason for withholding approval of the pending Bills and resolving such matters through the Supreme Court under Article 131 should be avoided. The Centre should facilitate progressive reforms that seek to dismantle colonial-era administrative structures, guide States towards aligning their university governance models with global best practices, and enable universities to focus on academic excellence free from political entanglements.

The author is a retired IAS officer and a former Vice-Chancellor of the Indian Maritime University, Chennai

THE GIST

▼ The Governor's role as Chancellor of State universities has led to political interference and diminished university autonomy, particularly in Opposition-ruled States.

▼ Over the years, Governors have increasingly become political appointees, undermining the credibility of the office and exacerbating conflicts between State governments and the Centre.

▼ Various commissions have recommended reforms such as appointing academicians or public personalities as Chancellors to preserve university autonomy and reduce political influence.

Fiscal health check

NTI Aayog's initiative will inform policymaking

Public debate in India over the coming days will be focused on the upcoming Union Budget, which will be presented by Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on February 1. Since growth has slowed significantly over the past few quarters and the Indian economy is expected to expand 6.4 per cent this financial year compared to 8.2 per cent in 2023-24, stakeholders would look forward to how the government plans to revive growth. While the public interest in the Union Budget is understandable, the Indian economy and well-being of citizens to a large extent depend on how states perform. State governments in India account for about two-thirds of general government expenditure and one-third of revenue collection. Thus, it is important that state-government finances also get adequate public attention. In this regard, the NTI Aayog's fiscal health index (FHI), released last week, must be welcomed. It will help improve general understanding and inform policymaking.

The FHI covers 18 large states and has been developed with a focus on five sub-indices: The quality of expenditure, revenue mobilisation, fiscal prudence, debt index, and debt sustainability. Aside from the rankings, the report has a detailed analysis of individual states. Based on the criteria, Odisha has been judged the best-performing state, followed by Chhattisgarh and Goa. Punjab is at the bottom of the list. The FHI highlights the stark difference in fiscal management among states. The difference in fiscal indicators between the top and bottom states is worth highlighting here. The fiscal deficit in Odisha, for example, came down from 6.9 per cent of gross state domestic product (GSDP) in 2000-01 to 2 per cent in 2018-19. Meanwhile, the fiscal deficit in Punjab increased from 3.1 per cent in 2018-19 to 5 per cent in 2022-23. Consequently, its debt stock has increased over the years and was about 46 per cent of GSDP in 2022-23. As the report notes, the debt stock will continue to rise without intervention. Given that states have vastly different fiscal positions, the policy approach will need to account for this to attain a favourable general government fiscal position.

Overall, as the recent study of state government finances by the Reserve Bank of India showed, the debt of state governments in 2023-24 was 28.5 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) — over 8 percentage points above the level recommended by the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Review Committee. Besides, states have issued guarantees worth nearly 4 per cent of GDP, which must be accounted for in any discussion and policy planning. Clearly, states with low scores on the FHI will need to address the situation more actively. India perhaps needs more stringent fiscal rules to maintain debt and deficit at manageable levels. Although the quality of expenditure in states has improved in recent years, competitive political pressures and the growing electoral popularity of cash transfers and other welfare schemes pose a risk to productive expenditure in the medium term. The issue is being widely debated, but there is still no clear understanding of how much of the state or general government expenditure is allocated to such schemes. Since the NTI Aayog has studied and ranked states on fiscal status, it could expand the scope to assess the extent of merit and non-merit subsidies at general government level. Such an exercise will greatly inform public debate and enable suitable policy action.

Durable foundation

The Constitution reflects India's founding values

The flawless pageantry on display in the celebration of each Republic Day has a special resonance this year, which marks the 78th anniversary of the Indian Constitution coming into effect. The existence of the Constitution as a dynamic and ambitiously contested document deserves celebration for two reasons. First, it reflects India's survival as a united, vibrant, argumentative republic against all the odds and the dystopian predictions by Western commentators in the 1950s. Second, when set against the examples of American electoral practices and transfer of power, the Indian Constitution has proven a bulwark of democratic principles. For instance, Article 326 guarantees Indians universal adult suffrage, one of the first bold steps introduced by the constitutional authors. This is a right all Indians above the age of 18, irrespective of caste, creed, race, or economic background, can take for granted today. By contrast, in the world's most powerful democracy, electoral rolls are the states' responsibility, making them vulnerable to discretionary policies tailored by administrations' political inclinations. Also, where Indians can assume a peaceful handover of power, the American establishment remains traumatised by the attack on the Capitol on January 6, 2021, by supporters of Donald Trump, who refused to accept his defeat in the 2020 elections.

Transfer of power based on citizens' electoral decisions is not to be taken lightly, especially when set against Xi Jinping's move in 2018 to appoint himself President of China for life. That said, like any living document, the Constitution relies on the people, political leaders, and the healthy enabling of independent institutions to work. The Emergency of June 25, 1975, to March 21, 1977, declared by Indira Gandhi, has stood as a cautionary tale in Indian political lore as an example of how the checks and balances of democratic functioning — Parliament and the judiciary in this case — can be manoeuvred to suppress citizens' rights. That interlude underlined how Constitutional protections of citizens' rights cannot be taken for granted. For example, several rulings have upheld the Indian judicial principle of "basic structure", which asserts that several basic features of the Constitution (notably fundamental rights) cannot be amended by Parliament. But politicians in states and at the Centre have often sought to erode the right to freedom (including of speech and expression), the right to freedom of religion, and the right to equality. It is fair to say that the institutional checks and balances — including the judiciary and the Election Commission of India — have proven variable custodians of these rights.

A good part of the problem lies in the inefficiency of the judicial system with its huge case backlogs and vacancies that have weakened the constitutional provision of the judicial review (ironically borrowed from the United States Constitution) to ordinary citizens. Cynics often dismiss the Indian Constitution, the world's longest written Constitution, as a clone of the Government of India Act, 1935, and, indeed, that legislation accounts for the bulk of its contents. But the fact that the Opposition sought to make defence of the Constitution an electoral issue in the recent Lok Sabha elections suggests that the people's representatives see value in it. It remains a guarantor of Indian democracy despite the efforts of those who seek to undermine it.

A sagging India story

Overenthusiasm about India was so 2024. The Budget's task is to revive flagging momentum

ILLUSTRATION: AJAY MOHANTY



In the past weeks and months, it appears that a great deal of momentum has gone out of the India story. Restoring that momentum will have to be the primary target of this week's Union Budget.

Around this time last year, there was confidence that India was out-performing along multiple economic indicators. But that may no longer be the case. Growth, for example, while still high by global standards, will likely slow to the lowest level since the year of the pandemic.

Even though official growth numbers are no longer as trusted as they once were, other indicators seem to be backing up this deceleration. Growth in electricity output, for example, often seen as one of the most reliable indicators of what is actually happening on the ground, was also at its lowest level since the pandemic in 2024. This was particularly intense in the second half of the year, according to analysis reported in this newspaper. Industrial activity also slowed towards the end of 2024.

Meanwhile, concerns about consumer demand — which some in the corporate sector have been quietly expressing for some years — turned into a loud chorus in the last earnings season. The festive period between October and November, normally an occasion for strong volume and price growth, was something of a disappointment for fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) companies. This newspaper has reported data from NielsenIQ suggesting that volume growth was only 3 per cent and price growth between 1 and 2 per cent.

Disturbingly, the FMCG companies attribute this partly to a slowdown in urban areas, particularly in

metropolitan cities. It is unsure why cities are particularly vulnerable at this moment; some have argued that the reason is real estate prices, while others point to subdued wage growth, high real rates, or sticky food inflation. Whatever the reason, slower consumer demand is a problem for the growth engine of the economy. The India growth story has always been dependent on strong consumer growth domestically; in its absence, the Indian market will struggle to attract

foreign investment, and domestic companies will worry about overcapacity. Nor will it be easy for a transfer and welfare system designed especially to bolster rural demand and agricultural income to address problems in larger cities.



POLICY RULES
MIHIR S SHARMA

Two issues other than the growth slowdown have also contributed to concerns about India in recent months. The first is the performance of the stock market, and the second the movement of the rupee. These may be overstated as problems, but are nevertheless worth examining.

In the markets, the story has two sides. Domestic institutions and mutual funds kept chugging along, while foreign investors have sold more than \$59 billion of Indian shares since the final quarter of 2024. India's have been the worst performers among major markets, in local currency terms, in the month to January 26; emerging market indices as a whole have fallen only 0.2 per cent. If the Nifty 50 ended this month having lost value, that would be its first four-month run of losses since 2001. And even then its forward price to earnings ratio would be considerably higher than its competitors in the Indo-Pacific.

Given the expectations built into current stock

prices, there isn't a lot of room for further surprises to earnings on the downside. Nor will things necessarily get better in the "America First" era. Bloomberg Intelligence's estimates of Indian 12-month forward operating margins during the last period when Donald Trump imposed tariffs, from January 2018 onwards, was a decline of 120 basis points. The Chinese decline, in comparison, was 128 basis points while European estimates barely moved.

Foreign investors will also keep an eye on the rupee. That India's currency has been losing value against the dollar is not per se a problem — the dollar has strengthened considerably, after all. An overvalued rupee in any case has been problematic for India's merchandise exports, and it would not hurt for its value to stabilise at a considerably lower level. But there are certainly questions about how and when it will find that value which weigh on investors' minds.

A linked question is the path of inflation in India; the rupee's value feeds into import prices, and thus particularly energy costs locally. Many analysts who had predicted that the Reserve Bank of India would cut rates by 50 basis points early in 2025 have pushed their predictions for such a cut back by several months as a consequence.

Framing a Union Budget that pushes back against these headwinds might appear to be a daunting task. But it should also be noted that there are multiple structural advantages that the Union finance ministry might be able to take advantage of. Many of these are the fallout of its own careful work in prior years.

First, India's tax position has grown more comfortable. Direct tax collection has surged in the past year, and is now ahead of indirect tax collection. The government has also been very cautious about raising non-tax revenue, and it might be time to revisit that approach.

On the other side of the ledger, revenue expenditure has been put on a tight leash year after year, with the exception of the effects of the pandemic — which were, in any case, visible less in India's fiscal than in many others.

Most importantly, India has built up a reputation in the past years for clarity and fiscal responsibility. It certainly can't afford a dent in that status now. Even when constructed under the current stresses, the Budget mathematics should be clear and above board.

There's also a lot of low-hanging fruit in terms of policy that could quickly restore optimism. This column had argued at the time of the last Budget in July 2024 that it signalled three welcome policy directions. First, movement towards cleaning up the direct tax system; second, reversing a protectionist trend in tariffs; and third, the promise of an overall policy framework to guide decision-making. Even taking the next concrete step on these three might serve to restore some juice to the India story.

The writer is director, Centre for the Economy and Growth, Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi

Budget 2025: More of the same?

Many people seem to be bewildered by the sudden slowdown in India's economic growth. But had you kept your gaze firmly fixed on India's policymaking, the slowdown would hardly be surprising, let alone inexplicable. Since public memory is short, here is a quick recap. For the first few years of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's tenure, India's economic policy was largely incoherent. India went through two Reserve Bank governors and a finance minister who didn't exactly set the Yamuna on fire. The government's main focus was on a bunch of social schemes: Swachh Bharat, Jan Dhan, Digital India, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Saraksha Bima, Jeevan Jyoti Rima, Atal Pension, Namami Gange, Soil Health Card, etc. These, and the "economic" schemes of that period like Make in India, Skill India, MUDRA loans and Startup India, were all heavy on slogans and propaganda but had the impact on the ground was not game-changing.

With the economy continuing to hobble along (from the previous regime's missteps), the coup de grace was the demonetisation of high-value currency notes in November 2016, which devastated millions of small businesses and 1.5 million jobs. Then came the poorly planned and hastily implemented goods and services tax (GST). These two moves wrecked supply chains and hollowed out the economy in the adjustment period. By 2019, every economic indicator was flashing red: Rising unemployment, poor export growth, punitive tax rates, tax terrorism, an imploding public sector, and a collapse in the gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate to 5 per cent (effectively 3.5 per cent under the old calculations). Manmohan Singh, who had been the constant butt of Mr Modi's jokes, gently pointed out that nominal GDP growth was at a 15-year low, household consumption at a four-decade low, unemployment at a 45-year high, bad loans of banks at an all-time high,

growth in electricity generation at a 15-year low, and so on.

Businessmen were restless. TV Mohandas Pai, a vocal advocate for nearly every policy of the current administration, did not mince words when he sounded the alarm. "Tax terrorism has gone rampant. The compliance burden has increased massively. There is a fear psychosis," he lamented. "There's a prevailing belief among government officials that all businessmen are crooks and must be pursued." His grim assessment of the business climate echoed across India's corporate corridors. "I have never seen mood and morale so down... Businessmen have given up hope." The late Rahul Bajaj, a titan of industry, was blunt: "There is no demand, and no private investment. So where will growth come from? It doesn't fall from the heavens." A M



IRRATIONAL CHOICE
DEBASHIS BASU

Naik, then head of Larsen & Toubro, suggested that India would be fortunate to achieve even 6.5 per cent GDP growth. More tellingly, Mr Naik cast doubts on the reliability of the official data, remarking that the "situation is challenging on data credibility". A panicky government enacted a drastic corporate tax cut in September 2019, hoping to spark investment and job creation. Grateful businessmen held on to their tax savings because of weak demand rather than reinvesting them. And then came the pandemic, which dealt a further blow to a weak economy. The data shows that growth between 2014 and 2022 — a period marked by the same Prime Minister and two finance ministers (not counting the interim stints of Piyush Goyal) — was driven almost entirely by government borrowing and spending. Indian households and businesses contributed a negligible share of this growth.

The economic rebound following the demand compression was sharp, and with the stabilisation of the GST system and improved tax compliance, government revenues surged. Capitalising on this windfall

and adding massive borrowings to the pot, the government decided to go all in. In the Budget 2023-24 announced a massive capital outlay of ₹10 trillion, which was increased to ₹11 trillion in 2024-25, to be spent on railways, roads, urban transport, waterworks, energy transformation, and defence production. The heavy hand of the state has rolled the dice of growth with a tax-and-spend model for two years now. Yet, in a society where the rule of law is weak, corruption is rampant, and red tape is entrenched, limitations to this strategy are obvious. Also, if tax-and-spend was expected to trickle down, it has failed. India's rural wages are stagnant, which has wrecked consumption growth. Given that government expenditure has been the sole driver of growth — with neither private capital expenditure nor household consumption contributing meaningfully — when government spending slowed in FY25, the inevitable deceleration in GDP followed. As I said, the slowdown is neither surprising nor inexplicable.

This, then, is the summary of Indian policymaking over the last 11 years and its impact. After the knee-jerk income-tax cuts of 2019, continuous increase in other kinds of tax, and a flood of government capex since 2023, here is the report card: The economy has "normalised" to 5-6 per cent growth, exports and the rupee are weak, inflation and interest rates will not drop much, and taxes will remain high. In other words, every single feature of India's lower middle-income status remains intact. On February 1, we will have another Budget. I have no idea what it will contain. What I do know is that it will not move the needle much. The fiscal deficit (the states and the Centre put together) is high, limiting the scope of further increase in government spending. Taxes will only be tinkered with, disappointing an already frustrated populace. We are likely to get more of the same as in the previous years, with exactly the same outcome.

The author is editor of www.moneylife.in and a trustee of the Moneylife Foundation; @Moneylifers

Christopher Columbus and the climate crisis



BOOK REVIEW

ELIZABETH RUSH

The slow-motion disaster that is climate change started with our unearthing long-buried organic matter and lighting it aflame, which released particles into the atmosphere that hold warmth. This is the story we tell ourselves about a central cause of our warming planet. But what if slowing down the climate change juggernaut has proved so difficult in part because we talk about the problem all wrong? Tao Leigh Goffe's *Dark Laboratory: On Columbus, the Caribbean, and the Origins of the Climate Crisis* argues that current scientific discourse obscures the racist roots of our existential

predicament while also overlooking potential strategies of repair and endurance.

Goffe, an interdisciplinary scholar and writer, contends that to understand our present plight, we need to look back in time, in particular to the arrival of Christopher Columbus in the Caribbean in 1492, which she cites as a marker for the start of globalisation. Over the intervening centuries, the region's interconnected islands have served as a kind of testing ground for different colonial practices — chattel slavery, resource extraction and the classification of flora and fauna (as well as people) — that transformed the world, destroying ecosystems, lives and livelihoods, while simultaneously bearing strange fruit.

Dark Laboratory is as interested in identifying the causes of the climate crisis as it is in offering a kind of alternative account of life in the wake of environmental apocalypse. "Once I realised that European colonialism achieves

are evidence lockers full of crimes against humanity, I began to stop arguing the case in court, as it were," Goffe writes. "It becomes liberating then to evaluate not what lies enclosed within the walls of colonial architectures, but to begin to comprehend the magnitude of what is outdoors."

In this case, "outdoors" encompasses a lot of different places at different moments in time. *Dark Laboratory* hops from Jamaica to Hong Kong, New York and London — all locales to which Goffe traces her roots — landing intermittently on a host of other spots in between (Dominica, Tahiti, Sardinia, Hawaii). In each, Goffe's ear is tuned to songs of resistance, to what it looks like to make life amid (and after) colonial subjugation. The result is an assemblage of sorts where blue-footed boobies, coral reefs and even tar guano play a leading role, illustrating the ways nonhuman actors and their attendant ecologies have survived human predation.

Consider, for instance, "the curious case of the Calcutta mongoose in Jamaica" (the title of one of Goffe's chapters). The animal was imported by a white plantation owner to eat the rats (endemic to Europe) that were eating the



DARK LABORATORY: On Columbus, the Caribbean, and the Origins of the Climate Crisis
Author: Tao Leigh Goffe
Publisher: Doubleday
Pages: 342
Price: \$35

about the mongoose's radical mothering practices: All births within a colony occur on the same night, with the result that all mongoose babies — up to three litters a year — belong to all mongoose mothers, a potential blueprint, Goffe argues, for collective survival. And yet much of the popular literature about these creatures paints them as lascivious tricksters, not to be trusted. For whose violence, Goffe asks, do they serve as a scapegoat?

Aiming to centre Black and Indigenous history and ecology, *Dark Laboratory* is a pointed response to the dominance of scientific rationalism as the climate crisis.

Yet Goffe's narrative moves so rapidly among disciplines — biology, literature, economics, musicology, geoscience — that it's easy to lose track of where or when we are in space and time. Her episodic style feels purposeful, an

obvious rebuke of a more conventional narrative structure, yet the effect can be truly disorienting.

There have been many proposals for what to name our particular era: the Anthropocene, the Capitalocene, the Trumpocene. Each has its own origin story, rooted in the sediment or the stock market or the doomscock. But what if the instinct for linear chronology — for beginnings, middles and ends — obscures the imbricated injustices that shape the present?

As Goffe writes, "The 21st century requires new genres of climate storytelling to pass the baton to the multiplicity and nonlinearity of salvation if it is possible." *Dark Laboratory* provides a noble and necessary, if at times unwieldy, example of what one such genre might look like, offering readers a novel account of post-colonial resistance, regeneration and survival.

The reviewer is the author of *The Quickenings: Motherhood, Antanica and Cultivating Hope in a Warming World*. She teaches creative nonfiction at Brown University. ©2025 The New York Times News Service

THE ASIAN AGE

27 JANUARY 2025

Indonesian Prez's R-Day visit sign of deeper ties

It was no coincidence that the Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto was given the pride of place at the ceremony celebrating the completion of 75 years of the Indian republic for the legendary leader of that nation, President Sukarno, had been the chief guest at the first Indian Republic Day parade in Jan, 1950.

Delicate negotiations may have taken place after inviting Mr Subianto in convincing him not to travel on to Pakistan directly from New Delhi as he may have intended to for India may not have appreciated an adverse message that such travel may have conveyed. In gracious acceptance of the condition, Indonesia has shown how much it values this continuation of the close bilateral ties between the two countries and the importance of the state visits by its President.

As the largest economy of Southeast Asia and 10th largest in the world in terms of purchasing power parity, Indonesia's economic heft has been growing even as the percentage of people in poverty declining. And the symbolism of inviting its head as the chief guest at India's show of pomp, pageantry and power was further enhanced by that nation being home to the largest Muslim population in the world.

That President Subianto travelled with a high-profile delegation of ministers, bureaucrats and representatives of business numbering around 100 was an indication of the importance his government was attaching to the visit.

The signing of five memoranda of understanding is the first step towards the next level of ties in which India recognises Indonesia as an important partner of New Delhi in the Indo-Pacific whose membership of BRICS, which came into effect this month, was actively promoted by India.

The MoUs envisage the boosting of cooperation in several areas like maritime safety, health and digital technology with India having considerable expertise in money transfers. There may, however, be considerable ground to cover in bilateral trade for India that has a deficit of about \$24 billion in \$30 billion, but that may be because India has Indonesia as a key supplier of coal, besides mineral fuels, chemical products, palm oil and flat-rolled iron and steel products.

It is significant that Indonesia is inviting Indian expertise in medical care and running of hospitals to participate in its economy, besides calling on private Indian airport operators. While some Indian automobile companies make in Indonesia, the country has tariffs on import of cars and the Indian Prime Minister may have made a special appeal for Indonesia to look at importing cars and vehicles from India as the country takes pride in the quality of its manufacture of automobiles.

Given the relative nearness of India and the Indonesian archipelago, which shares a maritime boundary with Andamans and Nicobar, it would make sense for India to try and close the trade gap. Prime Minister Modi's comment that everything was discussed including diversifying market access and the trade basket was in line with President Subianto's description of their talks as "intensive and frank". The vibes of a bilateral meeting with Indonesia may have added to the celebration of a milestone occasion for India.

Prez must defend India's ideals

President Droupadi Murmu's message to the nation on the Republic Day was justifiably imbued with a sense of pride in that the Constitution has sustained this country and the country, too, in its turn, sustained the Republic for 75 years. The President also noted the all-round progress the young republic has made in this span of time. However, she chose to ignore some of the big challenges that the ideals on which the Constitution and the country have been founded, including democracy, federalism, diversity and secularism, have been facing.

The President rightly pointed out that the Constitution has guided the path of our progress in the last 75 years. It is welcome that she reiterated the fact that "at the time of Independence, many parts of the country faced extreme poverty and hunger. However, we maintained a belief in ourselves and created conditions for growth". It is now for the people to build on it. The President's push for the bill, now before Parliament, seeking to introduce simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies, however, sounded a jarring note. She listed the advantages the proposed reforms would bring, such as promoting consistency in governance, preventing policy paralysis, mitigating resource diversion and alleviating financial burdens on the state. True, each of these goals merits discussion and we, as a nation, should think of how to make them happen, but all that should take place in the realm of administrative reform.

To prescribe a "one nation-one election" pill in a parliamentary system of governance would be like missing the woods for the trees. The ideals of democracy and the respect for people's choices in a democracy cannot be sacrificed at the altar of administrative expediency. If India chooses to do so, it would be nothing short of writing the prescription for a totalitarian government. It may be remembered that the President entered her office with a vow to "preserve, protect and defend the Constitution" and she must defend its foundational ideals as well.

THE ASIAN AGE

RACHIN MISHRA

India

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Zahid Hussain

An uncertain Gaza under siege: Can people there live in peace?

The guns have gone silent in Gaza with the ceasefire coming into effect, as life limps back to what is considered normal in the enclave, devastated by incessant Israeli bombing for the past 15 months.

But the war is far from over with the Zionist regime still not willing to end its occupation. It's only the first phase of the three-stage process that is being implemented; there are still questions about Israel fulfilling its promise of complete withdrawal.

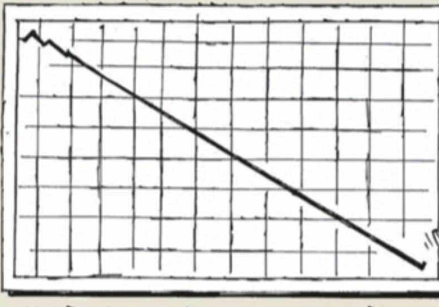
An eerie calm prevails, with the people of Gaza continuing to live under siege. Two Palestinian men, including a teenager, were killed by Israeli forces hours after the ceasefire started.

The Israeli Prime Minister has threatened to resume military operations if the second phase of the truce doesn't work. There is still no mention of an independent Palestinian state.

It is a tentative peace with hundreds of thousands of Palestinians returning to the rubble that was once their home. There are still dead bodies buried underneath. Each one has lost a family member or acquaintance in the genocide that has left more than 40,000 people dead and thousands of others gravely injured. Most of them are children.

Hamas was back taking charge immediately after the ceasefire. Thousands of Hamas fighters

Subhani



Twist in American Dream: Will Trump raj help India?



Sunanda K. Datta Ray

Reflections

If a cartoon were to sum up initial reactions to Donald Trump's second coming, its caption should read "Stop the world, I want to get off!"

Perhaps not quite. The 47th US President does crave the world's adulation even if withdrawal from WHO and the Paris climate agreement appear to begrudge any of the service and sacrifice that leadership should entail.

In a sense, he and Narendra Modi face not dissimilar dilemmas. Both are political outsiders. Both exalt the nitty-gritty of routine administrative responsibilities with grand notions of personal consequence. Neither shows any trace of the humility on which a silver-haired woman bishop dwelt as an essential component of leadership when speaking at the Washington National Cathedral as part of Mr Trump's inaugural ceremony. On the contrary, the US President publicly denounced Bishop Marianne E. Budde, leader of Washington's Episcopal Diocese, as a "so-called bishop" and "radical left hard-line Trump hater".

Like Mr Modi, Mr Trump too explicitly claims a sacred, divine mandate. Being neither historically nor institutionally entitled to such grandeur, they are trying to invent it. Mr Modi's territorial ambitions extending to Canada and Mexico, Panama and Greenland recall another head of state who rededicated himself "His Excellency, President for Life, Field Marshal Al Hajj Doctor Idi Amin Dada, VC, DSO, MC, Lord of all the Beasts of the Earth and Fishes of the Sea and Conqueror of the British Empire in Africa in General and Uganda in Particular".

Actually, the splendour of that bonnet is not too far a cry from the US Senate's initial proposal to designate the ruler "His Highness, the President of the United States of America, and the Protector of their Liberties".

The first US vice-president, John Adams, the President of the United States, and the Protector of their Liberties. The first US vice-president, John Adams, the President of the United States, and the Protector of their Liberties.

Americans didn't realise that the power he wielded didn't flow from any divine right or from his mother's ceaseless urging: "George, be a King!" It was the handiwork of lobbyists known as The King's Friends.

Even a future US founding father like Benjamin Franklin swelled with monarchical pride when he attended King George III's coronation in 1761.

Burning royal effigies and toppling kindly statues came much later. So did the presidential rhetoric of Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and Franklin D. Roosevelt's heady declaration that "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself"; and John F. Kennedy's noble exhortation to "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country." All that goes with an egalitarian George Washington setting the tone for republican disdain for frills and fancies by accepting the simple, no-nonsense title of "President of the United States".

Like Winston Churchill who rejected a dukedom, taking pride instead in being "The Great Commoner", a plain President was far more appropriate for the leader of a world in which one out of every ten persons languish below the poverty threshold, children, representing the future of mankind, account for more than half of the world's population.

Many European leaders also fear that Mr Trump's return to the White House could mean a momentous, almost apocalyptic, shift that might disrupt alliances and play havoc with economic relations. Only

Not that India's movers and shakers are unaware that the indigent world can be clothed out of the trimmings of the rich, citing Oliver Goldsmith in She Stoops to Conquer.

rest inhabitants, and despite the ramshackle glitter of tycoons like Mukesh Ambani, 24 per cent of the global poor are Indian.

Not that India's movers and shakers are unaware that the indigent world can be clothed out of the trimmings of the rich, citing Oliver Goldsmith in She Stoops to Conquer. On April 4, 2011, even before New Delhi sent directives to state governments, the late Sudarshan Agarwal, former governor of Uttarakhand and Sikkim, wrote to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, saying:

"It is with deep anguish that I am writing this letter as a concerned citizen of this country about the colossal wastage of food at weddings and other social occasions in the country. It is painful to see 100 dishes being served to 1,000 or more guests at several of these weddings. Last year, a minister in Karnataka had a wedding reception for 30,000 guests in a pandal where he had put 320 air-conditioners. I sincerely feel that we need to revive the guest control order which limits the number of dishes that can be served at dinners/lunches and also limit the number of guests."

He added: "Unfortunately, ministers themselves have not set an example. A couple of years ago, the first ethnic Indian 'Second Lady' could be the forerunner of a future that also means more wrangling over H-1B visas whose holders Sirhan Matloff, professor of computer science at a California university, famously called "indentured servants". That twist of the American Dream augurs interesting times.

The writer is a senior journalist, columnist and author

Vladimir Putin, who upholds the absurd theory that the last American presidential election was "stolen" from Mr Trump, thinks a Trump presidency might end the Ukraine war. Other US rivals and adversaries like China, Iran and North Korea expect new tensions and heightened anti-Western agendas.

Ironically, South and Southeast Asia, a region that includes many US allies, partners and friends, take a more placid view of Mr Trump's return. It does not cause the same strong emotions in Japan and South Korea or among Asian members that it does in some Nato countries. The prevailing pleasure with which India's media lapped up evidence of external affairs minister Subrahmanya Jaishankar's endorsement of a prominent front-row seat at the inauguration displayed no disapproval of Mr Trump's autocratic tendency and contempt for liberal internationalist ideals.

Being almost as transactional as the Republican Party chief himself, the region has long conducted relations with Washington on the basis of common interests rather than common values. Indians expect Mr Trump to be even more committed than Joe Biden to the Quad and the AUKUS nuclear agreement with Australia and Britain. India hopes for increased trade, improved technology transfer and, above all, greater scope for young men and women whose training and skills can benefit the world.

Mr Trump's "Make America Great Again" dream. Despite the racist comments of white supremacists, California-born Telugu Brahmin Usha Chakraborty, a practising Hindu and the first ethnic Indian "Second Lady", could be the forerunner of a future that also means more wrangling over H-1B visas whose holders Sirhan Matloff, professor of computer science at a California university, famously called "indentured servants". That twist of the American Dream augurs interesting times.

The writer is a senior journalist, columnist and author

LETTERS FARMERS' ALLIES

With the hiatus on the MSP issue raised by the farmers, a new corollary seems to have emerged. Small grocery store owners are aggrieved over their businesses being upstaged by e-commerce. The march of one lakh tractors on Sunday was in solidarity with them. Two lakh shops across the nation have closed down. Although the tractor rush will add to the miseries of commuters for a day, the integration of the grocers' issue with that of the MSP of farmers needs to be nipped in the bud. It is time for the government to take a strategic decision and resolve this now.

R.S. Narula
Patiala

SINNER WINNER

THE ABRUPT departure of Novak Djokovic from the semifinals made the plan of Jannik Sinner winning the Australian open in the most convincing way. The Djoker was able to manage a stunning win against Carlos Alcaraz in the quarterfinal but a pulled hamstring caused his campaign for a 25th Grand Slam and 11th Australian Open crown to end in disappointment. One has to appreciate the consistency of Sinner who after beating Ben Shelton in the semifinals took up to the challenge against formidable Sascha Zverev in the finals. The top two seeds tussled fiercely in this final but the champion's luck as well as his grit favoured the Italian who went on to win his third Grand Slam.

A.P. Thiruvadi
Chennai

PILGRIMS' BONANZA

AFTER AAP and BJP promised free yatras to Ayodhya, Varanasi and other pilgrimage centres to Hindus and Christians, could the Congress afford to remain behind? Therefore, it should come as no surprise that in Delhi the Congress has promised free pilgrimage to Buddhist sites if elected. Very soon we are going to see such promises made to Jains and followers of other religions which has a significant population in a particular state. When is this going to end? It would not be too surprising that in the coming days, the parties would even promise a free ride to heaven for the seniors!

Anthony Henriques
Mumbai

7500 for the best letter of the week goes to Vijay Singh Adhikari (Jan. 25). Email: asianage.letters@gmail.com.

have re-emerged from hiding and have re-established control over the enclave. It was apparent that despite the horror it has wrought Israel has failed to achieve its main objective of eliminating the resistance groups. According to some reports, more recruits have joined the militant outfits, replacing the fighters killed by Israeli forces.

After months of hectic diplomatic engagements that involved Qatar, Egypt and the US, the two sides finally reached a ceasefire agreement last week. The main resistance to the truce had come from Tel Aviv, which was not willing to withdraw its forces from the occupied territory. The three-phase deal finally came through just days before the installation of Donald Trump as US President. Interestingly, there was no significant change in the peace deal that has been on the table since May last year. There are several factors that seem to have led to the change of stance by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government.

It may be true that pressure from Donald Trump forced the right-wing Israeli government to step back from its hard-line position. Trump had repeatedly threatened that there would be "hell to pay" if the hostages were not released ahead of his January 20 inauguration.

And surely it did happen with some arm-twisting by Trump's special envoy for the Middle East,

Steve Witkoff. The first part of the three-phased deal began with a six-week ceasefire and an exchange of the first and second batches of, respectively, three and four Israeli hostages taken by Hamas in October 2023, and a total of 200 Palestinian prisoners by Tel Aviv. Over the next six weeks, if the deal holds, 33 of the roughly 100 remaining hostages still in Gaza, living and dead, and over 1,000 imprisoned Palestinians held in Israel would be released. In the second phase a permanent ceasefire, last week declared that he would withdraw forces from Gaza. The third phase envisages reconstruction process lasting three to five years.

It all sounds good on paper but there is a strong suspicion that Israel, under pressure from its far right, would not abide by the agreement in its second phase. Some coalition members of the Netanyahu government are already talking about not extending the ceasefire to the second phase, which would really mark the effective end of the war. It remains to be seen how the Trump administration would allow the deal to fall apart. President Trump, who has claimed credit for brokering the ceasefire deal, last week declared that he would build up the momentum of the freshly agreed upon Gaza ceasefire deal to expand the "historic" Abraham Accords.

The US-backed agreements struck during his

first term normalised Israel's relations with several Arab countries, including the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Morocco. "We will continue promoting peace through strength throughout the region" the new US president said.

President Trump would seek to broaden the deal to include major Arab power Saudi Arabia. During his previous term he succeeded in bringing Tel Aviv and Riyadh closer. But Israel's genocidal war in Gaza has halted the move.

Riyadh has said it will not consider normalising relations until Israel commits to a "credible path" to a Palestinian state. While there is no indication that the new administration in Washington would press Israel to agree to the two-state solution, President Trump appears optimistic that Saudi Arabia could still be persuaded to come into the fold of the Abraham Accords.

One is not sure that Trump's Middle East project would work without Israel accepting the two-state solution. In fact, some senior members of Mr Trump's nominated cabinet favour a further or even complete Israeli annexation of the West Bank, which could make a viable Palestinian state almost impossible. In such a situation there is no hope of ending the Middle East conflict.

—By arrangement with Dawn

An enduring commitment to the Indo-Pacific

The inauguration of Donald Trump as the 47th President of the United States marks an unparalleled comeback in American political history. It also signals a vital moment in global geopolitics, particularly for the Indo-Pacific region. During his first term, Mr. Trump redefined U.S. engagement in the Indo-Pacific. As he embarks on his second term, expectations of a more assertive U.S. security posture and strengthened alliances are high. The presence of the foreign ministers from India, Japan, and Australia – America's key Quad partners – at the inauguration underscores the strategic importance of this grouping in Mr. Trump's foreign policy vision. With the Indo-Pacific being central to U.S.'s strategic priorities, Trump 2.0 signals a renewed focus on deepening defence, economic, and technological cooperation with 'like-minded' nations to address persisting and emerging challenges, while ensuring regional stability.

Importance of Indo-Pacific
Mr. Trump's first term marked a pivotal shift in Washington's approach to this region, redefining the strategic landscape in three ways. First, under Trump's leadership, the U.S. adopted the term 'Indo-Pacific', replacing the previously favoured 'Asia-Pacific', which reflected a recalibration of the geopolitical lens, moving beyond a focus solely on East Asia and the Pacific Rim to encompass a wider area critical for global trade, security, and strategic stability. The term expanded the geographic focus to include the Indian Ocean, emphasising the importance of securing sea lines of communication, addressing maritime challenges, and underscoring the U.S.'s intent to counterbalance China's growing influence. The Indo-Pacific expanded the strategic narrative, integrating defence, security, and political considerations alongside



Harsh V. Pant
Vice President at Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi



Pratnashree Basu
Associate Fellow, Indo-Pacific, Observer Research Foundation

Under the new Trump administration, the Indo-Pacific is likely to regain prominence but with a sharper focus on hard power dynamics

economic cooperation. Second, there were structural changes in the U.S. defence and security framework, including the renaming of the U.S. Pacific Command as the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command in 2018, reflecting the operational import accorded to the Indo-Pacific. The Office of the Secretary of Defence was reorganised to establish specialised units focusing on Indo-Pacific allies and partners. Third, the revival of the Quad underscored the Trump administration's recognition of the Indo-Pacific as the fulcrum of 21st century geopolitics, reflecting a pragmatic convergence of interests among its members. The U.S. provided a robust push to institutionalise the grouping. The Trump administration elevated the Quad dialogue to the ministerial level, laying the groundwork for deeper collaboration in maritime security, supply chain resilience, and technological standards. The Joe Biden administration inherited the Indo-Pacific framework and maintained its strategic centrality. Mr. Biden elevated the Quad further by convening the first-ever Quad leaders' summit in 2021, marking a significant institutional leap. He emphasised multilateralism and sought to broaden the Quad's agenda by initiating collaboration on vaccines, climate change, critical technologies, and infrastructure development. He also introduced the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework in 2022, complementing the strategic focus with economic engagement. The emphasis on a rules-based order and inclusive development in the Indo-Pacific aligned the Quad's mission with broader global governance goals.

Prospects in Trump 2.0
The bipartisan consensus on the Indo-Pacific's importance ensures continuity in U.S. engagement. While Mr. Trump could take a more assertive stance against China, his reliance on India,

Japan, and Australia to share the burden of regional security would remain and likely be strengthened. The new administration's first major foreign policy initiative was a meeting of the Quad foreign ministers on January 21. At his confirmation hearing, the U.S. Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, characterised China as the most formidable adversary the U.S. has faced, noting that the challenges prompting the Quad's revival under Mr. Trump have intensified. This was the administration's first significant engagement with foreign leaders. All four members reaffirmed Washington's unwavering commitment to the Indo-Pacific region while also setting the stage for this year's Quad Summit early in the Trump Presidency. Mr. Rubio also met with the three Quad foreign ministers separately with India being the first bilateral meeting. A joint statement released after the meeting emphasised the importance of international law, peace, stability, and maritime security for regional prosperity while opposing unilateral actions to alter the status quo through force or coercion. It also highlighted the dedication to enhancing regional maritime, economic, and technological security, alongside promoting resilient and reliable supply chains. The members agreed to hold regular ministerial meetings and prepare for a leaders' summit to be hosted by India. Under the new Trump administration, the Indo-Pacific is likely to retain prominence but with a sharper focus on hard power dynamics. The Indo-Pacific has changed since Mr. Trump's last term in office, and so have the priorities that would influence the President's approach this time. It is likely that alongside boosting security-related frameworks, Mr. Trump may also bolster mechanisms that have a broader and more diverse agenda so long as they serve to preserve the existing rules-based order.

The failed 'Delhi model'

Under the AAP regime, fiscal space was created by reducing capital expenditure

STATE OF PLAY

Sthanu R. Nair & Dhruv Jain

As Delhiites prepare to elect a new government, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government has been pushing its welfare-based governance model, called the 'Delhi model', on the campaign trail. It has been advertising its welfare schemes, such as the free electricity and water supply, but travel for women, and primary health care, arguing that it not only managed to prioritise human capital development by spending more on the social sector, but has also succeeded in augmenting the fiscal space by cutting down inefficient government spending and mobilising revenues. To check the validity of these claims, we examined the fiscal indicators of Delhi on average during the 10 years when the AAP was in power (2015-16 to 2024-25) compared with those in the pre-AAP decade (2004-05 to 2012-13).

Before the AAP came to power, Delhi had demonstrated fiscal prudence from 2004-05 by containing revenue deficit and gross fiscal deficit (GFD). The revenue account remained in surplus throughout the pre-AAP and AAP regimes. However, the revenue surplus declined on average from -2.38% of gross state domestic product (GSDP) during the pre-AAP regime to -0.82% under the AAP regime. Although the GFD-GSDP ratio was within the Fiscal Responsibility Legislation (FRL) limit of 3% in the pre-AAP and AAP regimes, it declined from 0.68% on average in the pre-AAP regime to 0.25% in the AAP regime. But this downward correction in GFD was achieved by reducing much-



needed capital outlay, a violation of a 'golden rule' in public finance. The AAP government successfully reduced Delhi's debt-to-GSDP ratio to 2% on an average from 13.7% earlier. This is a stupendous achievement. The share of revenue expenditure in the total spending of Delhi increased significantly from 58.27% on average in the pre-AAP regime to 77.63% in the AAP regime. Concomitantly, the share of expenditures which are incurred on asset creation, namely capital expenditure (CE) and capital outlay (CO), declined significantly on an average from 41.73% (CE)/15.82% (CO) in the pre-AAP regime to 22.37% (CE)/10.32% (CO) in the AAP regime. These trends show that public expenditure quality deteriorated under the AAP regime. Both the quantity and quality of the development expenditure and its components were compromised in the AAP regime. As a percentage of GSDP, expenditure on social services declined from 3.60% in the pre-AAP regime to 3.41% in the AAP regime. In the case of economic services, the decline was steeper from 2.29% to 1.28%. This drop was caused by a cut in the capital expenditure on these two functional heads. The capital expenditure on social services declined from 0.82% of GSDP in the pre-AAP regime to

0.56% in the AAP regime. In the case of economic services, the decline was steeper from 1.82% of GSDP to 0.38%. As a percentage of GSDP, the expenditure on education and medical and public health increased by only 0.08 and 0.06 percentage points in the AAP regime over the previous regime. The expenditures on water supply and sanitation, housing, urban development, transport, and communication declined as a percentage of GSDP under the AAP regime, with the decline being the highest for roads and bridges, water supply, sanitation, and urban development. On the revenue front, too, the AAP regime has performed poorly. On average, Delhi's total revenue receipts declined from 7.42% of GSDP in the pre-AAP regime to 5.82% in the AAP regime. Both own tax revenue and non-tax revenue contributed to the decline. The own tax revenue-GSDP ratio declined from 5.85% in the pre-AAP regime to 4.84% in the AAP regime. Own non-tax revenue decreased sharply from 0.85% to 0.10%, implying that the AAP government's free electricity, water supply, bus travel, and health care policy have adversely impacted non-tax revenues. Interestingly, Delhi received more grants from the Centre (0.88% of GSDP) than the previous regime (0.71%). Overall, the revenue and expenditure trends reveal that the AAP regime has not augmented its revenue capacity to fund welfare programmes. Instead, fiscal space was created by reducing the much-needed capital expenditure.

Sthanu R. Nair teaches Economics and Public Policy at IIM Kozhikode. Dhruv Jain is a post-graduate programme student at IIM Kozhikode. Views are personal

India and U.S. lead Courseera enrolments for Gen AI courses

Corporate sponsorship plays a significant role in boosting enrolments in India

DATA POINT

The Hindu Data Team

The demand for generative AI training has grown significantly among learners and enterprises, according to Courseera data, highlighted in the Future of Jobs Report 2025. India and the U.S. are leading this global trend in enrolments, but the factors driving demand differ between the two countries. While individual learners primarily drive demand in the U.S., corporate sponsorship plays a significant role in boosting enrolments in India. Globally, individual learners on Courseera are focusing on foundational generative AI skills and conceptual topics, such as prompt engineering, trustworthy AI practices, and strategic decision-making around AI. Meanwhile, institution-sponsored learners are prioritising practical workplace applications, including using AI to enhance productivity in tools such as Excel or developing applications with AI-driven solutions. **Chart 1** shows the Generative AI enrolment trend in 2022-2024 in Courseera. The demand for generative AI training is not happening in isolation but is closely tied to broader technological shifts reshaping industries worldwide. The survey reveals that among nine transformative technologies, AI and information processing technologies are expected to have the most significant impact on businesses by 2030, with 86% of employers identifying them as likely to drive business transformation. This surpasses the anticipated influence of robots and autonomous systems (58%) or energy generation and storage technologies (41%). **Chart 2** shows the technology trends driving business transformation, as answered by the surveyed employers.

into AI technologies have increased nearly eight-fold, driving significant advancements in the field. This influx of capital has been matched by investment in the physical infrastructure required to support these technologies, such as servers. The growing demand for generative AI training is also closely tied to the shifting landscape of job roles driven by technological advancements. Employers expect technological developments such as AI and robotics to play a pivotal role in shaping the workforce, says the survey. By 2030, roles such as Big Data Specialists, FinTech Engineers, AI and Machine Learning Specialists, and Software and Applications Developers are projected to experience the fastest net growth. **Chart 3** shows the top jobs by fastest net growth as projected by surveyed employers. The interplay of humans, machines, and algorithms is fundamentally reshaping the nature of work. Automation and advancements in technology are driving a shift in how tasks are performed across industries. According to the survey, 47% of tasks today are completed primarily by humans, while 22% are handled mainly by technology, and 30% involve a mix of both. By 2030, tasks are expected to be more equally divided. This shift is driven largely by increased automation. Of the nearly 15% point reduction expected in the proportion of work tasks performed solely by humans between 2025 and 2030, approximately 82% will be attributable to advancing automation, while the remaining 19% will result from expanded human-machine collaboration. **Chart 4** shows the share of work tasks expected to be delivered predominantly by human workers, by technology, or by a combination of both. This transition highlights the growing importance of equipping the workforce with the skills needed to thrive in a world increasingly shared with intelligent machines.

Shifting landscapes

The charts are sourced from the 'Future of Jobs Report 2025' released by the World Economic Forum

Chart 1: The chart shows the Generative AI enrolment trend for 2022-2024. The chart reveals significant growth in demand for Generative AI training among both individual learners and enterprises

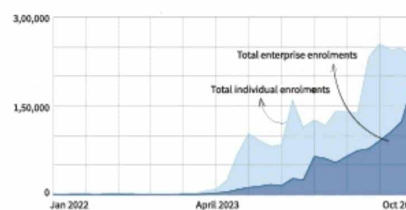


Chart 2: Share of employers surveyed who identify the stated technology trend as likely to drive business

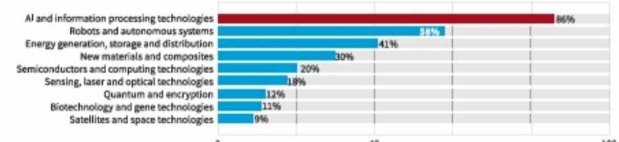


Chart 3: The chart shows the top jobs by fastest net growth by surveyed employers. The fastest growing job roles by 2030 tend to be driven by technological developments.

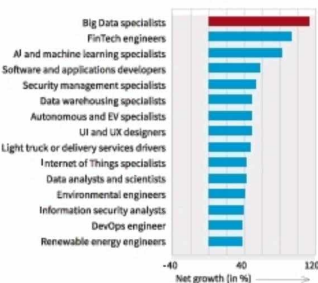
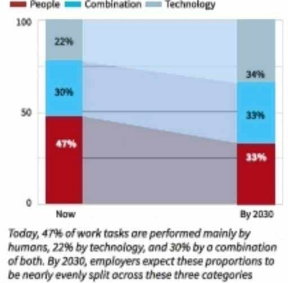


Chart 4: Share of total work tasks expected to be delivered predominantly by human workers, by technology, or by a combination of both



Today, 47% of work tasks are performed mainly by humans, 22% by technology, and 30% by a combination of both. By 2030, employers expect these proportions to be nearly evenly split across these three categories

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO JANUARY 27, 1975

Austerity marks Republic Day celebrations

New Delhi, Jan. 26: The nation today celebrated the Republic Day with gaiety. In New Delhi the highlight of the celebration was the parade at which the President, Mr. Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, took the salute. Reports received from all over the country show that the silver jubilee of the ushering in of the Republican Constitution was observed with subdued austerity. In the Capital itself, the duration of the Republic Day parade was cut short but this did not prevent hundreds of thousands of people gathering to witness the celebration. Both sides of the Rajpath were filled with seething humanity to watch the national spectacle of colour and pageantry. The visiting President of Zambia, Dr. Kenneth Kaunda and his wife Mrs. Betty Kaunda were among the distinguished guests who witnessed the parade. Mr. Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed who took the salute for the first time since becoming President, arrived at the site along with the Zambian President. He was received by the Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, and her senior colleagues. Before the start of the parade, Mrs. Gandhi laid a wreath at the India Gate memorial dedicated to the immortal soldiers. She was cheered by the crowds as she drove down to the saluting base at Rajpath. The entire function thus acquired a dignified solemnity. Among the other distinguished guests at the parade were the Australian Minister for Overseas Trade, the Swedish Army's Commander, the Secretary-General of the ILO, Iran's Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, Iraq's Minister for Higher Education, and the Deputy Chief of Army Staff of Bangladesh. **A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JANUARY 27, 1925** **"Fight leprosy" campaign** The following appeal has been issued by the Viceroy for funds in aid of the British Empire Leprosy Relief Association (Indian Council): I make an appeal to-day to India on behalf of the Leprosy Relief Association. I am confident that the object of my appeal cannot fail to command itself to the sympathy both of the rich and the poor and to all classes and creeds without distinction in India.



In troubled waters

Tidal flooding has become frequent in Ernakulam district lately. With the invading water staying on longer, more areas are getting affected. This month, water gushed into hundreds of households across Kochi Corporation, 20 grama panchayats, and two municipalities forcing people to abandon their homes. Local bodies want the occurrence to be notified as disaster so that more resources can be allotted for mitigation. However, that alone will not solve the problem, writes **M.P. Praveen**

Philomena T.A., 69, dreads returning to her home along Kuttikrishnan Road in Edakochi South, division 16 of Kochi Corporation, some 15 kilometres from Vyttila where she now lives with her daughter and family.

She can almost see in her mind's eye what awaits her behind those closed doors. It was five months ago that she locked the house, where she lived for 25 years, and left with her daughter with a heavy heart. She could no longer wade through the knee-high water in the house, thanks to tidal flooding. Also, the subsequent clean-up would be herculean.

"It will be a big mess now with the sludge left behind. It breaks my heart to think how my house, which my late husband built for a small fortune, is rotting with each day. No one will even take it on rent. Who will want to live in a house invaded by water, mixed with the nauseating waste in drains, almost daily," rues Philomena.

More intense, more frequent

Tidal flooding is nothing new to the coastal panchayats of Ernakulam district and even some areas of Kochi Corporation. However, now its intensity and frequency have gone up.

Worse still, the invading water, which previously receded in 15 to 20 minutes, now often remains stagnant for up to three hours. The phenomenon, called high tide slack, requires further study as its recurrence or the trigger behind it could not be predicted.

The longer the water remains inland, the more the chances of tidal floodwaters spreading to newer, hitherto unaffected areas. Just as it played out earlier this month when water entered hundreds of households in Kochi Corporation, 20 panchayats, and two municipalities.

The tidal gauge at Willingdon Island in Kochi recorded a high tide level of 1.62 metres around 3.30 a.m. on January 3. Though an even higher 1.63 metres, probably the highest in eight decades, was recorded on December 18, the impact was much less since the water receded within 10-15 minutes. However, on January 3, the relatively lower tide level caused greater havoc as the water remained above 1.5 metres for over two hours.

As per Equinot, a Kochi-based community-sourced modelling solution provider, over 12,000 hectares, including Pokkali farms, across the 20 local bodies in Ernakulam district remain affected by tidal flooding causing land degradation in critical Ramsar sites (notified wetlands of international importance) with ramifications for biodiversity and even the tourism industry. It has proposed a technology-driven dashboard for tidal flooding mitigation, impact assessment, and forecasting, modelled on its Community-Sourced Impact-Based Flood Forecast and Early Warning System (CoS-i-FloWS) designed to address river flooding.

"We had to elevate our house in 2002 as the water level kept rising. However, this time, water

Local bodies must incorporate tidal flooding into their disaster management plans and approach the State for further aid

SEKHAR L. KURIAKOSE
member secretary, KSMDA

reached our portico while submerging and contaminating our water tanks. It has been almost a month since we have had safe drinking water, and we have to buy water even to wash our mouths. Around 300 families in our area are affected, with the water level rising each year," says Manju Jayaprakash, a businesswoman staying at K.P. Vallon Road in Indira Nagar, a premium residential area at Kadavanthra.

Suja Lonappan, the councillor of Kadavanthra division in Kochi Corporation, says the water level in the drainages, canals, and surrounding rivers remains nearly unchanged, leaving little room for the tidal floodwaters to drain out. "As far as I remember, the rivers have not been dredged in the last 16 years, and until that is done, the situation will only worsen," she fears.

Two years ago, N.D. Dhaneesh, a government official, moved out of his house in Edakochi to the staff quarters in Willingdon Island, since his daughter had to wade through the dirty water to reach school.

However, he continues to make almost a daily trip back to Edakochi to give shape to a people's movement to draw the attention of the authorities to their plight.

500 coconut trees perish

"Nearly 250 households across two divisions in Edakochi are affected, while eight families have abandoned their houses. Routine activities like using bathrooms and cooking have become a challenge. The toll on the environmental ecosystem is equally worse, as is evident from the fall of around 500 coconut trees owing to constant exposure to saline water," he says.

Edavanakkad, a coastal panchayat 27 kilometres from Kochi city, which passed a resolution in 2022 demanding that the government notify tidal flooding as a disaster, is set to temporarily relocate willing families following fears over an epidemic outbreak owing to the near-constant presence of saline water. A 15-year-old was diagnosed with leptospirosis, a water-borne disease, on January 20 following which the panchayat convened an emergency meeting. Thirteen out of the 15 wards of the panchayat remain vulnerable to tidal flooding affecting over 27,000 people while many houses remain abandoned.

"Tidal flooding has reached a stage where addressing it is beyond the means of local bodies with meagre resources. That's why we demand its notification as a disaster by the government for mitigation measures using better resources and coordination," says Asena Abdul Salam, Edavanakkad panchayat president.

Dredging, a solution?

In fact, at a meeting organised by the district panchayat - COPE with Tidal Flood - 20 more local bodies decided to pass a similar resolution demanding that tidal flooding be included on the list of State-national-level disasters. At the meet-

ing, the local bodies decided to design projects, including detailed project reports for dredging, to ensure smooth water flow in waterbodies as part of the annual plan for the 2025-26 financial year. Steps would also be taken to include tidal flood mitigation works under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme.

"An action plan will be formulated based on the recommendations of the local bodies affected by tidal flooding. The local bodies have also called for field visits by the State Relief Commissioner to assess the situation in the affected panchayats," says Ernakulam district panchayat president and the Ernakulam District Disaster Management Authority co-chairman Manoj Moothedan. However, the Kerala State Disaster Management Authority (KSMDA) pointed out that notifying tidal flooding as a disaster would hardly address the problem.

Instead, the authority suggests that the local bodies convene 13th Working Group on Disaster Management, Climate Change, and Biodiversity, and allocate their funds for long- and medium-term mitigation plans.

In disaster management plans

"Local bodies should regulate land use, determining what can be built and how in compliance with the Indian Standard Code for constructions in low-lying areas. Risk-informed land use plans should be developed in consultation with the district town planner. They should incorporate tidal flooding into their disaster management plans and approach the State for further assistance," says Sekhar L. Kuriaiose, member secretary, KSMDA.

This, however, is being dubbed an attempt by the State to wash its hands of its constitutional and administrative responsibility of guaranteeing citizens' rights to life, livelihood, and property.

"Local bodies have systematically drawn up tidal mitigation plans and utilised their resources towards implementing them over the years. But the situation has deteriorated to a point where it is beyond their means and capabilities, especially financially weak local bodies with little resources to spare. In fact, there is a need for a master plan to address the problem that calls for Statewide coordination at the administrative and department levels," says K.D. Vincent, former president of Ezhikkara panchayat.

Incidentally, the panchayat had passed a resolution demanding notification of tidal flooding as a disaster during his tenure as the civic body head.

Kochi Corporation's master plan

Kochi Corporation claims that land use regulation has been taken care of in its master plan, which was notified by the State government in July 2024 marking the culmination of its nearly 20-year-long efforts to come up with a vision document for development. Henceforth, all the development activities in the city as well as construction works would have to be carried out as prescribed in the plan document, say civic authorities.

Besides, Mayor M. Anilkumar has requested the State Finance Minister to allocate ₹10 crore for dredging the backwaters in the forthcoming State Budget citing that it was beyond the means of the civic body. The water flow in the sledge-

No respite: Tidal flooding has turned life into a nightmare for people along the coastal areas in Ernakulam district. A scene from Edavanakkad in Vypeen.

THULASI KAKKAT

filled backwater network from Thoppumpady to Edakochi, Edakochi to Perumpadappu and up to Pandarachira remains disrupted. Hence, the affected areas, which account for around 30,000 households across 11 divisions, have been experiencing unprecedented tidal flooding in the last couple of years. The situation is no different in the areas in the heart of the city, like Thevara and Vaduthala. Fishing, a primary means of livelihood for 2,000-odd fishing workers and 10,000-odd workers in allied sectors, has also been hit, he says.

The Indian National Centre for Ocean Information Services (INCOIS), Telangana, has now dubbed the previously largely ignored swell surge as a 'low profile, high impact' hazard, which is now causing greater damage and for which the agency now issues regular alerts.

"Swell surge, which is not locally originated but can emanate as far away as the Atlantic Ocean, may take up to a week to reach our shore. The frequency of inundation caused by the swell surge, which is linked to climate change and sea level rise, is likely to intensify further. The back-to-back swell waves result in heightened sea level disrupting the ebb flow, thus causing water to stay inland for prolonged periods," says T. M. Bakkrishnan Nair, director, INCOIS.

Possibility of epidemics

T.S. Anish, Professor of Community Medicine, Government Medical College, Kozhikode, warns that exposure to sustained flooding caused by the high tide can lead to an outbreak of water and mosquito-borne epidemics like cholera, malaria, typhoid, and leptospirosis.

"We have also noticed a trend of emerging infections like West Nile fever in flooding-prone areas. The proliferation of mosquitoes causing diseases like West Nile fever could also make them carriers of infections from migratory birds visiting coastal areas. Besides, displacement caused by flooding could also have mental health consequences, especially among children," says Dr. Anish.

C.G. Madhusoodanan, Chief Executive Officer of Equinot, sounds caution against unscientific deep dredging, warning that it would only further worsen flooding by increasing the flow of seawater through river mouths. He emphasised the need for a detailed bathymetry survey of Vembanad Lake to assess silt levels. Based on the survey, hotspots should be identified for targeted and systematic dredging, he suggests.

"The silt and mud from dredging should be utilised to raise the height of land and bunds across Pokkali fields in the area, enhancing the resilience of Kochi's surroundings to tidal floods. Besides, sluices and shutters should be installed to regulate the flow through channels connecting the land and the lake. The effective implementation of this massive activity covering more than 7,000 hectares of land requires active community participation," he says.

Meanwhile, for Philomena, life remains a never-ending ordeal, having no idea when or if at all she will be able to return home someday.

MAHARASHTRA



The spot where the accident took place in Jalgaon, Maharashtra. THE HINDU

A ticket on a runaway train

Thousands of Nepal nationals migrate to India in search of employment. At the site of Maharashtra's Jalgaon train accident, where 12 people died, seven were identified as Nepali. **Snehal Mutha** speaks to survivors and migrants to understand why, despite low wages and poor working conditions, people make the journey from the Himalayan kingdom to Mumbai city

Every day the Pushpak (meaning a flower chariot) travels towards Mumbai from Lucknow, covering a distance of 1,436 kilometres, traversing 16 major stations, across a little over 25 hours. For people migrating from Nepal and a few districts in Uttar Pradesh to the Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR) for employment, the train is an important connection, for employment.

Kamala Bhandari, 43, was a regular passenger on the Pushpak Express. She was returning from a short vacation she took from her work as a house help in Mumbai's Churchgate area. Radha Bhandari, 35, accompanied her mother-in-law, on her first journey to find a job in Mumbai.

On January 23, at the Government Medical College in Jalgaon city, about 400 kilometres away from Mumbai, Radha waits outside the Department of Anatomy. Her face is pale, and she is trying hard to hold back her tears. "She was the strongest person I knew, the backbone of the family. For the past 14 years, she has been working in Mumbai, and has endured a lot all her life. Even death caused her pain," says Radha.

Radha and Kamala were among over 150 passengers in the general coach of the Pushpak Express train who, on January 22, deboarded the train over the fear of fire. Many jumped on the railway tracks, only to be mowed down by the Karnataka Express, running at 130 kmph.

"Seven Nepal nationals lost their lives among the 12 in the incident, and four Nepal nationals were injured from provinces in West Nepal, with severe injuries on their body," said Ayush Prasad, District Collector, Jalgaon. All the deceased and injured were either visiting their families or returning to their jobs.

At the hospital, spread out across 196 acres, Radha is waiting for her mother-in-law's body. It will be put into the ambulance and taken to her village in Sudurpashchim province in Nepal. She will travel in the ambulance, 1,022 kilometres to home. She and her brother-in-law, who had arrived in Jalgaon after the accident, refused to go back by train.

Before they set out, Radha piled some soil and stones she had carried from the place Kamala died, and performed a few rituals.

Like Kamala, hundreds of people from Nepal cross the border to reach Uttar Pradesh's Lucknow district. Here, they board the train to reach other parts of India. "We don't have exact figures on people from Nepal travelling to Mumbai as it is difficult to keep track of general coach passengers. However, at least 40% of train passengers are Nepalese. Most of the time trains are overcrowded with people sitting in the aisle," said a railway officer.

The Census data from 2011 says that there are over 8 lakh migrants from Nepal. The 2022 Base-

line Study on Cross-border Migration confirms that people migrate from Karnali and Sudurpashchim provinces.

Jobs beckon

The 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship between Nepal and India facilitates the free movement of people across the border of both countries. Raju Vishwakarma, belonging to the Hill Dalit community, has come to get the bodies of his relatives, Kala Kanchi Kami, 60; and Himu Vishwakarma, 11.

Raju's father came to India as a teenager and worked as a security guard. Raju himself came to Kalyan, Thane district, when he was five and helped his father. Today, he works a double shift as a guard at night and a driver during the day. "We own only a little land and the produce is not sufficient to sell in the market. We use it only for ourselves. There are hospital bills and the children's education. These can only be paid with money we earn here," Raju says. Unlike many others who enjoy Mumbai's infrastructure, Raju is not enamoured of Mumbai and its surroundings, but says working here is necessary. Himu's father is also a security guard. Kala had four children, two of who migrated to Himachal Pradesh, one in Kalyan, and one who stayed back in their village in Achham district, which is a hilly area. Experts say hilly regions in Nepal are seeing adverse weather conditions, driving people to migrate to India.

Raju says in Thane he gets free lodging and food, which enables him to save some of the

₹15,000 monthly salary. His driver's gig earns him some more, and his spouse's work as a housekeeper contributes to the family's income.

According to the 2022 baseline study, Nepalese migrants worked in hotel/catering businesses (21%), manufacturing (12%), and agriculture (12%). Most were low-skilled and worked as domestic helpers, guards, and drivers. Of those killed and injured in the Jalgaon accident, many are involved in cooking and cleaning, guard duties, and salespeople. Migrants are across castes, and the reason they come to Mumbai is poverty back home and to explore job opportunities here.

Dipendra Parihar, 30, is a cook with a food outlet in Kalyan. He was in the train and is now at the hospital helping his co-passenger and paternal aunt, Manju Parihar, 25. Manju's husband works and lives with Dipendra. "To get a job in Nepal we have to pay an agent," says Parihar, whose land in Dullu town, Karnali province, is fragmented. Meanwhile, Manju, who has severely injured her back in the accident is in trauma. She was on her way to visit her husband.

A connected community

Members of the community keep in touch using social media and help each other out. WhatsApp groups thrive, but there is no registered diasporic organisation.

After the news of the Pushpak Express accident went viral, a network of people from the community was activated. A Nepal national residing in Thane district, Shankar Singh received information about the accident at around 6 p.m. on January 22. By 8 p.m. he left for Jalgaon with a team of nine from Kalyan. "I was sure there would be people from Nepal, because 80% Nepalese take this train, as it is fastest," Singh says.

Singh and the team reached at about 1 a.m. and started inquiring about the victims. The team helped families with formalities related to bodies and interacted with authorities. Singh has a reputation in the Nepalese community in the MMR region for helping people.

Through his Facebook, he makes sure people stay connected, and he often helps with informing relatives back in Nepal in case of emergencies. "In last few years, we have helped with at least 16 cases," he claims.

Singh started as a helper at a vada-pav stall where his brother worked, with a monthly income of ₹800 in 2000, later worked in diamond units, where he fixed diamonds in the jewellery. Today he owns a house and runs an *anda bhurji* (scrambled eggs) stall. On the second day, 100 to



Jalgaon has 700 to 800 Nepali people. When there's any incident or accident we get to know via the group and reach out to people and try to help

YAM BHADURT

Nepali national, living and working in Bhusawal, Maharashtra

150 Nepali nationals were in the Government Medical College in Jalgaon, helping the injured and the families of the deceased.

Once documentation had been taken care of and the bodies released to relatives, they began dispersing. By the end of the day 20 to 30 people stayed to ensure that the last body of Nepali nationals reaches home," says Deepak Buda, 25, who lives in Jalgaon and works as a cook at a Chinese restaurant.

Yam Bhadurt, 48, came from Bhusawal, about 30 km away. He learnt about the accident from the WhatsApp group Nepal Pravasi Sangh. "Jalgaon has 700 to 800 Nepali people. When there's any incident or accident we get to know via the group and reach out to people and try to help. We treat India as our motherland, but we know it is still a foreign land, and have to take care of each other," he says. Yam Bhadurt belongs to the Chhetri ethnicity and has been in Bhusawal for the last 30 years working as a watchman. Of the ₹15,000 he earns every month, he manages to send ₹10,000 back home.

In transit

Nepal and India share a border of 1,850 km. There are five points from where Nepalese people can enter India. Parihar says he travels from Dullu, his hometown in Nepal to Rupaidiha in Uttar Pradesh by bus, a journey that takes about six hours to cover around 180 km. From here, he takes another hour to reach Bahraich in U.P., covering 60 km, and from there another 2 hours to reach Lucknow station. From the Himalayas to the Arabian Sea takes him about 35 hours.

A couple of days after the accident, the Pushpak Express sees no change. Where one berth has the capacity to accommodate three people in a sitting position, there are at least six. They "adjust", their bodies pressing against each other. The general coach has a capacity of 100; there are at least 180, a railway official on board says.

In the coach, people carry bags of belongings and food packed. People clutch at the edges of seats for balance; some sit and sleep on the floor. All the general coaches have thick cotton sheets strung up like hammocks, so people can sit in them. The sink is filled with the orange of gutka spat out; its packets everywhere.

Many know each other, chatting in Nepali. It is on one such train that the rumour of a fire spread, leading people to pull the chain to stop the train, and jump out.

Manisha Bhadur, 36, sits on a berth with five others. "Travelling is difficult, but worth it. We have no other option. Reservations are difficult, as this train is always full," she says, adding that walking from the berth to the washroom in a coach full of men is a challenge. She feels the government should increase the number of general coaches when they can see trains overfull.

Manisha and her husband, Kamal Bhadur, 48, work in Navi Mumbai, she as a cook, he in a hotel. Together they earn ₹35,000. Kamal works a 12-hour shift. When he goes home he doesn't get paid. Manisha calls it "majboori (no choice)". Kamal's relative Rajesh, 18, is travelling to Mumbai for the first time. He has been in Delhi and Hyderabad, working in hotels there. He hopes he will like Mumbai the way he liked Delhi.



Radha Bhandari, whose mother-in-law Kamala died, waiting for her body. THE HINDU



The Free Press Journal
Founder Editor: S Sadanand

Deny impunity

Tahawwur Rana, the Pakistan-origin Canadian citizen who stands accused of involvement in the 2008 terror attack in Mumbai, the 26/11 atrocity, is finally bound for India, with the United States Supreme Court rejecting a final appeal against his extradition. It has been a long saga, though. The legal and diplomatic process of bringing Rana to India to finally be tried for his role in organising and facilitating the Mumbai terrorist attack has been protracted. It was in 2019 that the Indian government approached the US authorities for the extradition. After a number of legal challenges, the extradition came after Rana had to face legal proceedings in the United States as well. Rana, let us recall, was a key conspirator who worked with David Coleman Headley, a US citizen who travelled frequently to Pakistan, becoming a cog in the Lashkar-e-Taiba terror machine, beginning his illegal activities by involving himself in narcotics smuggling. Headley, who had a Pakistan-origin father, was prosecuted both by the US authorities and, remotely, by India, was sentenced in 2013 to 35 years in prison. Indian authorities will be buoyed by this extradition, not only because Rana will be available to face the consequences of his actions, but also because this creates a precedent that will help New Delhi pursue other individuals who pursue activities inimical to India's security. Of late, of course, we have seen several skirmishes between India and both Washington and Ottawa in connection with malcontents of several shades, who endanger Indian security interests. Indian authorities are adamant that the United States and Canada, especially, have a duty to prevent groups from engaging in anti-Indian activities on their territory.

Rana, let us recall, was a key conspirator who worked with David Coleman Headley

It's not just a question of inimical activities of the violent kind that requires diplomatic and legal cooperation. In other words, the US, Canada and other countries ought to take much more seriously India's interests and sensitivities as far as economic offenders are concerned. There is a long list of people accused of serious financial crimes who are holed up outside India and are, thus, unavailable for prosecution. The who's who includes Vijay Mallya, Nirav Modi, and Mehul Choksi. Alongside them are gangsters of various hues: Anmol Bishnoi, brother of incarcerated public enemy Lawrence Bishnoi, Goldy Brar, and Arshdeep Singh Gill. Rana's extradition will encourage New Delhi to pursue more vigorously either the extradition or prosecution of those who have harmed or are harming India's security interests, including in the financial arena. Until India gets eminently greater satisfaction from the West in this regard, we are left to mull the irony of terrorists enjoying their liberty in the bastions of democracy, secure in the belief that they enjoy impenetrable impunity.

States of exception

The Madhya Pradesh High Court issued a welcome warning to the state authorities last week, asking the chief secretary to let district officers know the 'meaning and intent' of the National Security Act (NSA), so that they don't issue orders 'under political pressure and without application of mind'. It quashed an externment order passed by the collector of Burhanpur district and imposed costs, while noting that the order was against the letter and spirit of the NSA, which is a preventive-detention law meant to be used in 'states of exception'. In other words, it allows the central government and its counterparts in the states to act against a person, usually by means of detention, with the object of preventing him or her from carrying out actions that would be prejudicial to public order. It belongs broadly to the class of laws that are meant to deal with exceptional situations, which includes the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act and Section 152 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, which provides governments the power to act against individuals who threaten the sovereignty, unity and integrity of India. Though these legislative weapons are usually used to apprehend individuals who have committed acts threatening the sovereignty of the nation-state, they can also be used perversely. Which means that their use creates a state of exception to the normal functioning of the political system, much like the use of the Emergency provisions of the Constitution. Given that, as the Madhya Pradesh High Court has indicated, extreme caution must be exercised before pulling these arrows out of the executive quiver. Since untrammelled power is a perfect recipe for misuse and arbitrariness, it is the duty of the judiciary to keep even the hint of excess on the part of the executive in check. We must locate this discussion in a historical context. The circumstances under which India became independent — we must remember the savage violence of the Partition and the chaos attendant on what amounted almost to a 'transfer of populations' — encouraged the drafters of the Constitution to provide for many provisions that were potentially draconian. B.R. Ambedkar himself expressed the conviction that wielders of executive authority would act in good faith in respect of exceptional laws. This good faith has frequently been abused, at no time more than during the two odd years of Mrs. Gandhi's Emergency and in the past decade or so, when we have been labouring under what amounts to an undeclared Emergency. In this situation, it is up to the judiciary, especially at the higher levels, to check the executive. Whenever there is conflict between the fundamental rights of citizens and the exigencies of the state, it must examine thoroughly the exceptionality of the situation.

The Road Ahead

JAYAPRAKASH NARAYAN

January 26, 2025 marks the completion of 75 years of our Republic. By the time this column is published, we would have celebrated the Republic Day with customary pomp and ceremony. In the life of a nation of 5000 years of continuing civilisation, 75 years is not very long. However, this is a good occasion to reflect on our Republic, rejoice in our strengths and successes, and resolve to overcome our weaknesses.

By any standards, India is an extraordinary nation. Never before has a republic created with such diversity of language, religion, region and caste. That we have 22 officially recognised languages, each with rich history, culture and literature, and yet we harmoniously forged a republic is nothing short of a miracle. Until our audacious experiment, no nation introduced universal adult franchise since the inception of a republic. Britain, after centuries of democratic practice, finally had universal franchise only in 1928. The US, the first republic with a written Constitution and separation of powers, introduced universal franchise in 1920, 131 years after the founding of the

republic, and the Black people could exercise the right to vote only in 1964, 175 years after the Constitution came into effect. Our leaders welded a most unlikely nation and a republic and trusted future generations to exercise our freedoms wisely despite our diversity, mass poverty, illiteracy, and lack of any kind of democratic experience for about 1000 years since the days of village self-government during the Chola period.

In many ways, our republican democracy triumphed against all odds, proving many sceptics wrong. We endured as a united, strong nation despite our diversity. With all flaws, our freedoms are intact, and we conduct periodic elections and power is transferred peacefully. Our key institutions withstood vicissitudes of our democracy and, despite occasional lapses, served us well. The nation achieved moderate progress. Our states are stronger than ever before, and federalism has become more real and robust over the years. The nation is slowly regaining its self-confidence and is making valiant attempts to end poverty and promote prosperity.

However, in the course of these 75 years, we have seen many distor-

tions and failings. Our political parties have mostly become personal fiefdoms and family estates undermining democracy. Our elections, while free and fair, and noisy and competitive, have increasingly become auctions for public office. Vast amount of money is distributed to induce voters during elections, and reckless promises are made for short-term individual welfare at the cost of long-term public good, largely condemning people to perpetual poverty, instead of promoting real opportunities for upward mobility. Our rule of law is in shambles. Justice is delayed and denied, and might has become right. Abuse of public office for private gain has become endemic, and corruption has become integral to our daily lives. Power is highly centralised, and local governments are mostly ceremonial and inconsequential. People are not allowed to perceive the links between votes and public good and between taxes and services and, therefore, are induced to vote for money or short-term welfare promises. Our successes should make us proud and give us confidence in the future. Our failing should wake us out of our compla-

cency and strengthen our resolve to make our republic stronger and our democracy more robust.

Dr. Ambedkar, in his final speech in the Constituent Assembly on November 25, 1948, cautioned us about the pitfalls. This is a good time to reflect on his admonitions and take corrective action as a nation. Ambedkar wisely admonished us about blind loyalty to political parties ignoring national interest and public good: "The factors on which the working of the organs of the State depends are the people and political parties they will set up as their instruments to carry out their wishes and their politics. ... if the parties place (political) creed above country, our independence will be in jeopardy."

Our parties largely function as warring tribes, and often long-term public good and collective national interest are in jeopardy at the altar of short-term electoral gain.

Second, Ambedkar argued that we need to maintain democracy not merely in form but also in fact: "... we must, hold fast to constitutional methods of achieving our social and economic objectives... It means we must abandon the methods of civil disobedience, non-

cooperation and satyagraha ... Where constitutional methods are open, there can be no justification for unconstitutional methods. These methods are nothing but the Grammar of Anarchy and the sooner they are abandoned, the better for us".

Our methods of organisation and protest have not improved, and we continue to be addicted to the 'Grammar of Anarchy'.

Dr. Ambedkar cautioned against hero-worship and slavish loyalty in politics.

"... hero-worship plays a part in our politics, unequalled in magnitude by the part it plays in the politics of any other country in the world. Bhakti in religion may be a road to the salvation of the soul. But in politics, ... hero-worship is a sure road to degradation and to eventual dictatorship".

Finally, Ambedkar reminded us that political democracy cannot last unless there is social democracy, a recognition that all human beings are equal and are entitled to dignity and opportunity.

The author is the founder of Lok Satta movement and Foundation for Democratic Reforms. Email: drgopalakrishna@gmail.com / Twitter: @gpn_loksatta

Guest Column

K.S. TOMAR

Donald Trump's presidency reignited a deeply polarized debate on illegal immigration, with deportation of millions of undocumented immigrants at its core. Among these, around 500,000 Indian nationals, who entered the U.S. legally but overstayed their visas, represent a significant group. This distinction sets them apart from other immigrant populations, particularly those from Latin America, who are often associated with illegal border crossings. The mass deportation policy proposed by Trump's administration has far-reaching economic, social, and diplomatic implications for both the U.S. and India.

The Complex Nature of Undocumented Immigration: The undocumented immigrant population in the U.S. is diverse, including individuals from Mexico, Central America, India, China, and the Philippines. While many Latin American immigrants are associated with illegal border crossings, the majority of undocumented Indians have overstayed their visas. This distinction complicates the broader immigration debate, emphasizing the need for nuanced discussions about the different ways people arrive in the U.S. without documentation. Indian nationals are not part of the same narrative as migrants crossing the U.S.-Mexico border, and this complexity must be considered in policy-making.

India's Response and Preparedness: India must prepare for the challenges posed by the sudden return of a large number of deportees. The Indian government needs to focus on reintegration programs to help returning migrants find employment in a strained labor market. Without these programs, deported individuals may face economic marginalization, leading to long-term social issues.

States in India with high migration rates, such as Punjab, Gujarat, and Kerala, would be most impacted by the loss of remittance income. In 2022, Indian immigrants in the U.S. sent home approximately \$12 billion in remittances, a crucial source of income for families and local economies. The deportation of a significant portion of this population would strain rural economies, which are highly dependent on these funds.

Economic Impact on India: The economic consequences of mass deportations would be immediate and severe. In addition to the loss of remittances, many undocumented Indians are highly skilled professionals, including engineers, doctors, and IT experts. These individuals, who have contributed to the U.S. economy, would return to India, potentially exacerbating issues of unemployment and underemployment in sectors like information technology (IT), where India already faces workforce saturation.

India's labor market may struggle to absorb these skilled workers, leading to increased competition for jobs and a pool of underutilized talent. This could impede India's economic growth and technological advancement. The IT sector, which has long been a global leader, could be particularly affected by the return of these skilled workers, limiting India's ability to maintain its competitive edge in the global economy.

Social and Humanitarian Challenges: Beyond economic consequences, the social impact of mass deportations would be profound. Many deported individuals have U.S.-born children who are citizens. These children would face complex legal and social situations, as they may be left behind or forced to return to India. The disruption to their lives could be devastating, particularly for children who have grown up in the U.S. and have little to no connection with India.

Moreover, deported individuals would face significant challenges reintegrating into Indian society. The deportations would also disproportionately affect women and children, who may lack support networks in India, deepening gender inequalities and social tensions in already marginalized communities.

Diplomatic Strain and U.S.-India Relations: The mass deport-

ation of Indian nationals could strain U.S.-India relations, which have traditionally been strong due to shared economic, strategic, and defense interests. India would likely engage in high-level diplomatic talks, seeking to adopt a more measured and phased approach to deportations. India could push for reforms that would allow undocumented individuals to regularize their immigration status, rather than face deportation.

Additionally, India could advocate for more flexible visa policies, particularly for skilled workers in sectors like technology and healthcare, to protect its economic interests and ensure that the U.S. remains an attractive destination for Indian labor. If the U.S. becomes less welcoming to skilled Indian professionals, they may seek opportunities elsewhere, redirecting global talent flows to countries like Canada, the U.K., or Australia. This shift could have long-term consequences on the U.S.'s ability to attract and retain high-quality human capital, undermining its global competitive position.

Challenges in Policy Implementation: Although the Trump administration's immigration policies are aggressive, they face significant challenges in implementation. One major obstacle is the backlog of immigration cases in U.S. courts, which currently stands at over 1.8 million cases. This

backlog could delay deportations and lead to legal complications, prolonging uncertainty for undocumented immigrants.

Moreover, the financial cost of mass deportations is substantial. Each deportation is estimated to cost the U.S. government around \$10,854 per individual.

States and cities that support sanctuary policies may resist federal enforcement, leading to jurisdictional conflicts and escalating legal challenges.

Economic Consequences for the U.S: The U.S. economy relies heavily on immigrant labor, particularly in sectors like agriculture, construction, and hospitality. Undocumented workers fill essential roles in these industries, and their removal could result in labor shortages, disrupting productivity and straining supply chains. According to the Congressional Budget Office, the U.S. economy could lose up to \$1.6 trillion in GDP over the next two decades if mass deportations occur.

The Trump administration's approach to immigration includes several key elements:

Mass Deportations: The U.S. would target millions of undocumented immigrants, regardless of how they arrived, including those who overstayed their visas.

(Writer is strategic affairs columnist and senior political analyst)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A clarion call

Effective January 22, 2025, USCIS waives any and all requirements that applicants for adjustment of status to that of a lawful permanent resident present current documentation on their Form I-485. Report of Immigration Medical Examination and Vaccination Record, that they received the COVID-19 vaccination. There was no scientific basis for such requirements.

CK Ramani, Trichy

Credibility

Judicial interventions transgressing major cases like the Kallakurichi tragedy and Anna University assault to the CBI expose a trust deficit in Tamil Nadu's police. Repeated setbacks in court highlight systemic flaws. The government must urgently reform law enforcement, enhance professionalism, and rebuild public trust to restore the credibility of the state's policing and governance.

Gopalswamy J, Mylapore Chennai

Rana's extradition

Rana's extradition is a significant win for India. The US SC has rightfully cleared the way for his deportation after years of persistent efforts. Tahawwur Rana, who holds crucial knowledge about the terror conspiracy, will now face justice. This is a game-changing victory for India in its fight against terrorism.

P.V. Prakash, Mumbai

Trump is right

Is it wrong for Trump to bring in laws denying birth right to children of non-Americans born in the US? Is he wrong in deporting illegal immigrants? Do we allow such things to happen in our country? Allowing asylum seekers to naturalise in America on merits, mainly on humanitarian grounds is totally a different story.

Tharcius S.Fernando, Virugambakkam, Chennai

Attack on Saif

There are conflicting reports in the newspapers every day about the knife attack on Saif and the incident that occurred in connection

with it. This topic is also being discussed a lot on social media. While reading this, it seems that there are many confusing aspects of the information disseminated in the media.

Ravindra Bhagwat, Kalyan (W)

Waqf Act

The IPC on the Waqf Amendment Bill seems to lack the freedom to give its views on it. The discretionary power proposed in the bill to the collector to decide on any waqf land as government land, is seen as unreasonable by the opposition MPs. The bill needs to be put through thorough discussions and debates by the IPC.

Ravinder P.R., Hyderabad

Spicy news

Following a directive from the FSSAI, 'Patanjali' has recalled four tonnes of 200 gm red chilli powder packs from the market. On testing, the product samples were found to have contained pesticide residue far above the permissible limit. During the launch of the product, Baba Ramdev had claimed that the com-

pany used only natural ingredients, unlike his competitors.

P.G. Menon, Chennai

R-Day motto

The real Republic Day motto should be 'Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan, Jai Aam, Jai Javan, via only satellite patrolling of the border areas. Have pacts with Pak and China on this; Jai Kisan, through a dialogue between farmers and the government; and Jai Aam, that is, peace, prosperity and progress for all.

PV Madhu Nivritti, Secunderabad

Davos meet

The team that attended the Davos WEF meets to be investigated. Suspicions that these are foreign jaunts at the taxpayers' expense cannot be ignored. The opposition is right in calling them mere optics, as Mantralaya is just a stone's throw away from the corporate offices of the entities the government has signed the agreements with!

Anthony Henriques, Mumbai

Subianto visit

The recent visit of Indonesian President Prabowo Sub-



Respect to the tricolour

It is the duty of every citizen of India to show respect to the national flag. Streamers made out of small national flags are often used for decorative purposes on Independence Day and Republic Day. But once the celebrations get over, one finds

these flags being trampled upon on the streets or thrown into dustbins. This is an insult to the tricolour. Any display of the national flag must be in strict adherence to the flag code of India. The Centre and the State administrations should ensure this.

Jubel D'Cruz, Mumbai

lanto to India raises critical questions. Can this visit catalyse a substantial increase in bilateral trade? How will both nations address the geopolitical pressures from China while enhancing their

strategic partnership? Also, what steps will be taken to deepen defence cooperation and maritime security in the Indo-Pacific?

Anshu Bhatti, Begusarai, Bihar



Opinion

MONDAY, JANUARY 27, 2025

Back to square one?

Global tax deal might unravel after withdrawal of US; India needs to tread with caution

NEARLY A DECADE after the start of a multilaterally coordinated effort to attune the global tax systems to the digitised world of business, and despite a hard-won 2021 agreement among nearly 140 nations to put into effect the requisite new rules, things have come to a pass. The Trump administration has withdrawn from the OECD-brokered global tax deal signed during the Biden regime. To be sure, the much-touted two-pillar tax solution is designed to address the issues arising out of the current global situation, where companies gain market access with minimal or no physical business in the jurisdictions concerned. The global body had taken the G20 nations on board before it made a pioneering move in 2015 to address the tax challenges of the digital economy, under its Base Erosion and Profit Shifting (BEPS) project. That in fact was meant to mark a shift from the century-old approach to international taxation, under a network of bilateral tax treaties, and built around traditional business, relying primarily on physical presence.

The US move effectively means that the world's largest economy that is home to the Big Tech, has for all practical purposes forsaken the OECD's two-pillar solution. Trump's order is in keeping with his administration's patently inward-looking "America first" policy. Trump's negation of the tax deal has India and many other countries in a cleft stick, and raises the spectre of a flurry of moves and counter-moves by the principal countries on the world economic stage. The irony is this could be to the collective detriment of all of them.

It remains to be seen whether and how countries would defer to the 2021 tax deal as they respond to the US move, or take unilateral measures to underscore their tax rights. India, which was initially reluctant to embrace the Pillar-one solution for taxing the digital economy, and introduced an equalisation levies (EL) in 2016 and 2020 to ensure overseas digital firms making profits in India pay their fair share of taxes here, had in Budget FY25 announced withdrawal of the more substantive 2% levy on non-resident e-commerce operators. This showed the country's willingness to move to the multilateral Pillar-one framework for taxing overseas digital players. The revocation of the levy from August last year actually followed a US move to impose "retaliatory punitive tariffs" on India and the European Union, and an agreement reached with the US on a transitional approach to EL. Since the 2% levy was scrapped, India has been using a nexus rule (significant economic presence) to tax non-resident e-commerce operators, with most of them enjoying treaty benefits.

Pillar two may not have much revenue implications for India in the immediate future, given the nature of outbound investments. However, with its vast consumer market and wide digital user base, the prospects are much higher for the country from gaining legitimate taxing rights on digital service providers from abroad. Now that the US withdrawal has cast major uncertainties on the OECD tax deal, India will have to go back to the drawing board again to devise a new effective strategy. While the choice of reintroducing the levy on e-commerce firms is there, that would not only undermine the global framework but also lead to retaliation by the US. A tax on India's services exports by the US, by including these in the definition of digital business, is what could hit India where it hurts.

A soothing balm for overseas investors

MUKESH BUTANI
TARUN JAIN

The authors are advocates



THE MINISTRY OF finance has sprung a pleasant surprise a week before the Budget. Obviating investors' concerns about the entitlement of tax treaty benefits, the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) has issued a "guidance" to clarify the scope and application of the tax treaty anti-avoidance Principal Purpose Test (PPT). Borne out of the global disengagement against misuse of treaties — as a part of the OECD-led base erosion and profit shifting initiative (BEPS) — PPT standard forms part of the multilateral instrument (MLI) framework, which was ratified in 2019 and has been engrafted in Indian Double Taxation Avoidance Agreements (DTAAs). Arun Jaitley signed the MLI at the June 2019 OECD Paris ceremony.

The PPT is essentially a "purpose" driven inquiry seeking to ascertain the subjective reasons of an investor to locate in a favourable tax treaty jurisdiction, and a handle to the revenue to deny the treaty benefit in the event such benefit constitutes "one of the principal purposes" of the multinational structure leading to such benefit. Put differently, the PPT compels multinationals to rely on business reasons or commercial considerations uninfluenced by tax-benefit considerations. It is positioned alongside the general anti-avoidance rule (GAAR), which similarly operates to deny tax benefit to structures lacking "commercial substance". Both the PPT and GAAR can legally override tax residency certificates, which, as per the law laid down by the Supreme Court in the *Asadi Bachao Andolan* case, has served for the past two decades as a substantive limitation on the revenue's ability to question the propriety of corporate structures. Hence, introducing the PPT standard in the tax treaty space shakes the very foundation of MNC decisions on the choice of investment jurisdictions. Therefore, the CBDT guidance entails how tax officers will apply the PPT and is timely. Though there haven't been material disputes in this area, concerns among multinationals, particularly foreign portfolio investors and those operating in the GIFT City, prevailed. Equally, multinationals with regional headquarters located in a specified European and Asia Pacific region have been denied treaty benefits. So a perceived risk of denial of treaty benefits has been an essential business-risk imperative.

To amplify positive takeaways, the guidance clarifies that the denial of treaty benefit is "a matter of subjective satisfaction of the revenue — limiting revenue's discretion. Instead, invocation of PPT must be based on 'objective assessment of relevant facts'. Given that India legislated GAAR in 2017, investors feared retrospective application of PPT standards. Nipping them in the bud, the guidance, besides clarifying the PPT's prospective application, sets out specific illustrations on the date of application. The guidance further posits with respect to key foreign direct investment destinations, namely Cyprus, Mauritius, and Singapore, to clarify that the PPT cannot overcome grandfathering provisions under these treaties. To this end, the guidance reaffirms the importance of bilateral protocols between India and its counterparts. This reassurance obviates the scope of forever-ambiguous interpretation by tax officers, which, though often overridden by judicial proceedings, upends years of efforts to address investor anxieties. The bilateral negotiations leading to protocols with these countries led to a stable transition in addressing India's concerns on capital gains taxation and purposeful institutional investment jurisdictions.

To address other eventuality, the guidance has connected the PPT to India's official position at multilateral forums such as BEPS and the United Nations. The reference to positions expressed by India in the UN multilateral forum is puzzling, though, given that the OECD architected PPT standards.

It is now judicially settled that instructions of the CBDT draw upon its statutory empowerment binding upon tax officers, and create an enforceable legal right for taxpayers. The guidance is, therefore, a proactive measure to promote tax certainty and quell interpretive disputes. It is, at best, illustrative of the government's commitment to rein in unnecessary tax interventions.

FRONT-RUNNING WOES

INDUSTRY MUST COME UP WITH STRINGENT BEST PRACTICES IN INTERNAL SURVEILLANCE & SUPERVISION

Running ahead, running amok

MANY WILL RECALL the morning of March 1, 2001 when the proverbial penny, long waiting in the shadows of the tech boom, finally dropped, triggering one of the most significant crashes in Indian stock market history. This canonical event, that went on to inform sweeping structural reforms, also exposed an insidious and extensive pump-and-dump scheme orchestrated by one Ketan Parekh, no relative of the author, a former broker, and several major players in India's financial ecosystem. Nearly 23 years later, history seems to be repeating itself with another fraud masterminded by Parekh, uncovered by the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) after a months-long investigation into trading records, mobile communications, IP address mappings, and statements from key individuals.

The findings, released by Sebi in an interim order on January 2 expose a fraudulent scheme orchestrated to exploit sensitive, non-public information for illicit gains. This time around, though equally fraudulent, the modus operandi is fundamentally different from the last. Sebi has identified several individuals, including Rohit Salgaocar, Parekh, and others, who are found to have colluded to front-run the trades of an overseas institutional client, or "big client", of two Indian stock brokers. For the uninitiated, front-running is a form of market abuse where individuals trade securities based on advance knowledge of large, market-moving transactions by other investors. It allows the perpetrators to profit from predictable price movements, often at the expense of the original investor's interests and to the prejudice of the public. The probe revealed the involvement of individuals who can be categorised into information carriers, front-runners, and facilitators who played key roles in enabling the malpractice.

The information about impending trades flowed from Salgaocar, a Singapore resident, whom the big client often consulted on trading decisions in Indian markets. Salgaocar leveraged this role to access non-public trade information (as contra-



DEMOCRATIC ROOTS

Prime Minister Narendra Modi

"Today, we celebrate 75 glorious years of being a Republic. We bow to all the great women and men who made our Constitution and ensured that our journey is rooted in democracy, dignity, and unity"

SANDEEP PAREKH

Managing partner, Finsec Law Advisors



sted with non-public inside information), which was relayed to the front-runners. To add to this, traders of the big client, familiar with Salgaocar, interacted with him while executing trades in Indian securities. The communications typically took place over Bloomberg chats and calls. Parekh and connected entities exploited sensitive trade information from the big client's impending transactions in various securities to generate profits worth roughly ₹65 crore.

The operation involved three distinct groups. Salgaocar acted as a conduit for non-public information (NPI). By leveraging his role as a director of Strait Crossing Pte. Ltd. and MoUs with brokers, Salgaocar obtained detailed information about the big client's substantial market transactions. Using this information, Parekh directed employees of stockbrokers, as well as individuals who executed trades through private firms. These entities positioned themselves to benefit from price movements triggered by the big client's large orders. The front-runners used their access to trading accounts and networks to ensure seamless operations, directly communicating with Parekh. A notable aspect of the operation was the use of novel trading strategies termed as BBSS (buy-buy-sell-buy) and SSBS (sell-sell-buy-sell). To illustrate, in the BBSS approach, the perpetrators would purchase shares before the big client's buy order was placed in the market, which they would consistently mark in terms of timing, pricing, and quantity, providing strong evidence of prior knowl-

edge and coordinated execution, and then also go on to sell the remaining shares in the open market.

Privileged access to NPI distorts market fairness, which lays the foundation for investor trust. When trust diminishes, individuals and institutions become wary of investing, perceiving the market as inherently unsafe. In this case, the big client's transactions, aimed at executing legitimate investment strategies, were compromised. The illicit profits were found to have been shared among the perpetrators,

with Parekh orchestrating the scheme and distributing trade-related instructions. These coordinated trading patterns were critical to masking the front-running activities and misleading market observers.

Sebi data for 2022-24 reveals a concerning rise in front-running cases, with numbers tripling every consecutive year.

Between 2020 and 2024, nearly 116 cases have been taken up by the regulator. This highlights a troubling trend of violations, emphasising the need for more vigilance. At the centre of these cases lies the information leakage, who, based on past data, has predominantly been a dealer servicing the broker's institutional clients. While the exponential rise in front-running cases may reflect more proactive surveillance and enforcement, it is equally important to consider scenarios and systemic issues that make front-running possible and erode trust in the market. The broader policy implications are also significant and any questions around market integrity impacts private investment and capital

formation, ultimately weakening economic growth. The lack of adequate oversight has made it easier for front-runners to leak sensitive information, allowing those with access to exploit it for personal gain.

It is time to adopt a more targeted approach to front-running that addresses root causes. Brokers and other fiduciaries must reimagine compliance strategy and contemplate measures that minimise the possibility of front-running in the trading process by design. At the client end such measures could include rotation of specific brokers by institutional clients, splitting up of large institutional orders between multiple dealers and systematic checks to closely monitor broker activities. Introducing stringent accountability frameworks for brokers, accompanied by enhanced oversight of employees engaged in large-volume trading, can also strengthen preventive measures. The broking community needs to collectively adopt a higher standard of monitoring and surveillance over dealer activities. Additionally, brokers, whose dealers are often the primary source of such leaks, should face stricter liabilities. Restrictions on access to communication channels during critical trading activities, like proper implementation of dealing room restrictions, should be reviewed periodically to ensure such curbs don't remain on paper. Separate dealers can be assigned for institutional trades, subject to a higher level of monitoring. These measures would help reduce the risk of sensitive information leakage.

The growth of front-running cases highlights the urgent need for an innovative strategy that addresses systemic flaws, enforces accountability, and fosters a fair trading environment. Sebi's improved surveillance and heightened enforcement action bode well, but will not suffice. The industry must come up with stringent best practices in internal surveillance and supervision which are adopted industry-wide and become a benchmark before any institutional clients approaches them.

Co-authored with **Rashmi Birmole** and **Manas Dhagat**, respectively senior associate & associate, Finsec Law Advisors

A and jobs in India

NIRVIKAR SINGH

Professor of economics, University of California, Santa Cruz



Acceleration of advances in AI can be a reminder that the range of productive jobs and the skills needed for them is much broader than what has fuelled India's growth so far

INDIA'S ECONOMIC GROWTH has been notoriously stingy in generating jobs that pay better than traditional jobs like agriculture or low-level services. Among the reasons for this undesirable feature of India's growth are policies that either discourage using labour versus capital, or discourage the creation of productive, dynamic firms, irrespective of how they manage their labour-capital mix. Another reason has been the education system's failure to give people the right skills for productive employment. This is a policy failure, but also partly a consequence of the aforementioned biases against labour and entrepreneurship. Many Indians leave low-productivity agriculture for urban jobs, but those jobs are often also low-productivity.

High-skilled Indians, a labour elite, have always thrived, and have particularly benefited from India's opening up of its economy since 1991, as well as the impacts of information technology (IT). These changes gave skilled Indians greater access to productive, high-paid jobs. But skill acquisition has been rationed by the education system, as well as failures in health and early child welfare policies which add their own constraints on what people can accomplish as they enter the workforce.

The source of some of the benefits that have accrued to skilled Indian workers is captured in an aphorism of Brad DeLong, an American economist: "IT and the Internet amplify brain power in the same way that the technologies of the industrial revolution amplified muscle power." DeLong

wrote that a quarter century ago, when the Y2K problem was giving Indian IT firms and workers a jump start in applying that amplified brain power. Since then, India has become a global provider of a range of knowledge services. That was also the time of the dotcom bubble, and some were questioning the potential of the Internet, or IT more generally, but clearly the optimists were right — IT and the Internet have been transformative in many respects.

The technologies of the industrial revolution amplified muscle power, but also led to some skills becoming less valuable, as industrial machines substituted for skilled craft work. Some professions disappeared almost completely, like blacksmiths. Later advances created new jobs, like telephone switchboard operators, then further technological progress wiped out those as well. Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) is about to have a major impact on jobs everywhere. GenAI amplifies brain power, but also replaces it in some circumstances.

Presumably, people at the highest end of the skill spectrum will adjust, using GenAI tools to do their jobs better. But some jobs will disappear, just as they did during the original industrial revolution. This means that India's road in pursuing sustained growth, which requires job creation, will get bumpier. Some economists

have argued that India lost its chance to participate in the post-World War 2 global expansion of labour-intensive manufacturing. But climate change and demographics (ageing populations in many countries) will increase demands for many products and services that were not important in earlier growth. Workers with the right kinds of skills will still be needed in increasing numbers.

Arvind Virmani, who has served as a policy adviser over many decades, is an economist who has repeatedly emphasised the importance of "medium-level" skills in supporting India's future growth. He pointed out that such modern construction requires plumbers and electricians with advanced skills than traditional residential construction. Electricians will be needed everywhere, as energy production and transportation electrify. And whereas factory production for some manufacturers can be automated, repairs and maintenance in field settings require human presence and engagement. More generally, as our products become more sophisticated, servicing them demands greater training and skills. At a different level, caring for ageing populations will not only increase the demand for all kinds of monitoring and assistive devices, but also for direct care — nurses and other quasi-medical profes-

sionals will be increasingly needed.

The fact that millions of Indians spend years preparing for competitive examinations that might get them government jobs is an indication of a massive policy failure in the Indian system of education and training. Unfortunately, those jobs do not provide the kind of training and on-the-job skill acquisition that might lead to careers outside that sphere, except perhaps for the elite few. It might seem that training more nurses and electricians will run into a problem of insufficient demand, but we have seen how software engineers became part of a global labour market. Nurses and other skilled workers already emigrate. Increasing their domestic supply will fill growing global demands, and raise standards at home.

One problem, of course, is that India lacks the institutional expertise and human capital to ramp up these kinds of training. Drawing on global expertise to scale up domestic skill training seems to be a natural solution. India has long seemed to devalue practical, hands-on knowledge versus "pure" brain power. The first decades of the IT revolution covered up the limitations of that bias. The acceleration of advances in AI, substituting for some kinds of brain power, can be a reminder that the range of productive jobs and the skills needed for them is much broader than what has fuelled India's growth so far. India's demographic dividend might still be generated and cashed in, if its policies change strategically.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Manufacturing growth

Apropos of "Revive manufacturing growth" (FE, January 25), indeed there must be a budgetary push to increase the capex for labour-intensive industries to create jobs. Increased jobs will boost consumption and catalyse sales without blocking the cash flow and accumulation of stock. Production-linked incentives should be extended

to micro, small and medium enterprises, which could strengthen manufacturing and avert the dumping of cheap goods by China. Domestic industries need to be protected, and a boost in production with incentives will remove demand. Increasing exports of labour-intensive industries and strengthening the domestic market are needed to fully utilise production capacity. —NR Nagarajan, Sivakasi

Trump's tariff threats

US President Donald Trump has made a pincer attack on his major trading partners, such as Canada, Mexico, and China, through a "carrot and stick" policy of offering the largest tax relief for their "Make in America" initiatives while simultaneously threatening to impose steep tariffs if they disagree. During his video address at the World Economic Forum held in Davos,

Switzerland. He has also urged OPEC to slash oil prices to reduce export of Russian oil causing a deficit in funding the war in Ukraine. He is supporting domestic industries and American workers by reversing past policies. Reactions will erupt soon with the Democratic party's response and the implementation of his orders. —RS Narula, Patiala

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GUEST VIEW

MINT CURATOR

Monetary policy: It's best to hold rates steady for the time being

RBI should keep price stability in focus to favour the rupee and growth while it manages liquidity and awaits path clarity**GAURY KAPUR**
is chief economist, IndusInd Bank Ltd.

In its February meeting, the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) will deliberate on whether the trajectory of policy rates has reached an inflexion point from where an easing cycle can begin. With a new RBI governor at the helm, the MPC will consider the latest information on consumer price index (CPI)-based inflation and GDP growth available since the last meeting. Average headline CPI inflation in the third quarter of 2024-25 at 5.6% was well above the target, though in line with RBI's baseline estimate. The National Statistical Office's first estimate placed real GDP growth at 6.4% in 2024-25, again largely in line with RBI's forecast of 6.6%. Given these in-line outcomes, the MPC will decide the way forward based on its outlook on growth and inflation risks.

Near-term risks to price stability have risen since the December meeting. The rupee has depreciated by over 3%, weighed by renewed dollar strength and increased financial-market volatility amid heightened uncertainty around US tariff plans and their impact on inflation and rates. The US Federal Reserve has issued a hawkish forward guidance and signalled fewer rate cuts in 2025, triggering a risk-off mood among investors. According to the baseline forecast of RBI, headline inflation is expected to hold above its 4% target for the next 6 months. High but easing food inflation and sticky core prices are likely to keep it in the 4.5-5% range during that period. A weaker rupee presents an upside risk to that trajectory. Pressure on the rupee can intensify as the dollar's strength and Chinese yuan's weakness are likely to persist. Higher relative inflation in India is also contributing to rupee overvaluation in trade-weighted inflation-adjusted real effective exchange rate (REER) terms. That will get corrected through nominal depreciation and require vigilance on price stability. The pace of disinflation as envisaged in the baseline forecast is thus at risk from imported inflationary pressures.

The outlook on growth, on the other hand, is reasonably strong, with GDP expansion likely to pick up in the second half from the first, helped by an uptick in private consumption. While real GDP growth for 2024-25 is estimated to be lower than last fiscal year's 8.2%, nominal GDP growth at 9.7% is expected to be unchanged from 9.6% last year. This is suggestive of higher inflation having pulled down real growth, particularly hurting mass urban demand and highlighting the need for a cautious monetary stance. The International Monetary Fund projects growth in India to hold around 6.5% in the next two years, in line with the economy's potential. This appears plausible. Continued support for fixed investments in the Union budget for 2025-26 will help underpin growth. The Centre's focus on capital expenditure along with fiscal consolidation is likely to continue, aided by stable tax revenue growth. In 2024-25, a contraction in capi-



tal spending by the Centre has slowed the growth in capital formation; its contribution to headline growth has almost halved compared to the year before. That is likely to reverse with a pick-up in public capex, which would help drive aggregate demand as well as potential growth higher.

Private consumption, the largest component of GDP, will also be aided by an ongoing recovery in rural demand on the back of improved farm-sector activity, while urban demand will get support from relatively stable growth in services.

Thus, the growth outlook is of a return to its potential level after three consecutive years of over 7% growth. Considering increased risks to inflation, a *status quo* on policy rates may be prudent, especially to support growth. A wait-and-watch approach will also help provide more clarity on spillovers from external developments.

In the meantime, RBI can manage liquidity conditions in the banking system to ensure that the operating target—the weighted average call rate—remains within its policy-rate corridor. Since mid-December, liquidity has returned to a deficit, amid a build-up in government cash balances and RBI dollar sales to contain exchange-rate volatility. RBI had cut the cash reserve ratio (CRR) by 50 basis points in December and continues to address liquidity tightness through measures like daily variable rate repo (VRR) auctions. As a result, the call rate has hovered between the repo rate of 6.50% and the marginal standing facility (MSF) rate of 6.75%, suggesting that despite liquidity tightness, short-term rates have remained largely stable.

Bank deposit and lending rates too remain stable. Bank credit growth has slowed down this year, in part due to regulatory measures. But at 12.5%, it is holding well above nominal GDP growth. Yield movements in the bond market (both government and corporate) also remain orderly, suggesting that financial conditions are broadly supportive. Other than frictional pressures on liquidity, RBI will also be closely monitoring the decline in the durable liquidity surplus, which now stands at ₹64,350 crore, down from its peak of ₹4,885 trillion in early October. A durable liquidity shortage can push rates higher than warranted. Moreover, any easing in monetary policy rates without adequate liquidity in the system will dilute their effect. With a CRR cut already undertaken, RBI has the option of making open market purchases of government bonds, especially if its dollar sales drain durable liquidity.

Overall, price stability should remain the focus of monetary policy. This will help support growth while maintaining macroeconomic stability amid heightened financial and capital-flow volatility. A wait-and-watch approach would be best. Moreover, given the uncertainty around US industrial, fiscal and monetary policies, supporting the rupee through price stability will help manage any adverse spillovers. A rate cut at this stage without surplus liquidity may not help bring down rates in the wider economy. And, given that the room for monetary easing is limited under a 'neutral' policy stance, it will reduce the space available to support growth in the future if the need arises.

These are the author's personal views.

Trump's birthright citizenship stunt diminishes the country

America's 'greatness' is its generosity in welcoming liberty seekers**PATRICIA LOPEZ**
is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering politics and policy.

A closed-door country goes against a key factor in US success.

On 20 January, as US President Donald Trump attended an inaugural service at Washington National Cathedral, Episcopal Bishop Marianne Budde pleaded with him. "In the name of our God, I ask you to have mercy upon the people in our country who are scared now," she said. The vast majority of immigrants are not criminals, Budde said, but pay taxes and are good neighbours. Trump scarcely looked at her. He has made no secret of his desire to restrict entry to the US and won both the Electoral College and the popular vote.

The flurry of executive orders he signed aim to do just that. Among the most chilling: an attempt to override the 14th Amendment, limit birthright citizenship, and create a subclass of children who were born here, but through a cruel trick of timing, are not Americans. This takes effect in less than a month. Babies born in the US after that to undocumented parents would, Trump said, no longer be recognized by the federal government as US citizens.

Altering birthright citizenship has been high on Trump's agenda. Nevertheless, it is shocking to see the scope. The order not only includes undocumented immigrants, but also includes legal immigrants whose status is considered temporary. Hundreds of thousands who entered the US legally on student visas, the H-1B programme for skilled foreign workers or through refugee schemes such as Temporary Protected Status, would be subject to the same restrictions. No permanent status, no American citizen children.

Yes, the H-1B programme needs an overhaul. So do other temporary programmes. But this punitive approach is hardly the way. Ultimately, of course, this will be a matter for the Supreme Court. Trump lacks the power to alter the 14th Amendment, which explicitly states that "All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States."

Intended to guarantee citizenship for newly freed slaves, the amendment has long been interpreted as establishing birthright citizenship. That principle was affirmed in *US vs Wong Kim Ark*, the 1898 case of a Chinese American man born in San Francisco, but to Chinese citizens. The precedent set in that ruling has stood for well over a century.

Perhaps Trump thinks there is no way a Supreme Court with a conservative 6-3 majority—three of whom he appointed—would defy him on one of his obsessions. Maybe he thinks the longstanding prece-

dent will matter little to the court that overturned *Roe vs Wade* in 2022, robbing women of reproductive rights guaranteed by the Constitution for almost 50 years. Or perhaps he expects to fail, as many legal scholars suspect, but still feels the gambit gives him a talking point and another way to blame opponents for thwarting him.

Twenty-two Democratic-led states are filing lawsuits and injunctions will be sought. The American Civil Liberties Union has filed its own lawsuit.

The birthright citizenship ploy is just one part of Trump's frontal assault on immigration. He has suspended the entire US Refugee Resettlement Program, saying that Biden admitted far too many refugees. Another executive order requires a plan that assigns the Defense Department's US Northern Command to seal the borders. Other actions cancelled thousands of appointments with asylum seekers.

Although Trump's border czar, Tom Homan, said before Trump took office that the administration would prioritize the removal of criminals, Trump specifically broadened enforcement beyond that narrow charge and removed earlier guidelines against conducting raids in schools, hospitals, churches, shelters and more. Trump clearly intends to wage a campaign of "shock and awe" against immigrants, with the brutality of it sending a message to "keep out."

Trump appears not to believe that immigrants are part of what makes America exceptional. Each wave of immigration has made its contributions, creating a mosaic of cultures that enliven this nation and expose us to new ways and new thinking. Have there been rough spots? Yes. Do we need immigration reforms? Undoubtedly. Many Americans are frustrated with levels that seem to be rising beyond this nation's capacity to adapt. But this is not the humane reform many Americans seek.

I am a daughter of naturalized immigrants and my father believed to his last day that this was the greatest country in the world and that his greatest gift to me was my US citizenship. It saddens me to think that Trump's America may become a place that turns its back on what makes the US truly great: its generous and welcoming spirit, refreshed by the sweat and toil of newcomers seeking freedom.

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MY VIEW | GENERAL DISEQUILIBRIUM

Deal-making will dominate 2025 and drive the budget

RAJRISHI SINGHAL



is a senior journalist and author of *Slip, Stitch and Stumble: The Untold Story of India's Financial Sector Reforms* @rajrishisinghal

These winter months are turning out to be a season for deal-making, corporate or geopolitical. The annual deal-making Davos conference kicked off on 20 January, the same day a self-appointed deal-maker was sworn in as the next president of the United States. India observes an annual deal-making day on 1 February every year when the finance minister presents the budget. The budget is technically supposed to be a dull accounting statement but, by default, has become India's annual economic statement; in reality, it has always striven to strike deals between various sections of society through budgetary allocations and tax breaks. Given the deal bazaar that has welcomed 2025, it will be interesting to see the deal structures finalized by finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman.

A Goldman Sachs report on mergers and acquisitions for 2025 anticipates a stellar year for corporate deal-making as companies try to act on monetary policy normalization, easier regulations under the new US

administration, artificial intelligence disrupting normal operations and a widespread corporate desire to rebalance portfolios. The report expects the M&A engine to accelerate through 2025, knocked occasionally by volatility caused by geopolitical shifts and a new tariff regime.

The biggest deal in recent times was the breakthrough achieved in convincing the Israeli government and Hamas to sign a complicated truce agreement. Mediated by the Qatar government and pushed along by representatives from both Joe Biden's lame-duck government and Donald Trump's incoming administration, a complex and multi-phase ceasefire deal was announced, with hostages and prisoners released by both sides in its first phase as a gesture of deal acceptance. The truce could well be temporary because any perceived transgression during its prolonged duration by either side could reignite hostilities.

But despite these knife-edge risks, the negotiators soldiered on, modifying some conditions, using available pressure points to get some others accepted or using veiled threats when necessary to get their points across. This is exactly how corporate deals are closed and the presence of Steve Witkoff, a real-estate investor and President Trump's

frequent golf partner, may have speeded up proceedings.

Trump had, of course, promised on the campaign trail that his White House will drive multiple deals. Soon after his inauguration, he signed a flood of executive orders. These included withdrawing the US from the Paris climate accord and the World Health Organization, obliterating transgender rights and dismantling federal programmes that promoted diversity, equity and inclusion. It revealed the president's desire to unilaterally dictate the governance agenda, independent of the US Congress.

But two specific orders cast a sharp light on his transactional mode of governance, and both involve large corporations. The first surprisingly reverses the US's acceptance of a global tax deal facilitated by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, which sought to limit tax-evasion by large multinational corporations; these companies dodged taxes in countries of operation

by booking profits in low-tax jurisdictions. The order, which invalidates years of G20 negotiations and an agreement signed by 130 nations, is viewed as mostly beneficial to technology companies like Google, Amazon and Meta; the chief executives of all these companies were present in full strength at Trump's inauguration.

The second order seeks to provide a 75-day reprieve to social media platform TikTok after US federal law banned it (for ostensibly posing a threat to national security), an action that was subsequently upheld by the US Supreme Court. Trump's executive order is an attempt to provide TikTok breathing space to finalize a deal—essentially find a American suitor willing to buy a stake—that will help it side-step the ban. Interestingly, TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew was found seated next to Tobi Gabbard, the new director of national intelligence, at Trump's swearing-in ceremony.

So, what kind of deal is to be expected from India's budget?

The budget essentially has to strike a deal that optimizes the interests of five sets of stakeholders. One comprises middle-class salaried employees who feel squeezed between rising inflation, allegedly unfair tax laws and stagnant wages. The second cohort includes agriculturalists and the broader rural population, which, in the face of stagnating incomes, has been forced to depend on government handouts and loans to finance consumption. The third is the vast army of unemployed youth which sees no job opportunities and is therefore unable to supply the advertised demographic dividend. The fourth group includes the creamy layer of the corporate sector, which has used a bouquet of tax breaks and incentives to enrich top management without benefiting the broader workforce or the economy's investment ratio. The final side includes both foreign investors and domestic bean-counters who view the budget through the lens of its fiscal deficit to the exclusion of all else.

Given these five sets and a discernible economic slowdown, the finance minister will have to design a five-cornered New Deal that stimulates consumption, spurs employment generation, incentivizes capital expenditure, maintains tax buoyancy and yet keeps a tight leash on the fiscal deficit.

Good Job Plugging The Leaky Pipeline

Fiscal deficit nearly under control; target inflation

Fiscal deficit is likely to stay below 4.9% BE in 2024-25, and Nirmala Sitharaman is on course to meet the 4.5% medium-term target for 2025-26. That this correction is taking place as the economy slows down is an even more impressive achievement. The composition of the deficit has altered considerably to favour capex, and the current year's performance is based partly on slower project clearance in an election year. RBI is intervening heavily in the forex market to keep the rupee stable. A consequential higher dividend from RBI will help lower GoI's market borrowings in 2025-26. The extent to which the fiscal deficit undershoots in 2024-25 will make the job of meeting next year's target easier. Yet, GoI will have to squeeze expenditure in 2025-26 to make good on its medium-term objective.

Fiscal consolidation is entering an overlap zone with monetary easing, while inflation still off-target. RBI is widely expected to announce its first interest rate cut as early as next month, coinciding with GoI's deficit-reduction announcement. However, the interest rate downcycle will be shallow and fiscal adjustment is critical to inflation control, going forward. Rate-setters also cannot take their eye off food inflation, over which monetary policy has little impact. Supply-side responses to spikes in commodity prices limit the scope for fiscal correction, but GoI is right in pursuing its medium-term deficit-reduction objective.

The addressable policy objective when consumption is slowing should be the price level rather than the income level. The anticipated private investment upcycle that was to have delivered income growth is delayed. This stretches GoI's capex horizon with a supplementary impact on revenue expenditure. Expectations have been built over budget measures to revive growth, but inflation control is key to propping up real incomes.

Greenlight Greening The Electricity Sector

India's path to decarbonisation lies through its electricity sector. The country has been increasing its RE capacity — from 38.96 GW in 2015 to 203.18 GW in 2024. However, it must not only accelerate its pace to meet the ambitious target of 450 GW of RE by 2030 but also roll out a modern and smart transmission system. Equally important is addressing structural, regulatory and tariff-related challenges associated with integrating clean and intermittent energy sources. An integrated approach is crucial to ensuring a smooth and equitable green transition.

Beyond budgetary interventions for generation and transmission, GoI must initiate regulatory changes, revise market designs and reform tariff systems to power the transition and transformation of the electricity sector. Policy interventions should focus on equipping states to adopt integrated resource planning and robust resource-allocation frameworks. These measures will guide investments in flexible, clean technologies, and modern transmission infrastructure. Additionally, changes in market design are necessary to correct the existing bias towards coal. This requires innovative mechanisms to restructure legacy PPAs to enable an economic electricity dispatch system — one that respects existing contracts while incentivising new, cleaner providers. Addressing the economic viability of discoms is another critical challenge. Despite numerous rescue packages, discoms remain financially unviable. A fresh, out-of-the-box approach is required, integrating distributed RE, battery storage, smart meters and dynamic tariff designs to enable sustainable new business models. The budget must also lay the groundwork for a robust retail electricity market that values clean, efficient and cost-effective systems. Without structural and regulatory interventions, greening the electricity sector will remain a formidable challenge, jeopardising India's decarbonisation goals.



JUST IN JEST

Don't let vague Vogue tips fool you, style's about feeling good, not fitting in

How to Wear Clothes Right: Scandi-ly Clad

'Don't let fashion own you... express yourself through what you wear.' That was Gianni Versace decades ago. Clearly, Scandinavians heard the Italian designer loud and clear because Scandi-hi-fashion is now the vibe. Starting tomorrow, the 5-day Copenhagen Fashion Week (CPHFV) is where all the cool kids — and those pretending to be cool kids — will be flaunting it. Five years ago, Scandi fashion was a predictable playlist: bright colours, gingham, puffed sleeves — basically picnic chic with a dash of ABBA. But fast forward to today, and it's a free-for-all. There's no one look that thankfully screams 'Nordic naft' any more. Today's Scandi fashion threads are like a buffet where everything's delicious, and no one judges you for piling your plate high. At CPHFV 2025, expect stylish layers, bold colours, playful shapes and prints galore. The best part? You don't need a trust fund or a juice cleanse to pull it off. Scandi fashion is for people who love clothes, but hate being bossed around by them. Comfort meets confidence here, a rebellious shrug to outdated fashion rules, and Vogue vagaries. Whether you're layering for the Dilli or Danish weather or tossing on something that makes you happy, CPHFV's got your back. Fashion that fits everyone? Now, that's 'ought couture'. Or, as the Scandis may say — layer on the great, skip the stress dress.

Singh was not just the liberator of India's economic fortunes but also a genuine grand strategist

The Great Statesmanmanman



Ashley J Tellis

A month ago, India lost one of its greatest sons. Manmohan Singh, India's 13th PM, was the last of the Partition generation to lead the country. This trauma not only shaped his perception of the value of India's multiracial diversity, but also strengthened his resolve to nourish it in ways that only a liberal democratic society could.

Many have commented on his extraordinary decency, his generosity of spirit, and his understated perspicacity about politics and policy. I witnessed these traits in many meetings with him since 2001, and especially when the US and India consummated the civil nuclear deal.

His reputation as a brilliant economist and as coauthor of India's epochal reforms was entrenched by the time I first met him in New Delhi. But right from that meeting and through subsequent encounters, I was convinced that Singh was not merely the liberator of India's economic fortunes, but also a genuine grand strategist who perspicaciously envisioned what was necessary to cement India's successful rise as a great power while doing well by both its own people and the world.

Singh understood better than most that continued economic reforms would liberate India's productive energies and expand its economy. But being a child of Partition, he appreciated that a burgeoning economy would be insufficient to provide India with the security it needed for its fullest flowering.

Partition was a tragedy that could not be reversed. Yet, the continuing division of the subcontinent needed to be overcome so that India's new economic growth would not trigger envy or opposition on the part of its neighbours, but rather become an engine for their advancement.

His determination to pursue reconciliation with Pakistan by exploring a boldly innovative solution to the vexing problem of J&K was intended to achieve this. To lay a path for the subcontinent's eventual economic reunification, which he evocatively expressed in words that are ins-



Making India centre stage

pirational even today: 'I dream of a day when, while retaining our respective national identities, one can have breakfast in Amritsar, lunch in Lahore, and dinner in Kabul. That is how my forefathers lived. That is how I want our grandchildren to live.' This dream was hardly dreamlike. It represented a keen understanding that India's rising power would be resisted to its detriment in its neighbourhood unless it brought benefits to those adjacent to it. Because political reconciliation would open doors to economic integration, it became the natural corollary of India's domestic liberalisation — one that would bring increased material benefits to Indians while advancing the larger objective of easing India's path to greatness.

That this strategy eventually flourished can be attributed more to Pakistan's internal weaknesses than to any lack of effort on Singh's part. Yet, it remains the only enduring enure for co-opting the subcontinent into supporting India's rise.

Advancing this objective also motivated Singh to co-

plete the reconciliation with the US. Atal Bihari Vajpayee began the effort of seeking nuclear deal with George W. Bush. But it was a limited initiative focused on securing nuclear fuel for India's starving reactors. Singh pursued something far more ambitious: not only procuring the fuel but also engineering India's integration into the global non-proliferation order.

But even this was small potatoes. What Singh envisaged was nothing less than 'bringing sunlight into the nuclear power programme' at home while forging a new friendship with the most powerful entity in the international system, the US.

He understood intuitively that a sturdy partnership with the US was indispensable for India's rise. That was true even when India was poor. As he once ruefully said to me, 'India's non-alignment was sustained on the back of PL-480 wheat.' But its geostrategic emergence now and into the future would require even more the full-throated backing of the US.

Singh was determined to make this happen. As the



He understood intuitively that a sturdy partnership with the US was indispensable for India's rise.

That was true even when India was poor.

India's non-alignment was sustained on the back of PL-480 wheat,' he once told me

nuclear negotiations demonstrated, he secured that outcome while preserving both India's weapons programme and its freedom to pursue an independent foreign policy. Consequently, Vajpayee's reluctance to support the nuclear deal, which was his own progeny, dismayed Singh. But he all too astutely understood why. And being the gentleman that he was, he chose to appeal to his predecessor's patriotism rather than level angry accusations.

Singh's vision of reconciliation in the neighbourhood as well as farther afield was rooted in his deep commitment to liberal politics. That liberalism, which animated India's founding fathers, found worth in every one of its citizens, no matter what their religion or their social or economic standing was.

Like the founders, it also made Singh deeply respectful of India's long and complex history. Rather than quarrelling with it, it had to be embraced, and even rejoined over. For it was only by procuring the fuel but also engineering India's integration into the global non-proliferation order.

Singh's memorable speech at Oxford in 2005 cited Rabindranath Tagore's appreciation of the West — one of the many alien contributors to India's history — and declared that Tagore's recommendation was an act of courage and statesmanship. It was, however, also an act of great foresight.

Yet, these words apply a *fortiori* to Singh himself. For his policies towards India's neighbours and the wider world reflected the conviction that if India were to hobble itself by its grievances about history, it would only end up animating the resentments of others who might find in their own histories reasons to assail India. Even worse, it would prevent India from realising the vision of peacefully raising every one of its inhabitants to the full measure of empowered citizenship, and what would be the unkindest cut of all.

In his politics as in his life, Singh stood tall, the accidental prime minister who proved to be not only the acknowledged driver of India's economic transformation, but also the underappreciated custodian of the only strategic vision that promises India progress and peace.

The writer was special assistant to President of the US, US National Security Council, and is senior fellow, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

ChatGPT SHAIPI OF THE DAY

The budget'll be announced with great flair, But nobody seems to quite care.

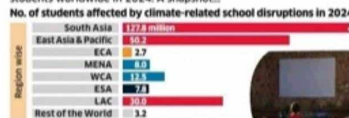
'Fiscal deficit? Meh. What's dropping on Netflix this Saturday?'

Said the crowd as they lounged on their chairs.

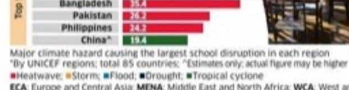
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Climate Disrupting Classes

Climate shocks are disrupting children's education, putting their learning and their futures at risk. A new UNICEF analysis finds that climate-induced hazards disrupted schooling for at least 242 million students worldwide in 2024. A snapshot...



Countries with most children affected



Major climate hazard causing the largest school disruption in each region by UNICEF region, total 85 countries. Legend: Heatwave, Storm, Flood, Drought, Tropical cyclone

ECA: Europe and Central Asia; MENA: Middle East and North Africa; WCA: West and Central Africa; ESA: Eastern and Southern Africa; LAC: Latin America & Caribbean

MEME'S THE WORD



Good 1st Day 1st Trumpshow Seats



Seema Sirahi

An early call, but India has started in a good place in Donald Trump's world. History and geography are in favour as before. But new signals are loud and clear: There's mutual recognition that the strategic partnership should be 'bolder', 'bigger' and 'more ambitious'.

Given the blur of extraordinary activity and blizzard of executive orders, it's blindingly clear that Trump is not wasting time. Early birds will have an advantage, and Delhi understands the need to be in the room, read it and move fast. Like next month for a prime ministerial visit if the White House is willing? It seems GoI has suggested February for a PM visit. The Japanese are pushing to be first among equals. But, ultimately, it will be Trump's call.

Trump is expected to travel to Delhi for the Quad summit sometime next year. But he's yet to name an ambassador to India, the only major country without a pick so far. China, Japan, Mexico and most of Latin America and Europe have nominees. Last time, India escaped the fate of Europe and got a professional in Kenneth Juster who managed both relationship and presidential volatility well. This time, several loyalists and donors are in the fray and whispers about a 'bidding war' are loud. A hef-

ty donation opens the door. It helps if you have the motivation/expertise since India is not a vacation spot. The issues are complex and often defy easy solutions.

Be that as it may, the Trump administration's messaging on India is on the mark. It seems S. Jaishankar's quick foray in December to meet NSA Mike Waltz and others apparently planted the idea of a Quad foreign ministers meeting soon after the inauguration to reinforce policy continuity and send a clear message eastwards. Indeed, that happened when he returned as the PM's special envoy to attend the inauguration.

Quad foreign ministers met within hours of Marco Rubio's confirmation as the new secretary of state. The short Quad joint statement touched all the points — strong opposition to unilateral actions by those trying to change the status quo by force (meaning China) while reiterating a shared commitment to free and open Indo-Pacific where the rule of law, democratic values, sovereignty and territorial integrity are upheld.

The meeting itself was well-timed as Jaishankar said. It's

worth reminding everyone, including the new Trump team, that the Quad was resurrected by Trump 1.0. The initial daring and declaring back then was crucial for Joe Biden to expand Quad as part of the 'lattice-work' of groupings to counter China.

Rubio's first bilateral meeting was with Jaishankar, with both sides flagging issues of concern. India raised US regulatory hurdles, visa delays and legal mobility while expressing strong opposition to what the US side called 'irregular migration'. The US readout was explicit on deepening the relationship further on critical and emerging technologies, defence cooperation, energy and advancing economic ties. The last two could be read as: 'Buy more US oil and gas' and 'Get moving on market access'.

Now for the fun stuff. Some were surprised, others envious, that Jaishankar got what arguably was the best seat at the inauguration. A good sign since in the world of

diplomacy, 'where you stand depends on where you sit'. A very good sign when China was straining from a corner in the back row behind the president. Technically, Chinese VP

Han Zheng was accorded a higher place — he was on the dais. But, practically, he was invisible. He was hidden behind the large and sleek family and Tech Central. The protocol war, for which Indian diplomats are known to shed considerable blood and treasure, was decisively won. How the 'seat coup' was staged remains a mystery. But the obvious conclusion most will draw: organisers gave India more importance than they did to others.

Later at the high-end 'Starlight Ball', Jaishankar did quick time with various cabinet members, including Rubio (secret, Scott Bessent (treasury), Howard Lutnick (commerce), Kash Patel (PDI), Mike Wright (energy), and key members of Congress, including Senator John Thune (majority leader) and Congressman Mike Johnson (House speaker). That's good outreach for an 'evening social'.

Questions are still circulating whether Narendra Modi did or didn't get an invitation to the inauguration after Trump announced he had invited Xi Jinping. Critics called it 'snub', while devotees went into contortions to explain. The real story is much less exciting. Turns out, the US side did consult the PMO, and it seems Delhi took a pass. As a former Trump official surmised, Modi probably didn't want to appear as a sycophant. He sees himself to be as independent as he can be. An early bilateral visit would be better, more substantive and with some control over the agenda. Plus, there would be a right of reply. India is neither an ally nor a suppliant with special needs or a rival like China. That should explain it.



THE SPEAKING TREE

Borders Must Go

OSHO

80% of humanity's ability goes into war. If this 80% ability went into farming, went into gardens, went into factories, this earth would become a paradise. The dream that your seers and prophets used to see, that of a heaven in the sky, can now be materialised on earth. There is no obstacle. But old habits — 'This is our country, this is their country. We have to fight, they have to fight.'

The poorest of poor nations are also engaged in an effort to make atom bombs. They are dying of starvation but they want to make atom bombs... I don't believe in countries that listen to the will of a few. I don't believe in the first country to renounce nationalism. It would be good if the country of Krishn, Buddha, Patanjali and Gandhi renounces nationalism... Someone must start it — and if it is started, there is no need for wars. These wars will continue as long as there are borders. These borders must go.

It can be said that I am a traitor in the context of following one country, but I am not a traitor to humanity. Actually, all your lovers of nations are traitors to humanity. The very meaning of patriotism is 'treason towards humanity'. Love of nation means dividing into parts. You have seen, haven't you, that a person who is patriotic towards his region becomes an enemy of the nation... I am not an enemy of the nation; my view is international. This whole earth is one. I want to abandon the small for the vast.

Abridged from Death is Divine, Osho Times International, courtesy: Osho International Foundation

MELODY FOR MONDAY

God Save the Queen

Sax Pistols

By now, you must be infused with deep patriotic feelings thanks to yesterday's playlist of one earnest 'Republic Day' song after another, Mahendra Kapoor's 'Mere Desh ki Dhar' being mandatory of course. But with music in India almost bereft of the 'audra rasa' — the emotion of anger or fury — listen to another kind of 'patriotic' song from another country, the kind that highlights the disaffection with those running one's country.

Released in 1977 as a powerful critique of the British monarchy and society, the iconic 'God Save the Queen' by the Sex Pistols delivers its message with unapologetic ferocity. The greatness of this track lies in its raw energy, provocative lyrics, and sheer impact on how the 'herd' views nation worship.

From the grating opening chords, this 'rejoinder' to the British national anthem grabs the listener by the collar. Johnny Rotten a.k.a. John Lydon's snarling vocals, wedded to the dark poetry of 'When there's no future how can there be sin? / Tell me how the flowers in the dust bin, / Tell you to look beyond the mantra propaganda. The chorus, with its infamous line 'No future, encapsulates the sense of disenchantment that is invisible to those in love with blindly loving one's country.'

Chat Room

V the People, or We the Weeple?

Agrees the Edit, 'Our Republics Missing in Action' (Jan 20), just because we vote once in five years to select our representatives does not make us a true democratic sovereign nation. Have we failed democracy or has democracy failed us? Our representatives only reflect upon the kind of people we are. And, it appears that we prefer a form of misbegotten leader that does not need us to be active participants in the democratic processes other than vote in the elections. The tragedy is that instead of being concerned about the quality of the elected reps and their performance in the parliament, we pay more attention to their religion and caste, and where they come from. Anthony Henriquez Mumbai

front row front line



Republican journey

The President of India should stay clear of partisan political discourse

In her customary address to the nation on the eve of the 76th Republic Day, the President of India, Droupadi Murmu, said that the Constitution has become a living document due to the millennia-old civil virtues of the country. Ms. Murmu also paid tribute to Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who chaired the Drafting Committee, and other members of the Constituent Assembly, who created a document that would guide the country's progress. Connecting India's journey as a modern Republic to its heritage, the President said the constitutional values of justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity have always been a part of India's civilisation. Sceptics who doubted India's prospects at the time of independence have been proven wrong due to these inherent strengths of the country. The President highlighted the representative character of the Constituent Assembly, whose members were drawn from every part of, and communities in, the country, including 15 women. While women's equality was at that time only a distant ideal in much of the world, Indian women were contributing to shaping the nation's destiny, she noted. Reflecting on the progress over 75 years, Ms. Murmu commended the Union government's efforts to move past the relics of the colonial era, particularly the "audacity of vision" of replacing colonial-era criminal laws with three new laws rooted in Indian traditions of jurisprudence.

The President strongly advocated the controversial proposal for simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies as a means to re-define good governance. The draft Bill on simultaneous elections, introduced by the Narendra Modi government, is under review by a joint committee of Parliament. The President waded into the debate with the argument that synchronised elections would promote consistency in governance, prevent policy paralysis, mitigate resource diversion, and reduce financial burdens. It is a contentious topic and opposition parties that are a part of the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance have opposed the plan on the ground that it violates the basic structure of the Constitution and undermines federalism. Not surprisingly, Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge has alleged that there is a "tendency" to impose a "One Nation, One Party" agenda by undermining the Opposition. The President could have stayed clear of this topic. The government will need to tread carefully to ensure that the First Citizen is not drawn into what is essentially a partisan political debate. Unity without uniformity is key to a more perfect union. And Republic Day is as good as any other day to reiterate that.

India with Indonesia

The two Asian nations must now build on their historic ties

Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto's visit to India, as chief guest at the Republic Day parade, was replete with the symbolism of historically important ties between the two countries, albeit short on concrete outcomes. India and Indonesia's ancient ties, that rest on trade and travel to the spread of an adapted form of Javanese Hinduism, as well as the use of Vedic scriptures and Sanskrit works, have given the two countries a formidable engagement. In the previous century, it was their solidarity against imperialism, which led to independent India's support to Indonesian leaders fighting Dutch colonialism, with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru banning Dutch overflights and sending Indian planes to evacuate the Indonesian Prime Minister and Vice President – in an article in *The Hindu* on January 5, 1950, Indonesia's first President, Sukarno, wrote about Indonesia's gratitude. Next, India and Indonesia were united by their aversion to great power politics. They supported the creation of the non-aligned movement (NAM), beginning with the Bandung Conference. Ties were also forged by their innate similarities as two Asian nations that dominated South Asia and South-East Asia by size. Both were countries where large religious minorities practised tolerance towards sizable minorities, as well as economic powerhouses committed to an equitable development of their large populations. In the recent past, ties have been spurred by common concerns over western sanctions after the start of the Ukraine war, U.S.-China rivalry and China's aggression in the Indo-Pacific, worries over "food, fertilizer and fuel" security and a weakening multilateral order. Their efforts to forge consensus at the G-20 summits in Bali (2022) and Delhi (2023), will now be put to further use as Indonesia has joined BRICS. At that sense, Mr. Subianto's visit, in the 75th year of bilateral ties, is a full circle: from Bandung to an enlarged BRICS.

Given the historical, strategic and geopolitical importance of relations, the announcements were more modest than expected. There were five MoUs in health, traditional medicine, maritime security, digital development and cultural cooperation and the joint statement referred to strengthening defence cooperation. However, no specific progress was announced on the sale of India's Brahmos missile, or on the Sabang port project and Aceh-Andaman connectivity initiatives. The joint statement was also pointedly non-committal on their world view, despite their similar positions on recent geopolitical conflicts, and initiatives to engage the Trump administration and China. India's Republic Day invitation and Mr. Subianto's visit, fresh in his presidential term, are, however, an important statement for both capitals to make. There is the impetus for the two Asian powers to forge the next phase in their ties.

Genocide and the world's averted gaze

Eighty years ago, on January 27, 1945, Soviet soldiers stumbled upon the barbed wire surrounding Auschwitz-Birkenau. Inside they found 8,000 emaciated prisoners, along with 44,000 pairs of shoes, piles of spectacles, and mounds of cooking utensils. This was all that remained of the approximately 1.1 million people, mainly European Jews, who were killed at Auschwitz. As the retreating Nazis destroyed their meticulous records along with much evidence of the brutally efficient killing operation, a precise figure is not available. This year, on the anniversary of the liberation, the few remaining survivors and world leaders have been invited to remember the dead and to renew the international community's pledge of never again allowing genocide to take place.

A stain in human history

As the Genocide Convention of 1948 recognises, the crime of genocide – "acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group" – has stained human history down the ages. The United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, said on December 9, 2020, on the international day to commemorate victims of genocide, "Genocide always has multiple clear warning signs."

The Soviet soldiers who liberated Auschwitz later said they were wholly unprepared for what they found. However, while the industrial scale of the killing that would eventually claim six million Jewish lives, in addition to tens of thousands of Roma, Sinti, and other people deemed inferior or political opponents, was not known in its entirety, the Allies were not entirely unaware.

On assuming power in 1933, the Nazis codified the persecution of Jews in hundreds of laws, culminating in the Nuremberg Laws of 1935 that took away German citizenship from Jews and others considered "non Aryan". Yet, when those Jews who could overcome restrictive German emigration laws tried to leave (until 1941, when Germany forbade Jewish emigration), they encountered bureaucratic obstacles, xenophobia and antisemitism.

Following the 1929 Stock Market Crash, the United States tightened already restrictive immigration quotas. The United Kingdom required those entering until 1938 to be self-supporting or sponsored; after the Anschluss it introduced a visa system. Neither made provisions for refugees. After 1938, Britain also



Priyanka Malik
writes on international affairs, security and defence, with a special focus on nuclear politics

restricted Jewish immigration into Palestine, then a British mandate. Some Jews moved to neighbouring European countries, only to be caught in Hitler's net as German tanks rolled over Europe. France, Belgium and the Netherlands were particularly assiduous in following Nazi orders to round up Jews for concentration camps.

The reality of 'Never again'

The Allies responded to the growing refugee problem by gathering at Evian in July 1938; apart from sympathetic statements, the 32 delegates offered little else. By the time the U.K. and the United States met at the Bermuda Conference of April 1943, reports of mass Jewish killings were unambiguous. The World Jewish Congress had submitted a report outlining Hitler's plans that Jews, "after deportation and concentration in the East, be at one blow exterminated" (Riegner telegram, December 1942). The Polish Government-in-Exile in London published a pamphlet in December 1942 titled "The Mass Extermination of Jews in German Occupied Poland". Escapees from the concentration camps brought their own harrowing stories. The evidence for genocide was mounting, but the Allies would not, or could not, look too closely.

Never again, they declared in 1945. And yet, between 1975 and 1979, the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia are estimated to have killed over two million people by execution, starvation, disease and exhaustion as they sought to recreate Cambodian society in some communist ideal. As refugees fled to neighbouring countries and a new regime was installed in Phnom Penh after Vietnam's invasion, the international community's responses were conditioned by Cold War calculations: China and the West supported the fleeing Khmer Rouge while Vietnam and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) supported the newly installed communist government.

Never again. And yet, in Rwanda, in 1994, between 800,000 to 1,000,000 people, mostly minority Tutsi with some moderate Hutu, were murdered over 100 days while UN peacekeepers watched helplessly. In July 1995, 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys were herded from a UN compound in Srebrenica – a place declared a safe zone (it is inescapable that safe zones were also created to prevent refugees flooding out of the former Yugoslavia) – and executed, as part of a careful campaign of ethnic cleansing. The Dutch UN commander requested reinforcements from

both the UN and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, which never arrived. It was the culmination of three years of indecision by Europe and America on how to respond. This year is the 30th anniversary of Srebrenica (July 11).

Never again. Less than a decade later, violence broke out in Darfur, Sudan. Approximately 200,000 people were killed in 2003-05 in what the International Criminal Court (ICC) and some states have recognised as genocide. The violence in Sudan continues and there are renewed fears of genocide occurring now while the international community's attention is focussed on Ukraine and Gaza.

In Gaza

Then there is Gaza. As world leaders gather at Auschwitz on January 27 to commemorate the 80th anniversary of its liberation, Gazans will attempt returning to the rubble of their homes. Some will be sifting through the debris to locate the remains of family still buried underneath, part of the 10,000 estimated to be missing. The International Court of Justice is examining whether Israel is guilty of genocide under a case brought by South Africa. The ICC has issued arrest warrants for the Israel Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, and the former Israel Defence Minister, Yoav Gallant, for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Gaza in response to Hamas' October 7, 2023 attacks. There are arrest warrants for Hamas leaders too.

And, yet, America's and western Europe's response was to criticise the ICC, expressing outrage that there should be any semblance of equivalence in the arrest warrants for the leaders of Hamas and Israel. In some perversion of international norms, there seems to be an acceptance of a hierarchy of suffering. Arms have continued to flow to Israel, even as the death toll in Gaza crosses 47,000, mostly women and children. The UN estimates that 92% of all homes have been destroyed, health-care infrastructure and 87% of schools destroyed, and entire populations forcibly displaced multiple times. All this happened while Gaza was under siege, the foreign press was barred from entering, and the world acquiesced in looking away.

Israel has a right to defend itself, and Hamas' actions in October 2023 are completely indefensible. Yet, when does self-defence cross over into genocide? Where is that line? Arguably, that line is where we avert our gaze.

As world leaders gather at Auschwitz, they must ponder over why 'never again' continues to be breached

A checklist for the Dhruv helicopter investigation

The fatal accident on January 5, 2025, where an Advanced Light Helicopter, Dhruv, of the Indian Coast Guard, had a fatal accident, has triggered the grounding of what is the workhorse of the country's armed forces. In aviation, accidents happen. But this does not reduce the gravity of the flight safety issues that India's flagship helicopter programme faces; flagship, because it is tailor-made for India's demanding operating conditions.

This writer was first associated with the project in 1988 when it was in the mock-up stage and engineering drawings were being converted to part parts which were being fused in the Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) hangar. Those were heady days as we, the test aircrew, reviewed the prototype under adjacent. To view one's recommendations bear fruit was pure bliss. This writer moved on for a staff course abroad and one's satisfaction knew no bounds when he read in the foreign press about its first flight on August 20, 1992. That the project had its fair share and more of problems is well documented but the initial decade of its operational service was, to put it mildly, very challenging.

As this writer had the unpleasant task of being the presiding officer of the court of inquiry of the first fatal Dhruv crash (in 2007) and later as Assistant Chief of Air Staff at Air Headquarters looking after helicopter operations, here are a few suggestions for the decision makers.

Search for the reason

The world over, new aircraft face problems in the induction phase. The Dhruv has had its own long list – from serious ones such as premature main gear box withdrawals and cabin vibrations to operational irritants such as rainwater leaks in the cabin.

There has also been the poor supply of spares and the exasperatingly long overhaul times



Air Vice Marshal Manmohan Bahadur (retired)
is former Additional Director General, Centre for Air Power Studies

whenever a machine entered an HAL hangar for maintenance. Though these have been, hopefully, addressed over time to some extent, a new and worrying problem of flight controllability has emerged. After each such accident, short and long-term fixes have been made to keep the Dhruv flying. The fact that three weeks (and counting) have passed and the Dhruv has still not been cleared to fly, shows that something more serious has happened, and/or the cause has not yet been determined. It is no shame to keep the machine grounded till the root cause is found and a permanent fix implemented; the Boeing 737 MAX remained grounded for almost two years till its flight control problem was resolved.

Involve domain specialists

The composition of a court of inquiry in India, even where such a basic characteristic such as flight controllability has been affected, is still no different than a 'normal' accident inquiry. Thus, as in the media, HAL (which could be blame-worthy), the Centre for Military Airworthiness and Certification, or CEMILAC (the certification agency which could be blame-worthy too), and the Coast Guard are the main investigators in the January 5 accident. Considering that the Coast Guard mishap is, at a minimum, the sixth accident involving the loss of flying control, the problem should, logically, have been found by now.

Since this has been a repetitive problem, should not there be a *de novo* look at the design issues for studying stresses, the metallurgy used and the fabrication process of flight critical components? Thus, a fresh fault analysis is necessary by co-opting outside specialists, say from academia or any other relevant field, to ferret out the root cause. Having an independent committee to holistically look at the Dhruv programme would be ideal.

Where rectification action is required from

HAL, the speed of the implementation of recommendations leaves a lot to be desired. In the fatal accident of 2007, referred to earlier, our recommendation for the institution of measures to warn a pilot of an impending 'flight control saturation' situation took the better part of a decade. One understands that even the fitting of the new stainless steel control rods – after an investigation of the earlier light-control-linked accidents – is still an ongoing process.

Apportioning of responsibility

HAL is the primary organisation for the production of airworthy assets. While design is frozen earlier, it is the quality of production that needs monitoring with a hawk eye too. CEMILAC's responsibility is to ensure both – the soundness of design and production quality control. These two organisations too must be held responsible for the proper discharge of their duties since the combat fleet of the nation and its security posture get affected. To aid CEMILAC in the discharge of its task, having flight test crew on its rolls could result in an element of greater inquiry.

One needs to remember that the Prachand (Light Combat Helicopter), which is planned as the mainstay of the attack helicopter fleet, has also been affected as its transmission system is the same as the Dhruv's. We have the Light Utility Helicopter in its final flight-testing phase and the Indian Multi Role Helicopter, a 13-tonne heavy machine with greater complexities, is in the offing. The investigation of the Coast Guard accident could, thus, be an inflection point in the journey of India's helicopter programmes. In the midst of the *aatmanirbharta* thrust, which is laudable, and other pressures, the only element driving decision making should be professionalism.

Precious lives and the standing of India's nascent helicopter industry are at stake.

The investigation of the Coast Guard ALH accident could be an inflection point in India's helicopter programme

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Indonesia and India ties

It is of significance that on India's very first Republic Day celebrations, we had the pleasure of having Sukarno, the first President of Indonesia, as the chief guest. Now, President Subianto was present on our completing 75 years as a Republic. In the 1950s, Nehru and Sukarno, leaders of two nascent republics, bonded well to further the cause of developing Afro-Asian nations liberated from the colonial yolk. Though our bilateral relations did traverse rough patches, our deep historical bonds and shared culture have endured. If Sukarno

means 'good', Subianto means 'inner purity'.
R. Narayanan,
Navi Mumbai

The visit raises critical questions about the future of India-Indonesia relations. Can this visit catalyse a substantial increase in bilateral trade? How will both nations address the geopolitical pressures from China while enhancing their strategic partnership? Further, what concrete steps will be taken to deepen defence cooperation and maritime security in the Indo-Pacific? These inquiries are vital for realising the full potential of

this historic partnership.
Anshu Bharti,
Begusarai, Bihar

Court on noise

The Bombay High Court has taken a tough stand on the use of loudspeakers by religious institutions by asserting that loudspeakers are not an essential part of any religion. Law enforcement agencies have been directed to take strict action against those who violate this. Religious institutions take advantage of the stoic resignation of people towards noise. Instead of creating a tranquil atmosphere for worship,

many religious places have become noise-creating places. People should not be deprived of their right to live in quiet places. People who suffer much discomfiture from noise from other sources are forced to endure the cacophony of loudspeakers too. Let us hope that the directive against the use of loudspeakers in religious institutions will be implemented all over the country.

Venu G.S.,
Kollam, Kerala

Rural reading rooms

It is heartening to note and read about ("Inside India's

rural reading rooms", January 25). Books are power houses of knowledge. The habit of reading is losing its way and direction at a time when information is being sought in the online mode. Rural India has immense potential and it is through such wonderful initiatives such as reading rooms, that knowledge can be shared and imparted among the young. The young of today, born in digital times, should be taught about reading, writing and gaining knowledge the proper way. Reading rooms would help them spend time prudently and, most importantly,

would limit the use of time on electronic gadgets, specifically mobile phones. Rural reading rooms should be encouraged.

Balasubramaniam Pavan,
Secunderabad

Dr. K.M. Cherian
Dr. K.M. Cherian is a legendary figure in the field of cardiac surgery. His passing is a loss to the medical world as he endeared himself to countless patients.

Manoharan Muthuswamy,
Chennai
Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address

9 THE IDEAS PAGE

Let's overhaul the tax system

It's a downward spiral: Present system dampens growth and discourages fresh investment; this leads to lower revenue collection, sought to be remedied by higher taxes, which leads to lower growth



ARVIND P DATAR

THE MONTH OF January is named after the ancient Roman God Janus, who is depicted as having two faces — one facing forward and the other backward. This symbolises the importance of looking back at the year gone by and simultaneously looking ahead at the new unfolding year. It's a time for deep introspection and understanding the lessons learnt so that the coming year can be planned for course correction.

Looking back at 2024, the decisions taken at the 55th GST Council are a symptom of slipping back to the old harmful habits of chronic tinkering with individual rates, promptly overruling any adverse Supreme Court ruling and very high rates of tax that on the one hand suppress demand and dampen growth, and on the other, are an incentive for tax evasion and a thriving parallel/black economy.

In 2014, the late Arun Jaitley termed retrospective taxation "tax terrorism". Prime Minister Narendra Modi has also condemned this practice on more than one occasion. But the 55th GST Council has now recommended a retrospective tax amendment to nullify a recent Supreme Court judgment that would have resulted in granting input tax credit to warehouses and infrastructure projects. The nature of the dispute, the judgment and the impact of the proposed retrospective amendment from July 1, 2017 merit a separate article. What is retrograde is the message being sent to the business world: We will first deny you relief, if you still fight us for several years and up to the Supreme Court and succeed, we will simply reduce the judgment to a nullity by a retrospective amendment. If we win in court, fine; if we lose, we will still win by a retrospective amendment.

Sadly, the GST department may succeed in recovering a few additional crores of GST by the amendment. But the collateral damage to India's reputation as an investment decision is staggering. Apart from disrespecting your own Supreme Court, the message conveyed is the absence of the rule of law.

The Vodafone verdict was a golden opportunity to showcase India as a rare developing nation where court verdicts are respected and the rule of law prevails. The ill-advised retrospective amendment to nullify that judgment resulted in an international award of Rs 8000 crore, which India had to pay. It is time to have a new year's resolution: No more retrospective amendments.

The fatal flaw in the functioning of the GST Council is the single-minded focus on revenue maximisation. The department repeatedly has news items published that only report tax evasion — often with exaggerated claims. No attempt is made to rationalise rates, cut down complicated notifications and circulars, check arbitrary and exaggerated demands through show-cause notices and create a fair and impartial appellate system.

It is morally unfair and economically disastrous to levy GST on various goods and services but deny them input tax credit. In particular, the GST Council must seriously rethink the levying of GST on lease rentals, on assignment of leasehold rights, and joint develop-



C R Sankumar

ment rights as these are neither goods nor services. This will be a huge boost to the real estate sector and, indeed, the economy if there is no GST on any activity other than works' contracts. It is paradoxical to speak of affordable housing but make it unaffordable by multiple taxes.

It is necessary to have careful empirical studies of the impact of high taxes on consumption. Will lowering of taxes stimulate demand, eventually resulting in larger tax collection? Will lowering of taxes enable Indian companies to compete with similar Chinese products? For example, why cannot there be a single rate of 12 per cent on all hotels and restaurants instead of multiple rates based on room tariffs and other parameters? Will a maximum rate of 18 per cent on cement reduce the cost of affordable housing and infrastructure projects?

High rates of tax, a complicated system of exemption and concessions, and an overbearing focus on revenue collection were the hallmarks of our direct and indirect tax system from 1950 to 1990. This socialist mindset crippled the Indian economy and led to the 1991 liberalisation that gave a boost to the economy. Looking back over the last few years, there are several signs that we are once again getting back to the old retrograde system that is a paradise for lawyers, chartered

The GST Council and, indeed, the Central Board of Direct Taxes must now adopt a new policy framework that focuses on growth maximisation. Taxes must be a by-product of growth and not an end in itself. After 1991, it is time to put in place Reforms 2.0, which will enable a 9-10 per cent annual growth rate. This growth rate is attainable, provided we have the courage to overhaul our tax system.

accountants and revenue officers but a nightmare for businesses.

The adverse consequences are clear: Imports from China have increased from \$70 billion in 2018-19 to \$100 billion in 2023-24, the share of manufacturing has slipped to below 15 per cent of our GDP, and the further sliding of the rupee is now taken for granted.

The present system retards growth and discourages fresh investment. This leads to lower revenue collection, which is then sought to be remedied by higher taxes, which, in turn, leads to lower growth. The dangers of such a downward spiral are real and require urgent attention.

The GST Council and, indeed, the Central Board of Direct Taxes must now adopt a new policy framework that focuses on growth maximisation. Taxes must be a by-product of growth and not an end in itself. After 1991, it is time to put in place Reforms 2.0, which will enable a 9-10 per cent annual growth rate. This growth rate is attainable, provided we have the courage to overhaul our tax system. It is indeed time for a new long-term fiscal policy for 2025-2030. As is true for an individual, so it is for a nation: There is no rebirth without death.

The writer is senior advocate, Supreme Court of India

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

Underlying disillusionment and anger in Korea remains a strong sense of the bloody cost paid for democracy and the need to defend it. — THE GUARDIAN

Unseeing the pain of others

Policies that roll back protections for marginalised groups are part of a larger trend that resists empathy



AMMEL SHARON

UPON TAKING OFFICE, President Trump signed an executive order mandating that the US government recognise only two sexes: Male and female. The order stated its intent to "defend women's rights and protect freedom of conscience by using clear and accurate language and policies that recognise women as biologically female, and men as biologically male." It further asserted that choosing a gender identity different from one's assigned sex at birth "does not provide a meaningful basis for identification".

The order also rescinded several initiatives introduced during former President Joe Biden's administration, including the "White House Toolkit on Transgender Equality", "Supporting Transgender Youth in School", and "Confronting Anti-LGBTQ+ Harassment in Schools: A Resource for Students and Families". These actions represent a stark shift in federal policy, prioritising biological definitions over gender identity. At the same time, they underscore a deeper divide in public discourse — a growing inability to understand and empathise with perspectives that challenge traditional notions of gender.

In recent decades, gender has increasingly been viewed as both universal and autonomous. It is universal in that gender seems to appear in all societies, spanning cultures and historical periods. Simultaneously, it is seen as autonomous, existing in a realm of individual choice, with an expanding vocabulary of identities that often seem disconnected from other aspects of social life. However, this understanding has sparked confusion and discomfort for many.

In gender sensitisation workshops I have conducted, participants often admit they struggle to grasp concepts like gender identity. "How can gender be different from sex?" they ask. Some express outright hostility, openly berating transgender individuals or dismissing same-sex attraction as unnatural. This resistance rooted in ignorance, a lack of empathy, or something deeper? Perhaps it reflects an existential discomfort with the very idea of gender.

The American critic Andrea Long Chu explores this discomfort in her book *Femmes*. She declares provocatively that "everyone is female, and everyone hates it". Even women hate being female as much as anybody else, because to be "female" is a psychic condition "in which the self is sacrificed to make room for the desires of another". This suggests that being female is a shared experience of vulnerability for all humans, and we try to constantly protect ourselves from it. When she writes, "The 1 per cent is 100 per cent female. The entire Supreme Court is female. The entire United States Senate is female. The president is, obviously, a female," she is implying that the President and his followers are so unreasonably cruel to women, queer folks and trans persons because we are all, in some way, too "female" — and that terrifies us.

Counterintuitively, the condition of being female feels so uncomfortable that it blocks all of us from extending considera-

tion to the desires of others. When we feel vulnerable and unable to confront or acknowledge our fears, our responses often become rigid and harsh.

This fear manifests not just in gender policy but in a broader resistance to addressing vulnerabilities in modern society, including environmental degradation, inequality, and systemic discrimination in citizenship. Policies that roll back protections for marginalised groups are part of a larger trend — one that resists the open-ended, empathetic approach needed to address complex social issues. Resistance to these policies is visible through court challenges, op-eds, and activism. However, we cannot always expect resistance and activism, so prevalent in the 20th century, to come consistently from those most aggrieved. To endure the fury of the state is exhausting and fear-inducing.

The United States has grappled with this fear for decades. One person who intimately understands this dynamic is Joan Nestle, a teacher and the co-founder of the pioneering 50-year-old Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York City. Joan shared with me her experiences growing up in 1950s America. Reflecting on the McCarthy era, and having attended the hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee at the age of 17, she said, "If you are going to be different, you are going to understand what dehumanisation means." Joan, now 84, is my friend and my guide, impressing upon me the importance of bearing witness to the pain of others and preserving those memories for future generations. This is an archivist's work in a time of disconnection and anger — what, then, is the work of a teacher? Public anger and pain over contentious policies have made their way into classrooms, and educators are struggling to respond adequately to students' opinions and questions.

At the National Law School in Bengaluru, we are adopting a "learning by doing" approach to help students engage with contemporary realities. This method allows students to engage actively with the world around them while simultaneously challenging traditional notions of teacher authority in the classroom.

Diya Deviah, a colleague in the law faculty, reminds me that "doing" does not imply following a pre-designed "Do-It-Yourself" kit where the outcome is predetermined. Instead, learning must remain open-ended. As educators, therefore, our work is to nurture students who are comfortable with a patient, exploratory approach. Such open-endedness requires an empathetic intelligence on the part of both students and teachers.

To better understand this approach, I keep a box of Lego bricks on my desk. Building something with these bricks isn't straightforward, and I often unsure where to start. So, I observe as Diya, Vijetha, and Megha gather around to construct helicopters, flag masts, and oceans right there on my desk.

Like gendered bodies, the plastic bricks are familiar and colorful, yet the worlds they allow us to create are new, inventive and thought-provoking. Building with Lego bricks confronts us with a multitude of possibilities, and dismissing any of those options without consideration defeats the purpose of education. As educators in a polarised world, we must adapt our methods, often doing so quietly but with steadfast resolve.

The writer is assistant professor, social science, at NLSIU, Bengaluru

A voice of defiance

Constituent Assembly member Begum Qudsia Aizaz Rasul broke new ground



SHAZIA ILMI

BEGUM QUDSIA AIZAZ Rasul was the only Muslim woman in the Constituent Assembly of 299 members, of whom only 15 were women.

The legacy of this iconic woman needs to be revisited. Representing Muslim women of the Indian subcontinent, invisibilised since before Partition, Qudsia broke through the quietism of her collective identity.

Cutting through her intersecting identities of religion, region, gender and class, Qudsia spoke out on the issue of a separate electorate. Leaders like Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and others sought a unified India with a unified electorate to preserve the newly acquired integration of Independent India. Begum Rasool stood in solidarity with Sardar Patel and fellow Constituent Assembly members like Tajammul Hussain and Hasrat Mohani who passionately opposed the reservation for minorities and warned against its ramifications.

It's interesting to learn that the "Quaid-e-Azam" of present-day Pakistan, Jinnah, had himself been a beneficiary of the British largesse of reservation. On January 25, 1910, Jinnah became the "Muslim member from Bombay" in the 60-man Imperial Legislative

Council of India in Delhi as a member of the Indian National Congress (which he later left).

The reservation for Muslims, which was introduced in the Imperial Council in 1909, extended to provincial legislatures and continued till 1947. The Constituent Assembly retained reservations for minorities, adopting a resolution to that effect on August 27, 1947. In May 1949, however, the Advisory Committee on Certain Political Safeguards for Minorities headed by Patel revoked the earlier resolution and decided to abolish the reservation. The bloody aftermath of the Partition was the turning point in doing away with reservation for minorities. In his report, Patel wrote, "If the members of a particular community genuinely felt that their interests should be better served by the abolition of reserved seats, their views must naturally be given due weight and the matter allowed to be reopened."

While most Muslim members vociferously agreed with Patel, there were those like Muhammad Ismail Khan who changed their stance and moved an amendment challenging the resolution. Then there was Zahurul Hasanani Lari, who espoused the system of proportional representation as a means to safeguard the interests and rights of minorities by citing the examples of Belgium, Switzerland and even Ireland, a plan which was deemed unworkable by others. Syed

Muhammad Saadullah from Assam sought reservation for a limited period: "I wrote to all the Muslim members of my party in the Assam legislature and they gave me the unanimous mandate of claiming reservation for the Muslims." He also had a bone to pick with the chairman of the sub-committee on minorities, H C Mookerjee, saying, "He should have taken the logical course of consulting the Muslim members only, but without waiting to do that, on the solitary support of Begum Aizaz Rasul, he has thought fit to recommend to this House that reservation of seats for the Muslims should go."

Begum Rasul had unambiguously opposed Muslim reservation: "It is very necessary that the Muslims living in this country should throw themselves entirely upon the goodwill of the majority community, should give up separatist tendencies and throw their full weight in building up a truly secular state."

Her words reverberated through the halls of the Assembly which was sculpting the future of the newly-created nation: "To my mind, reservation is a self-destructive weapon which separates minorities from majorities for all time. It gives no chance to the minorities to win the trust of the majority." Hailing from an affluent family in Malerkotla, in united Punjab, Begum Rasul was not merely a symbolic leader. She successfully contested from a non-reserved seat

in 1937 for the United Provinces Legislative Council elections and also became Leader of the Opposition in the UP Assembly in 1950. In 1947, she became the only Muslim woman member of the Constituent Assembly. In 1952, she was nominated as a member of the Rajya Sabha. Despite her privileged upbringing, she was vociferous in her opposition to the zamindari system and advocated for its abolition. In her later years, Begum Rasul was also the president of the Indian Women's Hockey Federation, a post she held for nearly two decades. In 2000, a year before her death, she was awarded the Padma Bhushan by the Government of India in recognition of her contributions to social work.

"There was much propaganda against me, especially a fatwa by the ulema that it was un-Islamic to vote for a non-purdah Muslim woman," Begum Rasul wrote in her autobiography, *From Purdah to Parliament*, which chronicles her journey as a Muslim woman leader in India.

Though she gave up the purdah when she won her first election in 1937, she became the voice of the silent Muslim woman, the minority within the minority. Her voice was that of defiance and dissent, as she urged her Muslim sisters to step out of the shadow of the veil.

The writer is national spokesperson of the BJP

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

R G KAR VERDICT

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'A Moral Failure' (IE, January 24). There is a widespread criticism of the Kolkata court for not awarding capital punishment to the accused in the R G Kar case. The writer has justified this on the notion that the death penalty hardly deters heinous crimes like murder and rape. But, as admitted by him, on average, there are 86 incidents of rape cases reported daily; many more may not even make it to the record books. Maybe the absence of properly enforced capital punishment emboldens criminals in this country.

Ravi Mathur, Noida

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'A Moral Failure' (IE, January 24). I do not agree with the writer's views. Not only the family of the victim, but even the chief minister of West Bengal, among others, sought the death penalty for Sanjay Roy. In another case, a woman has been sentenced to death in Kerala after she was found guilty of poisoning her boyfriend. Deciding what constitutes "rarest of rare" remains in the domain of the

judges to decide but considering the brutality of the R G Kar case, the judges should have sentenced Roy to death.

Raj Govind, Noida

EXITING WHO

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'A Weaker Shield' (IE, January 24). The role of the World Health Organisation in global public health cannot be understated. Beyond the prevention potential, basic functions like disease eradication and improvement of health conditions in underdeveloped and developing nations is crucial for a better world.

Anany Mishra, Bhubaneswar

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'A Weaker Shield' (IE, January 24). Donald Trump's decision to sever the US from the WHO is unimindful of Covid's message, that in a globalised world, no country alone will suffer the repercussions of another pandemic. Covid's lessons, however, should push rich nations to develop an equitable global mechanism to address emerging international health concerns.

LR Murnu, New Delhi



The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

A DAY IN REPUBLIC

This is a republic of incomplete victories and defeats, no full stops or clean slates. January 26 offers meeting points across the divides

FOR THE WORLD'S largest democracy, the celebrations and commemorations of 75 years of being a republic are a reminder of what lies alongside, and that which endures. While elections are a democracy's way of renewing itself every five years, Republic Day is a reminder of the constitutional pact that mirrors and forms the constant common ground. It is the space that is not defined by the winners, nor can it be overturned by them. It is the shared commitment to the values and rules of the game that hold out the possibility of today's losers becoming tomorrow's winners. Despite the unabashed conceits of those who win the election and seek to conquer all — look at how the newly elected leader of the world's most powerful democracy issues order after order in the manner of a Pakistan General's attempts to erase and remake everything in his image — in spite of the sometimes overwhelming pessimism of those who lose, and notwithstanding the cynicism of voters who think all is lost, January 26 comes every year as a countervailing idea and a restorative message.

Republic Day also brings a moment to celebrate the acts of ordinary individuals, not just the winners or losers of power, who constitute the republic and reclaim it in so many ways, not just by voting. In this paper, a series begun on January 26 revisits some of the landmark cases that have helped to reshape the republic, and expand its spaces. These cases are a testimony to the power of the individual, and also to the independent institution, the Court, that can make it writ large, ensure that it is seen and heard. The first report in the series recalls the 1950 *Romesh Thapar v State of Madras* ruling that came after an editor of a magazine that had been banned by the government challenged the decision and sought a remedy from the highest court. If the SC ruling, then, drew on the newly adopted Constitution that guaranteed individual freedoms, it continues to guardrail free speech, including press freedom, even now. The underlying reasoning still resonates — that laws curbing freedoms must be narrowly tailored and that such laws will be scrutinised by a vigilant court to protect the individual against Executive arbitrariness and excess. It's this spirit that's also violated when 10 Opposition MPs are summarily suspended, as they were on Friday, for allegedly disrupting a Parliamentary panel meeting on changes in the Waqf law. That's why January 26 is a reminder of the need for a different vocabulary and language. Not one that sees every election as a do-or-die, all-or-nothing fight-to-the-finish, but which frames it as one among many contestations and transitions in a large and diverse country. This is a republic of incomplete victories and defeats, no full stops or clean slates, and it offers many meeting points for parties and forces that are otherwise facing off across a dividing line. On January 26, and on the days after, the nation must collectively acknowledge a binding republicanism, and renew its pledge to retrieve its lost meanings.

CONTINUITY & CHALLENGE

Biden Administration strengthened bilateral relations. India should reap benefits with Trump 2.0 by embracing trade reform

A MID THE ANNOUNCEMENTS of sweeping policy changes during the first week of President Donald Trump's second term, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar's visit to the United States — his second within the span of a month — signals continuity in India-US relations. Jaishankar met with senior members of the outgoing Biden administration in late December in Washington, while outgoing National Security Advisor (NSA) Jake Sullivan visited India in January. Jaishankar's two trips to Washington reflect India's recognition of the importance of its relationship with the US and the necessity of managing it prudently amid global turbulence. After he attended Trump's inauguration, Jaishankar held bilateral talks with NSA Michael Waltz and Secretary of State Marco Rubio on the sidelines of the QUAD Foreign Ministers' meeting. While all this points towards a resilient engagement, some matters merit close attention.

The elephant in the room is the H-1B visa issue, within the larger and ongoing debate over immigration in the US. Speaking to reporters in Washington, Jaishankar emphasised that India is willing to take back illegal Indian immigrants, provided that their Indian origin is verified. With respect to legal migration, both India and the US have expressed their willingness to work towards reciprocal gains. While Trump has expressed the need for "competent people" in the US, in an attempt perhaps to assuage concerns raised by his executive order on birthright citizenship, Jaishankar has underscored that "Indian talent and Indian skills" deserve "maximum opportunity at the global level". The question of whether foreign talent depresses wages and causes job displacement for the American people is an issue that the US is likely to continue to wrestle with internally. Delhi can only hope that the outcome ultimately aligns with India's interests.

With Trump, India's primary challenge in the past has been trade. The Modi government, in anticipation of potentially raised tariffs, is reportedly considering measures such as recalibrating its own duties and increasing imports from the US. However, tinkering with the import-export balance may provide only a short-term fix. In the long term, India must focus on reforming its trade policies and deepening its economic ties with the US. Despite Trump's threats, the US remains one of the world's most open economies, second only to China. India must embrace trade reform rather than resisting it. Furthermore, America is arguably on the cusp of a technological revolution, driven by Artificial Intelligence and other sectors. India must act swiftly to implement its own technological reforms, modernise outdated laws, and position itself competitively within the global ecosystem. The Biden Administration strengthened bilateral relations, and India should reap the benefits with Trump 2.0, by ensuring that it remains aligned with the challenges of the changing global economic and technological landscape.

FREEZE FRAME

E P UNNY



Regional play, global game

Israel-Hamas ceasefire is a temporary reprieve. Lasting resolution depends on all parties seizing this moment



BERNARD HAYKEL

ISRAEL AND HAMAS have finally reached a staged ceasefire agreement, and according to news reports, this occurred only because of the enormous pressure exerted on Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu by the new US President, Donald Trump. There are, of course, echoes of the 1981 release of American diplomatic hostages by Iran when President Ronald Reagan took office, highlighting in each case the perceived weakness of a Democratic president and administration. President Joe Biden, it appears, was neither able nor willing to exert significant pressure on Israel to halt the war. At the same time, Hamas was incentivised to agree to a ceasefire only after Israel's defeat of its allies within Iran's so-called Axis of Resistance — namely Hezbollah — and the growing influence of less radical states such as Turkey and Qatar.

The agreement outlines a phased process, beginning with the release of 33 of the 100 hostages over the first six weeks. In the subsequent phase, the remaining hostages will be released, and in the final stage, the bodies of the deceased will be returned. In exchange, Israel has agreed to release thousands of Palestinian prisoners, return the remains of Hamas fighters, and withdraw militants from Gaza. Additionally, Israel will facilitate the flow of humanitarian aid into Gaza and support its reconstruction efforts.

However, the agreement is fraught with pitfalls and could collapse at any stage. Hamas may claim a pyrrhic victory simply by surviving, thereby undermining Netanyahu's stated goal of eradicating the movement and achieving total victory. Such a perception of Hamas's resilience could destabilise the right-wing coalition that keeps Netanyahu in power. If this happens, Israel may resume fighting before the agreement is fully implemented. To prevent such a scenario, President Trump will need to remain actively involved in the peace process, pressuring Israel to engage in negotiations with the Palestinians while mobilising regional allies such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Turkey, Qatar, Jordan, and Egypt. These countries can play a critical role in rebuilding Palestinian governance structures and the devastated infrastructure in Gaza.

The main obstacle to lasting peace remains Israel's right-wing parties, including

Netanyahu himself, who continue to resist the establishment of a viable Palestinian state. Yet, the creation of such a state is precisely what is required to stabilise the region and pave the way for long-term development. There are, however, emerging signs of hope.

The broader region of West Asia is currently at an inflection point. Iran and its anti-Western and anti-Israel allies have been decisively weakened, thanks largely to Israel's military successes and the continued support it has received from the US. As a result, Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria has collapsed, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza have suffered major defeats. Iran now finds itself in a precarious position, both militarily and economically. In Beirut and Damascus, new governments have emerged that are not beholden to Iran and are instead focused on domestic political reform and economic development. Saudi Arabia has played a crucial role in supporting these transformations in Syria and Lebanon, raising hopes that it could take on a similar role in Palestine.

However, for this to materialise, the Saudis are demanding ironclad guarantees for the creation of a viable Palestinian state, based on the principles of the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002. In return, and in pursuit of a mutual defence treaty with the US, Saudi Arabia is willing to normalise relations with Israel. This potential normalisation represents a significant opportunity for regional stability but hinges entirely on Israel's willingness to make meaningful concessions to the Palestinians.

Important developments within both Israel and the United States could also lead to positive outcomes. Polls indicate that an overwhelming majority of Israelis — between 70 and 80 per cent — are primarily concerned with the fate of the hostages. Many believe Netanyahu's government abandoned them for short-term political gains. Further, the investigation into the failure of his government to prevent Hamas's attack on October 7, 2023, could ultimately seal his political fate, despite Israel's recent military victories in Lebanon and against Iran. The Israeli public appears to be growing increasingly disillusioned with Netanyahu's leadership, potentially paving the way for a more centrist government that is open to negotiations. Once the acute trauma

of October 7 recedes, there may be greater receptivity to finding a compromise with the Palestinians — particularly if the United States applies diplomatic pressure in this direction.

President Trump's return to the White House represents another major shift. While Trump is known for his strong support of Israel, he is also highly motivated by his personal legacy and America's national interests. On a personal level, Trump has long desired a Nobel Prize, an honour awarded to his predecessor, Barack Obama. His ambition to surpass or match Obama may drive him to push Israel toward significant concessions in pursuit of a historic peace deal. Trump has also remained committed to achieving the so-called "Deal of the Century", aimed at resolving the Israel-Palestine conflict and fully integrating America's allies in the region through normalisation agreements between Israel and Saudi Arabia, along with other Gulf states.

The Saudis, as reflected in a recent article by journalist Abdulrahman al-Rashid, are eager for the stability such a regional arrangement could bring. They even believe that Iran, having been militarily weakened, might be persuaded to adopt more pragmatic policies in favour of stability and development rather than resistance and warfare.

West Asia is undergoing profound structural changes, and the Israel-Hamas ceasefire is an indication of this transformation. While it remains impossible to predict whether a more stable regional order will emerge, there are reasons to be cautiously optimistic. Achieving lasting peace, however, will require significant investment of time and effort from the new US administration, as well as from regional actors such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Most importantly, Israel must recognise that without addressing the Palestinian right to self-determination, the region will continue to experience cycles of violence driven by extremists who thrive on disorder and conflict.

Ultimately, while the ceasefire represents a temporary reprieve, the true test lies in whether all parties involved can seize this opportunity to pursue a more lasting and just resolution to the conflict.

The writer is professor, Near Eastern Studies, Princeton University

A NATURAL NONCONFORMIST

Jules Feiffer, cartoonist, was at once a political creature and an incisive seeker



E P UNNY

JULES FEIFFER DIED in New York on January 17 at the age of 95, three days before Donald Trump was sworn in. He was a cartoonist emblematic of taking on not just the new President but the kind of voters who elected him. That is not easy.

Cartoonists target power and go soft on the powerless. The public, including the reading public, has to be innocent. In the constitutional democracy where Feiffer functioned, cartoonists could offend the rulers and get away with it. But to question or unsettle readers is a tricky business in a career driven by readership.

It took another great cartoonist, OV Vijayan, to spell this out. In an interview in the 1990s, he said that adversarial art ceases to be so if it doesn't take on all interests: "Work against even reader interests, when you have to." Fan mail is welcome, he said, but if that's all you are getting in your career, you're no cartoonist.

One can't fault Feiffer on this count. Given his background, he couldn't have been any different. He was a natural nonconformist. Growing up in a Bronx Jewish family through the Great Depression and the McCarthyism that followed, he grew up out of sync with most things trending. Luckily for him and us, the crash of the economy and the hardening of politics coincided with the rise of American comic art. The doodler found his calling. Feiffer, still in his teens, pursued his icon, Will Eisner, to try him out. Eisner was then producing *The Spirit*, a weekly comic insert for newspapers featuring a crime-fighting neo-heric

leuth. A stidder for graphic values, he didn't care much for the boy's drawing but was bowled over by his passion for comics. Feiffer was first assigned to erase and clean up artwork, and soon to do an independent comic strip. The happy apprenticeship was interrupted when he was drafted into the US Army. More than the mentor's studio, two years in uniform made Feiffer the cartoonist we know him as. At once a political creature who resented all forms of authority and an incisive seeker who left nothing unexamined. When he couldn't oppose, interrogate or protest, he put his characters on the couch and analysed them to bring out the demons within.

Even before it was fashionable to mention the personal as political, Feiffer had seamlessly breached the border. After the Army relieved him, he broke into the booming American comics scene as a never-before-seen creator. Through 41 years as a staff cartoonist with *The Village Voice* from 1956, he did nothing to conform to the norms of his own art practice.

He formatted his weekly strip to a borderless six-panel free-flowing sequence. There was no cast of characters, the hard work of giving up for a professional comic artist then. It was unthinkable at a time when even tame non-superpowered comic characters like Charlie Brown, Snoopy and Dennis were widely merchandised and syndicated and creators were raking in fortunes. This, however, didn't limit his reach. He syndicated to as many as 100 publications worldwide, includ-

ing our Shankar's Weekly.

Feiffer wrote plays and graphic novels, illustrated for children and wrote a screenplay that won him an Oscar. A lesser cartoonist would have struggled with such distractions. He let it all flow into his satire. He featured recognisable personalities as much as unnamed private individuals. In the defiant 1960s and 1970s, he worked like an editorial cartoonist and a comic-strip artist rolled into one. His Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger and Ronald Reagan looked straight out of scathing news cartoons. So much so that the Pulitzer committee in 1986 picked this unconventional weekly sequential cartoonist for editorial cartooning.

The big-time stories of public policy randomly alternated with everyday accounts of anonymous men, women and children trying to cope. Readers didn't know what to expect next from the "Feiffer" comic. The only familiar comfort was the squiggly anatomical drawing interspersed with blobs of hand-crafted text springing to life in a choreographed crescendo. The artwork got even more spirited whenever his favourite character appeared — the dancer who seemed to somehow retain faith against all odds. When in 2000, bored with George W Bush, Feiffer wound up his cartooning work with a farewell strip, she was there in the last borderless panel to disapprove of his exit. The feeling is shared.

ep.unny@expressindia.com

JANUARY 27, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

UNION CARBIDE'S LIES

THE UNION CARBIDE Corporation knowingly misled doctors and the public when it claimed that the MIC (methyl isocyanate) leak in Bhopal could never cause cyanide poisoning. This falsification is perpetuated by the Union and Madhya Pradesh governments' insistence that MIC poisoning has no long term effects. This obstructs the treatment of the victims.

PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

PRESIDENT ZAIL SINGH has expressed apprehension at the resilience shown by the political system that had remained resolutely

unshaken in spite of the traumatic experience that the nation had passed through following the assassination of Indira Gandhi. In his Republic Day's message broadcast, the president said that the electorate's clear verdict in the recent cast of polls, Lok Sabha elections, also afforded hope for the future and exhibited the maturity and vigour of the democratic system.

1984 RIOTS REPORT

THE CITIZENS COMMISSION headed by former chief justice S S Sen has described the riots against the Sikh community last November as the "worst carnage across the

country since Partition". The report comments on the incredible and abysmal failure of the administration and the police, instigation by dubious political elements, and the equivocal role of the information media.

HEPTULLA ELECTED

NAJMA HEPTULLA has chosen deputy chairman of the Rajya Sabha. All opposition parties except the AIADMK walked out before the two motions to choose her were put to vote. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi after congratulating Heptulla said that of 10 deputy chairmen so far, seven had belonged to the Congress-L.