

THE ASIAN AGE

28 JANUARY 2025

Debate over Tamil Nadu's history is now cast in iron

Debates over the antiquity of Tamil language, civilisation and culture have been raging for many decades in the academic and political worlds. While archaeologists from Tamil Nadu and Tamil literature enthusiasts had put forward the theory that Tamil civilisation predated that of many other ancient civilisations that historians had identified to the world and cited as evidence the glorious narrations in the Tamil Sangam literature, well known historians had shot it all down, saying that literary work cannot be cited as proof for lived history. They argued that literature could just be a figment of the author's imagination and cannot stand scrutiny in the study of history.

But adamant Tamil historians insisted that there indeed was a thriving civilisation on the banks of the River Vaigai, which could not be rooted out of the excavations at Keeladi near Madurai threw up evidence of an urban settlement in the plains of River Vaigai. Since then the discourse on the antiquity of Tamil civilisation changed with many openly wondering if Keeladi could be older than Indus valley civilisation. Some said that it indeed was and even voluminous books were written on the subject, not all by career archaeologists or anthropologists or historians alone but also by former bureaucrats.

Such books were even used to silence the naysayers refusing to agree that Tamil civilisation could be older than those identified in school history textbooks. But research continued at various fronts and the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin came out with an announcement that the Iron Age started on Tamil soil, providing scientific evidence. He cited studies that have proved that iron had been found in the Tamil landscape 5,300 years ago, which is 1000 years before the time that it was earlier believed to be.

Now, the people of south India, particularly those in Tamil Nadu, could take pride in the fact that iron was smelted first in this part of the globe 5300 years ago, much before anybody else did it. Since the finding also establishes that the technology to smelt iron did not come from the West to India but had gone from here, it opens up new avenues for research. Did those ancient Tamil master skills in pyrotechnology, metallurgical sciences and furnace engineering to first separate iron from iron ore and then to harness the metal for human use? Answers for all these would probably be found in due course even as the search for the first iron furnace continues in the region.

Also it has opened avenues for anthropologists and other researchers to figure out the impact iron had on the life and lifestyle of the ancient society that did not have the use of the machines, gadgets, household appliances and war weapons for whose making iron is now used in a big way. To put it otherwise, what did the people do with iron then? That expands the scope of the research to the realm of sociology, too. Also it would have to be found as to how the technology transfer took place as other civilisations, as per contemporary history, had used iron before the people of south India. Till answers to these pertinent questions are found, let's bask in the glory of living where iron was born.

India's star bright in Davos

In spite of a slight moderation in the economic growth, India continues to be one of the bright stars in the global economic scene in its evidenced by the deals that the country clinched at the World Economic Forum (WEF). The Indian contingent led by five Union ministers, three Chief Ministers and top business leaders bagged investment commitments worth more than ₹20 lakh crore.

Maharashtra managed to get the biggest pie of almost 80 per cent investment proposals or 61 memoranda of understanding worth ₹15.7 lakh crore, with the potential to generate over 16 lakh jobs.

It was followed by Telangana whose deal portfolio was valued at ₹10.5 lakh crore, led by Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy, got 20 MoUs worth at least ₹1.80 lakh crore. The major proposal was from Infosys which would create 17,000 jobs in Hyderabad. Unilever will set up two factories in the southern state. Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Uttar Pradesh too made their presence felt at the annual meeting of the global economic elite. Most agreements entered into at WEF centred on data centres, green energy, and advanced technologies, reflecting the changing industrial landscape. These deals are expected to create over 50,000 jobs, which predominantly will be based in Telangana.

Though the deals hog headlines, the World Economic Forum should not be seen in the narrowed sense. No entrepreneur makes a call on large investments merely based on their interaction with government officials for five days. The WEF is a forum for governments to pitch investment opportunities in their countries and investment decisions could happen later. WEF also gives governments an opportunity to understand the requirements of the companies, and appropriately change their regulatory mechanisms to attract new capital.

The Central government should in fact organise Indian Economic Forum in major developing countries in active partnership with state governments to attract new investments.

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Aakar Patel

If Constitution had weak Centre, could Partition of India have been averted?



Acounterfactual is thinking about something that might have happened but did not happen. As we celebrate yet another Republic Day, there is occasion to think of a different kind of Constitution, one that India chose against.

As Congress president in 1946, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad had concluded that unilateral India's Constitution "must from the nature of the case" be federal. This, he explained, meant that it should be framed to give complete autonomy to the provinces in "as many subjects as possible", while addressing national unity.

This would attend to the problem at the root, which Azad felt was not independence — since that was a given in 1946 — but of settlement, and that the Muslims were troubled by what an independent India would bring. Federalism would be autonomy to the provinces and that the federal government would compulsorily control defence, foreign affairs and communications. What remained of the government would be the preserve of the provinces, save for those which with mutual consent could be shared between the two. India was Azad's dream, a country of homogeneous units in different provinces, and that made his plan seem natural. He did not, however, discuss it with other leaders in the Congress, because he was as president he had been authorised with "full powers".

He met the Cabinet Mission on Saturday, April 6,

1946, and then briefed the Congress Working Committee the following Friday, April 12. Here he writes that he was able to convince them of his plan's soundness, especially Gandhi, who "expressed complete agreement".

Sardar Patel asked what would happen to things like finance and currency. Gandhi, replying on Azad's behalf, said there was no reason to assume provinces would not want a unified policy in such things. Azad in his book does not record what, if anything, Nehru said.

Having apparently got the party behind him, Azad issued a statement three days later, April 15. In the greater part of it, he attempts to repudiate the call for Pakistan, pointing out what he sees as its flaws. Towards the end, he says he has succeeded in convincing the Congress about his formula, which secures "whatever merit the Pakistan scheme contains while all its defects and drawbacks are avoided".

The fear of Muslim majority areas of interference in a Centre dominated by Hindus he had addressed through his scheme of provincial autonomy. It had two lists of subjects, one compulsorily with the Centre and one optional, which the province could choose to give the Centre. Muslim majority provinces would have autonomy but also retain influence on issues that affected India as a whole. But a unitary state and a two-state solution would fail, he warned, the latter because too many Muslims would remain in a divided India, with

Subhani

Sane budgeting vital for a world becoming crazy



Sanjeev Ahluwalia

India has a budgeting problem, like any middle-class household. Aspirations are larger than means, possibly, driven by the doubtful glory of being the fourth largest economy and, politically primed, future expectations of becoming a "developed" country by 2047. Coddled by obliging import tariffs, clunky private corporates are risk averse and the financial sector dominated by public sector banks and institutions.

Protected MSMEs and agriculture are low productivity and low value-add, low wage jobs. This leaves public investment to bear the brunt of investment, spiking the fiscal deficit and debt beyond sustainable levels.

The social media obligingly spreads exaggerated achievements and projects a dazzling future, generating impossibly high public expectations, to meet which meagre resources are rationed widely. Expectedly, the completion time for projects gets extended, increasing completion costs and reducing the value-add from incomplete investments. Unsurprisingly, the cost of project overruns is estimated at ₹4.8 trillion per annum or about 20 per cent of the original project cost.

Like any modern middle-class family, India has borrowed to meet the resources gap. To its credit, India has abided by the metrics of creditworthiness. First, it has never defaulted on debt repayments. Second, fiscal rules bind both the Union and state governments' expenditure to limit borrowing. How long this restraint lasts in a world desperately trying to bolster growth by drowning in debt, remains uncertain.

Global government debt increased much more in emerging markets (EM) over 2010 to 2023 from 44

Budget 2025 could usefully remove the artificial tax preference for investment in equity as opposed to debt, so that middle class savings are more balanced.

per cent to 69 per cent of GDP than in advanced economies (AE) — (105 per cent to 112 per cent of GDP). Public debt in China increased from close to the EM average in 2010 at 44.3 per cent to 84.3 per cent in 2023. Public debt in India in 2010 was already higher than the EM average at 65.6 per cent and increased further to 81.6 per cent of GDP in 2023. Are we hoping that the mirage of developed status by 2047 can rub off on us today and allow us to borrow as an AE does? China too is well above the EM public debt level but, crucially, unlike us, it also has per capita income close to high income economies whilst ours is towards the bottom of upper middle-income economies per World Bank norms.

What would cutting back public debt levels imply? First, less borrowing must be less than debt repayments. Second, GDP must grow rapidly at least two percentage points above the average level of 6.5 per cent, where it is today, to reduce the debt to GDP ratio. Third, the investment push for growth must come from monetisation and disinvestment of public assets, foreign, and domestic private investment. To become a China-Plus-One or an America-Plus-One destination, all foreign investments must be welcome along with binding advance-tax guidelines and contracts on funding to international best practice, to reduce investment risk. Budget 2025 could usefully remove the artificial tax preference for investment in equity as opposed to debt, so that middle class savings are more balanced.

Deepening close RBI oversight by over irresponsible bank P/L lending is crucial. Maintaining fiscal deficit (FD) norms gives credibility to the government's resolve to be fiscally prudent to cheer up even less say, "I am one of those who considers the present chapter of communal bitterness and differences as a transient phase in Indian life", Azad wrote.

The Cabinet Mission plan the British released a month later, on May 16, does not differ much from Azad's except in one way. Instead of autonomy at the level of province or state, it was at the level of region. India would be divided into three parts (aligning with what is today Pakistan, India and Bangladesh) to reflect local majorities, and these three parts would have provincial autonomy under a Centre. Princely states would retain autonomy except for the powers ceded to the Centre.

Azad felt the Congress should accept this proposal. He writes that Mohanlal Ali Jinnah was initially opposed to it, because he had gone too far down the road with the Pakistan demand. But he felt he could not negotiate better terms than the ones on offer and the Muslim League came on board, voted in favour of the Cabinet Mission Plan.

On June 16, the Congress Working Committee also endorsed the plan. Azad wrote: The acceptance of the Cabinet Mission Plan by both the Congress and the Muslim League was a glorious event in the history of the freedom movement in India. It meant that the difficult question of Indian freedom had been settled by negotiation and agreement and not by methods of violence and conflict. It also seemed that the communal difficulties had been finally left



LETTERS

INDIA'S JOURNEY

As India celebrates 75 years as a Republic, the nation reflects on its journey towards fulfilling its constitutional dreams. While India has made significant progress in economic growth, technological advancements and social progress, it still grapples with challenges like poverty, inequality, inadequate infrastructure and environmental concerns. Despite these hurdles, however, India's resilience and determination are evident in its growing economy, expanding middle class, and increasing global influence. As the nation moves forward, it is clear that India's journey is ongoing, and its people continue to strive towards a more just, equitable, and prosperous society.

Amarjeet Kumar Hazaribagh

TRUMP'S BLUNDER

THIS REFERS TO "Why has the US often exited climate pacts?" The United States is the second largest producer of greenhouse gases in the world and it pulling out of the Paris agreement gives the wrong signal to countries who are going full throttle in order to cut down on their emissions. The implausible rationale given by the 47th US President that his economy is highly contingent on fossil fuels since it's the largest producer of crude oil shows that he has buried his head in the sand and is indifferent towards resultant climate hazards. Not to mention that the recent step taken by the American leader is certainly not well thought out and merits a rethink and revisit in the larger interest of humanity.

Aanya Singhal Noida

CLEANEST CITIES

NAVI MUMBAI has achieved another goal in its journey towards cleanliness and urban management excellence. The city has been included in the newly introduced "super clean league" category of the prestigious Swachh Survekshan 2024. The elite category of the rubber meets the road are fiscally and administratively empowered, rather than just the head office.

The writer is a former IAS officer, and a governance and public regulation expert

behind. Throughout the country there was a sense of jubilation and all the people were united in their demand for freedom. We rejoiced but we did not know then that our joy was premature and bitter disappointment awaited us." On July 7, the AICC endorsed it.

The question of the Congress presidency also arose that month. Azad had been elected in 1939 for a year but had remained in the post till 1946 by default because after the Second World War broke out, the Congress was banned and its leaders jailed. He chose not to contest and to throw his weight behind Nehru, instead of Patel, a decision he would come to regret. Patel would have seen his plan through, while Nehru, in Azad's opinion, "gave Jinnah the opportunity to sabotage" it.

On July 10, at a press conference, Nehru said the Congress was "unfettered" by the Cabinet Mission Plan and could do as it chose in the Constituent Assembly, where it had a majority. On July 27, the Muslim League council met under Jinnah and now rejected the Cabinet Mission Plan and reiterated its demand for Pakistan.

We know what happened after that. What might have been had the plan been accepted and undivided India preserved, but with a weaker Centre, we will never know.

The writer is the chair of Amnesty International India. Twitter: @aakar_patel



EDITORIAL

BENGALURU

TUESDAY 28.01.2025

THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS



There is no separation between my fate and the collective fate. I am part of the many who have faced the changing realities in Afghanistan

Shamsia Hassani

newindianexpress.com

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

— Rammath Goenka

FISCAL PRUDENCE: ODISHA AND OTHER STATES CAN LEARN FROM EACH OTHER

THOUGH Niti Aayog's Fiscal Health Index (FHI) paints a worrying picture for many states, it only has praise for Odisha. The state, which topped the chart on five indices, has its fiscal responsibility and budget management (FRBM) vitals on target. The report assessed 18 states on the quality of expenditure, revenue mobilisation, fiscal prudence, debt index and sustainability in 2022-23. It found Odisha's quality of spending judicious as its revenue expenditure on social sectors like health and education grew at 33.8 percent during 2020-22, faster than in other major states. Capital expenditure on education, sports, arts and culture also grew, as did spending on urban development.

The FHI pointed out that Odisha's prudence reduced its fiscal deficit to 2 percent of the gross state development product in 2022-23. The state's external borrowings have also been low compared to many others. Hence, the ratio of outstanding liabilities to GDP has been well within the FRBM target. Much of this financial discipline was achieved during the previous BJD regime, which had taken over in 2000, when the state's finances were in dire straits and a vicious super cyclone had ravaged the economy. That explains the focus on welfareism, which the party took to higher levels during subsequent elections—a trend many other states are following now. Whereas earnings from mining gave Odisha the liberty to splurge on handouts, most others do not have such a steady and substantive stream of revenue.

However, Odisha's focus has changed with the new BJP government. While it is mandated to push the pace of development through industrialisation, employment generation and spend on infrastructure, it has unfurled 16 new welfare programmes. The Subhadra Yojana alone needed a budgetary allocation of ₹10,000 crore for 2024-25. The state's main revenue source is a boon as well as a bane, as 90 percent of the non-tax revenue and 45 percent of own revenue receipts come from mining. Revenue from the sector crossed ₹46,000 crore in 2023-24, mainly because of the high premiums paid at auctions. Such a dependence on one sector is a cause of concern as expenditure zooms. So, while other states can learn prudence from Odisha, the eastern state will do well to take note of the trouble others are facing in funding their populist schemes. Each side will be better off learning from the other.

SINNER TAKES CHARGE, KEYS KEEPS OLD PROMISE

A Grand Slam final is not usually this one-sided. The blue-floored Rod Laver arena in Melbourne promised a pulsating clash—the No 1 versus the No 2. But on court, the difference of class belied the close ranking. Jannik Sinner hardly played a wrong shot the whole night. His opponent Alexander Zverev aptly summed things up: "[Sinner] does everything better than me." Hence the top seed defended his Slam without a flutter.

The nature of the Italian's triumph over the German strengthened the belief that Sinner is now the men's game's pre-eminent force. During his thrilling takedown of Carlos Alcaraz in their quarterfinal, Novak Djokovic showed he still has the hunger, but his body has started increasingly rebelling against his will. Time, after all, is no friend of mortals. This could well be the Serb's last season on the top-level tour. Meanwhile, 23-year-old Sinner, who has now won his last three hard-court majors, has stolen a march over Alcaraz in this new era's top rivalry. The Spaniard is younger and has won more Slams, but the Italian seems locked in for success now. But then, even while heading to Melbourne, Sinner knew his bigger battle would be at the Court of Arbitration for Sport in April, when the World Anti-Doping Agency's appeal on a doping charge will be heard. If the appeal fails, Sinner may be the top seed in Paris, where Alcaraz is the defending champion.

If the men's result was predictable, the women's was somewhat surprising. Madison Keys, a popular player who had last reached a Slam final at the US Open in 2017, finally fulfilled a long-proclaimed prophecy when she bested Aryna Sabalenka in the women's singles final. Keys was marked for greatness as soon as she won her maiden Women's Tennis Association tour match when she was only 15. Since then, though, the wins have not been as regular. There have been deep tournament runs, but the one big Slam title continued to elude her. Not anymore. Hopefully, the world will get to see more of Keys in the future. As with men's tennis, the era's top order in the women's game is also coming into sharper focus. Another age of great rivalries is upon us.

QUICK TAKE

RUMBLE IN AI JUNGLE

TWO concerns about artificial intelligence are getting flagged around the world more than others—cost and safety. DeepSeek, a Chinese startup's open-source models, recently shook up the industry by showing the costs need not be so high. Stocks of US and Japanese tech giants crashed as DeepSeek-V3's overtook ChatGPT as the most downloaded AI app. At such a disruptive moment, Narendra Modi is set to co-chair a two-day AI Action Summit in Paris in early February. While discussing regulatory issues over the major concern—safety—hope the global leaders will also look at making AI tools available for everyone at a reasonable cost. Equality among nations and individuals will depend on it.

FOR some time now, India's eastern front has drawn the major part of the country's strategic focus, especially after the dramatic meltdown in Bangladesh on and after August 5, 2024. Yet, a lot has been happening on India's immediate west too—in Pakistan and Afghanistan—that merits attention, especially because, with several inter-linked issues, there is hardly any clear geographical divide in India's strategic interests on either side.

A convergence of four challenges has considerably strained Pakistan's strategic situation: the continuing internal political instability, severe economic challenges that constrain effective governance including national security, deteriorating security condition involving militant activities, particularly by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and the fraying relationship with Afghanistan that complicates Pakistan's western border security and diminishes its influence in Kabul.

Pakistan has faced considerable political turmoil, particularly following the ouster of former PM Imran Khan in April 2022, which deepened polarisation within the country. The nature of Pakistan's politics borders on a virtual war between parties, with the army playing the kingmaker. From mid-2022 to date, we have witnessed an unremitting campaign to exclude the most popular personality in the Pakistan political scene despite the democratic support he obtained.

Imran was equally at fault in triggering fractious radical politics, which also intensely involved the army. To keep him out of reckoning for leadership, he was sentenced to 14 years in prison on corruption charges along with his wife, Bushra Bibi, who received a seven-year sentence. Imran's party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), which has announced plans to appeal the verdict, is also being targeted by the army and the coalition in power to make it politically irrelevant.

However, such alignments are usually short-lived in Pakistan; this may not be the last that we are hearing of Imran and the PTI, although the reconciliatory talks the PTI had entered into are now on hold.

Politics has divided the army, too, and deeply affected the scope of governance. These actions have drawn criticism from the international community, including the US, over concerns about judicial independence and due process. As a greater irritant, Pakistan's recent social media bill has restrained the freedom of expression in a market where Bangladesh, allegedly at the behest of its Chi-

Meanwhile, the World Bank has ap-

Pakistan's western border is being disputed by the Afghan Taliban, which has reached out to India. This loss of strategic depth makes our neighbour vulnerable to manipulation

AS IT LOOKS EAST, PAK FACES TROUBLE ON WESTERN FRONT

LT GEN SYED ATA HASNAIN (RETO)

Former Commander, Srinagar-based 15 Corps; Chancellor, Central University of Kashmir



SUDHAR BOY

proved a \$20-billion, 10-year programme to support Pakistan's reforms in renewable energy, education and social sectors. The initiative complements the \$7-billion facility secured from the IMF in September 2024, which focuses on economic stabilisation and structural reforms. The macroeconomic situation is showing some improvement with lower inflation, but growth is still quite restricted. The country's forex reserves are at about \$16 billion, compared to India's \$620 billion.

So, the strategic capability gap between Pakistan and India has expanded exponentially, making Pakistan that much more vulnerable to external manipulation—something quite evident from the hand it is now attempting to play in Bangladesh, allegedly at the behest of its Chi-

nese sponsors. The vulnerability could have been partially prevented had Pakistan's economy been in a better shape.

In response to a surge in militant attacks and sectarian tensions, Pakistani security forces initiated a major operation recently in the Kurram district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The district has been isolated since last November due to road blockages from clashes between Shiite and Sunni tribes. This adds to the difficulty of effective governance, especially when internal security challenges are characterised by militant activity, sectarian strife, legislative changes and political instability.

The TTP, garnering an advantage, has intensified attacks on the security forces, particularly from its bases in Afghani-

NEED TO SHIFT GEARS AFTER A DECADE OF BETI BACHAO

THERE'S a saying in Haryana, "Beti nahi bachaoge, toh kahaan se laoge (If you don't save daughters, from where will you bring daughters-in-law)?" Although it's inappropriate to assume all daughters are brides-in-waiting, this remains a powerful slogan that continues to raise awareness against the serious negative consequences of sex-selective abortions in a state that has been facing a 'daughter deficit' for decades.

Despite decreasing poverty, increasing education and improvements in girls' health, child sex ratios, especially the sex ratio at birth (SRB), continue to be low in India. It profoundly reflects the paradox of gender development in the country. To address this problem, on January 22, 2015, the central government launched the Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (BBBP) campaign, which is now marking its tenth year. This milestone offers an opportunity to reflect on the progress achieved and ask what the way forward should be.

BBBP was launched to combat declining child sex ratios by improving survival, protection, and education of the girl child. Since independence, governments at the national and state levels have introduced several such programmes to augment women's empowerment. While there have been signs of progress, the targets are still far from being met. BBBP was launched with the dual objectives of curbing gender-biased sex selection and improving girls' status, especially to raise the age of marriage and education level. The programme has been lauded for raising awareness about protecting and educating daughters. However, the progress towards gender development and equity has been a blend of triumphs and trials.

States like Haryana, once infamous for skewed sex ratios, have shown noticeable improvement. According to recent state reports, Haryana's SRB rose from 876 girls per 1,000 boys in 2015 to 916 in 2023. The progress can be attributed to awareness campaigns, strict enforcement of the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act 1994, and financial incentives like Ladli and Aapki Beti Hamari Beti (Your Daughter is Our Daughter) scheme, especially post BBBP campaigning.

However, BBBP's effect on improving the SRB is not observed in states other than Haryana, Punjab and Himachal Pradesh, which have been traditionally

known for low SRBs. Delhi, surrounded by these three states, continues to experience a decline in the SRB. The count has also declined in 10 states, and most of are in the south and east of the country, regions traditionally known for better sex ratios.

Among gender development indicators counted in successive rounds of the National Family Health Survey (1992 to 2021), significant progress has been made



Though the sex ratio at birth has improved in a few northern states, it has moved in the opposite direction in some eastern and southern states. We must improve women's employment rate and push for pay parity to make campaigns like Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao more effective

in narrowing the gaps in educational and health outcomes between genders, and this has pushed the age at marriage upwards. NFHS data also suggests that the child survival outcome for girls is now better than boys', although young girls have not yet achieved their full biological advantage in child survival. Literacy rates among young women are nearly at par with those of young men, and more girls are delaying marriage as a result of increasing educational opportunities and rising aspiration for decent jobs.

However, the trend in education and health has failed to contribute meaningfully to more autonomy and agency for women. The picture is particularly despairing when it comes to parity in em-

ployment opportunities, wages and financial autonomy. The female labour force participation rate remains dismally low. This inability to raise women's employment rate and wage has become a serious concern for a growing number of economists. It's reflected in the recent Global Gender Gap report for 2024, which showed that women in India, on an average, earned only ₹39.8 for every ₹100 earned by men, ranking 127th worldwide on gender pay parity.

While awareness campaigns have been crucial in spotlighting disparities, they must be complemented by systemic reforms addressing the patriarchal roots of gender discrimination to sustain and amplify their impact. SRBs are more skewed towards males among upper castes and richer economic groups, thus indicating that incentives promised under Ladli and Aapki Beti Hamari Beti schemes have minimal influence on these groups.

So the policy needs to reach them in a different manner. It's time to work towards eliminating age-old notions such as 'bringing up a daughter is like watering the neighbour's garden'. One of the most effective ways to change this mindset would be to reduce gender gaps in wages and financial autonomy. BBBP must promote the positive standpoint that daughters are just as capable as their male siblings in providing social and economic security for parents in their older ages.

Deep-rooted cultural attitudes often undermine the implementation of women's empowerment policies—such as women's right to property—necessitating community engagement led by local leaders and influencers to challenge and transform the unequal norms rooted in patriarchy. The BBBP scheme has undoubtedly been a step in the right direction, but it demands more nuanced efforts beyond sloganeering and conditional cash incentives. Bargaining for gender equity within the premise of patriarchal norms may not help the cause. Slowly but steadily, we need to change the mindset.

(Views are personal)

MAIL BAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Counterterror efforts

Ref: 26/11 co-conspirator's extradition to unpeel role of Pak deep state (Jan 27). Tahawwur Rana's extradition marks a key development in Indo-US counterterrorism cooperation. It is a step closer to justice for the martyrs.

Aditya Kamble, Kalaburagi

Propping rupee

Ref: Focus on growth to deal with the rupee dilemma (Jan 27). The RBI should stop interfering in the foreign exchange market in its bid to stop the rupee slipping against the US dollar. The depreciation is a result of aggregate demand and growth. The hope is that India's exports will be more competitive with the rupee's fall.

S Ramakrishnasayee, Chennai

Congress blinkered

Ref: Value the republic, cherish freedom won at a cost (Jan 27). The Congress is a party that is the mother of everything the author tried to highlight in its article. When the Congress is out of power, they seem to realise all the loopholes in the system.

Rajaram Shat, Mysuru

Bullying Trump

Ref: Trump wants to clean up Gaza, asks Egypt, Jordan to help with refugees (Jan 27). US President Donald Trump is acting too big for his shoes. The day may not be far off when Islamic groups retaliate against US interests, like in the past. Trump should think twice before issuing such sweeping directions to independent nations, that too ones that are not its allies.

Govardhana Myneddu, Vijayawada

Indonesian friendship

Ref: Emotions, nostalgia and book-lover President Prabowo Subianto (Jan 27). The recent visit of Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto as the chief guest for India's Republic Day celebrations showcased the enduring bond between the two nations. Strategic agreements in defence, health and maritime security further strengthened ties, while Indonesia's gratitude for India's support in BRICS emphasised mutual respect.

T Kalish Ditya, Hyderabad

Pathbreaking doctor

Ref: Dr. Cheria, who performed India's first bypass surgery, dies in 87th year (Jan 27). With the passing away of Dr K M Cheria, India lost a distinguished doctor. He cut a dash in his performance of India's first bypass surgery. He also did India's first heart-lung transplant and first pediatric heart transplant, which added further glory to his incredible surgical operation at a time when there was no special surgical equipment.

R Pichumani, Kumbakonam

thehindubusinessline.

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Time for parity

Budget should revisit taxation of fixed income assets

It may seem strange that the Association of Mutual Funds of India (AMFI) should come up with a long Budget wish-list for this year after the Centre's proposals to simplify and standardise the tax regime for investments in the July 2024 Budget. But the AMFI wish-list shows that the 'simplified' tax regime has dealt an unfair hand to those favouring fixed income instruments. For debt fund investors, changes in the last two Budgets have resulted in both capital gains and interest income getting taxed at their default income tax slab rate.

A retrospective element to taxation was also introduced last year, where indexation benefits on capital gains from debt fund investments made before April 1, 2023 were removed, subjecting all returns from legacy investments to tax at the slab rate. As AMFI has pointed out, debt fund investors typically make returns of about 7 per cent a year. Taxing these returns at the slab rate results in a negative real return to investors. Besides debt-oriented mutual funds, all fixed income investors — whether they opt for bank deposits, corporate fixed deposits, small savings schemes, corporate bonds or government bonds — are in the same boat. This is leading to several distortions.

For one, the unfavourable tax treatment of returns on debt instruments versus equity capital gains has skewed retail asset allocation towards the risky stock market, while savings in safer debt instruments are declining. The share of debt fund assets in the mutual fund industry has shrunk from 32 per cent to 27 per cent between December 2022 and December 2024, while equity funds have seen their share increase from 58 to 61 per cent. Asset allocation decisions should ideally be based on the individual risk appetite of investors — but taxation now seems to be influencing this choice. Two, fixed income investments such as deposits and small savings schemes are bread-and-butter investments for majority of households. Therefore, negative real returns on these instruments take away the *raison d'être* for saving itself. It is not surprising that households' savings in financial assets have been flat-lining in recent years, even as they are rising in gold and real estate assets. Three, punitive taxation on fixed income instruments hits vulnerable sections of population — be it the young earner parking money in recurring deposits or the retiree subsisting on passive income. Finally, healthy household deposit flows are critical to our infrastructure building ambitions. These cannot take wing without retail participation in deposits, bonds and debt mutual funds.

The Centre must initiate corrective steps to lighten the tax burden on fixed income instruments. It must move to a flat rate for fixed income instruments that allows for a positive real return. Debt avenues favoured by vulnerable sections such as post office schemes and senior citizen deposits, must be exempted from tax.

OTHER VOICES.

The Guardian

Global AI race: geopolitics, innovation and the rise of chaos
Eight years ago, Vladimir Putin proclaimed that mastering artificial intelligence (AI) would make a nation the "ruler of the world". Western tech sectors after Russia's invasion of Ukraine should have dashed his ambitions to lead in AI by 2030. But that might be too hasty a judgment. Last week, the Chinese lab DeepSeek unveiled R1, an AI that analysts say rivals OpenAI's top reasoning model, o1. Astonishingly, it matches o1's capabilities while using a fraction of the computing power — and at a tenth of the cost. Predictably, one of Mr Putin's first moves in 2025 was to align with China on AI development. R1's launch seems no coincidence, coming just as Donald Trump backed OpenAI's \$500bn StarGate plan to outpace its peers. OpenAI has singled out DeepSeek's parent, High Flyer Capital, as a potential threat. But at least three Chinese labs claim to rival or surpass OpenAI's achievements. LONDON, JANUARY 24

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Trump's Lumber Tariffs and Disaster Recovery

President Trump on Friday promised to help North Carolina and California rebuild faster. One way to do it would be to drop his threat to impose 25% tariffs on Mexico and Canada that would make disaster recovery slower and more expensive. The President reiterated his tariff threat in video remarks to the World Economic Forum on Thursday. "We don't need [Canada] to make our cars. We make a lot of them. We don't need their lumber because we have our own forests," he said. "We don't need their oil and gas, we have more than anybody." Mr. Trump is wrong on all three, but we'll focus on lumber. The U.S. doesn't produce enough lumber to meet domestic demand and thus imports about a third of the softwood used in home construction, mostly from Canada. Environmental policies restrict logging on public land in the American Northwest. Timber production has shifted to private land in the Southeast, but those forests must be managed so they aren't overlogged. NEW YORK, JANUARY 24

CAPITAL IDEAS.



RICHAMISHRA

Sticking to his narrative of "Drill, Baby, Drill", on January 20 Donald Trump, after taking office as the American President for the second time, declared National Energy Emergency. The objective of Executive Order is to ensure US' energy security, which Trump claims are currently not being met.

"We need a reliable, diversified, and affordable supply of energy to drive our Nation's manufacturing, transportation, agriculture, and defense industries, and to sustain the basics of modern life and military preparedness. Caused by the harmful and shortsighted policies of the previous administration, our Nation's inadequate energy supply and infrastructure causes and makes worse the high energy prices that devastate Americans, particularly those living on low- and fixed-incomes," it read.

"An affordable and reliable domestic supply of energy is a fundamental requirement for the national and economic security of any nation," it said. This was what even India has been working towards, but with limited resources and dynamic consumption.

For India, Trump's Executive Order has its positives and downsides. The positive side it will drive new investments in oil and gas exploration sector and oil prices will moderate. Also the removal of pause on LNG export will impact the dynamics of gas market. The worrisome part is the further strengthening of dollar, as oil trade is predominantly dollar denominated.

With the Union Budget around the corner, it would be interesting to see its peg on the average oil price. According to industry, currently, New Delhi will be comfortable with an average of \$70 a barrel. If it falls further, then it would be Trump's gift to consumers like India. However, the government will need to be flexible enough to protect itself from spike in prices. As on January 24, the Indian crude oil basket (price on which the Indian refiners source their crude) stood at \$81.18 a bbl. In December 2024 the Indian basket averaged \$73.34 a bbl.

But will Trump's moves see the revival of shale industry? According to Ehsan Ul-Haq, an Independent Energy Analyst, "I don't think, it will change much. US shale oil production is only rising in the Permian region, as other plays are now mature. However, there will be some increase in the Gulf of Mexico."

"You can emphasise 'drill, baby, drill' slogan but oil companies in the US are now interested in capital discipline. An increase of 300,000 to 400,000 bpd is possible this year but a slogan alone does not help boost production," he said adding that President Trump wants to

Trump's energy imperatives

Increased oil supplies will moderate prices. But renewable energy will now have to compete with fossil fuel industry



bring down prices but if he imposes 25 per cent tariff on Canadian and Mexican oil, this becomes impossible.

"Similarly, more sanctions against Iran and Venezuela mean higher prices. This could reduce supplies, but we still don't know how effective his sanctions against Tehran and Caracas will be. I don't think President Trump wants to hinder projects within the US. But sanctions against Iran and Venezuela could limit supplies and indirectly boost crude oil prices. But this also depends on the effectiveness of sanctions."

On any further sanctions on Russia, "It could force Indian refiners to look for alternatives from the Middle East in the next few months, as Gulf crudes are similar to Russian oil. In the medium to long run, Russian and Indian refiners could find ways to import despite sanctions as in the past. In the short run, it means higher costs and lower refinery margins. This comes at a time when global demand is not strong."

Umud Shokri, Energy Strategist and senior visiting fellow at George Mason University is of the view that "Trump's National Energy Emergency is set to significantly reshape the US energy market. A key objective is to accelerate domestic oil and gas production, potentially leading to a substantial

Trump's energy policy is seen as a positive for an import-dependent country like India.
But companies in the sector need to be nimble enough to leverage it

increase in supply. The declaration allows for expedited approvals of energy infrastructure projects, including pipelines and power plants, aimed at boosting production and distribution capacity."

"Additionally, the removal of a pause on liquefied natural gas (LNG) export reviews is expected to enhance the US's role in global energy markets by increasing natural gas exports. However, this emphasis on fossil fuels may divert investments and resources away from renewable energy sectors, potentially slowing progress in clean energy development and innovation," he said.

While the declared goal of these policies is to reduce energy costs for American consumers, the actual impact on energy prices could be complex, Shokri pointed out.

"Increased fossil fuel production may lead to market oversupply, which could temporarily lower prices... However, such oversupply could also result in price volatility, complicating long-term market stability," he said.

"Moreover, the prioritization of fossil fuels and the rollback of climate-focused regulations might undermine the long-term competitiveness of renewable energy industries. While the policies may temporarily benefit consumers and producers in the fossil fuel sector, they introduce significant uncertainty for other energy stakeholders," he added.

Trump's energy policies will have mixed implications for oil prices, shaped by a combination of domestic and global factors.

LNG BOOST

According to Shokri, India's LNG market is poised for significant growth,

with imports playing a pivotal role in meeting the country's rising energy demands.

The market is projected to expand from \$8.9 billion in 2024 to \$27.36 billion by 2030, growing at a CAGR of 13.2 per cent. "The United States has emerged as a key player in India's LNG imports."

GAIL has secured approval to import 3.5 million tonnes of LNG annually from the US for 20 years. In June 2024, the US surpassed Qatar as India's largest LNG supplier, delivering a record 851,000 tonnes in 12 cargoes. Moreover, India was the top destination for the US LNG cargoes in May 2024, receiving 45.3 Bcf of LNG.

"While India's LNG imports are sensitive to global prices, the country's strategic diversification and long-term agreements position it to leverage the US supplies and address its growing energy needs. Despite challenges, the Indian LNG market is set to thrive, driven by infrastructure expansion, government initiatives, and increasing contributions from US suppliers," he added.

For India's energy space — fossil fuel in particular — Trump's return seems to be a positive. But a lot will depend on the strategies adopted by the companies in this business and how India turns it into an advantage.

Already steps are being taken to strengthen the upstream sector of the oil and gas industry, while giving renewable a push. Now, there are hurdles — mostly political in nature — deterring a smooth ride as RE will have to compete with fossil fuels to decide investment directions for the corporates.

Will the Budget resurrect economic dynamism?

Rationalisation of direct taxes and relief to the salaried class must be the Finance Minister's top priority

Amarendra Nandy

As India's growth engine slows, with GDP growth projected to decelerate to a four-year low of 6.4 per cent in FY25 from 8.2 per cent in FY24, the upcoming Union Budget will be a critical policy lever for reigniting growth momentum.

NSO's first advance estimates reveal some concerning trends: manufacturing growth slowing from 9.9 per cent in FY24 to 5.3 per cent in FY25; weakening investment momentum with gross fixed capital formation at a six-quarter low of 5.9 per cent in Q2 FY25; and tepid urban and rural consumption. Meanwhile, global headwinds, including subdued trade and geopolitical uncertainties, continue to strain India's export potential.

So the Finance Minister faces a complex fiscal challenge. With nominal GDP growth expected to reach only 9.7 per cent in FY25, below the FY25 Budget target of 10.5 per cent, managing the fiscal deficit will require a careful balancing act. The FY25 deficit target of 4.9 per cent of GDP may reach 5 per cent, making it crucial to maintain the fiscal glide path without compromising growth-enabling expenditure.

TAX RATIONALISATION
In such a context, the FM's first imperative will be to review and

rationalise direct taxes. Despite reductions in corporate tax rates, SMEs and mid-sized firms face high effective rates that limit their global competitiveness. Rationalising tax rates for such firms, and adjusting slabs for inflation could spur reinvestment and expansion.

Also, for the crucial ₹15-50 lakh income segment, which forms the backbone of urban consumption, targeted relief — such as increasing the standard deduction limit; extending the HRA exemption limit to Tier 2 cities, recognizing their emergence as major economic hubs with rising living costs; and removing the ₹2 lakh cap on offsetting house property losses against other income — could boost retail spending and loan growth.

Such steps could reignite private investment and revive consumption demand, which are linchpins for GDP growth. Second, capital expenditure deserves heightened focus, too. With the Centre likely missing its FY25 target of ₹11.1 lakh crore by ₹60,000 crore, and a 14.7 per cent decline in government capital expenditure during April-October 2024, the Budget must take steps to reverse the twin slowdown in public and private investment.

This should include expanding the National Infrastructure Pipeline with time-bound execution targets; introducing tax-efficient infrastructure



BUDGET. Tough options

bonds to crowd-in retail investment; and establishing specialized credit guarantee schemes for infrastructure financing companies. Raising Section 80C limits for infrastructure-linked savings products and offering favourable depreciation regimes for new capital investments could also catalyse growth.

Third, India's external sector weaknesses warrant interventions, particularly as services exports emerge as a potential stabilising force amid currency and reserve pressures. While the Rupee's slide to nearly ₹87 against the US Dollar and \$70 billion erosion in forex reserves are concerns, services exports offer a countervailing opportunity. Growing at a CAGR of 10.5 per cent, services exports are projected to reach \$618 billion by 2030, marginally surpassing merchandise exports.

However, this growth is concentrated in software and IT services (56.2 per cent) and Other Business Services (33.2 per cent), with the US alone absorbing 70 per cent of IT exports.

The Budget should address such vulnerabilities by strengthening forex hedging facilities, providing tax incentives for companies diversifying into untapped segments like transport and financial services, and helping Indian firms capture more of the \$1.8 trillion global Other Business Services market through targeted initiatives and export-promotion schemes.

Fourth, the Budget must substantially increase budgetary allocations to agriculture &R&D, which can drive breakthroughs in crop innovations, enhance climate resilience, and ensure food security.

Finally, the Budget must address the growing divergence between growth and employment generation. Labour-intensive industries like construction, textiles, tourism, and footwear need targeted support to create jobs and boost export revenues. Also, with female workforce participation critically low, gender-sensitive frameworks, such as formalising the care economy, are imperative.

The writer is Assistant Professor (Economics), IIM Ranchi

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

Budget imperatives

US President Donald Trump's threats of import tariff hikes, visa crackdowns, and other immigration-related actions; capital outflows from a strong dollar; and rising treasury yields, which hasten the depreciation of the rupee, are causes for concern.

A weaker rupee not only prevents RBI from cutting rates but also from injecting liquidity due to its inflationary implications. In this backdrop the Budget needs to

rationalise GST rates to spur demand and a put leash on food and fertilizer subsidies and direct funds towards less market-distorting income support transfers and infrastructure.

M Jayaram
Shivamurthy (TN)

Pinching the pocket

Prices of rice, wheat, cereals and edible oil have been spiralling in the last couple of months. Every time one visits the grocery shops, one has to shell out a

minimum of 10 to 15 per cent more for the same items bought last (Birkles of the boom, January 26). The MRP of food items keeps changing hitting the common folk. Despite bountiful harvests, prices of agri commodities keep shooting up. A poor consumer tries to scribble on his spending temporarily to manage the situation but not for long. Retail inflation impacts Consumer Price Index leading to cascading effect on the exchequer in outflow

of money towards shelling out proportionate demands allowance to the government employees. The onus lies on the government to arrest the trend to cut down the inflation level.

IV Bakaran
Chennai

Pay panel quandary

I fully agree with your observations in the Editorial "Questionable rationale" (January 27). On the one hand, the RBI is obsessed

with inflation and not cutting rates. At the other end of the spectrum, we see that the government is ready to loosen its purse strings on the revenue expenditure.

Setting up of the Eighth Central Pay Commission and implementing its recommendations will undoubtedly increase the money supply and push up prices too. Also salary hikes are offset by higher taxes so they are often a mirage.

S Ramakrishnaswamy
Chennai

Improving health security

Strong India-US ties in pharma can lead the way

Sudharshan Jain
Archana Jatkari

With the 'Trump 2.0' administration at the helm, the US has reinforced its 'America-First' approach, prioritising the protection of American interests in critical sectors including healthcare and pharmaceuticals. This renewed focus stems from the hard lessons of the Covid-19 pandemic, which exposed glaring vulnerabilities in global pharmaceutical supply chains. Robust domestic health security is now a strategic necessity for most countries including the US.

Under this policy, India emerges as a key ally. With its unmatched manufacturing capacity, reliability, and alignment with US economic and security goals, India is uniquely positioned to partner with the US in addressing global health challenges while safeguarding American citizens.



SUPPLY CHAIN. India has been a major supplier of generics

Build resilient supply chains: Establish diversified production hubs for APIs and essential drug components for consistent supply of medicines.

Invest in joint research: Co-develop pharmaceutical innovations to address emerging global health threats.

Secure economic benefits: Foster job creation and economic stability in both nations through joint investments in pharmaceutical infrastructure

For the US and India, this collaboration goes beyond providing affordable medicines — it's about securing economic and strategic futures. Diversifying pharmaceutical supply chains with India, reduces risks of shortages caused by crises, trade wars, or geopolitical tensions. India's pharmaceutical exports are set to reach \$65 billion by 2030, reinforcing its role in global health security.

The global pharmaceutical market is projected to grow to \$1.7 trillion by 2027, with India poised to play a pivotal role. By 2030, India's pharmaceutical exports are expected to reach \$65 billion, strengthening its position as a global health security leader.

India's PLI scheme supports US goals by increasing domestic production of APIs and KSMs, reducing reliance on single-source suppliers and enhancing supply chain security.

Joint investments in infrastructure and research create high-value jobs and drive innovation in the US. India's pharmaceutical industry is projected to grow at 11-12 per cent CAGR, reaching \$120 billion by 2030. The PLI scheme is likely to reduce India's API/KSM import dependence by 29 per cent in value and 43 per cent in volume by 2025. This partnership offers substantial economic and strategic advantages, reinforcing the US-India alliance as a cornerstone of global health security.

The US-India partnership offers a compelling solution, combining India's manufacturing strength with the US's technological and financial resources to build resilient supply chains. Successful US-India collaborations in defence and energy provide a strong model for their pharmaceutical partnership. Health security is no longer just a public health issue — it's a strategic imperative. There are three ways in which India and the US can lead the charge:

Jain is Secretary General, and Jatkari is Associate Secretary General, Indian Pharmaceutical Alliance



JANAK RAJ

The Union Budget for 2025-26, which will be presented on February 1, has assumed added significance due to the macroeconomic challenges facing the economy. Private consumption, which has all along been the mainstay of aggregate demand, has slowed down significantly. Q3-2024-25 financial results declared by about 500 listed companies so far have been largely disappointing, especially of fast-moving consumer goods, thus continuing the trend of the previous quarter. This is indeed worrying. A key challenge for the Budget is to strike a fine balance between stimulating the economy and pursuing fiscal consolidation.

The Finance Minister has done well to pursue fiscal consolidation relentlessly in the last four years. However, given the elevated debt-GDP ratio at 55.5 per cent (Budget Estimates — BE) and huge interest payments which pre-empt 37.2 per cent of the government's revenue receipts, there cannot be any let up in fiscal consolidation. The first advance estimates of nominal GDP growth of 9.7 per cent against 10.5 per cent assumed in the BE, could have possibly made it difficult to achieve the budgeted gross fiscal deficit of 4.9 per cent of GDP.

However, the overall government expenditure (up to November) was \$6.9 per cent of BE compared with 58.9 per cent during the same period of last year. It, therefore, seems that the government may not be able to spend the budgeted amount, especially capital expenditure, in the remainder period. This should help achieve the GFD target for 2024-25. The process of fiscal consolidation needs to continue in 2025-26 and beyond. In fact, the Budget needs to lay down the roadmap for the next few years to reduce the elevated debt-GDP ratio to a sustainable level. This will be hugely positive for the bond market, which should have a salutary effect on the overall financing conditions.

Even while pursuing fiscal consolidation, the Budget needs to provide stimulus to the slowing economy. This will require re-jigging of priorities both on the expenditure and revenue sides. First, to counter the contractionary impact of fiscal consolidation, the Budget needs to increase capital expenditure as it has done in the last four years. Fiscal multiplier in the case of capital expenditure of the Central government estimated by the RBI in April 1991 was



Budget needs to be a growth-booster

CATALYSTS. Stepping up capex, enhancing tax benefits for middle class and home loans and pursuing disinvestment vigorously should provide the required stimulus

much larger (more than 3.25) than the revenue expenditure of less than one, i.e., 0.45. This means that while one rupee of capital expenditure by the Central government increases output by ₹3.25, one rupee of revenue expenditure increases output by less than 50 paise. This underscores the need to boost capital expenditure by cutting unproductive revenue expenditure, wherever possible.

TAX RELIEF NEEDED Second, the government needs to provide tax relief to the middle class to boost consumption. The slowdown of private consumption is attributable largely to the middle class as it has been hit hard by several adverse factors at the same time, especially high and persistent food inflation, slowdown in wages and rising indebtedness. In the last several years, there has hardly been any noteworthy tax relief in personal income tax to the middle class, even though their purchasing power has been

To counter the contractionary impact of fiscal consolidation, the Budget needs to increase capital expenditure as it has done in the last four years

significantly eroded by inflation. It is, therefore, important to provide significant relief to the middle class in personal income tax. Furthermore, since the propensity to consume of lower-income class is high, the Budget will do well to sharply increase the allocations for the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee and other schemes targeted at low-income households.

Third, the housing sector has huge forward and backward linkages, which can generate demand for several sectors at the same time. Tax benefits for home loans under Sections 24 and 80 C have remained unchanged for the last several years and their value has eroded sharply in real terms. Though Section 80EE/80EEA was introduced to provide tax relief to first-time homebuyers/affordable housing, it is too restrictive. It is significant that tax benefit under Section 80C is clubbed with several other saving instruments.

As such, Section 80 C is of no use to most home loan borrowers. Therefore, there is a need to suitably enhance the tax benefits for home loan borrowers and provide an exclusive limit for home loan principal repayments under Section 80 C over and above the existing limit of ₹1.5 lakh. Tax benefits for home loans could provide a huge fillip to the housing sector.

Now the question is how to generate resources for such benefits so that the

debt-GDP ratio does not rise. First, the government needs to pursue disinvestment vigorously. Disinvestment targets announced year after year in the recent period have not been met, barring two years. Disinvestment will help release large taxpayers' resources locked up in non-strategic public sector enterprises, some of which are ailing and continue to be a drag on taxpayers' money.

A case in point being the recent decision to make equity injection into Rashtriya Ispat Nigam Ltd. Apart from providing relief to the taxpayers for boosting growth in the near-term, the proceeds of disinvestment could be spent on critical areas such as health and education which will help boost the medium-term growth potential of the economy. Second, the Budget should take measures to further improve the tax compliance and make it difficult for anyone to evade taxes.

Given the economic slowdown facing the Indian economy, the key challenge is to provide immediate stimulus to the economy while ensuring fiscal consolidation. This means resetting the expenditure priorities by boosting capital expenditure and cutting down unproductive revenue expenditure and raising resources in a manner that does impact private consumption.

The writer is Senior Fellow, Centre for Social and Economic Progress. Views are personal

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

January 28, 2005

Investment fund set up to park disinvestment proceeds
The Government has unveiled its new disinvestment policy. It involves selling minority stakes in both listed and unlisted profitable public sector enterprises without ceding management control by retaining a minimum of 51 per cent. It also agreed to set up a 'National Investment Fund' with proceeds from the sale of Government equity in profitable PSUs.

Infosys lists reservation in pvt sector as risk in SEC filing
Infosys Technologies has listed the possibility of the Maharashtra Government passing legislation on reservations in the private sector as a risk factor in its latest filings with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) of the US. The Maharashtra Government is considering a legislation to introduce reservations for socially backward communities in the private sector.

Multi-commodity exchanges or specialised bourses?
Are the country's multi-commodity futures exchanges 'nauti' only in name? A perusal of daily trading volumes does suggest so. While MCX seems to be primarily specialising in bullion, NCDEX has emerged as an agri-products (particularly guar) exchange and NMCE largely a spices-and-rubber exchange.

Dilip Chetty
Sutirtha Ghosh
Manvi Sheraawat

The recently released "Guidelines for Installation and Operation of Battery Swapping and Charging Stations" by the Ministry of Power is a commendable step. They are designed to put in place a regulatory framework governing all battery swapping and charging stations.

According to reports by International Energy Agency (IEA), road transportation accounts for around 12 per cent of India's energy-related CO2 emissions and is a key contributor to urban air pollution. Thus, a robust electric vehicle (EV) sector in India is imperative to ensure sustainable transportation solutions and address the concerns of pollution as well.

With the rapidly growing demand for EVs, the market for battery swapping vehicles is also constantly expanding, especially in the 2W and 3W vehicle

segments. As of 2024, the size of battery swapping market stands at around \$500 million in India and around \$4.18 billion worldwide. It is projected to grow at a CAGR of around 47 per cent by 2036 across the world.

MANY BENEFITS At its core, battery swapping is a method of replacing a fully or partially discharged battery of an EV with another fully or partially charged battery at a battery swap station. Swapping significantly reduces the downtime to less than a minute as in the case of charging vehicles that have fixed batteries, and the upfront cost of ownership, for consumers, is brought down to less than 40-50 per cent compared to a traditional EV.

Battery swapping also takes away the concern of technology obsolescence from the customers, since a battery swapping operator (BSO) will be responsible for updating the battery technology.



SWAPPING. Reduces downtime

Furthermore, with a quick turnaround time, it also supports fleet operations better, such as ride-sharing and logistics services, where time efficiency directly impacts profitability. Currently, India has more than 3,500 swap stations across the country. More than 25 States have included battery swapping in their EV policies.

The guidelines will also allow government to facilitate existing fuel retail outlets operated by oil marketing

companies (OMCs) for installing battery swapping stations.

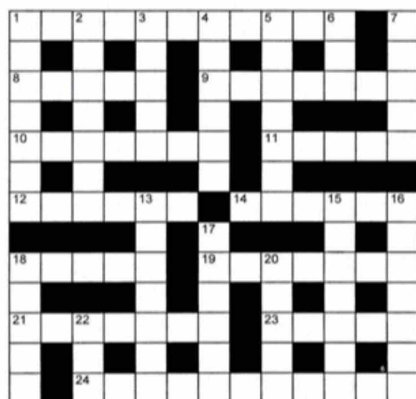
With this recognition to the battery swapping industry, it is anticipated to also encourage financial investment in swapping infrastructure in the near future.

This could include subsidies, grants, or tax benefits aimed at reducing the initial setup costs for battery swapping stations. With the lowering of financial barriers, more businesses will be inclined to enter the market, accelerating its growth.

Some of the critical steps to boost the industry can include amending the homologation certificate to include swappable vehicles, facilitating easy registration for vehicles sold without batteries, introducing safety standards for swap stations, and reducing GST for battery swapping for the customers to 5 per cent who now pay 18 per cent GST for every swap.

The writers are with India Battery Swapping Association (IBSA)

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2619



EASY

- ACROSS**
- Cycled without pedalling (4-7)
 - Puff up with success (5)
 - Turn out well; follow in order (7)
 - Pin bowled at (7)
 - Umbilicus (5)
 - Carpenter's borer (6)
 - Short, light sleep (3-3)
 - Cover with colour (5)
 - High chest of drawers (7)
 - In no place (7)
 - Indian corn, mealies (5)
 - (Expenses) paid out in cash (3-2-6)

- DOWN**
- Scented bulb flower (7)
 - Wiping, rubbing out (7)
 - Cereal grain (5)
 - Church festival (6)
 - Girl's name (7)
 - Change colour, stain (3)
 - To show clothing (5)
 - Fall back (7)
 - Club for looting (7)
 - Discharge of a debt (7)
 - It emphatically, reflexively (6)
 - Gasps for breath (5)
 - The borderland of Hell (5)
 - Which person? (3)

NOT SO EASY

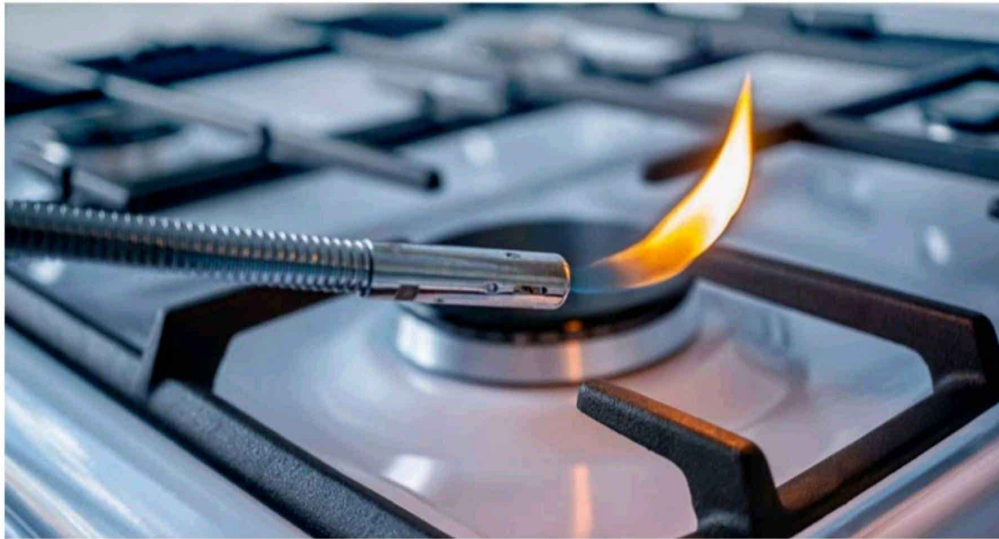
- ACROSS**
- Didn't pedal for nothing when we'd heel to turn (4-7)
 - Make one proud at early start, but get behind schedule (5)
 - One will do well to step into another's shoes (7)
 - Knock pin down with kilt set in a whirl (7)
 - It shows one was originally attached to a sort of orange (5)
 - They bore holes for us, gear being changed (6)
 - Jazz enthusiast has game of cards in short time off (3-3)
 - A coat may be one of many colours (5)
 - Chest to play with if it has broken ball in it (7)
 - Owner is upset when he comes in unplaced (7)
 - Corn one found in the middle of a labyrinth (5)
 - Where one got change and was worse off for such expenses (3-2-6)

- DOWN**
- Getting it for nothing is a different sort of flower (7)
 - Time to be a chorister if wiping it out (7)
 - Grain produced in thaw around the East (5)
 - Festival, each half of which disturbs one's repose (6)
 - Girl got in with Claud, somehow (7)
 - Change colour and go red, yet conceal it (3)
 - A paragon is a smaller version of the real thing (5)
 - Leave the field to rodent going round tree maybe (7)
 - Club for a writer to beat (7)
 - Money received for type man upset (7)
 - As it's reflexive, it flies around having time to enter (6)
 - Gasping, one runs for one's trousers in America (5)
 - Dance barred in the region of the lost (5)
 - What person starts wishing harvest over? (3)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2618

ACROSS 1. Eaves 4. Lawyers 8. Contemplating 10. Iriet 11. List 12. Sale 16. Erect 17. Straight-faced 19. Steered 20. Single
DOWN 1. Escapologists 2. Van 3. Specie 4. Lapels 5. Wealth 6. Eliminate 7. Sign the pledge 9. Discourse 13. Senior 14. Method 15. Staffs 18. Can

FROM THE ARCHIVES: BUILDING BLOCKS



GETTY IMAGES

How are everyday stove-lighters able to make electric sparks?

Piezoelectrics are materials with a particularly interesting property — they can effectively create a surplus and a deficiency of electrons when they are under pressure. The reason these materials can do this is because the atoms in such a material are arranged in a slightly funny periodic pattern

Adhip Agarwala

My mornings in IIT Kanpur, where I teach, are interspersed with sips of green tea, the longing calls of peacocks and peahens, and the purposeless barking of my neighbour's dog. Often making things interesting is a mess in the kitchen — the result of my tendency to ignore the milk I left on the stove, and remember it just as it boils, flows over the vessel, spills on the counter, and drools to the floor.

As I curse the milk, I also can't help but feel some sympathy for the innocent victim of this mess: my stove-lighter. Resting there in innocence on the counter, it has no idea that it is having a bad day.

These lighters are magical pieces of equipment. A push with your thumb, something clicks, and there comes a flame. If you haven't noticed it, go to your kitchen, pick up the lighter, point it towards yourself, and watch carefully. As you click it, you will notice a small spark flying between the central rod and the cylindrical covering. But don't worry: unless you are flammable (regular human beings are not), there is no danger of you catching fire or even getting an electric shock. This same spark accompanies the wonderful monsoons (which we eagerly await in Kanpur), just that they screech through the night sky and can add amazing percussions to a late night instrumental on the stereo.

What is it, then, that allows that small piece of equipment to create thunder in your kitchen, and at the innocuous push of your thumb?

To understand this, we first need to figure out what an electric spark is.

What is an electric spark?

A spark is essentially an electric charge flying in the air between two points, one of which has a large quantity of surplus electrons while the other has too few. This difference in quantities of electrons can happen due to many reasons. Sometimes people have engineered it this way using chemicals: the simplest example is the battery that we use in everything from remote-controls to electric vehicles.

A point with a large number of surplus electrons is called the negative terminal (since electrons are negatively charged) and a point that is deficient of electrons is the positive terminal. This is why you see '+' and '-' signs marked on every battery. In most situations — and unlike some people — electrons are extremely equitable in nature and dislike this difference in their quantities. So, given an opportunity, they will travel from a place where they are more in number to a place where they are fewer in number. This is why current flows when we attach a wire between the two ends of a battery, and in the process we make our fans move, or bulbs light up, etc.

However, if we don't attach a wire and the electrons still want to move, what will they do?

Is lightning a giant spark?

If the gap between the surplus and the deficiency of electrons becomes too extreme, at some point, these electrons will lose all patience and decide to fly through the air, disrupting everything in between. This is not very dissimilar to human society. Sometimes, you might notice that something upsets people slowly over time, and then suddenly, there is a surprisingly large bit of unrest.

To be able to break out like this, electrons first need to break up air molecules mid-air, creating ions (charged atoms). In addition, many electrons inside the atoms are also pulled out, creating free electrons in the air. All this creates a region through which electrons can easily move — as if they have made a wire for themselves in thin air! And when they travel on this path, we see it as a spark.

Clouds are charged objects. When they move over large distances and collide with other clouds, they get more and more charged. At some point, this charge becomes too much for the clouds to hold, and breaks out as the lightning that we see (followed by the thunder that we hear).

How do our stove lighters, which are limited to our kitchens, create such powerful electronic unrest?

What is a piezoelectric material?

This has to do with a class of materials called piezoelectrics, which every stove lighter contains. Piezoelectrics are amazing materials with a particularly interesting property: they can effectively create a surplus and a deficiency of electrons when they are under some pressure. As it happens, they can also easily remove this surplus when the applied pressure is removed.

The reason these materials can do this is because the atoms in a piezoelectric material are arranged in a slightly funny periodic pattern. They also usually have two types of atoms that have two different charges. One has a surplus of electrons and the other has a deficiency, i.e. they are negative and positive ions.

Now, under no extra pressure, these atoms are arranged in an alternating pattern and in such a way that there is no

surplus of electrons at one end compared to another. When some pressure is applied, the picture changes. The structure of these materials is such that, under pressure, the positive ions move in one direction and the negative ones move in the other direction. This creates a surplus at one end of the material and a deficiency at the other end. Essentially, the material has become a battery!

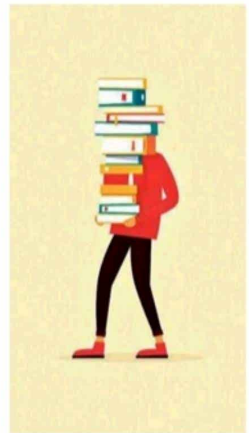
With some meticulous physics and engineering, this surplus/deficiency of electrons, created when the pressure is applied, can be made to be quite high — practically enabling the electrons to fly through the air, just like in the case of lightning. This is the spark you saw when you clicked the lighter.

Treat a lighter with respect

These flying electrons can ignite an inflammable object. So when the supply of cooking gas is on and you click the lighter near it, a fire erupts on your stove! Sometimes, the pressure applied is not enough to generate a spark, so at times you need to click it a couple of times, so that one of the hits is strong enough to create a sufficiently significant spark. (In case you are intrigued and interested in learning more about piezoelectric materials, taking a physics course on condensed matter physics may be worthwhile.)

So the next time you end up cooking something and it spills over your gas lighter — just like the milk I was boiling here at IIT Kanpur — please clean it with some respect. Every day, it creates tiny lightning bolts just for you, even if all you want to do is enjoy some crispy onion pakoras to go with the monsoon rain.

Adhip Agarwala is an assistant professor of physics at IIT Kanpur.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian
S. Upendran

"What is the third rule?"

"Prefer the single word to the circumlocution."

"What kind of elocution is this? Why don't you use a simple word?"

"I am quoting the Fowler brothers. They have used the word."

"Circumlocution" means 'the use of many words where fewer would do.' What it means is don't use two or more words where one will do. In ordinary conversation, we tend to use a lot of unnecessary words. Some tend to say in a roundabout way what can be said in a simple, straightforward way. Careful writers and speakers don't waste words. They are very precise. I will give some examples of circumlocution. The reason for his failure is due to his carelessness. What is the reason for his failure? His carelessness. Why did he fail? It was due to carelessness. The reason for his failure is carelessness. He failed due to carelessness. Why say 'The reason for ... due to'? Take another: With a view to going to the station, I engaged a taxi."

"What is wrong with the sentence? It sounds OK to me."

"There is nothing wrong grammatically. I took a taxi to go to the station. Isn't it simpler? Why use so many words when you can use fewer words? Also, for some reason, we use the word 'engage' rather than 'take' with a taxi. My British professor once told me that the average Indian loves to use the word 'engage' with 'taxi'."

"Why? Is it wrong to say 'I engaged a taxi'?"

"No. It is not wrong. The native speaker generally would use either 'hire' or 'take'. I took a taxi. I hired a taxi. But we tend to use the word 'engage'. But don't think you shouldn't use 'engage' at all with 'taxi'. A taxi is engaged when it is occupied, when it is not available for hire."

"So I can take a taxi or hire a taxi only when it is not engaged. Have I used 'engage' correctly?"

"Yes."

"So an Indian engages a taxi, an Englishman takes a taxi. Both do the same thing. Don't they?"

"They do. It is good to know the difference in their expression."

"Let me go now. I have to attend an engagement."

Published in *The Hindu* on November 29, 1994.

THE DAILY QUIZ

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

A quiz on the occasion of the 39th anniversary of the Challenger Space Shuttle disaster

V.V. Ramanan

QUESTION 1

How many crew members made up the ill-fated flight and what was the primary goal of shuttle mission 51-L?

QUESTION 2

There were two women on board with one being mission specialist Judith Resnik. Name the other who would have become the first teacher in space.

QUESTION 3

After how many seconds post lift-off did the tragedy happen and what were the last words heard from pilot Michael Smith?

QUESTION 4

According to later analysis, what caused the death of the astronauts as it was believed they survived the initial breakup.

QUESTION 5

What connects the first human on the moon, Neil Armstrong, and first American woman in space, Sally Ride, to the Challenger disaster?

QUESTION 6

Name the Nobel Laureate, part of the commission that looked into the tragedy, who convincingly demonstrated the loss of O-ring resiliency was the prime cause for the disaster.



Visual question:

Part of the back-up crew for the ill-fated mission, this astronaut later became the first teacher to go into space. Name her. FILE PHOTO

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

- India's Constitution borrows this from this country's Constitution. **Ans: Directive Principles of State Policy; Ireland**
- This artist illustrated the Constitution. **Ans: Nandalal Bose**
- This word was added in 1976 to the Preamble. **Ans: Secularism**
- The first chairman of the Constituent Assembly. **Ans: Sachidanand Sinha**
- This man was one of the Chief Ministers of the Madras Presidency and leader of the Indian National Congress. **Ans: C. Rajagopalachari**
- The calligrapher who wrote in English. **Ans: Prem Behari Narain Raizada**
- Early Birds: Basant Malik Dodo Jayaditya Piyali Tulji Arun Kumar Singh Barnali Biswas

Word of the day

Imprimatur:

formal and explicit approval

Synonyms: countenance, endorsement, sanction, warrant

Usage: My client needs the imprimatur of someone else.

Pronunciation: newsth.live/

imprimaturpro

International Phonetic

Alphabet: /jɪm.pɹɪˈmeɪ.tə/, /jɪm.pɹɪˈmeɪ.tə/, /jɪm.pɹɪˈmeɪ.tə/, /jɪm.pɹɪˈmeɪ.tə/

For feedback and suggestions for Text & Context, please write to letters@thehindu.co.in with the subject 'Text & Context'

Address states' serious concerns on draft UGC rules

IN recent years, there has been a perceptible growth in India's global intellectual property (IP) filings, reflecting innovation resilience despite economic challenges. India clocked the fastest growth in patent (+15.7%) applications in 2023, marking the fifth consecutive year of double-digit growth. It now ranks sixth globally for patents with 64,480 applications, with resident filings accounting for over half of all submissions (55.2%)—a first for the country. India also stands out with the highest number of institutes in the latest rankings.

Still, there is a vast scope for improvement in India's higher education system to enhance the quality of education as also make it more accessible. The University Grants Commission (UGC) is the statutory body that oversees and improves higher education. Its functions in-

clude: Setting standards, providing grants, advising governments, promoting research, improving access, curriculum development and grant of scholarships.

The Union government recently released the draft UGC (Minimum Qualifications for Appointment & Promotion of Teachers and Academic Staff in Universities and Colleges and Measures for the Maintenance of Standards in Higher Education) Regulations, 2025, to infuse innovation, inclusivity, flexibility and dynamism in every aspect of higher education.

There are many proposals that won praise but a few are causing consternation among the governments, especially in the non-BJP ruled states. Education is in the Concurrent List and as such any potential move to undermine state role will be viewed with concern in a federal set-up such as ours.

Telangana CM A Revanth Reddy terms them as "attack on the Constitution". Tamil Nadu even passed a House resolution demanding withdrawal of the draft UGC regulations. AIADMK, Kerala government, CPM also echoed concerns of threat to the basic federal principles enshrined in the Constitution.

Opposition parties and their governments in the states are rising up in arms over the purported move of the Centre to seek control over institutions through Governors, thus depriving any role for States in selection of Vice Chancellors (VC) for universities. What irks them further is a proposal to make non-academics eligible for the VC post. The opposition asks what will prevent the BJP-led NDA government from appointing Sangh Parivar loyalists as VC. Vesting selection powers in the Chancellor (Governor), who will pick one of the names forwarded by the search-committee selection committees comprising Chancellor, UGC Chairman and university senate, may further strain the ties between Governors and non-BJP governments.

Indeed, there are notable initiatives such as allowing candidates to pursue teaching careers in subjects that they qualify for with NET/SET, even if such subjects are different from their previous degrees. It definitely is a novel initiative aimed to dismantle rigid norms and bring in those who are talented and passionate to research and teach in subjects of their choice. But this move also risks diluting academic credentials and need to pursue competence in subject right from UG to PG level.

Any prior teaching experience needs significant weightage but the draft is apparently silent on this. Any scope for manipulation of recruitment conditions shall be eliminated by enulating the practices of the highest ranked universities in the world.

A diverse talent pool is envisaged by lifting the cap on contract jobs, as also with recruitment of experts in arts, sports, and traditional disciplines. Accomplished sportspersons will be able to enter the teaching profession. This move is quite innovative and they would provide refreshing perspectives.

While facilitating corporate funding for research, the UGC must guard against any driven agenda by vested interests. The objective shall be to address huge infrastructure inequity and faculty shortage between state and central varieties, and also to make public funding easy for taking up research projects that benefit society at large, rather than respective companies or sectors of the donors.

LETTERS

President backs ONOE before House nod

WE have had the practice of ONOE (One Nation One Election) during the first two decades of post-independence era. Subsequently, due to several factors, we witnessed the system going awry and the ONOE concept got discontinued. The advantages of ONOE are well known and explained by the President-Dr. B. D. Jaisankar. The huge expenditure on account of holding elections every now and then, and the resultant waste of man hours, resources and the constant brakes on governance could all be mitigated with ONOE, thus providing a platform that would have uninterrupted period of 4-years to provide that service the people expect of the government of the day.

Govardham Mysorelu, Vijayawada

PRESIDENT Murmu backing One Nation One Election is not surprising. Democracy is no longer government-for, or by and for the people, it is for, of and by Modi and Shah. The President in India has never spoken for the people. If in 1975, the then President signed the ordinance and now it's same when government sponsored anti-democratic actions are simply approved by President. Ideally, President should have avoided endorsing something that's yet to get a stamp of approval from people.

N. Naganjan, Hyderabad

India on path to be Swarnim Bharat

REF: Editorial - 'Swarnim Bharat: Virasat aur Vikas' (Jan 27). At this year's Republic Day parade, tableaux truly lived up to the Golden India - Cultural Heritage and Development - with an overall progress on technological achievements that should leave nobody in doubt that the country has chalked out for itself in terms of human potential, women empowerment and defence preparedness. The country's vibrant history, spirituality, artistic brilliance and traditional wisdom would surely make India a true 'Viswa Gurur'. India's unquestionable march towards digital infrastructure and efficient economy - coupled with enhancing education, healthcare and social equality - would surely lead to a Golden India.

K. V. Raghunath, Wayanad

US must rethink funds denial to WHO

REF: WHO is tackling global health crises? 'Undoubtedly, it is World Health Organisation (WHO) working in tandem with countries, strengthening primary healthcare to tackle specific communicable diseases. Thus, the role of WHO is paramount in providing guidance and playing a very important part in immunisation programme. For this, the member countries have an obligation to help WHO meet the financial requirement. Apparently, US withdrawal from WHO will cripple its finances at a time when the countries are plagued by more diseases due to various reasons. Therefore, it needs to review its decision to enable WHO to continue its fight against many diseases including pandemic in order to provide succour to suffering millions.

K. R. Srinivasan, Secunderabad

TG Gov-CM cordial ties laudable

THE Telangana Governor has all praises for CM Revanth Reddy's governance in his Republic Day speech. It seems magical that the Governor-CM relations are so cordial in a state where constant confrontations have become normal. The Governor of TG affirms that the CM has a constructive relationship with the centre, exemplifying the spirit of federalism. Does the Governor signify that other states must follow Telangana to learn lessons on how to uphold federalism?

P. R. Ravinder, Hyderabad

A matter of pride for Telugu people

IT is a matter of pride to the whole of modern fraternity, especially to the Telugus, that Dr D. Nagavardhan Reddy has been awarded the second highest civilian award of our country, the Padma Vibhushan. It is yet another feather in his cap added to Padma Sri and Padma Bhushan that he had already won. I recall with due gratitude that I had met him in early 80s one fine morning while he was doing MD at Madras Medical College, and I wanted to witness the collection of bone marrow from a stem. He spared his valuable time and helped me witness that procedure for the first time in my life. He was so empathetic to the patient that he comforted him with kind words calling him by name, "Yenna Kuppusamy". We did not know each other though we belonged to the same MBBS batch at different colleges but his illustrious father, Dr Bhaskar Reddy, was our Principal. Dr Nagavardhan Reddy has been doing yeoman service to Humanity through Asian Institute of Gastroenterology (AIG) and I equate him to late Dr Kakarla Subba Rao, who was an epitome of service to humanity and yet down to earth with humility and excellence and developed NIMS on invitation from the then CM NTR. I wish the present CM Revanth's vision will further uplift Dr Reddy's acronym to help the poor and needy.

Dr T. Ramadas, Visakhapatnam

thehansreader@gmail.com

BENGALURU ONLINE

Viral fever, infectious diseases on the rise in Bengaluru

BENGALURU: Frequently due to changing weather and other reasons, fever cases have increased in Bengaluru. Cases of fever, cough, sore throat, cold and vomiting have increased in children. Hospital statistics show that viral fever is also appearing due to the changed weather. For the past few weeks, cases of viral fever, including Dengue, have increased. Health problems are increasing due to the changing weather, and doctors have advised to monitor the health of children. Pneumonia, respiratory problems and viral fever have increased in children. Cough, fever and respiratory problems are increasing. Along with children, parents are also facing more health problems. Due to the extreme weather change, children are suffering from problems like fever and cough, and there has been an increase in patients in the OPD of hospitals.

Read more at

<https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

LA fires akin to 'Khandava Dahana'

FOR NOW, THE ANSWER TO WHAT CAUSED LOS ANGELES WILDFIRES IS ELUSIVE

VENANJIN RAO
NARASIMHA RAO

THE Los Angeles wildfires raging from January 7, 2025, or named as 'Hughes Fire' later, which resulted in 28 fatalities, destruction of structures, and displacement of about 2 lakh people directly or indirectly, may be symbolically, with significant differences, compared to the mythological story of 'Khandava Dahana'. The massive catastrophic fire affecting large portions of Khandava forest represented the 'End of one Era and Beginning of Another' as part of the destruction and creation cycle as mentioned in the great epic Mahabharata. The process involved divine powers. But, the modern wildfires tend to be more destructive without the accompanying divine or purposeful creation. Both events highlight the 'Power of Fire' as a force.

In the Los Angeles wildfires, several famous Hollywood celebrities lost their priceless homes in the Pacific Palisades Area, which is their favored location. The Palisades and Eaton fires burned more than 23,700 acres and 14,100 acres respectively. Los Angeles Times, where 'The Doors' guitarist Robby Krieger penned the Bands Hit Song, 'Light My Fire', was destroyed. Significant landmarks including the J. Paul Getty Museum and University of California were damaged.

Wildfires are driven by a combination of natural and human-induced factors. Global warming causing rising temperatures; prolonged droughts turning into highly flammable fuel; heatwaves and reduced rainfall; strong hot and dry winds that spread wildfires; windborne sparks causing new fires in unburned areas; overgrown forests increasing fire intensity; flammable plant species; wildland-urban interface; untended human and natural causes; lightning as

an ignition source; construction in high-risk fire zones; terrain causing spread of fires faster; narrow canyons and valleys etc. are among them.

Satellites, drones, and fire tracking technologies allow for better monitoring and predicting of wildfire risks. However, meteorologists may not be able to predict the precise timing of the outbreak of wildfires, and the path of a fire, which is an annual occurrence in California, especially during the dry summer and fall months. This is partly due to the complexity of weather and terrain factors. This time, the scale and intensity of the fires were exacerbated beyond prediction. Strong, unpredictable winds caused fires to spread much faster than anticipated.

The crisis manifested during the Los Angeles wildfire required a comprehensive approach, involving state and federal government agencies, which jumped into action with immediate firefighting efforts. Thousands of firefighters comprising specialized teams were deployed to bring the situation under control. A state of emergency was declared. National Guard was deployed and evacuation shelters were established. Hundreds of federal personnel and aircraft were pressed into service to support firefighting efforts, which, however, were significantly hampered by water shortages due to century-old pipelines. Fire hydrants ran dry, forcing firefighters to rely heavily on aerial water drops. Relief centers provided very temporary support.

Mandatory evacuation orders were issued promptly to protect residents. Wireless emergency alert system, social media, and local broadcasts to issue real-time updates were pressed into action. Preventive power shutoffs to reduce risk of electrical equipment sparking new fires was done. Major disaster decla-



According to the Mahabharata, the vast forest 'Khandava', inhabited by many creatures as well as Maya, the 'Architect of the Demons', was set on fire deliberately through 'Fire God Agni', who was 'Hungry for the Forest' due to a curse, by Arjuna and Krishna, with the divine purpose and mission of clearing forest land. It was part of a cosmic plan that led to the destruction of the forest but simultaneously cleared the land for creation of 'Maya City'.

ration was made enabling Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) assistance. National Emergency Fire Center (NEFC) coordinated firefighting efforts across the state. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) monitored the hazardous air quality that was causing respiratory and cardiovascular problems. Severe air pollution, smoke and ash blanketed large areas of Los Angeles.

Social and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) played a crucial role in wildfire response, relief, and recovery. Their involvement ranged from immediate relief efforts (shelters, food, and water) to mental health support, animal rescue, advocacy, and rebuilding efforts. Limited resources, communication gaps, and uneven recovery highlighted the need for better coordination between NGOs, government agencies, and local communities. American Red

Cross and other local (California) volunteers provided critical disaster relief services during the wildfires.

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Modern wildfires, like those in California, do not have the divine or purposeful elements of Khandava Dahana, though there are symbolic parallels. Much like

the destruction of Khandava, modern wildfires can devastate forests, wildlife, and human settlements. In both cases, lives are lost, and the landscape is dramatically altered. Just as the burning of Khandava led to the creation of new city, post-fire recovery of modern wildfires can lead to new development and an eventual return of wildlife, and sometimes may result in ecological transformation, and, eventually, in coming up of a new city. However, the land can also face long-term challenges like soil erosion or loss of biodiversity.

In the ultimate analysis, in the Mahabharata's Khandava Dahana, the fire was part of a larger moral and ethical battle, with the heroes (Krishna and Arjuna) being part of a divine plan. Modern wildfires invariably lead to human suffering, loss of property, and environmental damage. They are typically seen in the context of disaster management rather than cosmic or divine action. Praying to Hindu Gods for total normalcy or recovery from wildfires, which is deeply spiritual and cultural, and which many people in Hindu tradition find meaningful, may be an answer for early salvages.

In Hinduism, there are specific prayers and rituals that may be offered to seek divine intervention for protection, recovery, and restoration of normalcy. These include prayers to Lord Agni, Maha Mrityunjay Mantras, and prayers to protectors like Goddess Durga and Lord Shiva. While spiritual prayers and rituals offer important emotional and cultural support, bringing about long-term restoration may also require pragmatic disaster management. A combination of spiritual resilience and scientific action ensures not only the rehabilitation of affected communities but also the prevention of future wildfires. Ultimately, addressing the wildfire crisis requires multi-faceted and mul-

given projections of a 10 to 15 per cent escalation in terrorism this year. He added that the AU and the UN should jointly support predictable, sustainable, and flexible funding for peace enforcement in counter-terrorism contexts.

Therefore, the "swift action" of Council Resolution 2719 (2023) which opens the door for African-led peace support missions to access UN funding - "would be a significant step forward for the African Union in its efforts to combat terrorism across the continent."

Meanwhile, Africa will overtake Asia as the continent with the highest number of people experiencing hunger in the world by 2030, the UN has predicted. In its annual state of food security and nutrition report, five UN agencies said there was a "clear trend" of rising prevalence of undernourishment in Africa. Africa already has the largest proportion of people who do not have enough nutritious food to eat (20.4%) but Asia is home to more than half the world's hungry people. In 2023, 384.5 million people in Asia were facing hunger, compared with 298.4 million in Africa. The report, published last week, said that if current trends continue, almost 600 million people will be chronically undernourished by 2030, with 53% living in Africa. The figure will resemble those seen in 2015, said the report, marking a concerning stagnation in progress, according to a report in The Guardian.

She also emphasised the need for "human rights-based approaches to counter-terrorism, grounded in accountability and inclusive institutions." Finally, she highlighted the importance of regional cooperation and ensuring that these efforts are "in lockstep, unified in purpose, and aligned in strategy."

Flexible funding

The African Union (AU) Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security, was among the speakers at the meeting. Ambassador Bankole Adesoye said that last year, the AU Counter-Terrorism Centre (ATC/C), recorded over 3,400 terrorist attacks on the continent which resulted in over 13,900 fatalities.



The African Union (AU) Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security, was among the speakers at the Security Council meeting last week. Ambassador Bankole Adesoye said that last year, the AU Counter-Terrorism Centre (ATC/C), recorded over 3,400 terrorist attacks on the continent which resulted in over 13,900 fatalities.

With soaring unemployment, has left an entire generation vulnerable to extremist groups," she warned. "If we don't act, we risk losing this generation to the horrors of terrorism, their futures stolen before they even have a chance to begin." While acknowledging the complexity of the issue, Ms. Mohammed stressed that "as terrorism evolves, so must we."

Innovation & action

She said effectively countering terrorism in Africa must involve innovation - with an approach centred on respect for human rights and rule of law. She pointed to the Pact for the Future, adopted last September by UN

Growing terrorism threat in Africa

AFRICA tragically remains the epicentre of global terrorism, and more action is required to implement international commitments to combat this scourge, the Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations and Chair of the United Nations Sustainable Development Group, Amina Mohammed, told the Security Council recently. Amina Mohammed was speaking at a meeting focused on strengthening counter-terrorism on the continent, convened by Algeria, the Council president for January. She emphasised that the Council has a critical role in supporting African Union (AU) counter-terrorism initiatives, grounded in African leadership and solutions.

Deadly spread

Ms. Mohammed said terrorism is the most significant threat to peace, security and sustainable development across Africa today, and presented sobering statistics outlining its devastating toll. Despite continued efforts by Member States, sub-Saharan Africa now accounts for nearly 59 per cent of all terrorism-related deaths globally.

The Sahel is "ground zero" for one of the most brutal crises in the world. Terrorism-related deaths in the region have soared past 6,000 for three consecutive years, making up more than half of all global fatalities. In this surge,

Burkina Faso now leads the world in terrorism deaths, with a staggering 68 per cent increase. At the same time, Al-Qaeda and ISIL affiliates have spread to coastal countries in West Africa, with violent attacks soaring by more than 250 per cent in two years.

Old and emerging threats, concerns

"Meanwhile, a new group known as 'Lakura' is conducting cross-border attacks in northwest Nigeria, Niger, and Chad," she said. "There are also growing risks of infiltration and radicalisation along Ghana's northern regions, as well as in Togo, Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria." The threat persists elsewhere as groups such as Al-Shabab in Somalia, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama in Mozambique, continue to unleash horrific violence. She recalled that these groups are not only terrorising communities but also committing sexual and gender-based violence, as well as assaulting children and forcibly recruiting them into their ranks.

West Africa warning

"Let us make no mistake. At this rate, in West Africa, the future is at stake. The marginalization of youth, coupled

'Waqf report will be tabled in first part of Budget Session'

The Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) on the Waqf (Amendment) Bill has witnessed heated exchanges between the Opposition and the treasury bench MPs. The Bill to change the existing law on the maintenance and ownership of Muslim endowment properties is seen as a key political agenda of Modi 3.0. Speaking with **Dr. Sumit Pande**, JPC Chairman **Jagdebika Pal** denies the Opposition's charges of bias and says the committee's report will be tabled in the first part of the Budget Session of Parliament beginning this week. Excerpts:

Why did you have to suspend some MPs from proceedings of the JPC on the Waqf (Amendment) Bill? Opposition MPs are comparing the move to the imposition of the Emergency.
If they believe in parliamentary democracy and the Constitution, (they should know that) Parliament holds debates and discussions based on which decisions are taken. If regular meetings of the Committee are being held, where is the question of Emergency?
We are holding discussions with

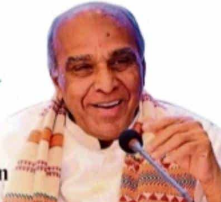
everyone. Mirwaiz Omar Farooq from Jammu and Kashmir was invited. If you disagree with the government's amendments, you can respond with a note of dissent. You can vote against the amendments when they are taken up clause by clause. But if you think you can impose your will by force or violence, by disruptions, that is not acceptable.

The Opposition MPs allege that the time allotted for deliberations was insufficient.

Whenever meetings were called, ample time was given. When the JPC was formed on August 8, 2024, it was tasked to conclude its report in the Winter Session of Parliament. Its term was extended as per their (Opposition) demand. Now, we have to present the report in the Budget Session. Amendments have to be sought to finalise the report, followed by clause-by-clause discussions to submit the draft report to the relevant department so that an amended bill is prepared.

Now that we are completing this task, it appears they (Opposition) are thinking

The Tuesday Interview With Jagdebika Pal MP and Chairman, JPC on Waqf (Amendment) Bill



why is this being taken to the logical conclusion? It is not me but the House Speaker who has decided the timeline for the submission of the JPC report.

The Opposition has also alleged that you changed the agenda at the last stage.

In the last meeting, a clause-by-clause discussion was scheduled. The Opposition insisted that Mirwaiz be called, and we agreed. We agreed to hear one more

delegation. They have not been deprived of any rights as far as proceedings of the committee are concerned.

What was the objective of the JPC's visits to multiple states?

We had detailed discussions; we visited Maharashtra, Gujarat, Karnataka, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, and other states. The committee met at least 40 to 50 delegations in each state, including representatives from the state govern-

ment, minority commission, state Waqf Board etc.

What was your feedback from the Karnataka visit?

In Karnataka, there are farmers who have been tilling their land for hundreds of years. A minister in the state government is in charge of the Minority Welfare Department. By citing Waqf law, claims have been laid on farmers' land. This has led to protests and agitation by farmers in the state. Their ancestral properties are being claimed as Waqf.

Rebel BJP MLA Basangouda Patil Yatal also met you in this regard.

We met a lot of people from Karnataka. Tejaswi Surya was there; we also met Union Ministers Pralhad Joshi and Shobha Karandlaje.

When are you planning to submit the report?

We will submit it in the first part of the Budget Session.

The Opposition MPs have plans to contain against you, in writing, to the Lok Sabha Speaker.

They have done it in the past as well. The Speaker has given us a mandate to complete this job in time. For that, we have to hold meetings and speak with all stakeholders. If I failed in holding meetings or did clause-by-clause voting without discussion, I should have been reported to the Speaker. But I have been transparent in conducting the proceedings. I'm following the constitutional procedure.

For the first time, we have seen incidents of bottles being hurled in parliamentary meetings. How do you react to that?

How am I responsible for that? If people are angry, they can write a letter. They can walk out of the meetings or vote against the Bill. The way they approached us, abused us, and raised slogans - it was provocative. Reacting to these provocations could lead to unpleasant situations. This has happened from only one side and we have only tolerated it.

There appears a desire to discuss issues not limited to the war and to take on the whole Moscow-Washington relationship, possibly including revived nuclear arms talks

DAVID E. SANGER AND
ANTON TROIANOVSKI

They have been circling each other carefully for seven days now - sending out invitations to talk, mixing a few jobs with ego-stroking, suggesting that the only way to end the Ukraine war is for the two of them to meet, presumably without the Ukrainians.

President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin, whose relationship was always the subject of mystery and psychodrama in the first Trump term, are at it again. But it is not a simple rerun. Trump was unusually harsh in his rhetoric last week, saying Putin was "destroying Russia," and threatening sanctions and tariffs on the country if it doesn't come to the negotiating table - a fairly empty threat given the tiny amount of trade between the US and Russia these days.

Calculating and understated as ever, Putin has responded with flattery, agreeing with Trump that Russia would not have invaded Ukraine had he been president three years ago. He repeated that he was ready to sit down and negotiate over the fate of Europe, superpower to superpower, leader to leader. So far they have not spoken, although Trump told reporters on Air Force One on Saturday night that "he wants to speak, and we'll be speaking soon." As they prepare the ground for that first conversation, they are sending signals that they want to negotiate about more than just Ukraine - a war that, in Putin's telling, is only one of the arenas in which the West is waging its own fight against Russia.

Both men seem to envision taking on the whole relationship between Moscow and Washington, possibly including revived nuclear arms talks, a conversation that has a looming deadline: The major treaty limiting the arsenals of both nations expires in almost exactly a year. After that, they would be free to pursue the kind of arms race the world has not seen since the deepest days of the Cold War. Recalling conversations with Putin in 2020, before his defeat in the US election that year, Trump insisted last week, "We want to see if we can de-nuclearise, and I think that's very possible." He appeared to be assuming that China would engage in the same conversation. (It has refused, at least so far.)

While he kept using the word "de-nuclearise," Trump almost certainly meant negotiating a new agreement to reduce - not eliminate - the stockpiles of strategic nuclear weapons, which can cross continents. For his part, Putin talked about reviving discussions on "strategic stability," the term of art among negotiators for talks that cover not just the number of nuclear weapons deployed on each side, but where they are based, how they are inspected, and steps to deter their use.

The last, tentative arms control talks ended shortly before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Putin has insisted since then that any talks on limiting nuclear arms should also cover the war in Ukraine. The Biden administration had refused to make that demand, but Putin's real goal was to trade limits on its nuclear arsenal for the territory he had captured in Ukraine and other concessions. But Trump seems open to a broad-



ILLUSTRATION: DEEPAK HARICHANDAN

Trump, Putin and an agenda beyond Ukraine

er negotiation, which is exactly what Putin would like, because it could enable him to make that trade-off.

It is unclear what, if any, long-term security guarantees Trump is willing to offer to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who he has insisted in recent days should have made a deal with Putin and avoided a devastating war.

Trump clearly wants to establish himself as a peacemaker. In his first term he suggested he deserved the Nobel Peace Prize, and bringing some kind of end to Europe's biggest war since World War II would bolster his argument. He seems unconcerned about giving Ukraine a substantive role in the process, in contrast to former President Joe Biden, whose mantra was "Nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine."

"For all these blustering exchanges, the thing Putin most wants to hear is that this is a deal Russia and the US will strike by themselves," said Stephen Sestanovich, a Russian and Eurasian studies expert at the Council on Foreign Relations, and a former State Department official.

Keith Kellogg, a retired general who, at 80, has been tasked by Trump to get the conversations going, insists that the key will be economics, not casualties. "When you look at Putin, you can't just say, 'Well, stop the killing,' because candidly, that's not their mentality," he said on Fox News last week. Trump "approaches warfare differently: he looks at the economics as a piece of that warfare." And he will focus, Kellogg insists, on limiting Russia's oil revenues.

Putin, confident of his position on

Ukraine's battlefield despite Russia's enormous casualties, has been trying to telegraph a wait-and-see approach to Trump. Russia's goals haven't changed, he has said, and while it is ready for talks to end the war, it will only do so on its own terms.

Putin has strongly signalled that, at a minimum, he would demand to keep the roughly 20% of Ukraine that Russia now controls, as well as an agreement ruling out NATO membership for Ukraine and limiting the size of its military. At the same time, Putin has made clear his eagerness to engage with Trump - and, more broadly, with the United States, after three years of diplomatic isolation by the Biden administration.

The Kremlin's spokesperson, Dmitry Peskov, has been telling journalists on a near-daily basis that Putin is ready to receive Trump's call. "We're waiting for signals," he said Friday. "Everyone is ready."

On January 20, Trump's inauguration day, Putin held a televised meeting of Russia's Security Council - an event that normally happens on Fridays and largely behind closed doors. He said Trump "showed courage" in surviving an attempt on his life and had won "a convincing victory."

On Friday, in a stage-managed moment, Putin stopped to answer a state television reporter's question about Trump. The Kremlin promptly posted the video on its website. It is probably better for us to meet and, based on today's realities, talk calmly about all areas that are of interest to both the US and Russia," Putin said. He brushed aside Trump's sanctions threats, calling him "smart" and "pragmatic," and spoke Trump's language

by saying the 2020 election had been "stolen" from him.

Like Trump, Putin has hinted at a desire to discuss a much broader set of issues with Trump than only the war in Ukraine. In his comments to state television Friday, Putin said the Kremlin and the Trump administration could "jointly look for solutions to the key issues of today, including strategic stability and the economy."

The "strategic stability" reference signalled potential interest in arms control talks, which the Kremlin briefly began with the Biden administration in 2021. "We discussed the range of arms control and non-proliferation issues, from AI in weapons to renewal of New START," Wendy Sherman, the former deputy secretary of state, who conducted the talks for the US side, said in an email. (New START is the arms control treaty that has been partly suspended by Russia, and expires in February 2025.)

Even as Putin welcomes talks with Trump, Russian officials aren't backing away from their overall message about the US as a malignant force - one sign of how the Kremlin is hedging its bets in case discussions with Trump do not go well.

Sherman, who has extensive experience negotiating with Russia, warns that if talks with Russia begin, the Trump administration should be ready. "Putin will want what he has always said he wanted: As much territory as possible, no Ukraine ever in NATO, no Western nuclear weapons in Europe that could target Russia." Given that, she bets that actually negotiating a follow-on to the New START treaty "is likely low on his list." **NYT**

Prioritising a passenger-first route

ARUN KUMAR DAS

In line with its current growth trajectory, Indian Railways could receive a jump in capital expenditure (capex) allocation in the upcoming 2025-26 Union Budget - a potential rise from about Rs 2.65 lakh crore in the current fiscal year to nearly Rs 3 lakh crore.

The Railways Finance Directorate is not optimistic about a big rise. However, irrespective of the extent of this rise, the requirement for capacity augmentation remains a grim ground reality. Passenger amenities for common rail users, punctuality in schedules, and goods movement patterns are not very encouraging. The sector has witnessed a six-fold increase in capex since 2014, while a troubling stagnation in infrastructure capacity has been noted, particularly from 2023. This stagnation is starkly highlighted by the current fiscal, where the freight traffic growth rate has notably decreased compared to the previous years. The freight was 1,233 million tons (MT) in 2020-21 which increased to 1,418 MT in 2021-22, 1,512 MT in 2022-23, and 1,597 MT in 2023-24. In 2024-25, the figure is estimated to touch 1,630 MT, signifying a slower growth rate compared to the previous years.

The higher allocation is expected to be spent in capacity enhancement projects such as laying new tracks, upgrading signalling systems, and buying rolling stock. The focus in FY26 would be on commissioning upgraded railway stations, launching modern trains, and decongesting the network. Currently, a considerable portion of capex has been allocated to less productive infrastructure projects such as the upgradation of railway stations. "We which, while essential, should have been linked to a more comprehensive brownfield monetisation strategy to support O&M expenditures.

There is an alarming absence of a clear policy focused on monetising the O&M of railway stations, jeopardising potential revenue streams. The introduction of the Vande Bharat trains, aimed at enhancing average train speeds, has unfortunately coincided with a dramatic decline in the punctuality of passenger services. Neither freight nor passenger services have shown improvement in average speeds. The Railways has launched 34 pairs of semi-high speed Vande Bharat trains; equipped to run at a maximum speed of 160 kmph, these could run only at 130 kmph

because of safety precautions. The operation of Vande Bharat Sleeper trains, with improved amenities, is also expected this year. The maximum train speed was 160 kmph in 2014. However, it has been reduced to 130 kmph due to safety concerns after a spate of accidents and derailments.

Slowing down

While the rail freight share is not increasing despite the heavy flow of funds, the speed of freight trains is also abysmally low at 40-50 kmph. The Railways' plan to increase the maximum speed to 160 kmph for all premier trains after the upgradation of signalling and safety measures like Kavach - is being implemented. Barring a few premier services such as Rajdhani, Duronto, Shatabdi, and Vande Bharat, nothing much has changed for the majority of other mail/express train services. Hygiene, quality of catering, and availability of confirmed tickets for common passengers are still a cause of worry.

The Railways' periodic cleanliness drives have made a mark in stations but onboard conditions have not improved. The long-anticipated rail route connecting the Kashmir valley to the rest of the country has also raised significant planning concerns. The much-delayed bullet train, expected to run between Mumbai and Ahmedabad, is likely to get enhanced budgetary support to speed up the work in the Mumbai-Ahmedabad High-Speed Rail Corridor. In FY25, Railways had planned an investment of Rs 21,000 crore for the bullet train project. Earnings for the Railways have topped Rs 2.04 lakh crore in the current financial year which includes Rs 58,327.38 crore from coaching. Rs 1.33 lakh crore from goods, and another Rs 7,442.78 crore from sundry (mainly parking, catering, and advertisements). Another Rs 5,278.34 crore was earned under the "other coaching head" which includes revenues from parcels, luggage, and warpage charges.

Industry experts attribute challenges ahead of the sector primarily to a deviation from the National Rail Plan, a strategic framework intended to guide the development of the rail transport sector. Railways is targeting an operating ratio of 98.2% by the end of FY 2024-25. If successful, this will result in a net revenue of Rs 2,800 crore. The surplus revenue could be ploughed back into the development funds and the Rashtriya Rail Sanraksha Kosh.

(The writer is an independent journalist)

OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

50 YEARS AGO: JANUARY 1975

Havarru expelled from Cong

Bangalore, Jan. 27
The KPCC Executive today expelled Mr. L. G. Havarru, Chairman of the Karnataka Backward Classes Commission, from the membership of the party for six years. PCC President K. H. Patil, who briefed newsmen on the six-hour meeting of the Executive here, said the decision to expel Mr. Havarru was unanimous. Of the 18 executive members, who attended the meeting, only one had pleaded for a milder punishment. Chief Minister Devaraj Urs, who attended the meeting, supported the action taken by the PCC against Mr. Havarru, Patil said.

25 YEARS AGO: JANUARY 30

President cautions against revision of Constitution

New Delhi, January 27
The controversy over the government's proposal for a Constitutional review needed a fresh twist today with President K. R. Narayanan sounding a word of caution about undertaking such an exercise. The President, while speaking at a ceremony this morning to commemorate the completion of 50 years of the Indian Republic, said that while there was much talk about revising the Constitution, one thing that needed to be considered was whether "it is the Constitution that has failed or whether it is we who have failed the Constitution".

OASIS T S KARTHIK

Turning problems into possibilities

Don't say dear God I have a big problem. But say dear problem I have a big God!

We all face problems in our lives. Some are small and easy to solve, while others are big and complex. Sometimes, we feel overwhelmed by the challenges we encounter and we lose hope and faith. We may think that our problems are too big for us to handle and that God is too far away to help us. We may say things like "Dear God, I have a big problem" or "Why me, God?" or "God, where are you?" But what if we change our perspective and attitude? What if we look

at our problems as opportunities to grow and learn? What if we trust that God is bigger than any problem we face and that He is always with us and for us? What if we say things like "Dear problem, I have a big God" or "Thank you, God, for this challenge" or "God, I know you are with me?"

This simple shift in our words can make a huge difference in our lives. It can help us to overcome our fears and doubts and to face our problems with courage and confidence. It can also help us

to experience God's presence and power and to witness His miracles and blessings. It can transform our problems into possibilities and our trials into testimonies.

There are many inspiring examples of people who have adopted this positive and faith-filled approach to their problems. Walt Disney was a poor and struggling artist who faced many rejections and failures. He even lost the rights to his first successful cartoon character, Oswald the Lucky Rabbit. But he did not give up on his dreams. He created

Mickey Mouse and went on to build a media empire that has brought joy and magic to millions of people.

Hellen Keller was a deaf and blind woman who faced many obstacles and limitations in her life. She could have lived in isolation and despair, but she chose to overcome her challenges and to pursue her education and passions. These are just some of the many examples of people who have faced big problems with a big God. They have shown us that nothing is impossible with God and that He can use our problems for our good and His glory.





THE GOAN EVERYDAY

Men can starve from a lack of self-realization
as much as they can from a lack of bread.
Richard Wright

Goa tourism: Even a peaceful stroll on beach has hurdles

On Sunday evening, while people in Goa and the rest of India were still revelling in the celebrations of the Republic Day, the death of a 28-year-old youth at Arambol beach once again pierced the peace along the coast. Amar Bandekar, who was on his evening beach walk was assaulted after he reportedly moved a few chairs put up by a shack owner since they obstructed his path. What began as a minor spat escalated into a major assault resulting in the tragic death of Bandekar. This incident, while unique, falls into a broader pattern of chaos that has begun to define Goa's tumultuous tourism landscape.

The unfortunate death in Arambol is not an isolated incident. Just weeks earlier, a tourist was killed in Calangute after a fierce disagreement with shack staff over a food order, and there have been cases of assaults before that too. The tension is in the air on one side, and there are gaping holes in the system on the other. Such violent confrontations are symptomatic of a failing system, one that has turned a blind eye to the corruption, negligence, and spiralling lawlessness characterizing Goa's tourism sector. With each violent episode, the perceptions of safety are irrevocably tarnished and the chinks in enforcement begin to show.

In an increasingly familiar narrative, recent events along the northern coastal belt have highlighted the dangerous culmination of ignored regulations and rampant illegalities. Shack owners continue to extend their operations beyond stipulated limitations, encroaching significantly on public spaces. Tables, chairs, and beach beds now stretch perilously close to the shore — an infringement that has completely gone unchecked. The shamolic enforcement of the shack policy — existing merely on paper — fuels a sense of lawlessness that leaves scope for such altercations.

All the recent cases of violence and deaths may appear isolated, but there is a common thread that binds them together — the threat of violations, including the recent paragliding tragedy at Keri. Shacks, in their over-adventurism to attract business, have been wading beyond all boundaries. The point is, that piecemeal solutions don't work beyond a point. Authorities must understand that people could end up paying for the systemic compromises made to accommodate the interests of businesses on beaches. Yes, Goa needs tourism. But not at the cost of chaos or the cost of human lives.

It is disgusting that while the tourism department talks of high-end tourism, the visitors cannot even have the luxury of an unhindered stroll on the beach. Tourists or locals expect an environment that is not only enjoyable but also safe. Picture the serene peaceful ambience of beaches that Goa once showcased against the turmoil seen now. The local is lost in the crowd, and so is Goa's identity.

The ongoing allowance of illegal practices and unsafe conditions threatens the core of what makes Goa beloved. Restoring order along the shores is imperative — not merely as a means of ensuring safety but as a necessary step to preserve the peace and sanctity of tourism. The systemic failures faced by the tourism sector must be urgently addressed. It is a matter of safeguarding the very legacy that Goa embodies.

An actionable plan aimed at tightening regulations, enhancing enforcement, and promoting a culture of accountability is essential for reviving Goa's status as a serene and inviting destination, where both visitors, locals and businesses can coexist harmoniously by the sea.

OPEN SPACE >>

Move to cancel licence of guest house right step

It is learnt that a day after solving the gang rape of a mentally challenged woman at Cansaulim, the Fatorda police reportedly moved the Tourism Department for cancellation of trade licence of the guest house at Cansaulim where the victim was sexually assaulted by five accused persons. This is a step in the right direction as it will act as a deterrent for such horrific incidents taking place. According to the police, the guest house at Cansaulim where the crime took place did not maintain any details of the accused nor their identities. It is learnt that one of the alleged accused would often visit the guest house with various women and the details were never registered on the log book. It must be made mandatory for guest houses to keep a record about the identities of the guests along with the purpose of their visit. It is pertinent to note that there is a proliferation of rental units illegally operating as tourist accommodations. The tourism department needs to act against these illegal rental units as it hurts the interest of legitimate hotels thereby causing loss of revenue to the government.

ADELMO FERNANDES, Vasco

Goa's 'taxi mafia'... and All That Jazz

Cab fares in Goa are also driven more by oversupply of vehicles and local geography, which make return-trips next to impossible



FREDERICK NORONHA

The writer has been a journalist and commentator as a Dev's Advocate on Goan life

The other day, there was this interesting online debate, which was hard to avoid getting caught up in. It started with a post which read "Taxi Mafia v/s The People: Is a negotiated win-win settlement possible?"

This post suggested that the solution to the "problem" could be making a GTDC (Goa Tourism Development Corporation) taxi app go live in four months. Taxi unions could be given the chance to operate it. Besides Goa Miles and the proposed GTDC taxi app, inviting other operators like Ola and Uber to start services in Goa from June onwards was suggested.

Someone narrated a recent experience with Goa Miles. The service offered a pickup from Mopa; but the driver wanted cash, though the payment was online. He wanted money to pay for petrol. The poster concluded that there seemed to be some exploitation going on here.

Someone else pointed out: "The argument against the aggregators, is that they are guilty of unfair trade practices against their drivers, which in turn leads to inefficient passenger services, with drivers cancelling rides at the very last moment, in order to fight for every extra rupee they can potentially earn. Thereby defeating the purpose of an app."

Not long back, we would find the Goa Miles a useful way of travelling in Goa, especially at late hours or odd destinations. Then, suddenly, these vehicles became less ubiquitous. One could not find their vehicles close by. It didn't work as efficiently as earlier; correct me if wrong.

We are quick to blame the 'taxi mafia' for our woes. This issue came up recently, when vloggers and cyber influencers pointed to the difficult traffic situation in Goa, and costly taxi rates.

Yes, it is true that taxis are indeed costly here. Taxis are out of reach to the local population, and even visiting and short-stay tourists find them prohibitively priced. But, neither are the taxi drivers or owners making a quick buck. Quite the contrary. The opposite is true. Many are struggling to make a living, and this shows up in their desperation.

The discussion moved on in different directions. Why not opt for CNG (com-

Taxi fares in Goa cannot be like Mumbai's because the density of population and geography are simply not comparable

Housing projects with swimming pools waste water

Surely water should not be wasted but then if water resources have to be protected, where is the logic of the Goa government indiscriminately allowing permissions to housing projects particularly with numerous swimming pools, etc many times being pursued in violation of local environmental laws including destruction of forests, trees, water bodies and hills. There are numerous complaints by concerned citizens on so many illegalities and "blind" approvals by the Goa government, TCP Ministry and Goa's ministers strangely ignore the same. Recently there have been concerning reports that have come out that Goa's ground water is actually going down. Also it's well known that the crumbling public infrastructure is responsible for so much water wastage, leakage. Then there is the Mhadei issue where the Goa government appears (in my view to be compromised) and giving away a winning case and not using its strengths; like for example notifying the tiger reserve which can surely help Goa's case. I request the Goa chief minister to address the water resource issue with his own government, bureaucrats and municipality, panchayat, ministers instead of advising Goans on how to save water.

ARWIN MESQUITA, Colva

sold. I wonder if the national parties are purposely doing this for 100 per cent takeover of Goa. I am a old style Goan who voted for Opinion poll along with my Catholic brothers and sisters from Quepem to keep Goa identity. BJP has allowed the demography of Goa to be totally altered. The Muslim community that constituted just about 1 per cent in 1961 has reached close to 20 per cent. Migration to Goa needs to be controlled.

FRANCISCO BARETTO, Tilamal

NPO registration process on Darpan portal cumbersome

The recent demand for mandatory registration on the Darpan portal within 10 days, under the threat of account blocking, is causing undue stress for many Non Profitable Organisations (NPOs). It appears there is no clear directive from the Income Tax Department imposing such a tight deadline, leading to confusion and potential harm to compliant organizations. Many NPOs already fulfill their obligations, such as submit-



Send your letters to us at editor@thegoan.net. Letters must be 150-200 words and mention the writer's name and location

a taxi only if we face a health emergency. Many have been pushed into owning their own vehicles, at least a set of two wheels.

The elephant in the room here is the abysmal state of public transport overall in Goa. This affects both locals and tourists. This columnist lives barely kms from Panaji, but one can't depend on public transport. On the other hand, if like me you find the Panaji-Margao route well covered, like me you would possibly shift over to public transport for that leg of the journey.

As far as tourists go, their main pain-point is the connections between the airport and railway stations to their place of stay. The Kadamba buses to the airports are comfortable and reasonably priced; but simply too few. Likewise, the number of buses to Goa's main train stations are simply too infrequent to cope with the deluge of people landing by the daily trains.

In the past, shared yellow-and-black taxis were available. There also were the river-based transport and launch link from Dona Paula to Mormugao... this gets spoken of once in away, in some official plan, to be quickly forgotten.

The share-taxi system used to work well on the Panaji-Margao route decades ago, even when the Mandovi bridge was down. People would find it reasonably priced, and a quick option to the buses.

Goa's transport problem needs to be seen at different levels (i) connections between main towns (ii) connections from the main roads to smaller villages, lying off major roads. Better transport could make life here more efficient.

Or else, we can continue the blame game, fault the 'taxi mafia' and leave the situation much like it is. It's no fun arguing with a taxi driver, who probably feels he is badly sinking deeper into debt, while struggling to feed a family. Try it....

ting audited annual financial reports, whether funded by foreign contributions or government agencies. Forcing all NPOs, including those not covered under specific Darpan conditions, to register is unnecessary when discrepancies could be identified through existing audits.

Additionally, the registration process on the Darpan portal is excessively cumbersome. It requires witness verification, Aadhaar card submission, and an affidavit, making it overly bureaucratic. Simplifying this process would save valuable time and resources, allowing NPOs to focus on their charitable missions rather than navigating administrative hurdles.

NELSON LOPES, Chinchinim

Ensure that Goa does not lose its quiet, clean charm

There has been much debate on diminishing tourism and a decrease in high-end foreign tourists. Goa has been a destination of choice for its old-world charm, greenery, open space, unique culture and a peaceful atmosphere, all of which are disappearing. These were values treasured earlier by foreign, as well as many Indian tourists, who now are abandoning Goa for destinations in southeast Asia. The tourism department and the government should refrain from indulging in mass conversion of land for residential purposes, fancy ventures such as a rope-way to Reis Magos, extended loud speaker timings in certain areas, increasing jeep tours to pristine reserves, all of which are totally counter to what had earlier made Goa attractive. Instead, they should focus on maintaining cleanliness and curbing noise pollution. The cities need better parking facilities and improved traffic. The charming heritage buildings should be revived and preserved. Mega projects that disrupt the space and greenery should be discouraged. Goan demography and culture should be safeguarded. The aim should be to ensure that Goa does not lose its quiet charm. Don't clutter it.

S RAGHU KUMAR, Dona Paula



FIRST COLUMN THE SHOPPING CONSPIRACY

shopping environments—from store layouts to online algorithms—are carefully designed to drive mindless spending



SHAINY SHARMA

From smartphones that slow down strategically to fashion designed to fall apart after three wears, planned obsolescence is a multibillion-dollar industry where challenges are integral, not incidental. Today, most people engage in shopping without much thought, but beneath the surface, a complex web of psychological tactics and strategic decisions influences consumer behaviour.

This shopping conspiracy, orchestrated by marketers and retailers, is designed to maximise profits by subtly manipulating purchasing decisions. Understanding these hidden strategies can empower consumers to make more informed choices and resist unnecessary spending. Of recent a Netflix documentary BUY NOW! THE SHOPPING CONSPIRACY is gaining its viewership, for the film fascinates the ways and means by which mass consumerism is encouraged by big corporations, by whistleblowers from the technology, fashion and e-commerce industries. There is no denying that retailers and marketers rely on behavioural science and data analytics to shape shopping environments. Every detail from the layout of a store to the placement of products is meticulously designed to influence decision-making. For instance, supermarkets place essential items like milk and bread at the back of the store to ensure that shoppers pass by other tempting products, increasing the likelihood of impulse purchases.

Eye-level shelves are reserved for the most profitable items, while products aimed at children are placed lower to capture their attention. Also, psychological pricing, such as Rs 99 instead of 100, creates an illusion of a deal. Similarly, discounts like "Buy One, Get One Free", Limited-time offers, and low-stock warnings often encourage bulk purchases



of items that might not be needed. They even create a fear of missing out, prompting consumers to act quickly without fully considering their needs. Music, lighting and even scents are carefully curated to evoke emotions that encourage spending. For example, slow-tempo music can make shoppers linger longer, increasing their exposure to more products. Today, many companies have started the concept of subscription services to lock consumers into recurring payments, making it harder to notice ongoing costs. Undoubtedly online shopping has elevated the conspiracy to new heights. Algorithms track browsing habits, purchase history, and even time spent looking at specific items to create a highly personalised shopping experience. While this can be convenient, it has increased the chances of overspending by presenting irresistible offers tailored to individual preferences. The only way to curb this problem is by establishing clear spending limits and sticking to them, regardless of tempting offers.

Whether shopping in-store or online, a list can help focus purchases on what is genuinely needed. As an educated and aware consumer, recognise and understand common strategies used by retailers to manipulate decisions and avoid making impulsive purchases by giving time to self-consider whether an item is necessary. Most importantly, unsubscribing from marketing emails used as blockers to reduce exposure to targeted advertisements and pay attention to emotions while shopping. It is important to know that every click, every impulse purchase is a vote for planned destruction. The shopping conspiracy highlights the extent to which consumer behaviour can be influenced by strategic manipulation. By understanding the tactics employed by retailers and staying mindful of their effects, shoppers can regain control over their spending. Empowered with this knowledge, consumers can make choices that align with their needs and values, resisting the subtle pressures of a system designed to encourage excess.

(The writer is an educator; views are personal)

Pakistan's shift from Taliban to regional realignment



NISHAKANT JHA

Since the Taliban's resurgence in 2021, South Asia has faced profound geopolitical shifts, revealing Taliban fractures and amplifying extremist threats

Since the Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan in 2021, South Asia has experienced profound shifts in its regional dynamics. What initially appeared to be a strategic victory for Pakistan has instead revealed deep fractures within the Taliban, the emergence of internal resistance movements, and a growing threat from extremist factions. These developments have forced Pakistan's intelligence services, particularly the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), to recalibrate their strategy.

Historically, the ISI concentrated its support on the Southern Wing of the Taliban (SWIN), a Pashtun-led faction. However, recent changes indicate a pivot toward engaging the Afghan-Wing Intelligence Network (AWIN), which collaborates with non-Pashtun factions, most notably the National Resistance Front (NRF). This faction, led by Ahmad Massoud, has gained significant traction in northern Afghanistan, challenging the Taliban's hold. This strategic shift by the ISI has implications far beyond Afghanistan's borders, influencing neighbouring countries such as India, Tajikistan, and Bangladesh. Pakistan's growing support for the NRF, coupled with the recent visit of the ISI chief to Bangladesh, highlights a broader regional strategy aimed at reshaping South Asia's security dynamics and diplomatic alignments.

ISI's Strategic Shift: From SWIN to AWIN

For decades, Pakistan's policy in Afghanistan has revolved around supporting the Southern Wing of the Taliban (SWIN), a predominantly Pashtun-centric faction. This alignment was rooted in Pakistan's desire to maintain influence in Afghanistan while countering India's regional presence. Leaders like Mullah Omar and Hibatullah Akhundzada embodied the Taliban's Pashtun-dominated leadership, aligning closely with Pakistan's ideological and strategic objectives. However, the Taliban's return to power in 2021 has not unfolded as Pakistan had hoped. Instead of consolidating power and stabilising Afghanistan, the Taliban has struggled to govern effectively. Its failure to establish an inclusive government and address the growing threat posed by ISIS-K (Islamic State Khorasan), Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and other extremist groups has led to widespread instability. Furthermore, resistance movements like the NRF, composed of Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras, have challenged Taliban rule in the provinces of Panjshir, Badakhshan, and Takhar.

In response to these developments, Pakistan has shifted its focus from SWIN to AWIN, which prioritises engagement with non-Pashtun factions such as the NRF. By supporting AWIN, Pakistan is acknowledging that a fragmented Afghanistan, divided along ethnic lines, could better serve its strategic interests than a centralised Taliban-led government. This approach also enables Pakistan to counter India's influence in Afghanistan, as India has historically allied with non-Pashtun factions, providing them with military, economic, and diplomatic support.

The NRF and Non-Pashtun Resistance: Pakistan's New Allies The National



THE TALIBAN'S RETURN TO POWER IN 2021 HAS NOT UNFOLDED AS PAKISTAN HAD HOPED. INSTEAD OF CONSOLIDATING POWER AND STABILIZING AFGHANISTAN, THE TALIBAN HAS STRUGGLED TO GOVERN EFFECTIVELY

Resistance Front (NRF), led by Ahmad Massoud, has emerged as the primary opposition to the Taliban. Ahmad Massoud, the son of the legendary Northern Alliance leader Ahmad Shah Massoud, has rallied Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras under the NRF banner. These ethnic groups have long been marginalised under the Taliban's Pashtun-dominated rule. The NRF's guerrilla warfare tactics have posed a significant challenge to the Taliban, particularly in northern Afghanistan.

Pakistan's engagement with the NRF through AWIN presents several advantages. First, it weakens the Taliban's hold on power, which serves Pakistan's goal of maintaining leverage in Afghanistan. Second, it ensures that Afghanistan remains politically fragmented, preventing any single faction from dominating the region. This fragmentation allows Pakistan to exert influence over multiple stakeholders, including the NRF, which could align with Pakistan's interests more closely than the Taliban has. However, this strategy is fraught with risks. The NRF has historically been aligned with India, which has supported non-Pashtun groups in Afghanistan as a counterbalance to Pakistan's influence. If India perceives Pakistan's engagement with the NRF as a threat to its interests, it could escalate tensions in the region.

Bangladesh: The ISI Chief's Visit and Its Implications: Another significant development in this evolving regional strategy is the recent visit of the ISI chief to Bangladesh. This visit underscores Pakistan's intent to strengthen ties with Bangladesh at a time when South Asia's geopolitical landscape is in flux. While Bangladesh has traditionally maintained a policy of non-interference in Afghanistan's internal affairs, the growing instability in the region has implications for its own security. Pakistan's outreach to Bangladesh serves multiple purposes.

First, it seeks to counterbalance India's influence in the region. Bangladesh, with its strategic location in South Asia and its growing economic importance, is a key player in regional geopolitics. Strengthening ties with Dhaka could provide Pakistan with a valuable ally in its broader regional strategy.

Second, Pakistan is likely seeking cooperation with Bangladesh on counterterrorism efforts. The rise of extremist groups like ISIS-K and the TTP in Afghanistan poses a threat not only to Pakistan but also to neighboring countries, including Bangladesh. The ISI's interest in intelligence-sharing and counterterrorism collaboration reflects a recognition of these shared security concerns.

Finally, the visit signals Pakistan's broader strategic aims in South Asia. By engaging with Bangladesh, Pakistan may be seeking to secure a favorable diplomatic position in anticipation of further instability in Afghanistan. Bangladesh's strategic location near the Bay of Bengal and its potential role in regional security frameworks make it an important partner for Pakistan's evolving strategy.

India's Strategic Calculus: India, as a dominant power in South Asia, has a vested interest in Afghanistan's stability. Historically, India has supported non-Pashtun groups like the Northern Alliance and the NRF, providing them with military and economic aid. India's objectives in Afghanistan are twofold: countering Pakistan's influence and preventing the region from becoming a haven for terrorism. The ISI's shift toward supporting the NRF complicates India's strategic calculations. On the one hand, this development aligns with India's historical support for non-Pashtun factions.

On the other hand, Pakistan's involvement in the NRF could undermine India's influence over the group and create new challenges for its regional strategy. To

navigate this complex landscape, India will need to carefully balance its engagement with Afghan resistance movements while avoiding actions that could escalate tensions with Pakistan.

Tajikistan's involvement in Afghanistan's evolving dynamics is significant due to its strong ethnic, cultural, and linguistic ties with Afghanistan's Tajik population. Tajikistan has consistently opposed Taliban rule, citing concerns over the marginalisation of Tajiks and the destabilising effects of Taliban policies on its borders. As a result, Tajikistan has become a key supporter of the NRF, providing it with logistical and political backing. Pakistan's engagement with the NRF through AWIN creates an opportunity for cooperation with Tajikistan. Both countries share an interest in countering the Taliban and preventing Afghanistan from becoming a breeding ground for extremist groups. However, Tajikistan must balance this cooperation with its relationships with other regional powers, including Russia and China, which have their own stakes in Afghanistan's stability.

The evolving situation in Afghanistan is reshaping the strategic landscape of South Asia. Pakistan's shift from supporting SWIN to engaging with AWIN and the NRF reflects a broader recalibration of its regional strategy. This approach aims to weaken the Taliban, counter India's influence, and maintain Pakistan's leverage in Afghanistan's fractured political environment. For countries like India, Tajikistan, and Bangladesh, these changes present both opportunities and challenges. Each nation must navigate the complexities of Afghanistan's internal politics, the shifting allegiances of various factions, and the broader geopolitical competition between Pakistan and India.

(The writer is a leading authority on geopolitics and counter terrorism; views are personal)

Quick commerce and the promise of India's evolving e-commerce

India stands at the cusp of a retail revolution, driven by the rapid ascent of Quick Commerce and the evolving e-commerce landscape

In this new-age era, India is transitioning rapidly to a faster delivery model known as Quick Commerce (Q-Commerce).

Given India's massive population, it is unsurprising to witness an annual growth rate of up to 300 per cent in Q-Commerce, a subset of the burgeoning e-commerce sector. Unlike traditional e-commerce, Q-Commerce focuses on meeting daily consumer needs, making its astronomical growth remarkable as it started from scratch.

The seamless experience enjoyed by younger consumers has been a key growth driver for this industry. Even specialty retailers like Sangeetha have innovatively combined physical stores with quick



SUBHASH CHANDRA

commerce to deliver electronic gadgets such as mobile phones, laptops, and other devices in record time. This model, however, requires further development to include non-banking financial companies (NBFCs), enabling easier purchasing options for high-value items like electronics. Integrating NBFCs into this ecosystem would provide value-added services that

could drive growth across the retail sector as a whole.

India has been deliberating on an e-commerce policy since 2018. However, progress has been slow, with several delays. In 2019, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry released a draft national e-commerce policy after extensive discussions with industry stakeholders. Yet, with the industry undergoing a paradigm shift, the wait for this policy has become too long. In August 2024, Union Minister Piyush Goyal assured that the policy would be announced soon, highlighting critical issues it aims to address. The minister stressed the importance of transparency in algorithm-based online platforms, emphasising

that they should neither manipulate nor unduly influence consumer choices. Additionally, he underlined the need for authenticity in online ratings and reviews, ensuring they reflect genuine customer experiences. Misleading advertisements on e-commerce platforms were also identified as a pressing concern, with calls for their elimination to maintain trust and integrity in the digital marketplace. With the budget session approaching, there is an opportunity to address these long-pending policy issues. While discussions on the draft e-commerce policy have almost concluded, the final proposal awaits approval. The government is finalising the draft



e-commerce policy, and the industry hopes it will be introduced during the budget session. Parliamentary discussions could make the policy more robust, fostering a win-win situation for all stakeholders. The new policy is expected to strike a balance between protecting small businesses and supporting large e-commerce platforms. Creating a regulatory environment conducive to growth would not

only safeguard domestic entrepreneurs but also promote "Make in India" initiatives. A well-structured policy would encourage innovation and competition while ensuring consumer interests remain a priority.

Both e-commerce and Q-Commerce are redefining the way consumers shop, albeit with distinct approaches. E-commerce prioritises variety and cost-effectiveness, while Q-Commerce emphasises speed and convenience. The evolution of these models highlights the need for businesses to balance customer satisfaction, operational efficiency, and sustainability. The retail sector's adoption of cutting-edge has played a pivotal role in optimising business operations. New technologies

enable accurate predictions of order patterns, improve delivery timelines, and streamline inventory management, thereby enhancing overall business efficiency.

This tech-driven optimisation is expected to dominate commerce in the years to come. As e-commerce and Q-Commerce continue to evolve, the focus will be on delivering a seamless and quick experience to consumers. Companies that excel in providing instant gratification through efficient delivery systems, innovative business models, and advanced technologies will gain a competitive edge in this fast-paced industry. The government has a pivotal role to play in fostering an environment where businesses can thrive. A robust

e-commerce policy, introduced during the budget session, would address longstanding industry challenges and set the stage for sustainable growth.

By ensuring transparency, authenticity, and fair practices, the policy can instil confidence among consumers and businesses alike. The industry's expectations from the upcoming budget are high. Stakeholders hope for a policy framework that nurtures innovation, encourages investment, and supports small and medium enterprises while holding larger players accountable for ethical practices.

(The writer is Chairman and Managing Director of Sangeetha Specialty Retail Chain. Views expressed are personal)

Safeguarding data

By emphasising informed consent, data security and accountability, the proposed guidelines seek to balance innovation with regulation

India has made a landmark move toward establishing a robust data protection framework with the release of the draft Digital Personal Data Protection Rules, 2025. This follows the passage of the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, by Parliament in August 2023. While the Act is yet to be implemented, the draft rules provide a glimpse into the envisioned system for managing and safeguarding personal data in the digital age. The draft rules emphasise transparency, particularly in mandatory notice requirements to ensure individuals, referred to as data principals, are well-informed before consenting to the collection and processing of their data. These notices must be standalone documents, free from being buried in terms of use or privacy policies. By allowing flexibility in their format, the rules aim to strike a balance between clarity and practicality, enabling organisations to provide meaningful notices without undue rigidity. Another critical element is the obligation on data fiduciaries to implement reasonable security safeguards to protect personal data. While baseline measures are outlined, businesses are given the flexibility to tailor these safeguards to their specific contexts, avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach.



In the event of data breaches, fiduciaries must notify affected individuals and the Data Protection Board of India. However, the rules lack clarity on notification timelines, requiring disclosure 'without delay' but failing to define what constitutes a reasonable timeframe. The dual-stage notification process, involving an initial report followed by a detailed submission within 72 hours, may pose practical challenges in meeting such requirements. Retention of personal data is another area of focus. The draft advocates for data erasure once the purpose of processing is fulfilled. However, prescribed retention periods are limited to specific entities such as large e-commerce platforms and social media intermediaries, leaving others to set their own timelines. This selective approach may create inconsistencies in compliance practices. Provisions for cross-border data transfers add complexity by restricting personal data movement to jurisdictions identified by the Indian government. This requirement introduces additional compliance steps for organisations but leaves questions about handling existing data in restricted jurisdictions. The concept of consent managers, introduced in the Act, is further elaborated in the draft rules. These intermediaries will help individuals manage their data rights through interoperable platforms, potentially simplifying compliance for businesses but also increasing operational costs. Despite its progressive stance, the draft has drawn criticism for perceived vagueness and delayed release. Concerns include the overreach of localisation mandates, ambiguous provisions for minors' data protection, and the practical difficulties of verifying parental consent. While challenges remain, the draft rules represent a significant step toward aligning India's data protection framework with global standards.

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PICTALK



Tourists take a boat ride on Ganga river, in Varanasi

Indian Railways: Connecting India and driving progress

With a focus on reducing costs, increasing speed and expanding logistics, Indian Railways drives India's progress and unity



GOURAV VALLABH

Every journey by train across India tells a story of the destinations reached and the people brought together to bridge gaps that geography and society once created. Indian Railways has a rich legacy that has been around for more than 170 years, with its recognition as the fourth-largest railway network in the world.

Of late, two large projects have captured the country's attention, reflecting the transformative vision of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership. He inaugurated the Jammu Division, which addresses a long-standing demand and precedes the first direct train service to Kashmir in six decades. This will be the 70th railway division of the Indian Railways and the 6th under Northern Railways, all set to energise this region's economy and fulfil a cherished dream of seamless connectivity. Equally important was the foundation stone laid for the headquarters of the newly created South Coast Railway Zone. This 18th zone would unleash a new trade, agriculture and tourism era, breathing fresh life into the local economy. Together, these achievements underscore Indian Railways' role as a mode of transportation and a driver of growth and national unity.

The recent decisions align with the 2015 Railway Reforms report by economist Bibek Debroy, which recommended empowering field officers, General Managers, and Divisional Railway Managers. The government has implemented most of these suggestions, including creating a new division and zone to enhance the railways' competitiveness. Additionally, initiatives like Vande Bharat trains and the KAVACH safety system focus on integrating technology. The establishment of Gati Shakti Vishwavidyalaya and the creation of the 'Rashtriya Rail Sanraksha Kosh' (RRSK) on April 1, 2017, address safety concerns, with a funding commitment of Rs 1 lakh crore for five years, recently extended with an additional Rs 45,000 crores for 2022-23. Indian Railways is progressing rapidly, but even powerful engines encounter challenges that require careful navigation.



While celebrating current achievements, it's essential to identify potential obstacles ahead to maintain and accelerate momentum. Potential obstacles to growing at a faster rate require working simultaneously on increasing Share, Speed and reducing Service charges. Primarily 3 S Strategy. The first and foremost thing that Indian Railways should do is to reduce Service charges (Logistics Costs). According to the Economic Survey 2022-23, the current logistics costs in India are in the range of 14-18 per cent of GDP against a global benchmark of 8 per cent. While India has jumped up the rankings on the World Bank's Logistics Performance Index from 54 in 2014 to 44 in 2018 and up to 38 in 2023, there remains a competitive gap of almost \$300 billion (Rs 26 lakh crore). This is a significant improvement, as India has moved up six places from 44th in 2018 and 16 places from 54th in 2014. Indian Railways has taken commendable strides in this direction through track electrification, improvement in digital logistics systems, and enhancement of freight handling. Building on these, there is a need for a time-bound plan to reduce logistics costs further. The key measures include increasing the share of rail in transporting bulk commodities,

WITH A GREATER FOCUS ON TERMINAL INFRASTRUCTURE AND CAPACITY, THIS SPEED COULD IMMEDIATELY INCREASE BY 7 TO 10 KM/HR. ON THE OTHER HAND, THE AVERAGE SPEED OF GOODS TRAINS IS OFFICIALLY RECORDED AT 25 KM/HR

ties, expanding terminal capacities, and ensuring last-mile connectivity efficiently. A policy to protect freight customers from cross-subsidisation and improve operational cost efficiency will also be pivotal in achieving global standards. The average speed of trains, both passenger and freight, is an area where Indian Railways has seen some success and has the potential for huge further improvement. The average speed of superfast trains in India is 55 km/hr, significantly lower than global benchmarks.

With a greater focus on terminal infrastructure and capacity, this speed could immediately increase by 7 to 10 km/hr. On the other hand, the average speed of goods trains is officially recorded at 25 km/hr; however, customers often experience a much lower speed of 13-15 km/hr due to delays and inefficiencies. To improve the efficiency of operations, customer satisfaction, and competitiveness, efforts should be made to enhance asset reliability, reduce detentions at terminals by increasing their capacity, and invest strategically in specific sections to increase speed. Finally, to increase the share of railways in the country's logistics, which currently stands at around 17 per cent, it is essential to pursue a strategic imper-

ative relentlessly. While Indian Railways has done a commendable job modernising freight terminals and expanding its freight network, there is still room for improvement to make rail transport the preferred choice for logistics. Pricing must be competitive; rail freight charges should consistently remain cost-effective compared to road transport. Continuous investment in terminal improvements, enhancing customer experiences, and implementing customer-friendly policies will enable Indian Railways to further contribute to national logistics.

These initiatives position rail transport as the cornerstone of India's logistics ecosystem, fostering sustainable economic growth. Modernising infrastructure and safety systems and introducing advanced trains have transformed the railways into a key driver of connectivity and logistics in India. As it embraces change, Indian Railways must focus on increasing its Share in the country's logistics movement, that too with higher Speed and lower Service cost (3 S Strategy). Doing so can continue connecting dreams and people like never before.

(The writer Professor of finance - XLRI Xavier School of Management and BIP leader; views are personal)

The transformative power of sports in shaping industries and careers

Sports tourism is projected to reach \$1.33 trillion by 2032. This statistics underscore the immense career potential within this dynamic industry

Reflecting on the last year's defining moments, it becomes evident that many are rooted in the realm of sports. From global events like the Paris Olympics and UEFA Euro 2024 in Germany to recurring spectacles such as the Tour de France, FIFA World Cup, and weekly Formula 1 and MotoGP Grand Prix races, sports continue to drive travel, tourism, and consumer spending on an unprecedented scale.

The economic significance of sports is staggering. According to the *Sports Global Market Report 2024*, the global sports market is expected to grow from \$480 billion in 2023 to over \$500 billion in 2024, reflecting an annual growth rate of 5.6 per cent. Sports tourism, a rapidly expanding segment, is projected to reach \$1.33 trillion by 2032, fueled by a compound annual growth rate of 10 per cent. These statistics underscore not only the universal allure of sports but also the immense career potential within this dynamic industry. This growth signals a shift in how organisations engage fans and stakeholders. Today,



sports businesses focus on delivering curated, immersive, and unforgettable experiences that leave a lasting impression. Success is increasingly defined by an organisation's ability to craft these experiences, which has become a cornerstone of the industry's evolution.

This transformation is mirrored in the ambitions of students and alumni. Many are venturing into sports-related careers, with graduates influencing the future of major organisations like FIFA, Formula 1, Nike, and the International Olympic Committee. This trend highlights a growing demand for professionals adept at blending hospitality and business acumen to create seamless, high-quality experiences for fans, athletes, and stakeholders.

The expanding scope of hospitality has also reshaped its role in the sports sector. Hospitality is no longer confined to hotels and restaurants; it now encompasses the design and management of memorable experiences across diverse contexts. Whether managing VIP suites at global tournaments, ensuring seamless fan journeys, or crafting luxury travel packages for sports tourism, hospitality principles are integral to the sports industry's success.

To meet these emerging needs, Les Roches introduced a specialised programme in sports business management and sports tourism. This four-year degree equips candidates, athletes and enthusiasts with the skills to excel in this competitive industry. The

curriculum covers sustainability in sports operations, digital marketing, and experiential marketing campaigns, preparing graduates to thrive in an evolving global landscape.

The sports industry is a gateway to talent and leadership, with a growing demand for professionals who can innovate, adapt, and lead. LinkedIn reports a 23 per cent increase in global sports management job postings in 2023, with Europe, North America, and the West Asia driving this demand. This reflects a broader shift in the industry's emphasis on resilience, creativity and excellence.

Looking ahead, the synergy between sports and hospitality will deepen, propelled by sustainability, digital transformation, and inclusivity. Success in this field requires blending passion with innovation, excellence, and the art of crafting impactful experiences. It is time to nurture the next generation of leaders, empowering them to leave a legacy in the ever-evolving worlds of sports and hospitality.

(The writer is CEO of Les Roches; views are personal)



CARLOS DIEZ DE LA LASTRA

US DEPORTS ILLEGAL MIGRANTS

Madam —Apropos of the front page news 'MEA Jaishankar talks deportation of Indians in US', the malaise lies deep in how illegal immigration to the US, Europe, and other countries was manoeuvred for decades, not just from India but several other countries. Since the deportation of illegal immigrants will cost the US equal to or more than their GDP, and their business and industry will be left high and dry, their foreign ministries, consulates, and visa authorities should investigate their roles. Beyond doubt, the illegal immigrants should return and contribute to our country's progress, business, industry, and service sector, but the game behind it is murkier.

Without addressing the menace of the illegal pigeons flying out to the US, Canada, and Europe, besides Australia, etc., their Ghar Wapasi is incomplete. The role of smaller airlines outside India, whose flights are booked in their entirety by the unscrupulous traffickers and used for flying out such illegal immigrants, needs investigation. India stands to gain if they are deported back. Donald Trump has taken up this issue in the larger interest of the US, but it is in the much larger interest of India, which has huge opportunities in education, business, and industry, and we are helplessly losing our young generation at the hands of illegal human traffickers. The jail authorities need to contribute to the multi-levels in illegal immigration from India, in which the consulates of foreign countries and airlines are also involved neck deep. The unnecessary craze for greener pastures in the US, Europe, etc. should end as the slave life with all uncertainties of jobs and survival is question-marked.

Vinod Johri | Delhi

MOBILE PHONES IN JAILS

Madam —The use of mobile phones in jails is only a part of the larger problem of how well known gangsters operate

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR



In the present scenario, the warning issued by the World Economic Forum (WEF) not only raises concern but also inspires us to think deeply and work towards a positive direction. The forum has clearly stated that crises like economic recessions and nationalism can prove to be more devastating than COVID-19 and the 2008 financial crisis. Yet, hidden within these challenges lies an opportunity—an opportunity to build global unity

and lay the foundation for a stronger future. To address factionalism and geopolitical instability, nations must set aside their differences and adopt a coordinated approach. Shared solutions and collaborative efforts are the only sustainable answers to these crises. Data from the forum indicates a 370 per cent increase in factionalism since 2017.

This alarming statistic serves as a reminder that without dialogue and collective leadership, the future cannot be secured. When nations prioritise green energy, technological innovation, and human welfare, they will pave the way for a prosperous and balanced world. The challenges facing humanity can be transformed into opportunities through partnership and collaboration.

Jayanthi Raman | Coimbatore

REGULATE AIRFARES

Madam —The airlines have skyrocketed their airfares from Delhi to Prayagraj exponentially, exploiting the rush situation of the 'MahaKumbh' mela to their advantage, which is totally an unethical practice that amounts to playing with the religious emotions and faith of commuters. The Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) should come down heavily on them and rationalise the fares, not only on paper but also effectively on the ground. A similar situation was created recently during the Punjab bandh when the Chandigarh-Delhi airfare shot up to fleece the passengers. A bill needs to be passed by the union government to control the fares of all the airlines in order to prevent them from exploiting the emergent crisis in the interest of the welfare of every citizen.

RS Narula | Patiala

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

comment

THOUGHT
FOR THE DAY

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere — Martin Luther King Jr., American Baptist minister and activist

Govt must compensate those wrongfully arrested

A man who was at first wrongly identified as Saif Ali Khan's attacker has seen his life upended since that day, even though declared innocent, with the police claiming they have caught the real attacker who is a Bangladeshi.

This unfortunate man was detained from a train in Chhattisgarh but was then let off. He claims his life has gone for a complete toss, with him losing his job and even his proposed marriage being called off.

This is a huge tragedy for the man,

whose claims if they have merit, must be compensated by the police or the state government. First of all, the police must issue a clarification that this is not the man at all, and then, the government needs to intervene and give a job.

It also shows that the police have erred hugely in letting the identity of a suspect get leaked. That is a complete and gross neglect, for this alone, this man needs monetary compensation.

This is also one of the reasons why

there is a trust deficit between the public and the police. People simply do not trust the police to keep their identities hidden for any reason.

Here, of course, is a case of mistaken identity. Even whistleblowers fear compromise as there is a trust deficit when it comes to giving information to the police. So many people simply do not believe our cops when they say that if they come in and give information, they remain anonymous.

The police need to keep the 'sus-

pect' identity absolutely secret. In today's world where a click of a button can send news spinning across the world, where time spans to check credibility or double-check are incredibly short, or next to nothing, this is absolutely essential and non-negotiable.

It takes a lifetime or years to build a reputation or keep a clean slate and a second, one error, which is no fault of yours, can change that.

This is the case here and deserving of compensation.

LETTERS

AI should be used to avoid wrongful arrests

Apropos of 'Saif attack: Have cops got the wrong man?', outdated CCTV cameras should be replaced with HD devices to avoid hazy footage and wrongful arrests. Artificial intelligence must be used to enhance evidence in the Saif Ali Khan assault case.

IQBAL GILANI MANSURI

Compensate man who was wrongly charged

Haste leads to mistakes. The cops must make use of footage from functional CCTVs, artist's impressions and dogs. Wrongly charging an innocent person is unfair; he must be compensated and the real culprit identified.

PETER CASTELLINO

Forget Saif case; there are bigger issues at hand

This refers to 'Borivlikars on edge after series of housebreakings' (January 25). When will discussions about Saif's attack and perpetrator end? The police are investigating the matter, and the truth will emerge eventually. Crimes occur daily in Mumbai; let's focus on bigger issues.

MAYA HEMANT BHATKAR

Improve public transport for benefit of commuters

Apropos of 'From Feb 1, auto taxi base fare to rise by ₹3' (January 25), the steep hike in taxi and auto fares is unjustified, making these modes of transportation unaffordable for many. The government should enhance public transport to provide better alternatives for Mumbaikars.

S N KABRA

have your say!



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When enough is really too much

I.M.H.O

C Y Gopinath

Sometimes a question about toothpaste enters my head in the morning. It pops up after I stumble to the bathroom, eyes wide shut, find my toothbrush, and squeeze out the toothpaste. It slides out like a sweet, white, chubby slug with red stripes, that cheerful blob shape made famous by millions of TV spots. The question also slides out around then, short and sweet like the blob—Do I need so much?

People normally don't waste time on such trivial matters. Toothpaste is a passing blip in the day, and who cares if you squeeze out a little more or less? It tastes zesty, your mouth zings afterward and you're off to a great start. I would have moved on, but the caffeine jolt I got next reminded me of two of life's guiding principles—Never let a good question go unanswered; and Details matter.

So I ask you, again—is the 2–2.5 cm or about 1.2 ml of toothpaste you squeeze out daily really overkill? Have you turned into a toothpaste glutton? Here's what I found—

How much toothpaste you use depends on how many teeth you have and how big they are, which brings us to your age. According to celebrity dentists Drs Chetan and Shalini Pradhan, a smear of toothpaste about the size of a grain of rice is sufficient for children under 3. For kids between 3 and 6, a small pea of toothpaste is quite enough. For everyone else, a ribbon of toothpaste 1–1.5 cm, or about 0.25 ml, pushed between the bristles to prevent it from getting dislodged, is more than enough.

So—we're all using just a little more toothpaste than we need? So what? What's my point here?

Let's do some math using a popular brand, let's say, Colgate Total Advance, which you can get from Flipkart in a standard 120 gm tube or about 92.3 ml for ₹210.

Squeezing out a fat dollop of 1.2



Through the lens of sufficiency, nearly everything around us turns out to be excessive, often by strategy. ILLUSTRATION BY C Y GOPINATH USING AI

ml each time would give you about 77 brushings, or about five weeks of use if you brush twice daily. Each brushing would cost about ₹2.70. You'd buy about 10 tubes a year, an annual spend of ₹2100.

If you followed the dentists' advice and carefully squeezed out only 0.25 ml, a ribbon about 1.5 cm long, you would get dramatically more brushings—369, or about 26 weeks of use. You'd spend a mere ₹420 a year on toothpaste. That's two tubes a year instead of 10.

The bottom line: by overusing toothpaste unthinkingly, you are spending ₹1680 more on just this one product. That money is going to the toothpaste company.

Which brings me to the sneaky part—it's in nobody's interest to tell you how much toothpaste you need for a good brushing. In the TV ads, you saw that fat sweet dollop and assumed that was how much you should use—and no one told you otherwise. With millions of toothpaste users pumping out a smidgeon more than they need every time, the toothpaste company is laughing all the way to the bank.

It's in the toothpaste manufacturer's commercial interest to subtly encourage you to use more than you

need. The net sales of just one company, Colgate-Palmolive, grew by 8.8 per cent in the year ending March 2024, equivalent to an additional ₹456.3 crore, with its toothpaste range growing in double digits.

The answer to my question—Do I need so much?—is apparently no.

Let's go wider. No one tells you how much shampoo is sufficient, or body wash, hand sanitiser or dish soap. Here's the downlow—

For most hair types, you need a coin-sized amount of shampoo, about 2–3 ml. Most people use a palmful: 10–20 ml.

One or two pumps of body wash, or 3–5 ml, is enough for a full body bath. People joyously pump out 3 to 5 glops or between 10 and 15 ml. Oh, and it doesn't have to lather.

You don't need more than a fat drop of hand sanitiser, about 0.5 ml. People use 2–3 ml, or 2–3 pumps.

Most dishes don't need more than a drop or two of detergent—not the exuberant 5–10 ml you squirt out.

The minuscule extra amounts of toiletries we deal ourselves are enriching corporate coffers while draining significant thousands from your pocket.



Let's talk about Bombay

Click the QR code above to join my WhatsApp group to share your Bombay stories for my book—and perhaps answer some of my Bombay questions.

Through the lens of sufficiency, nearly everything around us turns out to be excessive, often by strategy. The water tap, for example, is designed to offer no resistance; one twist and it's gushing out in full force, even if all you're washing is a teaspoon. The sooner you run out of water, the earlier you'll need the well-water supplier's truck. We live lives of too much—too many clothes we don't wear, way too many shoes and sandals, and more food than we can eat.

Ask yourself the 'enough' question and the answers may change your life. Do you need three meals a day? Eight glasses of water? 10,000 steps? Eight hours of sleep? Once you start interrogating the numbers and quantities we follow unthinkingly, something remarkable happens.

Life becomes simpler, more elegant—and ineffably richer.

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THIS WORD MEANS

LEZIM

Maharashtrian folk dance at the centre of controversy involving Vicky Kaushal's new Bollywood film

ALOK DESHPANDE
MUMBAI, JANUARY 27

ASCENE from the trailer of the upcoming Bollywood film *Chhapa*, based on the life of Maratha ruler Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj, has led to controversy in Maharashtra. Actor Vicky Kaushal, who portrays the king, is seen performing the *Lezim* dance alongside actress Rashmika Mandanna, who plays Sambhaji's wife Maharani Yesubai in the film. Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj (1657-1689) was the son of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj (1630-1680), the founder of the Maratha empire.



A *Lezim* performance during a cultural program in Pune, Maharashtra. *Arul Horison*

What is the controversy about?

Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj, a descendant of the king and a former Rajya Sabha MP, objected to the depiction and questioned the cinematic liberty taken by the filmmakers. On Saturday, Maharashtra's Minister for Industries & Marathi Language, Uday Samant, said in a post on X, "It is a matter of joy that a Hindi film is being made based on the life of Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj, the protector of religion and freedom... Our position is that this film should not be released without first showing it to experts and knowledgeable people."

On Monday, the film's director Laxman Utekar, after meeting Maharashtra Navnirman Sena chief Raj Thackeray, said the scene would be removed. "We thought of Maharaj as a 20-year-old. It was obvious that he had played the *Lezim* dance. And why not? *Lezim* is a part of Maratha culture. It is just our traditional dance. But, if anyone is hurt by those dance moves or *Lezim* dance, we will remove them," he said.

What is *Lezim*?

Lezim is a dance performed using a wooden instrument, which has small cymbals attached to it. It is a major part of cultural celebrations in the state, such as Ganesh Chaturthi. In the book *Traditions of Indian Folk Dance*, the late Indian art scholar Kapila Vatsyayan wrote that the *Lezim* often featured in marriage processions in districts of the Konkan coast. Such events were accom-

panied by an *akhada*, which is "a party of persons skilled in performing many feats of physical skill". Today, *Lezim* has "become part and parcel of physical education drill in all schools and colleges" in the state, she wrote.

"*Lezim*, a small mallet, is made of a thin wood with pieces of metal strung together which clash and produce a sonorous sound when swinging. *Lezim* is as much a rigorous physical exercise, a drill, as a dance: the formations are in twos and fours and sometimes even a circle. The dance is accompanied by a *dhol* or *dholki* (small *dhol*). There are no wind or string instruments accompanying it, often there is no song accompaniment either, but of late, sometimes, a song is sung," she said.

Vigorous movements, such as stepping, squatting, and jumping, form an intrinsic part of the dance. The drum beat usually starts at a slower pace and gradually speeds up, with the dancers performing faster movements in sync with the sound.

Who was Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj?

Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj was the eldest son of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj. He came to power in 1681. The Mughal emperor Aurangzeb (1658-1707) was a contemporary and his plan to extend his empire towards the Deccan often resulted in clashes with the Marathas. While Sambhaji was able to defend many famous forts against Mughal forces for some years, he was captured by them in 1689 and eventually put to death.

MICROPLASTICS CAN BLOCK BLOOD FLOW IN BRAIN IN MICE: STUDY

A NEW study has revealed that microplastics — tiny plastic particles that measure less than 5mm in diameter — can block the flow of blood in the brains of mice. Although it is still unclear if plastics could cause similar blockages in humans, the new analysis is concerning as a growing body of research has found microplastics in nearly every part of the body, including lungs, testicles, bone marrow, etc.

The study, 'Microplastics in the bloodstream can induce cerebral thrombosis by causing cell obstruction and lead to neurobehavioral abnormalities', was published in the journal *Science Advances* last week.

For their study, the researchers fed mice tiny bits of polystyrene, a common form of plastic used to make appliances, packaging and toys. They then used a specialised microscope to

trace the flow of plastic in mouse brains through a transparent window surgically implanted into the animal's skull.

Around three hours after the mice consumed polystyrene, scientists observed that the animal's immune cells had ingested some plastic bits. "Further investigation suggested that immune cells known as neutrophils and phagocytes had ingested the bright plastic specks. Some of these cells probably got trapped in the tight curves of tiny blood vessels in an area of the brain called the cortex," according to a report in *Nature*.

As these immune cells got stuck in blood vessels, the flow of blood was blocked, like it does in case of a clot. Some blockages eventually cleared, but others remained for days. This resulted in decreased mobility in the mice.

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How Libia Lobo Sardesai became the voice of Goa's liberation struggle

PAVNEET SINGH CHADHA
PANAJI, JANUARY 27

GOAN FREEDOM fighter Libia Lobo Sardesai, 100, was honoured with the Padma Shri on Sunday for her pivotal role in the state's liberation struggle. From 1955 to 1961, Libia and Vaman Sardesai (later her husband) ran an underground radio station from the jungles of the Western Ghats.

Goa in the 1950s

Libia was born on May 25, 1924 in Portuguese-ruled Goa. She grew up in Bombay (now Mumbai). While in college, Libia became closely involved with the Goan nationalist movement.

In 1954, after the Portuguese assaulted and arrested Goan activists who had entered Goa to demand an end to colonial rule,

India closed its borders to the state and imposed an economic blockade. Sea, road, and rail links were snapped, and only clandestine communication channels remained operational. In August 1955, the Portuguese authorities opened fire on thousands of Goans trying to enter Goa, leaving many dead.

At the time, Goa was under what Libia called "total censorship". "Not even a wedding invitation card or a calendar could be printed or circulated without the seal of the 'censor'." No outside papers or printed material were allowed to come in. The couple of local newspapers and the official Goa radio told the Portuguese line. "Libia had told *The Indian Express* in an interview in May last year.

The nationalists had to find a way to counter Portuguese propaganda. The answer came in the form of an underground

radio station," Libia said.

'Voice of Freedom'

Two wireless sets from Dadra and Nagar Haveli were converted into a radio transmitter, and a team comprising Libia, Vaman, and Nicolaus Meneses came together to set up an underground radio station, initially called 'Q'. The station was later renamed to 'Goenche Sodvonecho Awas' (Voice of Freedom of Goa) for Konkani broadcasts and *Voz de Liberdade* for Portuguese ones.

On November 25, 1955 — the anniversary of Goa's conquest by the Portuguese in 1510 — the station began hour-long broadcasts in the morning and evening. In the initial days, the radio set was mounted on a truck parked in a densely forested area in Amboli, Maharashtra. After a few months,

Menezes left, and Libia and Vaman relocated to Castle Rock in Karnataka.

"We worked nearly 18 hours a day, not only preparing broadcasts but listening to various bulletins and news from India and abroad... studying reports, collating information received from inside and outside Goa, scanning Indian and foreign newspapers and newsletters to select information about anti-colonial struggles," Libia said.

She would later recall in her diary that the six years she spent running the radio station felt "unendingly hard and arduous... at times seemingly worse than normal imprisonment". "We had to live completely isolated in a corner of the forest... infested with cobras, pythons... and wild animals. One could not take a few steps without being bitten by leeches. We were never wounded by

weapons or mishaps, yet a lot of our blood was spilled every day," she wrote.

The last broadcast

Days before Operation Vijay was launched to liberate Goa, the Indian border police bundled Libia and Vaman in a jeep, and took them to a rest-house in Belgium.

On December 17, 1961, the radio station relayed a direct message from Union Defence Minister VK Krishna Menon to the Portuguese Governor General. Menon asked the Portuguese to surrender in order to prevent "unnecessary casualties", failing which the Indian Army would march into Goa. "Since no reply came, Operation Vijay started," Libia said.

In Gen J Chaudhuri, then the GOC of the Southern Command, informed Libia of the Portuguese surrender. The General said "Kumari Lobo! I have good news for you. The

Portuguese have surrendered." "I did not know how to react. I felt as if the ground beneath my feet was shaking," Libia recalled.

"He then asked me, 'Kumari Lobo! What do you want to do now?' Impulsively, I said I would like to take to the skies and announce that Goa is free. He took me seriously... We were warned that the plane could be shot down... but we were not scared. I said that it did not matter... if the plane is shot down, we will fall and die in a free Goa," she said.

On the morning of December 19, 1961, Libia and Vaman flew over Panaji in an Indian Air Force plane with a radio transmitter on board, and a loudspeaker fitted on the belly. They dropped leaflets and announced in Portuguese and Konkani that the Portuguese had surrendered.

They said, "Tremble brothers and sisters, rejoice! Today, after 451 years of alien rule, Goa is free and united with the Motherland."

India's ties with Indonesia

After starting on a high in the late 1940s, ties deteriorated in the 1960s. The relationship has been growing steadily since the 1990s, when India launched the 'Look East' policy. Here's a short history

ARJUN SENGUPTA
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 27

INDIA AND Indonesia signed agreements on maritime security, health, traditional medicine, culture, and digital cooperation on Saturday as Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Indonesia's President Prabowo Subianto had their summit meeting in New Delhi's Hyderabad House.

In the 75 years between Indonesia's first President Sukarno and President Prabowo being the Chief Guest at India's Republic Day celebration, the relationship between the two countries has gone through its highs and lows.

After starting on a high in the late 1940s on the back of a common commitment against imperialism and shared democratic principles, ties were strained in the 1960s as Indonesia sided up to China and Pakistan. Relations improved under President Suharto (1967-98), but they took off only in the 1990s as the government of P V Narasimha Rao initiated India's 'Look East' policy. In 2014, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India took a step forward and began to 'Act East'.

United against colonialism

The shared experience of colonialism, and common post-colonial goals of political sovereignty and economic self-sufficiency drove India's friendly bilateral ties with Indonesia in the late 1940s and 1950s.

Jawaharlal Nehru supported Indonesian independence during the National Revolution (1945-49). Although Indonesia proclaimed independence in 1945, the Dutch formally recognised its sovereignty only in 1949. In the four years in between, the Dutch tried to re-establish their colony — they had lost to Japan during World War II — through military force.

After taking charge of the Interim Government in 1946, Nehru said in a radio broadcast that "the kernel of India's foreign policy would be the ending of colonialism all over Asia", and that India would "help and support" Indonesian nationalists "in every way possible". (V Suryanarayan, 'India and the Indonesian Revolution', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 1981)

Apart from sending supplies and humanitarian aid to the Indonesian nationalists, Nehru banned Dutch airlines from flying over India, and pushed the Indian Federation of Labour to direct dock workers' unions in Karachi, Bombay, and Calcutta to not "handle Dutch shipping or do anything prejudicial to the interests of the Indonesian republic". (Suryanarayan)

In July 1947, Nehru sent the young Biju Patnaik to besiege Jakarta to evacuate Indonesia's Prime Minister Sutan Sjahrir and Vice President Mohammad Hatta. Patnaik dodged Dutch anti-aircraft fire to bring the



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto at Hyderabad House in New Delhi on Saturday. *PTI*

two revolutionaries to New Delhi, from where they headed to the West to present their case before the world.

A friendly decade

On January 5, 1950, President Sukarno wrote in *The Hindu*: "On the eve of the rebirth of our nation, I am trying vainly to measure the gratitude of the Indonesian people to India and to her Prime Minister personally for the unflinching and brotherly support in our struggle in the past."

Later that month, Sukarno was the Chief Guest at India's first Republic Day celebrations, and Nehru travelled to Indonesia on a state visit soon afterward.

Over the next decade, bilateral trade and cultural and military cooperation grew. In March 1951, India and Indonesia signed a Treaty of Friendship for "perpetual peace and unalterable friendship".

"On general questions of nonalignment, Panchsheel (peaceful coexistence), colonialism, apartheid, relations with the West, military alliances, and approach to the communist bloc... both countries consulted each other..." political scientist L P Singh wrote in 1967.

India and Indonesia became strong votaries of independence of Asian and African countries in the United Nations, the spirit of which led to the Bandung Conference of 1955 and subsequent forma-

tion of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961. Nehru and Sukarno were the first five founders of NAM, along with Yugoslavia's Josip Broz Tito, Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser, and Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah.

A nosedive in ties

India's friendship with Indonesia did not remain "unalterable" for long. Cracks emerged by the end of the decade and, in the 1960s, ties suffered on account of the divergence in the two countries' attitude towards China.

Sukarno and Nehru also had a personal falling-out. The latter refused a second Bandung Conference. At the 1961 Belgrade Summit that officially birthed NAM, Nehru and Sukarno are said to have clashed repeatedly "to a point necessitating friendly intervention by third parties on the very first day of the conference". (*The Times of India*, September 3, 1961)

When China invaded India in 1962, Indonesia showed little sympathy — let alone solidarity — with its fellow NAM member. As ties with New Delhi turned fraught, Jakarta drifted closer to Islamabad. Sukarno visited Pakistan several times in 1963-64, as Jakarta abandoned its neutrality on Kashmir.

When war broke out between India and Pakistan in September 1965, Indonesia's Foreign Minister Soedarto announced: "It is the obligation of all nations belonging to the new emerging forces to give help to

Pakistan to face India's aggression." Jakarta supplied Islamabad with weapons, and its leaders fuelled anti-India sentiments among Indonesians, culminating in a mob attack on the Indian embassy in Jakarta.

Drift during Cold War

Domestically, Sukarno maintained a precarious balance of power between the Army, two communists, and himself. An attempted left-wing coup in 1965 swiftly changed things. The Army retaliated brutally, and nearly wiped out the communists. This left Sukarno weakened. By 1966 he had effectively handed over power to General Suharto, a staunch anti-communist who had the backing of the United States.

This effectively broke the Beijing-Jakarta axis — in no small part due to China's alleged support for the 1965 coup. Suharto started working towards repairing his country's damaged ties abroad, including the relationship with India. New Delhi reciprocated with a number of trade agreements in 1967.

But by the 1970s, India under Indira Gandhi had drifted ever closer to the USSR, and the growth of New Delhi's ties with the US-backed regime in Jakarta stagnated. However, the two countries continued to engage, signing some crucial agreements, including one in 1977 that determined the maritime boundary between the two countries.

Suharto visited New Delhi in 1980, and Indira and Rajiv Gandhi made trips to Jakarta in 1981 and 1986 respectively.

Ties since 'Look East'

Following the economic reforms, as India sought opportunities to push trade and economic cooperation, Prime Minister Rao's government launched the 'Look East' policy. India aimed to bolster ties with Southeast Asian nations, which were emerging as some of the world's fastest-growing economies at the time. The Modi government would raise the level of engagement by instituting the more project- and outcome-oriented 'Act East' policy.

Since 2000, every Indian President and Indian Prime Minister has visited the other country. Indonesia today is India's second largest trading partner in ASEAN after Singapore. Bilateral trade increased from \$4.3 billion in 2005-06 to \$38.84 billion in 2022-23, and \$29.40 billion in 2023-24.

India is Indonesia's second largest buyer of coal, and the largest buyer of crude palm oil. Key Indian exports include refined petroleum products, commercial vehicles, telecom equipment, agriculture commodities and bovine meat.

With Prabowo's visit coming early in his tenure — he assumed office last October — the two nations are seen as being well placed to accelerate trade and step up maritime security and defence industrial cooperation. The agreements signed on Saturday are a step in that direction.

EXPLAINED GLOBAL

recognised. "While the US has previously decried any Israeli attempts to settle in Gaza, Trump's latest comments may signal a shift in this policy."

Behind Egypt, Jordan's refusals

Although both Jordan and Egypt have diplomatic relationships with Israel, they support the so-called "two-state solution" in which Israel and Palestine exist side-by-side as sovereign states.

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi had said in 2023 that facilitating a migration of refugees from Gaza would help "eliminate" the Palestinian cause. Further, he argued that the presence of Palestinian militants within the refugee population could pose a security challenge for both Egypt and Israel.

He said that Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, which lies to the south of Gaza, "would be-

come a base for attacks on Israel. Israel would have the right to defend itself... and would strike Egyptian territory."

What is exactly what happened in Lebanon, when it accepted thousands of Palestinian refugees in the 1970s, "Yasser Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organisation, the leading militant group of its time, transformed the country's south into a launchpad for attacks on Israel. The refugee crisis and the PLO's actions helped push Lebanon into a 15-year civil war in 1975," a report by the Associated Press said.

Today, millions of registered Palestinian refugees already live in 58 UN-recognised camps in countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. Jordan alone hosts some 2 million refugees, the majority of whom have been granted citizenship. Like Lebanon, Jordan too clashed with the PLO in the 1970s for using its territory as a launchpad against Israel.

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We the sporadic sovereigns

Absence of air pollution from Delhi election manifestos shows that in democracies, often political parties frame electoral issues, voters only respond to them



DESHKAAL
BY YOGENDRA YADAV

WHY IS AIR pollution a non-issue in Delhi elections? This question is usually posed rhetorically to express anguish more than curiosity. The answers are lost in the smog of political blame-games. As Delhi concludes another election campaign without so much as addressing this all-important question, it's time we approached this as a serious puzzle. This takes us to the heart of the theory of democracy.

On the face of it, we have good reasons to expect air pollution to be among the biggest, if not the most decisive of political issues that determine the election outcome. The level of pollution in Delhi is more than 20 times higher than considered safe by the WHO. After Lahore, the national capital is the most polluted metro in the world. An average Delhiwala loses anything between 8 to 12 years of life expectancy due to air pollution. Even if you take the lowest estimate of 7.8 years, this works out to more than a billion years of lives lost in this one city. One would assume that the citizens of Delhi would get worked up about the polluted air they inhale, that they would demand action from those who rule the city, that they would use the elections as an occasion to hold them to account, that contenders for power would compete with one another to offer attractive solutions, that the party with the best offer would stand a good chance to grab power.

Nothing of that sort is happening in the ongoing political contestation in Delhi. As I type these lines, AAP has released its 15 new guarantees for the voters of Delhi, besides retaining the six ongoing schemes. Air pollution does not figure in this long list, not even as a bland repetition of the generic promise made in 2020 election to cut down pollution by one-third. The damning thing is that a ruling party desperate to stem its loss of popularity, does not feel clean air is going to matter to its chances of re-election. The BJP manifesto makes vague promises to cut down pollution by half with the help of flimsy steps like more sprinklers and WYAP instruments etc. The Congress is yet to speak on this. More than manifestos, what matters is that the issue of air pollution features nowhere — not even as a notable distraction as Yamuna pollution has — in the daily circus of allegations and counter-allegations that pass off as political debates.

Here, then, is a political equivalent of what economists call "market failure" — the demand and supply equilibrium does not work out. We do not know if AAP will retain its government. But we do know that air pollution is not going to be the reason for its victory or loss.

This democratic failure is deeper than it appears. Some of the most common reasons why electoral democracies fail to offer to the voters what they need do not apply in this case. Unlike inequality, pollution is visible. Unlike monetary policy, its consequences are within the grasp of ordinary people. Though environmental consciousness here is not as



CR Sankumar

high as in Karnataka or Kerala, more voters understand AQI in Delhi than they do in most other parts of the country. Even if they don't, smog is there for everyone to see. Besides, this is one issue that the "national" media does take up. The Indian elite — that loves to call itself "middle class" — has managed to insulate itself from the lives of ordinary Indians in every respect, but they have not yet managed a parallel supply of air, notwithstanding air-purifiers. Therefore, unlike poverty, education and health, air pollution does grab TV headlines. Besides, elections are held in winter when pollution is more visible. In other words, even though it is difficult to mobilise people on an intangible issue like air pollution, the "demand side" of democratic mechanism is not where the real problem lies.

Air pollution is a classic case of "supply side" failure in democracy. Something may well be a real need of the people, the need may turn into a demand and the demand may be articulated powerfully. Yet, political parties need not respond to it. Citizens' needs and demands become an effective political issue only when leading political parties compete with one another to make better and more credible offers. In many cases, the parties may not do so either because they don't have much to offer or they don't want to. If the leading competitors collude to keep an issue outside their competition, the voters have few choices. In principle, they can support a new party, but that's very rare — the barriers to entry in the electoral arena are simply too high.

That's the real problem in Delhi. Through their acts of omission and commission, both AAP and BJP are implicated in the worsening of the pollution crisis in Delhi. The AAP government has done little to redeem its 2020 election "guarantee" to reduce pollution by one-third. It promised to add 2 crore

Unlike inequality, pollution is visible. Unlike monetary policy, its consequences are within the grasp of ordinary people. Though environmental consciousness here is not as high as in Karnataka or Kerala, more voters understand AQI in Delhi than they do in most other parts of the country. Even if they don't, smog is there for everyone to see. Besides, this is one issue that the "national" media does take up. The Indian elite — that loves to call itself "middle class" — has managed to insulate itself from the lives of ordinary Indians in every respect, but they have not yet managed a parallel supply of air, notwithstanding air-purifiers.

trees in the city; records show that forest cover in Delhi has reduced in the last five years. The BJP too has a lot to answer for. The Modi government's much-flaunted National Clean Air Programme has failed to clean the air; the MCD has been synonymous with dirt and corruption. The last time any government in Delhi did anything substantial to cut air pollution was the Sheila Dixit led Congress government's move to convert bus fleets to CNG. There is no one to push and expand that agenda aggressively today. While everyone loves to blame farmers, no government is willing to compensate them adequately so that they don't burn crop residue. No government or political party is willing to take on the serious issue of industrial and vehicular pollution in Delhi, for it affects vested interests. So, it is safe to wait for the courts to order emergency measures. Or, to indulge the public with gimmicks like sprinkling of roads or smog towers. And to keep debating *sheesh mahal* and *Rohingyas*.

This is a lesson not just about air pollution or Delhi. It is a lesson in the theory of democracy that tells us why Covid deaths, endemic poverty, poor-quality education or health services do not become election issues. People's will prevails in an electoral democracy only if and when a series of conditions apply, which they rarely do. In real-life democracies, parties and leaders do not respond to issues framed by voters; voters respond to issues delimited by parties. Unless the citizen comes together to force parties to take up the issues that matter to them, the mechanism of election does not work for them. The voters are sporadic sovereigns who mostly choose from what they can choose from.

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

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The US is... following Europe's lead, where the far right has practically declared war on migrants. People from across the globe who seek to reach American shores must now accept the new reality: Mr Trump has pulled the welcome mat."

—DAWN, PAKISTAN

To make the giant leap

For India to lead the way in transformative innovations, it must focus on overcoming fundamental constraints in existing technologies



CHINTAN VAISHNAV

THINK ABOUT AN innovation that transformed your life in the recent past. I mean, having experienced it, you cannot imagine your life without this innovation. Things like the mobile phone, Google search, or the Global Positioning System (GPS) when getting around may come to mind. What makes these ideas transformative, or in scholarly terms, "radical innovations"? And more importantly, what will it take for such innovations to emerge from our nation? There is no easy answer, but we must first discuss what sets such innovations apart.

What makes something a radical innovation? Generally, when posed with this question, people respond with something like this: One that solves an old problem in a very different way, or one that causes a large jump in performance, or one that brings about a big change. Yes, a radical innovation does exhibit these characteristics. The problem is, adjectives like "so different", "large", and "big" are not quantifiable. They don't guide the creation of radical innovation that may transform lives or experiences.

In engineering, there is an elegant conception of a "radical" versus an "incremental" innovation. Engineers formulate a problem as follows: They determine (a) an Objective Function to maximise, minimise, or optimise (a goal to meet); (b) the Input Variables at the designer's disposal (knobs one could turn to meet the goal); subject to (c) constraints one cannot violate. An innovation is radical if it allows overcoming fundamental constraints, and incremental if it merely changes input variables within a constraint. This may feel a bit abstract, but it really isn't. Let's look at a couple of examples.

Take the Wright Brothers' invention of the aircraft. The objective function or the goal here was to travel from one place to another. This goal was already being met by various means at the time of the invention of the aircraft. There was the bullock or horse cart, a four wheeler like a car or a bus, a train, even a ship. Each of these had input variables at the designer's disposal: The shape and size of the vehicle, the colour, the type of engine, the number and size of wheels, and so on. In fact, even for simple vehicles, there are hundreds of choices to make as we break the design down into components and options. These are all input variables. All of this, however, was subject to one constraint — each existing option moved while staying in contact with a surface, whether road or water. The aircraft overcame that constraint. Overcoming that fundamental constraint

is what made it radical or transformative.

Let's take one more example: In its early days, telephone systems were worked by a human operator in the switching exchange, manually connecting the caller to the person who called, on a dashboard. There were many incremental innovations in the layout of the dashboard which facilitated the human operator's efficiency in connecting calls with a reduced connection time. There was, however, a fundamental constraint: The human reflex to connect the line physically could not be lower than one-and-a-half second. Ultimately, a radical innovation arrived in the form of an electro-mechanical switch, where a dial that rotated to connect the calling party's line to the called party's eliminated the need for the human operator. This is when the telephone system scaled.

Is this pattern unique to engineering? No. You can see it in all domains, including arts. Let's take the example of *jasrangi*, a classical vocal duet where a male and a female sing two distinct ragas at the same time. How does the above pattern apply here? A classical duet is hard to sing because a woman has a lower pitch than a man. This is a natural, God-given fundamental constraint. The legend goes, it was Late Pandit Jasraj's lament: Why had nature made it so hard for males and females to sing together? This led him to invent *jasrangi*.

Here is how it works: A female sings a raga at a lower pitch than is natural to her while the male sings a different raga starting at a higher note that is natural to him. Technically, whichever may be the base note ('*Sa*') of the female's rendition, the male considers the fourth ascending note from it ('*Ma*') as his base note ('*Sa*'), thereby making the rendition easier for each person's natural range. In other words, overcoming a fundamental constraint, *jasrangi* has gone global. Others have copied the concept, often with a different name. This is a radical innovation.

To be clear, there is no competition between incremental versus radical innovation when it comes to advancing the innovation frontier. Both are good. In fact, much of the progress in a product class happens through incremental innovation. Giant leaps, however, happen through radical innovation.

I don't mean to say that looking for fundamental constraints when solving problems and designing innovations to overcome them is easy. Nevertheless, this is what you'd have to do as a young person pursuing arts, science, engineering, etc., if you're wondering when our nation will produce globally transformative innovations. A popular subject like Design Thinking will get you going with techniques for identifying such constraints and conceiving creative solutions to overcome them. Even though this would just be the beginning, focusing on the right problem is half the journey of solving it.

The writer is a socio-technologist. Views are personal



RUTH VANITA

INDIA IS BY no means the worst Asian country to live in a same-sex union. In many Asian countries, one can be legally imprisoned or even executed if discovered to have engaged in same-sex relations. India, the largest democracy in the world, however, is not the best Asian country either for those who are married to a person of the same sex. I use the word "married" to refer to the many religious but not legally recognised marriages Indian same-sex couples enter into because, in 2023, the Supreme Court refused to protect same-sex marriage rights and, in 2025, it turned down a review petition.

In March 2024, Thailand's House of Representatives voted by a vast majority (400 to 10) to ratify same-sex marriage, and in June, the Senate voted similarly (330 to 4). In August, King Vajiralongkorn gave his assent. Thailand is now the largest Asian country to have legalised same-sex marriage.

The first Asian country to legalise same-sex marriage was Taiwan. In 2017, Taiwan's Constitutional Court ruled that the constitutional right to equality and freedom of marriage gives same-sex couples the right to marry. A referendum by the electorate blocked the government from amending the marriage law to include same-sex couples. But Taiwan's government found a way. Parliament passed a separate marriage law in 2019, giving same-sex marriages almost all the same rights as marriage. In 2023, Taiwan

The answer lies to the east

Thailand is now the largest Asian country to legalise same-sex marriage

amended its same-sex marriage law to allow couples to adopt jointly. In the same year, Nepal began temporarily registering same-sex marriages after a Supreme Court interim order. Still, married same-sex couples do not have all the rights that cross-sex married couples do.

In India, same-sex couples have been getting married by Hindu rites since at least 1987 when policewomen Leela Namdeo and Urmila Srivastava's marriage made headlines. That was much before same-sex marriage was legal anywhere in the world. My book, *Love's Rite*, the first book on same-sex marriage in India, is about these pioneers. The book lists hundreds of couples who have got married all over India and Nepal since then. In the 1980s and '90s, almost all these couples were non-English speaking, low-income women, including agricultural labourers, factory workers, fisherwomen, domestic workers, and tribals. They were from a whole range of jatis, and had no contact with any social movement (indeed, in the 1980s, there was no gay movement to speak of). While some families violently opposed the marriages and forcibly separated the couples or drove them towards joint suicide, other families were supportive and even helped arrange weddings. These marriages and joint suicides continue to occur.

Despite the evidence that same-sex unions have existed throughout history in

every culture, including India, the myth persists that the idea of same-sex marriage is a Western import. Ironically, the Supreme Court, in its 366-page-long judgment, combated the myth. The Justices quoted details and cases of marriage from *Love's Rite* and from the media, and acknowledged that same-sex marriage is not imported from the West and is part of Indian culture and society because people inclined to same-sex relations are Indians too. And yet, the Supreme Court decided not to recognise the constitutional rights to freedom and equality of these millions of Indians and left it to Parliament.

The Supreme Court refused to even grant domestic partnership to same-sex couples, which would have given them some but not all the rights of marriage. Therefore, two Indians of the same sex who have been together for 40 years cannot make medical or funeral decisions for each other, cannot inherit from each other without a will, and cannot receive medical insurance or pension benefits, but a cross-sex couple married for one day has all these rights. A wealthy and well-connected couple may be able to get around some barriers but not the majority of them.

Indians legally married to same-sex spouses in other countries are in the strange position of having two legal statuses. They are married in some countries, such as Thailand or Argentina, but single in India. A foreign man married to an Indian woman or a for-

eign woman married to an Indian man obtains Overseas Citizenship of India and can live and work in India for as long as they like, but a foreign spouse of an Indian of the same sex can stay in India for only six months at a time, on a tourist visa. This discrimination is manifestly unjust.

Thailand is a Buddhist majority country. Taiwan is one-third Buddhist and one-third Taoist, and Nepal is 81.9 percent Hindu. Hinduism and Buddhism have never treated homosexuality as a serious crime, the way the Abrahamic religions have, and, as I demonstrated in my co-edited book, *Same-Sex Love in India*, many Hindu texts depict homosexuality as part of human nature and even celebrate same-sex love.

But India is also one of the very few functioning democracies that recognises the diversity of marriage practices for minorities to a way that most functioning democracies do not. For example, polygamy is legal for Muslims in India but is illegal in Taiwan, Nepal, Thailand, Japan, and all Western democracies. But despite the Supreme Court having stated that it is up to the legislature to legalise same-sex marriage, the Indian Parliament has not followed the examples of Thailand and Taiwan to grant marriage equality to this particular minority. Perhaps it will some day, but probably not in my lifetime.

Vanita is a novelist and scholar

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

ATTRACT INVESTORS

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Let's overhaul the tax system' (IE, January 27). To effectively compete with China, simplifying and implementing uniform lower rates on goods and services is imperative. This calls for a thorough examination of the existing policy framework and the development of well-defined strategies for implementation. *Prima facie*, the obstruction of justice through retrospective amendments poses a significant concern, undermining the judiciary's purpose. Such actions are profoundly unwarranted and project India unfavorably to prospective investors.

Shawwat Jena, Ghaziabad

ENDURING LEGACY

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'A lot done, more to do' (IE, January 25). As the nation celebrates the 75th year of making of India's Constitution, it's a powerful reminder of the challenges faced by its framers, who drafted a document that has withstood the test of time. The introduction of the Basic Structure Doctrine by the Supreme Court in 1973, ensuring that the Constitution's core principles, such as secularism and democracy, cannot be altered by Parliament. This judicial safeguard has played a crucial role in protecting the soul of our Constitution. The Preamble and its ideals of justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity is a poignant reminder of the values that underpin our nation. The words, "We the People of India" affirm that the Constitution is not merely a legal document but a testament to the

struggles for freedom and justice.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

FOR STRONGER TIES

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Delhi & Jakarta' (IE, January 25). President Prabowo Subianto's visit provides an opportunity for the leaders to undertake a comprehensive review of bilateral ties and discuss regional and global issues of mutual interest. In 2018, the two countries established a Defence Cooperation Agreement, further strengthening the sensitive security partnership in a contested region. The India-Indonesia Coordinated Patrol became the backbone of maritime security in the Indo-Pacific. Indonesia is an important pillar in India's Act East Policy, and central to its vision of the Indo-Pacific. In terms of economic cooperation, Indonesia is one of India's largest trading partners in the ASEAN region. Hence, strengthening ties between the two countries is important.

SS Paul, Nadiu

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Delhi & Jakarta' (IE, January 25). The recent visit of Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto to India raises critical questions about the future of India-Indonesia relations. Can this visit catalyse a substantial increase in bilateral trade, currently at only \$30 billion? How will both nations address geopolitical pressures from China? Further, what concrete steps will be taken to deepen defence cooperation and maritime security in the Indo-Pacific? These are vital questions. The full potential of this historic partnership

Anshu Bhatti, Agassani

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THE INDIAN EXPRESS, TUESDAY, JANUARY 28, 2025

THE EDITORIAL PAGE

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

HEALTH OF STATES

Niti Aayog report on state finances points to need for drawing up detailed roadmaps for fiscal consolidation

THE DEBT-DEFICIT DYNAMICS of state governments had worsened during the pandemic. Their debt to GDP ratio had, for instance, surged from 25.3 per cent in 2019 to 31 per cent in 2021. Subsequently, with states staying on the path of prudence, they witnessed a steady improvement across various metrics. As per the RBI's most recent state finances report, states managed to bring down their debt to GDP ratio to 28.5 per cent in 2024. However, there is considerable variation across regions. For instance, the debt to GDP ratio for Odisha and Gujarat is as low as 16.3 per cent and 17.9 per cent respectively. In comparison, in the case of Punjab, it is as high as 46.6 per cent. Considering this marked divergence, as well as the multiplicity of parameters that can be used to gauge a state's fiscal health, there is a need for a framework that not only helps provide an overall assessment of the fiscal position of all states, but also allows for comparisons to be drawn. A few days ago, the Niti Aayog released a report which attempts to put forth such a structure.

The report has created a Fiscal Health Index, a framework for assessing the fiscal position of states across several parameters. The index, which covers 18 major states, is based on five sub-indices — fiscal prudence, debt index and sustainability, revenue mobilisation and quality of spending. This allows for not only assessing the performance of states across various indicators, but also identifying the areas for improvement, and can perhaps help promote best practices. As per the index, the top five performing states are Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Goa, Jharkhand and Gujarat, while the states of Punjab, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Kerala and Haryana rank at the bottom. In 2022, economists at the RBI had also attempted such a study. They had identified Bihar, Kerala, Punjab, Rajasthan and West Bengal as "highly stressed".

Despite an overall improvement in recent years, state debt remains well above levels suggested by the FRBM review committee. State government finances also face several risks. The RBI study had identified loss-making power distribution companies, the growing inclination for "freebies" and realisation of guarantees, among others, as areas of concern. This is so especially for the more indebted states. For instance, the Niti Aayog report says that states like West Bengal and Punjab have seen increasing debt to GDP ratio, "raising serious concerns about debt sustainability". It adds that "high persistent deficits and varying fiscal performances among states underscore the urgency for reform and targeted interventions". In such a scenario, it would be advisable to draw up detailed roadmaps for bringing down debt in a time-bound manner, especially for states with high levels.

SAFETY FIRST

Environment ministry panel may have been hasty in clearing the dam on Teesta river. Due process must be adhered to

HON OCTOBER 2023, a glacial flood ravaged four districts of Sikkim, killing more than 40 people and washing away a 60-metre-high dam of the Teesta III hydel power project. Less than 15 months later, the environment ministry's expert appraisal committee (EAC) has cleared a proposal to construct a 118-metre high dam in its place. The panel's decision raises questions because the design of the new structure has not been cleared by the Central Water Commission, the Geological Survey and Central Soil and Materials Research Station. A public hearing has not been held to make sure the project addresses the concerns of local people. It's particularly disquieting that the EAC has allowed the dam's construction before its own safety-related questions were addressed. As reported by this newspaper, the EAC was not convinced of the structure's ability to withstand the force of flood waters. The project does not seem to have adequately factored in threats from overflowing glacial lakes.

Teesta III is part of a mega hydel power push in the Eastern Himalayas that was envisaged more than two decades ago. The project has been dogged by ecological and safety-related concerns. Hydrologists and other experts have questioned the infrastructure push in a region prone to earthquakes, landslides and climate change-related disasters. A section of the local population has opposed the project because its construction involves alteration and destruction of parts of mountains, forests and a flowing river. However, authorities in charge of the projects do not appear to have always paid heed to these issues. In 2014, for instance, the National Hydropower Corporation told the National Green Tribunal that Teesta III faced no threats from glacial lake overflows. The project took more than 12 years to construct, exceeding its budget more than two-and-a-half times. It came apart in October 2023, proving the power corporation wrong. A year later, a landslide caused a loss of more than Rs 300 crore to another project on the Teesta River — thankfully no lives were lost.

Infrastructure projects in the mountains — dams, bridges, buildings, highways — must be subjected to stringent safety measures. The bar must be set particularly high for structures close to rivers or other water bodies. As the 2023 flood underlined, dams are the first to be hit when glacial lakes overflow. A growing body of scholarship shows that climate change-driven ice mass loss is exacerbating the threat of glacial lake floods. The environment ministry must, therefore, not be hasty in going ahead with its committee's latest recommendation on Teesta III. No effort must be spared to ensure that the disaster of 2023 is not repeated.

ALCARAZ & SINNER

A powerful new duo is announcing itself in tennis, mimicking the dominance of Federer and Nadal

CARLOS ALCARAZ AND Jannik Sinner have divided the last five Grand Slam singles titles between themselves. It may be too early to say so, but the smiling Spaniard and ice-cool Italian may be forming a duopoly on the lines of what one saw in the initial dominance of Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal. Like that period in tennis history, their relative strengths are clearly demarcated. Federer seemed unbeatable on grass and hard courts, while Nadal was unparalleled on red clay. Now, Sinner thrives on hard courts while Alcaraz is the better of the two on grass and clay.

Sinner's successful defence of his Australian Open title seemed almost routine once he passed a medical scare midway into the tournament. He cruised past his quarterfinal, semifinal and final without dropping a set, with only two of the nine sets even getting to tie-breakers. But the current World No 1 may still have some room for improvement. He is the prototype modern tennis player, with his big frame not compromising his mobility. With an enormous wingspan and reach, he thrives on the predictable pace and bounce expected on artificial surfaces. He can hit the ball harder and more consistently than his contemporaries. But unlike his titles at the Australian Open and US Open, Sinner has not made it past the semifinals at Roland Garros and Wimbledon. The natural variation that clay and grass bring need a bit more guile and inventive shot-making, where Alcaraz is probably a bit ahead.

Where does this leave the field for the rest of the season and beyond? On the evidence of what transpired in Melbourne over the past fortnight, Novak Djokovic is still the biggest challenger in the short and medium term. Djokovic, in his quarterfinal victory over Alcaraz, showed he still has the nous and craft required, but age makes it difficult for him in seven best-of-five matches in two weeks. In such a scenario, one may have to wait for the emergence of a genuine challenger, in the way Djokovic himself came out of the shadows of Nadal and Federer.



PRASHANT JAIN

"COMPOUND INTEREST IS the eighth wonder of the world. He who understands it, earns it; he who doesn't, pays it." These words of Albert Einstein apply not just to investments but to economic growth as well. A six per cent real growth for 20 years should conservatively increase India's GDP per capita to USD 10,000 from USD 2,650 by 2045. A majority of Indians should live to see that day given that 63 per cent of the population is below 50 years of age. Even a 5.5 per cent real growth rate will take us there, but in 22 years. Whether it happens by 2045 or 2047 makes little difference in a nation's journey. The key is to get there. The key is to grow for extended periods with low risk. (Assumptions in both cases of this exercise: 5 per cent India inflation, 2 per cent US inflation, 3 per cent INR depreciation and 1 per cent population growth, all per annum).

There have been countries that have delivered high growth fuelled by high borrowings, only to witness sharp slowdowns and/or restructuring in the future. Countries that run current account deficits are more vulnerable as debt-fuelled growth, even in local currency terms, is likely to eventually lead to rising foreign currency indebtedness, which in certain situations can lead to painful outcomes.

Recently, concerns have been raised about a moderation of growth in India. Apart from normal volatility in growth, this could be a result of multiple factors. It is common knowledge that Indian household indebtedness has gone up. Our forefathers typically borrowed only for emergencies or for acquiring appreciating assets. This has given way in current times to borrowing also for depreciating assets and expenses.

Click-driven EMIs, the influence of social media, the coming of stores to our homes courtesy of e-commerce, and the lack of incentive for cash down purchases over EMIs in many cases, have enabled this. Debt-led consumption merely shifts growth from future to present, and eventually payback time comes. Given the rising indebtedness of households,

When India's GDP per capita hits \$10,000 makes little difference. Key is low-risk growth for long periods

Click-driven EMIs, social media's influence, the coming of stores to our homes courtesy of e-commerce, and the lack of incentive for cash down purchases over EMIs in many cases, have enabled this. Debt-led consumption merely shifts growth from future to present, and eventually payback time comes. Given the rising indebtedness of households, as also evident in rising retail NPAs, steps to slow the growth in personal loans are welcome and these are showing results. This could be one reason for a temporary slowdown in consumption, but this also sets the base for more sustainable growth in the future.

as also evident in rising retail NPAs, steps to slow the growth in personal loans are welcome and these are showing results. This could be one reason for a temporary slowdown in consumption, but this also sets the base for more sustainable growth in the future.

The long-term impact of debt-fuelled consumption should be carefully evaluated. The marshmallow test is a famous psychological experiment designed to measure a child's ability to delay gratification. The test involves offering a child a marshmallow and telling them they can eat it right away or wait for a second marshmallow. The results suggest that children who delay gratification do better in life. An EMI, while it brings a high-end gadget/experience within reach of a lower-income person, also habituates them to these for life. It is debatable whether this impacts life positively or not. Tweaking risk weights on such loans, and ensuring that cash-down consumers get lower prices vs EMI-based purchases, can moderate this trend by encouraging the consumer to make a more conscious choice.

The second factor that could be impacting growth is the continued strength of Chinese exports. While China+1 is a favourable development, the results will be slow to come as a lot of work needs to be done before India can become a meaningful alternative. The Chinese manufacturing engine is firing well. The advantages of decades of large investments, policy support, great infrastructure, etc., that China enjoys will not make the going easy for India. Moreover, weakness in China's domestic demand adds to its surplus capacity and is leading to deflation in export prices for merchandise goods, complicating things for Indian exporters.

Given our relatively small but decent manufacturing footprint, the government's supportive role and favourable geopolitical status, India should be able to increase its share of manufacturing. However, we should not be complacent and be aware that progress is going to be slow and tedious.

WORDLY WISE

WE MUST USE THE WRATH OF NATURE AS OUR TEACHER.

—BHUMBOL ADULYADJ

Apart from these, there are a few other temporary challenges like the rising US interest rates, the low yield gap between India and the US at around 2.2 per cent, the strength of the US dollar and a sharp fall in net FDI. The latter is driven by the sale of equities not just by private equity funds but also by multinational companies (Tinkers, GE Vernova, Hyundai, Whirlpool, BAT, ZF etc). The sale of stakes in their Indian arms by MNCs is a first and is driven by prevailing valuations in these sectors, not by a lack of optimism regarding India. While these headwinds should pass over time, a conservative approach is desirable for now.

Stock markets, too, seem to have taken the narrative of sustained economic growth and a likely acceleration in the same to an excess. This is especially true for small/mid-caps. Nearly everyone I meet believes that small/mid-caps create wealth faster. While this may be true in a few cases, I doubt whether it's the case on average. The faster wealth creation post-Covid by small/mid-caps can be largely attributed to the much sharper fall they experienced. If 100 falls to 70 (representative of the fall of large-caps during Covid), the journey back to 100 returns 40 per cent; on the other hand, if 100 falls to 30 (representative of small/mid-caps in the Covid downturn), the journey back to 100 yields more than 200 per cent. It is primarily for this reason that the returns experienced in small/mid-caps have been much higher over the past four-five years.

It did not help matters that nearly 75 per cent of the current 20 crore demat accounts did not exist before Covid! This set of investors has no understanding or memory of the similar cycles of 1992, 2000, 2008 etc. Even the frenzied activity in IPOs calls for caution. Investors would do well to remember the golden words of the American investor John C. Bogle: "Reversion to the mean is the iron rule of the financial markets."

The writer is founder and CEO, 3P Investment Managers

MSP IS NOT ENOUGH

Excessive focus on it is narrow and counterproductive

SHOUMITRO CHATTERJEE

THE DEBATE ABOUT instituting a legally binding Minimum Support Price (MSP) for crops is both narrow and counterproductive. While it aims to address farmers' challenges, it overlooks complexities that can exacerbate rural poverty and destabilise agricultural markets. These include climate-induced production shocks, which pose a greater risk than price volatility, and the need to align agricultural production with changing dietary preferences.

The two best policy instruments to address these are income support and price deficiency payments to ensure stable rural incomes and expanded and decentralised public procurement at market prices for production and consumption diversification.

First, the baseline safety net should be a targeted quasi-Universal Basic Income (q-UBI) for rural households, as the former chief economic advisor, Arvind Subramanian, proposed. This support would extend PM-Kisan beyond cultivators. Setting the q-UBI payment higher than PM-Kisan payouts — perhaps at the average income of a five-acre farmer — will ensure meaningful coverage of price and quantity shocks.

MSP-driven frameworks ignore the reality that rural livelihoods extend beyond agriculture. For example, thousands of rural citizens earn their livelihoods as traders and are the backbone of our agricultural supply chains.

An artificially high MSP combined with depressed retail prices undermines their livelihoods. Additionally, focusing only on price stabilisation leaves farmers vulnerable to climate-induced yield shocks.

In addition to q-UBI, price deficiency payments can insulate farmers from extreme price shocks while maintaining market discipline. For instance, when crop prices in a dis-

trict drop drastically, farmers there could be compensated for a fraction — say 30 per cent — of the average loss. This shields farmers from extreme volatility while incentivising market adaptability.

This approach requires a robust market intelligence system, which, though established in some states, remains underdeveloped or absent in others. This mechanism should come into play during extreme fluctuations. Persistently low prices over several seasons must serve as a signal for farmers to switch crops or consider alternative livelihoods.

Second, public procurement must evolve and be rationalised to reflect changing demand patterns. State governments, with central funding, should expand their procurement portfolios to include a broader range of crops for the Public Distribution System (PDS), mid-day meals, and other welfare schemes. To keep consumption subsidies fiscally manageable, the expansion in the scope of products covered should be accompanied by better and narrower targeting of beneficiaries.

Programmes like PM-AASHA already allow for decentralised procurement, but states must take the lead in implementation. The central government should not be held accountable for states failing to operationalise these frameworks effectively. Additionally, states should be held fiscally responsible to minimise wastage. PM-AASHA puts a cap on procurement and incorporates this principle. It can be tailored further to ensure the Centre pays a consumer subsidy only if the procured crops are utilised in welfare programmes.

Concomitantly, the Centre should broaden strategic reserves beyond rice and wheat to include pulses, oilseeds, and other essential crops. This benefits farmers and shields con-

sumers from price shocks in key commodities, as in the case of onions, which have experienced wild price swings in recent years. Unlike the present, however, all public procurement should occur at market prices, not predetermined MSPs. Procurement quantities should be guided by demand conditions and existing inventories to prevent overstocking and wastage. The major shift I am proposing here is that the central and state governments help farmers not by stipulating a minimum price but by being key players in markets. A diversified PDS will lead to a procurement strategy that would stabilise demand, fostering a more resilient food system.

The demand for a legally binding MSP stems from years of ignoring the farmers on various counts such as inadequate crop insurance and suppressed prices due to export restrictions. There is also merit in debating the legal framework for agricultural support. However, by focusing solely on MSP, we risk missing the opportunity to implement a more comprehensive and dynamic policy framework.

The two components of the proposed package represent significant departures from existing systems. However, they are grounded in the infrastructure and experiences gained over the past decade. Admittedly, working out the details will require careful planning and collaboration, but this integrated approach promises a more sustainable and equitable way to support farmers. It safeguards rural livelihoods, fosters dynamic agricultural markets, and aligns policies with future demands.

The writer is assistant professor of International Economics at Johns Hopkins University, USA

JANUARY 28, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

SUMMIT ON NUKES

THE SIX-NATION summit on nuclear disarmament to be held in India is likely to call for restrictions on nuclear weapons in space. The Prime Ministers of India, Sweden, Greece and the Presidents of Tanzania, Mexico and Argentina will adopt their statement on follow-up action on the joint appeal issued last year calling for a freeze in nuclear arsenals.

ARMS CONTROL

US PRESIDENT, RONALD REAGAN, says US-Soviet arms control talks resuming on March 12 in Geneva are likely to be long and tough.

But he told reporters that the US would "stay there at the table with the hope that this time we can arrive at an actual reduction". The announcement of the new talks, made simultaneously in Washington and Moscow, ends a 14-month hiatus in negotiations.

IT PROBES MARUTI

INVESTIGATION TEAMS FROM the Income Tax Department have begun a detailed scrutiny of the Maruti cars sold in the black market. Special teams began their work at the premises of the authorised Maruti dealers in Delhi and collected the names of all those who had been delivered cars.

Instructions have been issued to carry out such surveys in all the metropolitan cities and dealers in other major cities and towns of the country. Sources said that Finance Minister V P Singh has expressed concern over this business that has generated Rs 20 crore in black money in less than six months.

INDIA IN HOCKEY FINAL

INDIA SCORED A thumping 9-1 victory over Japan in the semi-finals of the Asia Cup in Osaka. In the final, they will meet their traditional rivals Pakistan, who beat South Korea 7-0 in the other semi-final.





DECCAN HERALD
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Loud and clear: Noise not part of religion

The Bombay High Court's ruling that the use of loudspeakers is not an essential part of any religion is, more than an opinion about religion, an assertion of the right of people to a life without unwelcome decibels. The world is becoming increasingly noisy and also contributing to the problem are places of worship that blare out sounds in various forms such as *azaans* (calls to prayer) and *bhajans*. All this is defended as part of religious prescriptions or essentialities. The court rejected this argument in a petition filed by members of two housing societies in Mumbai. The petitioners told the court that the *azaan* from nearby mosques violated the Noise Pollution (Regulation and Control) Rules, 2000. The court allowed the petition and told law enforcement agencies to take action in the case of such violations. It noted that noise was a major health hazard and denial of the use of loudspeakers could not be considered a denial of religious rights. It is in public interest and the rights under Article 19 or Article 25 are not infringed by that.

Environmentalists and those who are concerned with public health have been highlighting the risks noise poses in India. High noise levels cause inconvenience to students, senior citizens and sick persons. *Azaans*, *bhajans*, speeches from public platforms, and announcements all cause noise pollution. The 2020 rules were framed with the objective of "maintaining ambient air quality standards in respect of noise." Religious grounds are often invoked when they are breached. The court has now made its position clear.

Loudspeakers are a fairly recent invention and have come to be widely used in religious and public places only in the last few decades. They are not part of centuries-old religions. Political parties and organisations that make speeches and announcements through loudspeakers also should shun or minimise their use. Unfortunately, all activities connected with religion and politics are aimed at impressing or influencing people and are often enhanced with noise, colour, or spectacle. The use of loudspeakers in processions has, sometimes, created law and order problems. There should be better appreciation of the dangers of noise pollution in a rapidly urbanising society. It is a problem even in villages now. Those who manage religious places and others who raise the levels of noise in public places should care for the physical and mental well-being of people. Police have to adopt a zero-tolerance approach when initiating action against violators of the rules.

Strengthen state's conservation policy

Karnataka has witnessed a sharp rise in wildlife conflicts in recent years, and the situation is only set to worsen unless immediate corrective measures are taken. From cattle deaths to crop destruction, and even human injuries and fatalities, the state's wildlife management is facing a full-blown crisis. An analysis of data paints a grim picture: the number of cattle kills has increased from around 2,000 to over 3,000 annually in just five years. Similarly, crop damage is now near 38,000 instances per year. While the rise in conflicts is often attributed to forest encroachment, this narrative oversimplifies a much more complex issue. Encroachment is undoubtedly a major concern, but it is not the root cause. A far more pressing issue is the deteriorating health and quality of the state's forests. The rapid growth of monoculture plantations and the spread of invasive species like *lantana*, *eupatorium* and *parthenium* have depleted the biodiversity of the forests, leaving animals without their natural food source, further escalating conflicts.

This ecological imbalance is compounded by the absence of effective afforestation policies and their poor implementation. While the state has undertaken numerous afforestation initiatives, the quality of these efforts is often questionable. Is afforestation really taking place on the ground, or is it simply a paper exercise to justify the release of funds? This calls for a thorough audit of the state's afforestation programmes and the overall health of the forests. Is the state creating habitats that can support wildlife, or is it merely planting trees without any regard for the ecological need of the land? Moreover, the problem is being amplified by climate change. As temperatures rise and rainfall patterns shift, the forest ecosystems are under immense stress, disrupting the delicate balance of flora and fauna. Forest fragmentation, driven by infrastructure projects, mining and unchecked tourism, has further shrunk the living spaces of many species.

What is urgently required is a comprehensive conservation policy, that goes beyond piecemeal solutions. The forest department needs to prioritise ecosystem restoration, address the invasive species problem, and ensure that afforestation programmes are scientifically and ecologically sound. The department, already stretched thin, needs more support in terms of resources and personnel. At the same time, a coordinated effort between government agencies, NGOs, and local communities is essential to manage and mitigate wildlife conflicts. To prevent this crisis from spiralling out of control, the government should move beyond blaming encroachment and focus on restoring the quality of forests. Only with a holistic approach to conservation can the state hope to balance human development with the survival of wildlife.

Bombay HC has noted that denial of the use of loudspeakers is no denial of religious rights

Funds are coming in but is the afforestation push working in Karnataka?

Non-binary narratives in learning practices can foster social consciousness outside classrooms

SWARUPA DEB AND ANIKET NANDAN

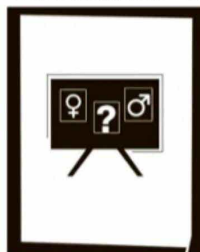
There is a pertinent question that reverberates through the very fabric of inclusive education: What does it truly mean to belong in a classroom? A question that has profound significance, especially for non-binary students navigating binary-oriented classrooms. This concern requires not just a response, but a reimagining of what classrooms can and should be – a transformative arena where every student feels seen, heard, and included.

Recently, the Karnataka High Court, in hearing a writ petition (WP 14908/2023) of Mugil Anbu Vasantha v. State of Karnataka & Ors., directed NLSIU, Bengaluru, to uphold constitutional guarantees for transgender students by providing 0.5% reservation in law courses. While NLSIU has been a relatively inclusive campus space for non-binary students as part of an ongoing journey towards holistic inclusivity, this directive by the High Court presents a key framework for extending representation of non-binary students in India's classrooms. Mugil Anbu Vasantha's writ petition goes beyond placing the spotlight on a single institution. It rather highlights a broader systemic failure of mainstream society floundering to address the concerns of non-binary students.

This calls urgent attention to the need to interrogate the existing 'inclusive' educational frameworks fraught with concerns of discrimination and exclusion. Simultaneously, a discussion on the contemporary perspectives on education also underscores the radical project of subject formation – driven by notions of efficiency, merit, and commodification. While the education landscape claims to pursue new forms of reasoning and rationality that aim to instill liberal values of equality and the legacy of humanism, it is often observed to be reviving the traditional moral order associated with family, gender roles, and social hierarchies. It is also to be noted that within this framework, inclusive education for non-binary students encounters unique contradictions.

Therefore, the model of inclusive education vis-à-vis non-binary students emphasises a system that adapts to the needs of students rather than expecting students to conform to a rigid framework. For non-binary students, this approach challenges traditional norms and paves the way for greater acceptance and equity.

On the contrary, the content of curricula – shaped by the binary mainstream – emphasises the social construction theory expounding on the constructs of 'men' and 'women' based on physiological signifiers, further reinscribing the normativity of cis-embodyments both inside and outside classrooms. A practice that effectively posits trans and non-binary bodies as exceptions or 'others' confounding the very logic of inclusion. Academic resources and teaching techniques often omit diverse identities, and rigid assessment systems struggle to acknowledge the lived realities of marginalised groups, including queer and non-binary individuals. Moreover, these inclusive classrooms



often discuss non-binary discourses distinctively outside of/adjunction to the binary reinforcing the binary as the mainstream and all other identities and practices as exceptions: a construct that has historically harmed non-binary people and their knowledge. These classroom methods rooted in traditional gender roles, reflect cis-gender heteronormative priorities by favouring conformity over diversity, ensuring that societal structures remain predictable and governable.

Unlearning the normal

Education systems have mutated from spaces of critical thinking to prioritising individual achievement and societal expectations. Consequently, narratives that challenge conventional norms, such as those of non-binary identities, are often overlooked or marginalised. Inclusive education for non-binary students in India continues to face systemic barriers exacerbated by structural inequities, where access to quality education is rapidly privileging financial capacity and peripheralising marginalised students. What we need are classrooms that integrate non-binary discourses into contemporary, intersectional contexts rather than a narrow specialisation dealing with a caricatured population of non-binary people – classrooms that encourage students to unlearn the hegemonies of arranging bodies and their preferences into binary categories.

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

The romance of e-commerce

Every update is a thrilling chapter in the unseen story of how my online purchases find their way to my doorstep

SHYAMALA RAO

Umesha has picked up your order! There can be no words more thrilling when you're hungry and tracking your order on the food delivery app.

But you don't just settle down patiently for your brown paper bag to arrive. You continue to watch the red-and-black motorcycle icon on the map as it inches its way towards you. You cheer for Umsha when he makes a nifty U-turn, and wait nervously as he nears that troublesome traffic bottleneck. The tracking experience brings a little excitement of its own, and you're not alone if you indulge in it.

When you're famished and impa-

tient, it's a natural urge to see how far away your food is. But people often track even when the reason is not so urgent. A consumer habits survey found that people liked to track their orders every day, even if delivery wasn't expected immediately. Some do it, apparently, because of what Urban Dictionary calls "pre-purchase anxiety," the state of nervous apprehension you're in until you have your hands on the thing you've paid for. But I find that there are far nicer reasons to track a package, especially if it's to reach you after a long journey: the romance of all those far-off, unknown places it touches on its way, the images it conjures of early-morning trains and cargo trucks on dusty roads.

If you're into old novels, you're aware of the delicious thrills that await a sentence like this: "Early that morning, the ship dropped anchor at the port of Aden." The tracking enthusiast feels a similar rush on seeing "5:30 a.m.: Package left Sonepat." There's a flutter of anticipation for the thing that's arriving, of course, but to check on it during its

journey is a delight in itself.

The order update shows me that my 'Tangail cotton saree was picked up in Santipur, West Bengal. But it has to stay overnight in Ranaghat before it is sent to the regional facility at Howrah. And the bell metal box from Sirohi must rest for a while at the Abu Road Junction in Rajasthan. They both arrive at the Hoskote sorting hub on the same day, and travel together to my Bengaluru home.

And having followed their adventures, I picture dotted lines crisscrossing all over the country, connecting my life with the lives of innumerable strangers who played a role in bringing me something I desired. I think of someone, somewhere, folding and packing my saree, someone else loading it onto a rattling truck in the predawn hours. Tracking a package isn't just watching its progress; it's imagining the invisible hands that are all part of this unspoken adventure. In the quiet, overlooked romance of e-commerce, there's a joy not just in what you get, but in the story of how it found its way to you.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Guidelines needed

The government's inquiry into microfinance bodies' lending practices, prompted by complaints of harassment during lean recovery periods, is a welcome step. To better serve the needy, guidelines for lending and recovery practices should be established. Additional-

ly, alternative microfinance schemes through banks, cooperatives, and authorised finance companies should be explored to provide more facilities for the underprivileged. **A K Shariff, Mysuru**

A misguided pull-out

Apologies 'Trump decision bad for global healthcare' (Jan 27). US President Donald Trump's short-sighted decision to disengage his country from the WHO has justifiably raised concerns throughout the world. If not reversed, it would inflame a major blow to the functioning of the renowned global body, which has long dealt with emerging threats

from new viruses and outbreaks of life-threatening and major diseases. **Kamal Laddha, Bengaluru**

How uniform is UCC?

The Uniform Civil Code is a forward-looking mechanism ('Uniform Civil Code' to be rolled out in Uttarakhand today, Jan 27) that proposes to unify people irrespective of caste, creed or social status. India's exist-

ence hinges on diversity with people practising different religions and the exemption of tribal communities from the scope of the code raises questions about its 'uniformity'. **S S Paul, Nadia (West Bengal)**

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

SPEAK OUT

The BJP government in Haryana has mixed poison in the Yamuna which flows into Delhi. If mixed with Delhi's drinking water, it would've caused many deaths.



Arvind Kejriwal, former Delhi CM

Doubt is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is absurd.

Voltaire

TO BE PRECISE

HOW WILL YOU SURVIVE IF ALL CITIZENS ARE EQUAL?



IN PERSPECTIVE

Are India's laws ripe for review?

SC has underlined the need for legislative reviews to assess how laws meet their objectives

SURBH SACHDEV AND JIWALIKA BALAJI

If you were to die tomorrow, your will would have to conform to the arcane and archaic procedures laid out in the Indian Succession Act of 1925, a 100-year-old legislation. Your will would have been registered under a law fast approaching its 120th anniversary – the Registration Act of 1908. These laws suffer from glaring shortfalls, such as the need to make a physical will and registering it through a paper-based and in-person process. Though these laws have clearly withered with time, they have somehow withstood the test of time.

A literal century, and then some, has gone by, yet a wholesale review of the performance of these laws remains a pipe dream. Fast forward to the Companies Act of 2013 – this legislation has seen a decade of substantial amendments. But who is to say an untouched 100-year-old law has performed better or worse than a 10-year-old law in a state of constant revision? At the moment, we struggle to answer this question as we do not have a framework to review these laws.

Recently, the Supreme Court reiterated this need for a periodic review of legislation, calling for "legislative reviews", in addition to judicial reviews, in order to question how well a law has fulfilled its objectives. As recently as July last year, the Supreme Court directed that a "performance audit" of the Maharashtra Slum Areas (Improvement, Clearance and Redevelopment) Act, 1971 be undertaken. The Court emphasised the government's "constitutional duty" to ensure the accomplishment of a statute's purpose while implementing it, which entails an additional duty to "closely monitor the working of a statute", along with a continuous and real-time assessment of the statute's impact. This, according to the Apex Court, is an integral part of the Rule of Law.

A two-judge bench of the Supreme Court does not use the words "constitutional duty" and "Rule of Law" lightly – it imposes a heavy impetus on the government to regularly evaluate its laws for their efficacy. However, conducting such evaluations would require a systematic framework for evaluation as a first step.

A dedicated department In India, the Law Commission, standing committees, and Parliamentary Committees sometimes review specific legislation on an ad-hoc basis. However, these reviews

are neither mandatory nor periodic. A periodic review of legislation can concretely be built into a regulatory framework, through executive or legislative action. An exclusive department to evaluate the functioning of laws could be set up (as in Chile with the Law Evaluation Department). Alternatively, a legislation can be enacted which mandates periodic review, and sets out the framework for the same (as is the case in Thailand through the Rules of Legislative Drafting and Evaluation of the Outcomes of Law Act, B.E. 2562 (2019)).

Once we answer how such a framework can come about, the question of what this framework evaluates for, continues to loom. In India, although the Law Commission is tasked with ad-hoc review of legislations, there is no clarity on the methodology and the metrics it uses for the same. For example, the 'Terms of Reference' for the 22nd Law Commission of India state that it should carry out a review and repeal of obsolete laws, assess laws for their clarity and simplicity, and evaluate their impact on stakeholders from a socio-economic and gender equality perspective.

However, the reports published by this Law Commission contain no further specifications on the methodology by which these Terms of Reference were met, and on what basis the Commission was evaluating the legislations and provisions in question. In reviewing a law for effectiveness, a fair and comprehensive assessment scheme is key. A model framework for evaluation should strive to be comprehensive, even if it cannot be exhaustive. Laws could be assessed both from a rights-based perspective (for example, assessing the balance between rights and restrictions, evaluating the effects of the legislation on individual rights) as well as an administrative perspective (for example, undertaking a cost-benefit analysis of implementation, measuring the impact of the law on various stakeholders etc.).

Another approach to review a law could be the use of "macro" and "micro" markers. Macro markers would involve general and objective metrics, such as clarity in drafting, interface with other laws, adherence to the Constitution and so on. Micro markers are the objectives that the law sets out for itself, allowing for more substantive scrutiny of the laws as well. These models are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive, but merely indicative. They emerge as possible starting points to begin imagining such a framework, rather than concrete suggestions.

As the laws in India hit their ten, twenty, or even hundred-year marks, they are not only ripe for a review, but for a systematic, periodic, and objective review.

(The writers are research fellows at Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy)

Protecting consumers

Rules for e-commerce must be comprehensive and clear

The recent e-commerce draft guidelines, brought out by the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS), are a move in the right direction at a time when online shopping in India is witnessing fast growth. The self-regulatory rulebook is aimed at addressing concerns of consumers as well as other stakeholders, and, therefore, will mean. However, the involvement of multiple ministries and departments in framing policies and rules, whether mandatory or self-regulatory, sends out a confusing signal. For instance, the e-commerce policy is still being made at the commerce and industry ministry. Without that umbrella policy, the guidelines framed by the BIS, which functions as a statutory body under the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution, may translate into a piecemeal exercise. An early release of the e-commerce policy will bring greater transparency to regulations.

As for the latest draft guidelines, to which the industry can respond by mid-February, an effort must be made to tweak the rules in a way that they address the varied business models followed by e-commerce companies. The diverse models have evolved over time. How a large online marketplace operates is very different from a food-delivery platform. And how a niche inventory-based single-brand fashion e-commerce company runs its business has no similarity to a quick commerce entity's operations. Therefore, the guidelines must factor in these variations to help e-commerce businesses stay nimble while protecting consumers from fraudulent practices.

Estimated at around \$137 billion, India's e-commerce market is projected to expand at a compound annual growth rate of over 20 per cent between 2025 and 2030. The BIS has taken note of this growth in e-commerce to frame the guidelines for self-governance, citing challenges in consumer protection and trust. The draft outlines a framework with a three-phase approach covering pre-transactions, contract formation, and post-transaction stages. Each phase would require elaborate compliance processes by e-commerce platforms, including KYC (know your customer) checks on business partners/sellers, product listings, details on seller contacts, a level playing field for all stakeholders, among others. While some of the proposed steps like having a human interaction for help/guidance would be useful for a large majority of the buyers, others like stating the carbon footprint in product labels and online platforms could be challenging.

Despite its recent high growth, the size of the e-commerce market in India is still a fraction of the country's retail sector, which was estimated at around \$950 billion last year. This leaves a huge window of growth in e-commerce, especially with increasing internet penetration and adoption of smartphones. With that in mind, regulatory intervention in e-commerce should be light-touch so that businesses, a large part of which are startups, are not stifled with multiple compliance obligations. However, the government and the stakeholders must work together to ensure consumer protection across the retail universe, both in physical stores and e-commerce platforms, in terms of quality of products, return and refund policy, and payment issues. For that to be enforced with zero tolerance for violations, a central regulatory body has to be put in place with powers to penalise errant businesses. Rules made by different ministries and departments would only end up complicating business processes, increasing compliance costs, and thwarting growth in a sector that has shown promise.

Small steps to equity

Lowering SIP threshold should increase penetration

The Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) has proposed the "sachetisation" of systematic investment plans (SIPs) by allowing funds to offer SIPs at ₹250 per month. If necessary, the regulator says it will help to subsidise transaction costs for asset management companies (AMCs) that offer these schemes. The small ticket size has been compared to shampoo sachets in the consultation paper and the objective is to further democratise investing by making SIPs affordable for lower-income groups. It could be a good product for Tier-III towns and rural settings, given the income match with those populations. In analogy, just as shampoo sachets opened up rural markets and reached lower-income groups, Sebi hopes this would lead to an explosion of interest in equity products in underpenetrated geographies and income groups.

Currently, the minimum SIP amount for most funds is ₹500 per month. The new sachet SIPs can be offered by any fund, but an investor can take only three SIPs (from different schemes) at a rock-bottom cost. The mutual fund industry may welcome the concept in principle but there could be significant challenges in getting it off the ground. According to back-of-the-envelope calculations by members of the Association of Mutual Funds in India (AMFI), each instalment of the new SIP will cost around ₹2, given transaction costs such as gateway fees and processing fees. This amounts to around 0.8 per cent, which is higher than the total expense ratio in direct mutual fund purchases (the investors buy the units directly from the AMC and save on intermediary costs). In effect, given the new target audience and geographies, AMCs will have to develop a distribution network, which will further drive up costs. This would leave funds with no headroom to invest in distribution or publicity, implying the schemes would not be well publicised. Since this product targets low-income groups, which aren't currently part of the investment community, and it looks at geographies that are underpenetrated, the scheme may not be easy to publicise.

While Sebi may be prepared to subsidise the scheme to some extent, there would still be little headroom to publicise the sachet schemes or invest in distribution. Eventually, if the scheme becomes popular, it could be profitable at scale for the funds. Hence, big AMCs may be prepared to use this sachet concept as a loss leader to penetrate new geographies and investment cohorts. However, smaller funds may simply not have the resources. This could lead to an asymmetry in the market with smaller funds being elbowed out of the competition. The devil will be in the detail. How much subsidy will the regulator provide or, alternatively, how can it reduce transaction costs incurred by AMCs for mutual fund products? The former option cannot be a long-term proposition. Even if Sebi decides to kickstart the concept with a subsidy, it would not be healthy for the regulator to subsidise investors for an extended period because it would lead to distortions in the ecosystem. The latter possibility—bringing down costs—may be the way to go but it's up to the regulator to find viable ways to do this without hurting the interests of stakeholders.

Net-net, the idea is attractive in theory, but a lot of detail would have to be worked out in place for it to be workable in practice. Floating the concept may, however, lead to solutions being found, since AMCs would like to bring low-income groups into the investment fold. However, the regulator would have to work out the designs carefully after consultations with the industry.

Taming inflation: How the Budget can help

By easing supply-side constraints and using counter-inflationary tariff policy, the finance ministry can ensure prices remain in check

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SHINHA



Budget 2025 will be presented against the backdrop of a cyclical slowing of growth to a two-year low 5.4 per cent in Q3 2024 and persistent concerns over inflation. This two-front economic challenge and the appropriate monetary policy response to deal with it have led to sharp differences of opinion within the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI's) monetary policy committee (MPC) and among economists.

Very little attention is being paid to the role of the fiscal authorities in mitigating the costs of the inflation-growth trade-offs. Budget 2025 is an opportunity to address some of these dilemmas and, in the process, improve the efficacy of monetary policy.

Take the case of food prices, the main driver of headline inflation and the bone of contention between the monetary "hawks" and "doves". During the last decade, food price volatility has remained unaffected by interest rates, lending credence to the claims it is a purely supply-side phenomenon.

True, weather and other supply-side disruptions are crucial factors behind food price volatility. But there is more to the issue than meets the eye. Counterintuitively, elevated food inflation over most of the last decade has been accompanied by rising consumption levels for food and non-food goods across the board.

According to the Household Consumption and Expenditure Surveys 2023 and 2024, since 2011-12, the food basket has become healthier as shares of milk products, fish & meat, and fresh fruits have increased for all income strata. Another indicator of rising income levels is that the share of food in the consumption basket has come down across the board. The dietary improvements are striking for the poorest 20 per cent in rural and urban areas. Poor households experienced a relatively significant increase in expenditure shares of milk products, eggs, fish & meat, and fresh fruits.

Therefore, food inflation seems to be, at least in

part, driven by the income effect, powered by direct income transfers (e.g., PM-KISAN, pensions), free or subsidised food, and other "freebies" provided by the Centre and states. These fiscal transfers are here to stay, for political economy reasons. They, in effect, increase the beneficiaries' purchasing power, which is used to buy non-food items and services. This inference is further corroborated by steady rural demand for two-wheelers and relatively low-price fast-moving consumer goods in rural basket, even in the face of relatively high inflation. To the extent driven by the income effect, food inflation, rather than hurting the poor, seems to manifest improved welfare.

At the same time, post-harvest losses and rotting stocks due to inadequate storage capacity restrict supplies and thus significantly contribute to vegetable and fruit price inflation and volatility, especially for potatoes, onions, and tomatoes. The onus lies with the Centre and state governments.

To ease food inflation, Budget 2025 should focus on cold storage, warehouses and transportation logistics. Such facilities should be developed on a public-private partnership basis for efficiency gains. Irrational caps on storage and load capacity should be removed to attract private investment. Budgetary support should be increased for R&D, extension services, and price support to improve the productivity of edible oil crops, which are a leading cause of food inflation and avoidable import bills. Customs duty on food items should also be anti-inflationary.

These measures will reduce food inflation, creating enough elbow room for the RBI to cut interest rates to provide the much-needed boost to private investment and consumption. Sticking to the fiscal glide path and restricting the fiscal deficit to 4.5 per cent of GDP will also help.

The effectiveness of interest rate cuts in inducing



RAM SINGH

'Virasat aur Vikas' in clothes and food

The theme of this Republic Day, "Virasat aur Vikas", heritage and progress, is an invitation to examine how our Indianness in everyday life has evolved since liberalisation and how far we have travelled from an earlier love for all things foreign to a comfort with our Indianness. Food and clothes are the most interesting lenses through which to examine this. In the early 90s, global consultants advised Indian marketers to prepare for Indians significantly westernising in their choice of clothes and food, following the pattern of most markets that developed before us. The saris would go the kimono way and become ceremonial and as the ranks of working women swelled, Indian breads would become crumbed and sold in "breads". Things have, however, panned out a bit differently 25 years later.

Food and clothes, of course, have changed significantly. You cannot accuse India of over-remaining static. However, change has not been linear or along clearly defined vectors. It has been a constant swirl of the old, the new, and the remixed.

The sari is now worn a lot less frequently across all ages and social classes. But sari wearers are not so rare as to attract special notice in public spaces. Yes, nowadays at certain kinds of business and social events in a few big cities, sari wearers are rare and conspicuous, but young women in impeccable business suits do not dismiss them with the judgemental coding of "behind the curve". In fact, they offer the observation of the sari wearer being "power dressed".

Interestingly, the sari is finding its new modernity. It is now being worn with sneakers, t-shirts, and crop tops, escaping the tyranny of matching colours and the constricting styles of old-school sarees. There is a new energy of innovation in sari colours, designs, and fabrics across the price spectrum—especially at the middle to high end. And for the younger generation that is unwilling to struggle with draping 18 feet of

fabric, the pre-stitched "ready-to-wear" saris have arrived. Men in urban, upper social classes are not lagging behind either, embracing the so-called "ethnic clothes" for both formal and casual occasions, with apparel brands sprouting to serve them. Ready-to-wear dhotis are here to accompany the ready-to-wear saris!

At the same time, experimentation with adoption of non-"ethnic" clothing has taken women by storm across the board, egged on by exciting, affordable e-commerce. The judgemental coding, even as recently as the 80s, of people who wore Western clothes is fast disappearing. Temples abound with young women clad in jeans even as women police constables wear sindoor and garla with their uniforms during Marathi festivals.

A young professional from a community known for traditional social norms said she was going with her parents to a community event, her "coming out" or "debut" onto the arranged marriage scene. Asked what the dress code was, she said (designer) jeans—a nice top, quilted jacket, and a pair of sneakers. A young man of the contradiction between such clothing modernity and the otherwise conservative milieu. A young married couple from a similar milieu explained: "Because it's only the outside trappings; nobody cares about that as long as you conform to the important stuff". Modernity in India has often been seen as a tight fist loosening slowly, and we are seeing a lot of that.

Today's India has women ubiquitously embracing the new uniform of freedom wear, akin to the transition from dresses to pants in the rest of the world, but in the form of a new-age remix of the traditional north Indian salwar kameez. Called "punjabi dress", it is India's even in the most conservative parts of South India. This remixed garment has gained even more freedom by losing its dupatta, considered *de rigueur* for decency not long ago.

Dupattas are now worn symbolically for formal occasions, relegated to one shoulder, not serving



RAMA BIJAPURKAR

investment will depend on domestic demand prospects. Labour market conditions also play an important role. The usual status unemployment rates have reduced drastically to 3.7 per cent and 3.5 per cent for urban and rural areas, respectively. However, there is slack on the wages front—real wages growth is modest for semi- and mid-skilled workers. This manifests in the subdued middle-class demand for discretionary items—small houses, sedans, hatchbacks, etc.

Greater fiscal and administrative support is needed for the success of employment-linked incentive schemes to improve labour market outcomes. The PM Internship scheme—monthly assistance of ₹5,000 for the 12-month internship—needs to be scaled up to achieve the target of 10 million beneficiaries over five years. To make it popular and successful, the scheme should be integrated into the academic curricula of vocational universities.

There is a chorus demanding income tax rate cuts to boost consumption-led growth. The fact is that most of the "middle class" pays very little income tax. In the assessment year 2023-24, only about 3.4 per cent of the adult population of India actually paid any income tax. The income tax rate cuts will help boost demand but for the upper middle and top-income groups. Benefits of goods and services tax rates are better to boost demand of low- and middle-income groups.

To revive middle-class demand, we must rev up India's economic engine, powered by 60 million micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), which account for about 250 million jobs and 45 per cent of exports. They borrow at usurious rates ranging from 24 per cent to 36 per cent. Unsurprisingly, many end up with special mention accounts or non-performing assets. According to estimates, 1.2 million jobs at stake can be saved by revamping the Framework for Revival and Rehabilitation to restructure distressed accounts.

Bringing the PM Internship scheme to MSMEs will help both employers and the additional hands they employ. However, the most serious hurdles for the growth of MSMEs are access to affordable finance and the broader market. The solution lies in creating digital collateral and asking banks to use them. The Budget should support digital infrastructure for MSMEs by linking the Unified Lending Interface (ULI)—the RBI's digital platform to facilitate lenders' decision-making—with other digital platforms, such as Aadhaar-linked KYC, e-Udyam, TReDS, GST data, income tax, and the Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC).

The ONDC can make MSMEs easily discoverable without relying on costly platforms like Amazon and Flipkart. Its usage should be encouraged through tax rebates and subsidies for ONDC-compliant software and hardware. AI-powered Big Data analytics can consolidate financial data from this and other platforms, along with bank statements, to create an accurate financial profile that can be used by banks to finance MSMEs.

Through these measures, the Budget will generate employment, boost income levels, and bolster the efficacy of growth-supportive monetary policy.

The author is director, Delhi School of Economics, and member, monetary policy committee. The views are personal.

The curious case of Cuba and Kerala



BOOK REVIEW

NEHA KIRPAL

Most people think of Cuba as "a tropical paradise known for three Ss (sun, sand and salsa), three Rs (rum, rumba and romance) and three Cs (cigars, classic cars and communism)". Having been fascinated by Cuba over several decades, author, journalist, columnist and political commentator Ulfleth N P finally had a chance to visit the country in the summer of 2023 on a journalist visa. This book is a result of that visit. It consists of his observations as well as conversations with various local people, including senior bureaucrats, scientists, students and tourists among others.

"As the largest island in the Caribbean Sea, Cuba is breathtakingly beautiful and

a magnet for tourists with its shimmering blue sea, stately mountains, colonial architecture, old-world charm, iconic cocktail, addictive music and the innocent faces of its people," he sums up his impressions at the beginning of the book. According to 2014 figures, there are about 60,000 classic cars on Cuba's streets, most of which are in Havana. "All these cars, according to their owners, are museum pieces," he writes. "The former grandfathers to sons and now grandsons," writes Ulfleth. With its thousands of species of flora and fauna as well as bars and restaurants made famous by the likes of Ernest Hemingway, however, there is a lot more to discover in Cuba than meets the eye.

As a young primary school boy in Kerala, Ulfleth first came across Cuba and Fidel Castro in 1982. These encounters were mostly in the form of political discussions at his Marxist household and on the streets of Kannur where he lived. Mainly due to its active theme along with works on and by the Argentine-born Cuban revolutionary, Che Guevara, recalls Ulfleth. He adds

repository of communist values. "The influence of leftist politics in Kerala was so deep that it spawned a literary culture that familiarised the people with classics and heroes associated with liberation movements from afar," writes Ulfleth. In 1983, Castro visited New Delhi, where he met the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, whom he "bear-hugged" at the inauguration of the Non-Aligned Summit. "A dashingly man with a beard and film-star looks, and more than that, charisma—for us kids, his photographs in dailies left a lasting impression," recalls Ulfleth.

Growing up inspired by the Cuban Revolution that brought Castro and his fellow revolutionaries to power, Ulfleth pored through countless left journals, documentaries, articles on Cuba by Malayali Marxists as well as Malayalam translations of Cuban literature over the years. "Some of us friends, all of us like-minded and curious about Cuba, also shared books on Castro and discussed them along with works on and by the Argentine-born Cuban revolutionary, Che Guevara," recalls Ulfleth. He adds

another reason for Malayalis to feel a special affinity for Fidel—who is his love for drumsticks (morning), which are perhaps consumed more in Kerala than in any other part of India. As a young journalist later, Ulfleth had the opportunity to meet Guevara's daughter, Aleida, who was pleasantly surprised at his heroic welcome she received in several parts of Kerala, when she visited India in 1997. In 1990, Ulfleth first read the Malayalam translation of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, who soon became one of his favourite authors. Interestingly, Marquez also became the favourite of publishers and booksellers in the state, where his books continue to be bestsellers. In fact, shortly after Marquez died in 2014, Red DC, who runs the state's top publishing house DC Books, is believed to have commented, "Marquez has been accepted

and enjoyed by Keralites as a Malayali writer and not as a foreigner." Further, the love for Maradona in football-crazy Kerala knows no bounds. "Maradona became synonymous with Cuba, too, besides, of course, Argentina, which, to date, remains the all-time favourite team among the Malayalis," writes Ulfleth.

Ulfleth elaborates on how Cuba is unique in more ways than one. "The country has been under the longest term embargo in modern history—since 1960," he points out. Despite American sanctions, the great progress Cuba has made in education, biotechnology, public health, pharmaceuticals and agriculture is commendable.

average life expectancy in the country is above 79 years, which is on a par with advanced countries. According to the World Health Organization, Cuba has literacy levels of close to 100 per cent, and is home to the highest number of centenarians in the world. Founder-director of Antara Foundation, Ashok Alexander, once

referred to Cuba and Kerala as "curious cousins", given all that they have in common—small places with less population, high female literacy rate, a socialist-communist ideology, and both winners in public health delivery, especially maternal and child health. "Cuba, in a sense, is also a metaphor in Kerala for so-called communist values—which are considered not very different from Gandhian values in the state," explains Ulfleth.

But as with many small nations, Ulfleth discovered that in recent years, most young people have moved for jobs in large numbers to the US and Spain. While interacting with some of the nation's youth, he also found that unlike the older generation that was interested in the utopia of the revolution, the younger lot wants freedom from perpetual economic misery. "The young generation has ballooning aspirations of well-educated Cuban youth connected through the internet with peers around the world have led to frustration and a collective sense of 'FOMO'," he concludes.

The reviewer is a freelance writer based in New Delhi.



MAD ABOUT CUBA: A Malayali's Review of the Revolution
Author: Ulfleth N P
Publisher: Penguin
Pages: 223
Price: ₹399



Opinion

TUESDAY, JANUARY 28, 2025



COMMON LAW
Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar

Article 44 of the Constitution ordains that the State shall endeavour to secure for the citizens a Uniform Civil Code throughout the territory of India. One state has done it. I'm sure it will be a matter of time that the entire country will have similar legislation

Focus on smaller players

Budget should look at removing policies that end up breeding local monopolies

A GAINST THE BACKDROP of a slowing economy, in which smaller enterprises and downstream units have been hit by import restrictions, the government must heed the many voices cautioning against high import duties and other trade barriers that help only large corporations. Concerns have been expressed about how government policies may be creating "local monopolies". Indeed, the government would do well to review the imports and import policies on products such as solar panels, polyester, and viscose fibres, and other critical raw materials such as steel, copper, and aluminium. Tweaking the Customs duties on inputs, and correcting any anomalies is important to encourage the manufacture of finished goods in a host of sectors. By lowering import duties and easing other barriers, the government would not be doing the user industries a favour; it would merely be ensuring these businesses operate in a fair environment that will make their operations viable. This has the potential to create job opportunities at a time when larger Indian companies are scaling back on hiring and reining in wage hikes, and unemployment is a problem.

Critically, it would boost local manufacturing and help further India's China+1 aspirations. Although capacity-building has been meaningful in sectors such as green energy, semi-conductors, and electronics goods, the kind of capital commitment expected from the private sector after corporate tax rates were slashed in 2019, simply hasn't materialised. The government has gone all out to boost investments, rolling out schemes like FAME (Faster Adoption and Manufacturing of Hybrid and Electric Vehicles) for electric vehicles. The production-linked investment scheme is a generous one with 75% of the capex tax being picked up by the Centre and the state concerned. Reports in the media to the effect that the government is looking at a new concessional corporate tax scheme for new manufacturing units at 18% (plus cess and surcharge), in the nature of the one that lapsed in 2024, are encouraging.

Investments by the private sector have been sluggish partly because visibility on consumer demand remains hazy, especially with the economy having slowed sharply, and the fact that capacity utilisation is at a fairly high 74-75%. The finance minister has defended the private sector alluding to investments for CBAM — carbon border adjustment mechanism — but the fact is the sharp cut in the corporation tax from 30% to 22% was intended to drive more capex. However, it has been the government that is doing all the heavy-lifting these past few years.

Be that as it may, the current situation — slowing growth, tepid investments, and weak consumption — would call for some counter-cyclical support. The Budget is likely to have income tax steps for middle-income households which are reeling under runaway inflation, and it is possible that, at some point, goods and services tax rates may be eased. But while the Centre and states forgo revenues, companies, for their part, must meet them halfway by lowering prices, and sacrificing margins, to stimulate demand. Again, while credit is not much of a concern for sound projects, interest rates could certainly be lower and the Reserve Bank must reassess its priorities. Also, even as policy rates are cut, the liquidity in the system needs to be adequate at all times. One way the government can help unleash animal spirits, especially of small entrepreneurs, is by slashing the number of clearances and permits required. Red tapism and tax terrorism are throttling the ambitions of many small businessmen who cannot cosy up to the powers that be.

RUPEE DEPRECIATION

MONETARY POLICY INDEPENDENCE WILL BE TESTED

Concerns in capital account trend

RENU KOHLI

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Consider its four main financing components, i.e., net foreign portfolio investment (FPI), net foreign direct investment (FDI), external commercial borrowings (ECBs), and non-resident (NRI) deposits. The rupee pressures seemed to have been triggered by sudden FPI outflows of \$10.8 billion and \$2.4 billion in October-November as the US interest rate rose and the dollar strengthened. This was no novelty as India has withstood several such bouts of volatility in the past. The RBI seemed to have mastered the art of simultaneous interventions in both spot and forward markets to ensure an orderly correction.

So, what could have been different in the current episode? In fact, the central bank has been building up an outstanding net forward sales position from March 2024, and yet the pressure on the rupee did not ease.

The answer possibly lies with other components of the capital account, particularly the slowing inflow of FDI. Net FDI inflow, which fell to a 17-year low of \$10 billion in FY24, has worsened this year. During the first eight months (April-

November), net FDI inflow aggregated just \$478 million, largely because of net outflow of \$7 billion in the last three months (September-November 2024). NRI deposits (FCNR(B) and NRE(B)), a very stable financing source, also moderated to \$740 million in October with net outflow of \$38 million in November. Net ECB inflow too has been quite low recently, a monthly average of \$600 million to September 2024. While we do not have data for October-November 2024, there was risk this too could have weakened further because of the dollar's rise and rupee volatility.

Thus, the financing gap would have been much bigger than the RBI's currency managers had bargained for!

The RBI is likely to roll back its forward market position and minimise its spot market intervention for a more flexible rupee. Unfortunately, though, that may be a necessary condition but not a sufficient one. A weaker rupee is no guarantee to improve the current account balance in the short run. Without any immediate reversal in capital flows, the pressure on the rupee is unlikely to ease as financing

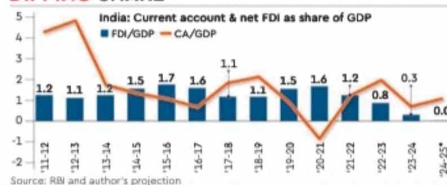
much smaller CAD could prove critical. Thus, the policy focus must turn to the capital account, specifically reversing the trend of secular decline in net FDI which is turning out to be a double blow — weakening prospects for private investment revival, and shutting off a significant and durable financing source for the current account. In fact, net FDI mostly stayed above 1% of GDP until FY22, after which it has slowed alarmingly from FY24 and fell to negligible amount until November 2024. If the trend persists in the forthcoming months, the pressure on the rupee can only mount (see chart).

Can ECBs and NRI deposits fill the gap? Most unlikely. Both respond to interest and exchange rate movements. Although the RBI has raised the interest rate cap on various tenures of NRI deposits in December, exchange rate volatility could be a deterrent. And with mounting rupee pressure, corporates would likely delay borrowing plans until the exchange rate stabilises.

Thus, in the short run, the only hope is that FPIs return. That appears difficult. After a small \$3-billion inflow in December, FPIs have sold nearly \$8 billion this month so far. It is striking that the total FPI sell-off, \$19 billion since October 2024, is Centre, the Treasury market — perhaps reflecting weak corporate results. There has been very little movement in the debt market, neither buying nor selling, despite hardening US interest rates. Although one must flag that FPIs have mostly stayed away from India's bond market post-inclusion in the JP Morgan bond index.

The situation remains fluid, and possibly macro-critical. One will have to see if the RBI will be able to assert monetary policy independence and lower the policy rate in February, risking a debt market sell-off and further pressuring the rupee. Likewise, any deviation from the fiscal consolidation path could unnerve the bond market. And to believe external sector pressure could be relieved through a more flexible exchange rate is somewhat misplaced. For a durable rupee stability, policy must address structural issues — make India an attractive destination for FDI again.

DIPPING SHARE



Skip the hype, here's how AI 'agents' can really help

SO-CALLED AGENTS ARE meant to be the next big thing in artificial intelligence this year. If the headlines about them are to be believed, you might think your job is on the line. It's not (for now at least) — but some back-office occupations probably are.

Last week, OpenAI announced its first agent-like tool called Operator, which carries out online tasks like navigating to a website and clicking on buttons, according to the company. But the idea is not unique. Alphabet's Google Anthropic, and Salesforce have all launched platforms for agents, or AI systems that can act autonomously. Imagine, for instance, a customer service bot that doesn't just generate information, but can also book an appointment or lodge a complaint. Mark Zuckerberg has said they'll replace mid-level software engineers this year, and earlier this month, Axios reported that a tech firm was preparing to release software that could autonomously handle complex tasks at a "PhD level". The hype around AI agents and their capabilities has reached fever pitch.

Yet while Silicon Valley dreams big, a small start-up in London called REKKI offers a more realistic preview of how agents could transform business. It sells access to a bot dubbed Claire, which processes orders for restaurant suppliers. Using large-language models from vendors such as OpenAI and Anthropic, the software can convert midnight voicemails from chefs into standardised data for a food seller's enterprise-resource planning (ERP) systems.

The result is that one wine supplier cancelled plans to hire six seasonal workers during the 2024 Christmas rush, according to Orat Benyamini, REKKI's co-founder and chief operations officer, while other firms have cut their order processing teams from 15 people to just three or four. "We're seeing more and more suppliers being able to transition headcount, or not hiring," he says. Naming the agents makes it easier for suppliers to conceptualise their return on investment. "You can compare it to the cost of a salary of a person," Benyamini adds.

The start-up has second agent called Aileen, designed to support the restaurant tendering process, scanning a spreadsheet of, say, 800 necessary ingredients and matching that data to a catalogue. And a forthcoming third bot will help suppliers boost their sales, scanning the menus of prospective customers and advising on what ingredients could be up added to the restaurant.

Businesses don't have to wait for PhD-level agents, or even the next big breakthrough from OpenAI. It's now about conventional software engineering, evaluation and iterating, says Raza Habib, the CEO of San Francisco-based AI start-up Humanloop. It's also safer to keep tasks narrow, when large language models have been known to make mistakes. Combine their access to customer data with the ability to take action and you get more risk, and not just for making errors.

One of the earliest uses of AI agents has been to send personally-crafted sales emails. Downtown San Francisco is filled with billboards urging businesses to hire an "AI sales representative". But they've had mixed results, according to Habib. "I get so many of these (sales) messages now that I'm not sure if they're human-sent or not."

The reality of where AI agents are headed is that they'll be highly-specialised at repetitive chores, particularly where the risk of a mistake won't kill the business.

"AI being sold about AI and 'agents' in particular is a fantasy," says Matt Calkins, the CEO of enterprise software firm Appian Corporation, which has spent years automating processes for banks. "AI shouldn't be making big decisions. It should be doing discrete tasks for which it is suited, as part of a team pointed toward a greater goal." Sometimes the most powerful technology isn't the most ostentatious, but the kind that quietly gets the job done. ("Secret agents, anyone?") Companies that wait for super-intelligent AI tools promised by OpenAI might miss a more immediate opportunity focused on more focused automation. You don't need PhD agents to process orders and handle routine documents — but for now, handing such assignments over to software is more likely to help the bottom line.

What to expect from the Union Budget?



MADAN SABNAVIS

Chief economist, Bank of Baroda

THE BUDGET IS a statement of income and expenditure of the government just like the profit and loss of a company. But the thoughts that go into its formulation are important and spelled out in the Budget speech. Further, akin to a company's balance sheet is the government's liabilities schedule with debt statement being the critical component. While there may be limited flexibility in designing the Budget as almost all revenue components are contingent on the economy, governments do their best to provide incentives and support while drafting the document.

What can one expect from the Budget? These can be divided into three parts: macro, revenue, and expenditure. With macro, first priority is the fiscal deficit ratio target. The entire edifice is drawn up on it, as there is a resolve to lower the ratio to 4.5% of GDP by FY26. With the revised deficit for FY25 expected to be 4.7-4.8%, a cut of 0.5% of GDP is likely this time.

Second is the assumed GDP growth rate. The first advance estimate for FY25 was relevant mainly to form the base for the Budget when targeting revenue numbers for FY26. The revised 9.8% for FY25, instead of 10.5%, will probably make the Budget take a conservative view of 10.5% for FY26. This will be the basis for calculating the tax revenue, normally taken as a proportion of this number. The ratio has been increasing in the last decade and a ratio of 12% can be expected this time.

On the revenue front, two areas need attention. The first is income tax rates. Past Budgets have sent a strong signal that ideally the government would like all individuals to move to the new tax system that has lower rates with no concessions. However, since consumption has been hit in FY24 and FY25 due to inflation, lowering tax rates could be considered, providing relief only at the lower income levels may not lift aggregate consumption.

This can be delivered in the new tax system by raising the tax slabs, including the basic exemption limit. Ideally these slabs should be adjusted with inflation. Such a cover will help protect real tax slabs.

Second, the tax rates across income streams may need a rethink. All income is virtually taxed at slab rates.

The exception is equity where long-term capital gains are taxed at 12.5% — the rationale is that it helps build confidence in the market leading to more investment. There is a strong reason to give similar benefits to bank deposits, as 18% of these funds are by statute invested in government securities and help finance the government borrowing programme. In FY25, there has been a migration of savings from banks to equity markets including mutual funds on this score. Both nominal and tax

A lot is expected in terms of measures to push for growth in consumption and investment. On the other hand, a more detailed look at expenditure would be in order

related returns are higher compared with deposits. So, declaring a lower tax rate on interest on all fixed deposits with maturity of above one year, say 20%, could be a first step in narrowing the differential.

Third, given the evolving global conditions and the possible threat of dumping on the imports front, a detailed evaluation of all such steps should be done and a strategy drawn up to the counter them.

Fourth, a lower fiscal deficit ratio would mean the government's gross borrowing programme would be stable in the range of ₹14-15 lakh crore. An area that can be considered in light of the growing importance of climate issues is the growing green bonds to retail with a tax-free incentive. This will address the issue of leaving more money in households for consumption.

On the expenditure side, while capex will be the primary tool to drive investment, diversification across ministries can be considered. In the last few Budgets which have witnessed spikes in capex, the three sectors that have benefited are defence, roads, and railways. In particular, getting agriculture into the fold will help at a national level. Interlinking of rivers is a subject that demands urgency and cannot be carried out at the state level alone.

Second, the production-linked incentive scheme should be extended for micro, small and medium enterprises. Industries like auto parts, chemicals, textiles, handicrafts, etc. would benefit and are important components of the exports basket. For industry, the Centre could add an employment condition along with turnover. Last year, the government announced employment schemes involving payments made from the Budget for first-time employees, etc. By dovetailing the scheme with employment targets, the Budget can address the issue without straining finances.

Third, there can be a case for shifting social welfare spending to health and education. Budgets have concentrated on subsidies and cash transfers to vulnerable sections, improving living conditions. To make money work better by creating more social capital, the focus can also be on creating schools and hospitals as a joint venture with states.

A lot is expected from the Budget, in terms of measures to push for growth in consumption and investment. On the other hand, a more detailed look at the expenditure would be in order given that the government is well on the glide path of lowering the fiscal deficit ratio, to probably 3% in the next three-four years. That the economy is doing well is an advantage as no emergency measures are required and the focus can be on the medium term.

Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Front-running inaction

Apropos of "Running ahead, running amok" (FE, January 27), with the increasing popularity of stock markets as a source of wealth, the number of demat accounts, it is but natural that shady practices and outright criminal acts will increase. Ketan Parekh was banished from the stock markets for his role in scams but has apparently resurfaced and is involved in front-

running. The lack of rigorous action against market related criminal activities has only encouraged the trend of front-running. With artificial intelligence-assisted algorithms, it should not be too difficult to zero in on such operations. But when the Securities and Exchange Board of India chief herself is under a cloud, can we expect any real action on this front?

—Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra

Stay above politics

President Droupadi Murmu's Republic Day address is appreciated for her tribute to the Constitution and its guiding values. But one is concerned about her dwelling on the contentious issue of simultaneous elections. While perhaps well-intentioned, her remarks risk drawing the highest office in the land into a highly partisan debate and undermining its neutrality. The

proposal for simultaneous elections is deeply divisive, as it raises significant concerns about undermining India's federal structure and concentrating power at the Centre. The President should refrain from endorsing specific policies or proposals, especially when they are still under debate in Parliament.

—Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

Write to us at letters@expressindia.com

Navigating growth challenges in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's new National Peoples Power (NPP) government, led by the charismatic President, Anura Kumara Dissanayake, entered office in late 2024 at a turning point in the country's economic history. Following default on its external debt obligations in April 2022, Sri Lanka had experienced its worst post-independence economic crisis in 2022-2023. While the economy is stabilising now, the challenges are far from over. Sri Lanka is on the precipice of both opportunity and risk and it is crucial that the government charts a path that balances growth with debt sustainability.

Sri Lanka's recent economic outlook offers cause for cautious optimism. Thanks to prudent monetary and financial stability policy by the Central Bank of Sri Lanka, a \$3 billion International Monetary Fund (IMF) programme, and \$4 billion of Indian aid, the economy appears to have steadied. A debt restructuring deal of \$17.5 billion reached with private bond holders and China has given Sri Lanka the breathing room it desperately needed, while inflows from tourism have accelerated, contributing to the recovery of foreign exchange reserves. In this environment, the new government has inherited a stabilising economy, with the latest World Bank growth forecasts pointing to growth slowing from 4.4% in 2024 to 3.5% in 2025.

Internal challenges

However, there are looming risks that the new government must tackle head-on. One of the most pressing concerns is the significant brain drain involving as many as 3,00,000 people from Sri Lanka in 2024 alone. This wave includes educated IT, banking, marketing, and medical professionals migrating for better job opportunities abroad and a future for their children. This is a serious challenge for business and governance, as the country faces a growing gap in the talent pool needed to propel growth.



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and former executive
director of Sri Lanka's
Foreign Ministry
think tank

At the same time, the new government has a Parliament with little experience. Of the 225 MPs, about 150 are untested first-time representatives, mostly from the NPP, which raises questions about the legislative and technical capacity needed to enact economic reforms. To counteract this, the government must focus on better public sector service delivery, retaining key talent within the state sector, and creating policies that encourage the development of expertise in both governance and public administration. Improved state planning for undertaking market-oriented public policies, digitisation of public services, training MPs in the legislative process and understanding the complexities of economic reforms are the need of the hour. A top quality public policy school to train civil servants and MPs would be an important addition to the university system.

Tourism offers significant potential to boost foreign exchange reserves and spur growth. Over 2 million tourists visited Sri Lanka in 2024, a 38% increase over 2023. However, the government must do more to ensure that tourism is sustainable and benefits communities beyond Colombo. Better marketing of Sri Lanka as a multi-cultural destination, coupled with targeted development of less-visited regions such as the north and east of the country, will help create a more balanced and decentralised tourism industry. Furthermore, supporting small businesses linked to tourism activities and tackling the recent wave of gang-related violence should be a priority.

Sri Lanka is on the precipice of both opportunity and risk. It is crucial that the government charts a path that balances growth with debt sustainability.

Fiscal sustainability remains a contentious issue. While revenue has increased, rationalisation of government spending remains high, largely due to the expansive role the state plays in the economy. Despite ruling out privatisation, the government plans to turn around state-owned enterprises (SOEs) through better management. However, some of the larger loss-making SOEs (such

as Sri Lankan Airlines and the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation) should be reconsidered for privatisation or restructuring, as their drain on public funds threatens long-term fiscal stability.

External factors

In addition to internal challenges, Sri Lanka's foreign policy will be critical. The geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific are set to change dramatically following the re-election of President Donald Trump in the U.S. India has emerged as a key player in Sri Lanka's economic future. Given the complex relationship with India, the government must strengthen economic ties with this fast-growing nation, ensuring that Sri Lanka benefits from Indian investments and collaborations. The President must also live up to his promises of non-interference in India's security concerns, including halting visits from Chinese spy ships that have raised tensions in the region. His visit to India in late 2024 offers a promising foundation for stronger bilateral relations, and the government must now focus on making concrete progress—particularly in B-B links, cross-border energy projects, a digital identity system and the deeper bilateral free trade agreement under negotiation.

Apart from limited fiscal space for social spending, Sri Lanka faces the serious risk of repayments (capital) on its external debt starting in mid-2027 if it is unable to generate sufficient foreign exchange through trade-led growth. Working in partnership with the IMF and World Bank, India should stand ready to help if Sri Lanka falters a second time.

The Sri Lankan government must develop a comprehensive growth plan that addresses both immediate risks and long-term opportunities. Navigating these choppy waters will require pragmatic leadership, bold policy decisions, and a clear vision for Sri Lanka's future prosperity. The National Budget in February offers an opportunity to make a start.

Time for Congress to walk the talk

The Congress government continues to follow the 2021 order restricting protests

STATE OF PLAY

Rajendran Narayanan
Vinay Sreenivasa

The Congress recently announced the launch of 'Jai Bapu, Jai Bhim, Jai Samvidhan', a campaign to commemorate the 75th year of the Constitution. Hindutva ideologues have denigrated M.K. Gandhi while their anti-pathology towards Dr. B.R. Ambedkar became evident through the disparaging remarks made by Home Minister Amit Shah in Parliament. In this light, this campaign appears to hold promise.

Since coming to power in Karnataka in 2023, the Congress government has signalled its commitment to the Constitution. It hosted an international conference titled 'Constitution and National Unity' in February 2024 and held massive celebrations in September 2024 to mark the International Day of Democracy and the Chief Minister urged people to abide by constitutional values.

Notwithstanding these, a genuine commitment to democracy must minimally ensure that everyone feels like an active participant in a consultative process. Therefore, spaces for peaceful dissent should not be curtailed. In 2021, the BJP government in Karnataka passed the Licensing and Regulation of Protests, Demonstrations and Protest Marches (Bengaluru City) Order, making public protests outside a designated area illegal. The grounds for these were that the 'unauthorised manner adversely affect traffic movement, which cause huge vehicular congestion.' After the order, protests in Bengaluru have been limited to a small park ambushed by a parking lot; it is ironically called Free-



dom Park. Protests attempted to be held anywhere else have met with police crackdowns and FIRs.

The right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly is a fundamental right (Article 19). Indeed, the very idea of satyagraha or peaceful civil disobedience is one of the biggest contributions of India to the rest of the world. When tenant farmers in Bihar's Champaran district were forced by the British to cultivate indigo and were heavily penalised for any crop failures, Gandhi initiated the historic Champaran Satyagraha in 1917. He defied government orders to leave Champaran; this resistance led to the Champaran Agrarian Law providing relief to farmers. In 1923, the Bombay Legislative Council permitted people across castes to use places built and run by the government. However, Dalits were prevented by caste Hindus from drinking water from public tanks. In defiance, in 1927, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar led thousands of Dalits to walk to Chavdar tank in Maharashtra's Mahad and drank water from the tank in protest. These, among many others, have given the world a grammar of dissent.

The Congress government in Karnataka has continued the undemocratic order passed in 2021. On August 15, 2022, 72 farmers protesting against government acquisition of their land in Devanahalli were arrested and FIRs

were registered against them. Numerous pro-Palestine protesters have been detained. The police slapped FIRs against several people who gathered at the steps of Town Hall in Bengaluru to protest against the assault of two Manipuri women. The Karnataka High Court quashed those FIRs, but the process of fighting itself became a punishment. In 2023, on Gandhi's birth anniversary, hundreds of citizens walked from the Gandhi statue to Vidhana Soudha as a satyagraha to reclaim the rights to peaceful assembly. They were detained by the police and an FIR was filed against several people.

Although election rallies and religious processions cause traffic, only protest rallies are banned. Controlling traffic is a civic matter. The government's rationale that protests held at a particular spot cause traffic is unfounded. For instance, protesting at the steps of Town Hall does not cause traffic. The real reason for traffic snarls are the exponential rise of private vehicles without a commensurate increase in affordable and quality public transportation. Peaceful protests are usually the last resort for people when all appeals to the government fail. Therefore, using traffic as a reason to curb constitutional freedoms is undemocratic.

If the Congress wants to walk the talk, it must revoke the 2021 order. Peaceful protests are sites where the theatre of democracy is performed and its pedagogy is put to practice. So long as this is not done, the 'Jai Bapu, Jai Bhim, Jai Samvidhan' campaign and other events would appear to be mere platitudes.

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Will the FY26 Budget reverse the decline in social sector spending?

Over the last few years, there have been steep cuts in MGNREGS, the national social assistance schemes, and PM-Poshan

DATA POINT

Sambavi Parthasarathy,
Samreen Wani
Vignesh Radhakrishnan

The share of the Union Budget allocated for the social sector has declined rapidly in recent years. Data show that the outlays to most schemes under the rural development, education, health, and social welfare heads have either declined or stagnated. Table 1 shows the allocations for various social sectors as a share of the total Budget. Expenditure on health as a share of the total Budget declined from 2.47%-2.22% in the FY18-22 period to 1.85%-1.75% in the FY23-25 period. The share of the total Budget allocated to the Ministry of Rural Development did not cross the 6% mark in the last three years, which was the case for many years prior.

Similarly, allocations for higher education as a share of the total Budget declined from the 1.57%-1.37% range in FY17-20 to 1.27%-0.88% in FY21-25. Allocations for school education declined from the 2.18%-1.96% range to 1.63%-1.23% and allocations for social welfare schemes declined from the 1.89%-1.61% range to 1.17%-0.97% in the same period.

The reduced allocations can be better understood at the scheme level. Table 2 shows the allocations for various social sector schemes as a share of the total Budget. Notably, allocations for schemes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), introduced under the United Progressive Alliance government, have declined significantly over time. The ₹86,000 crore (Budget Estimates) allocated for MGNREGS for 2024-25 formed only 1.78% of the total Budget, a 10-year low. Latest data show that the Rural Development Ministry was short of ₹4,315 crore, which result-

ed in a delay in the disbursement of wages to MGNREGS workers. Allocation for the national social assistance programme, which includes old age pension, widow pension, and disability pension, has declined as a share of the total Budget from the range of 1.21%-0.36% in the years FY19-21 to about 0.2% in the last four years.

The allocations for the Pradhan Mantri Poshan Shakti Nirman (PM-POSHAN) scheme as a share of the total Budget declined to 0.26% in FY25 (Budget Estimates) – the lowest in the last nine years – except FY24 (Revised Estimates). The primary objective of the scheme is to improve the nutritional status of children studying in Classes 1 to 8 in eligible schools. It was earlier known as the National Programme of Mid-Day Meals in Schools.

There were some exceptions to this trend: allocations under the Ayushman Bharat-Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PM-JAY), the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY)-Rural, and PM Schools for Rising India (PM SHRI) as a share of the total Budget were on an increasing trend or at least stagnating. Notably, all these schemes were launched post 2014.

With the Budget for the next financial year set to be presented on February 1, it will be crucial to examine how the declining allocations for the social sector are being addressed. The sector has under its umbrella a host of important schemes, as shown in Table 3. The table shows major expenditure heads under each social sector. The number in the table corresponds to a scheme/expenditure head's share in each sector's total Budget. For instance, about 33% of the health budget for the current year went to a flexible pool to be used by States for their health needs and 20.6% was allocated to autonomous bodies such as AIIMS. Close to half of the rural development budget was given to MGNREGS and over 30% went to PMAY-Rural.

Shrinking social sector pie

The data for the charts were sourced from the Union Budget documents

Table 1: Allocations for social sectors as a share of Budget (in %)

Year	Health	Rural Development	Higher Education	School Education	Social Welfare
FY18	2.47	6.3	1.57	2.18	1.75
FY19	2.35	5.74	1.38	2.09	1.89
FY20	2.36	5.3	1.37	1.96	1.86
FY21	2.28	6.1	0.92	1.48	1.07
FY22	2.22	6.03	0.88	1.23	1.07
FY23	1.75	5.69	0.92	1.4	0.97
FY24	1.76	5.32	1.27	1.61	1.04
FY25	1.85	5.51	0.99	1.51	1.17

Table 2: The table shows the allocations for select social sector schemes as a share of India's total Budget each year

Total	FY19	FY20	FY21	FY22	FY23	FY24(RE)	FY25(BE)
Rural development							
National social assistance programme	0.36	0.32	1.21	0.21	0.23	0.21	0.30
MGNREGS	2.67	2.67	3.17	2.60	2.17	1.93	1.78
Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana	0.67	0.52	0.39	0.37	0.45	0.38	0.35
DAY-NRLM	0.28	0.34	0.26	0.25	0.28	0.31	0.31
Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY)-Rural	0.83	0.67	0.55	0.79	1.07	0.71	1.13
Health							
Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PM-JAY)	0.09	0.12	0.08	0.58	0.35	0.15	0.15
School education							
Samagra Shiksha		1.21	0.79	0.66	0.78	0.73	0.77
PM POSHAN	0.41	0.38	0.37	0.27	0.30	0.22	0.26
PM Schools for Rising India (PM SHRI)						0.06	0.13
Higher education							
University Grants Commission	0.26	0.17	0.11	0.12	0.12	0.14	0.05
Grants to Central Universities (CUs)	0.29	0.30	0.24	0.23	0.26	0.28	0.33
IITs	0.24	0.25	0.19	0.21	0.21	0.23	0.21
IIITs	0.015	0.018	0.013	0.017	0.014	0.007	0.004
NTs and IIST	0.15	0.13	0.09	0.09	0.10	0.11	0.10

Table 3: The table shows major schemes/expenditure heads as a share of each social sector's total allocations in FY25BE (in %)

Health		Rural development		School education		Higher education	
Flexible pool for States	32.8	MGNREGS	48.4	Samagra Shiksha	50.7	Central Univs.	33.4
Autonomous bodies	20.6	PMAY-Rural	30.7	Autonomous bodies	21.4	IITs	21.7
PM-JAY	8.3	DAY-NRLM	8.5	PM-POSHAN	17.1	NTs, IIST	10.6
Infrastructure maintenance	8.0	PMGSY	6.8	PM-SHRI	8.3	UGC	5.2
Medical treatment of pensioners	6.1	Social assistance	5.4			Student aid	4.0

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO JANUARY 28, 1975

Bill to ensure correct weights and measures

New Delhi, Jan. 27: A Bill regulating the provisions relating to metric weights and measures would soon be considered by Parliament, the Minister of State for Industry and Civil Supplies, Mr. A.C. George, said here today.

Mr. George, who was inaugurating a conference of the developing countries on metrication and legal metrology, stressed the need for a correct measurement of weights and measures in a developing country not only to prevent consumers being cheated but to ensure that the commodities of developing countries could compete effectively with those of the advanced ones.

The Weights and Measures (law revision) committee, on whose report the proposed legislation would be based, estimated that even one per cent error in weighing and measuring in retail trade in India would cause a loss of Rs. 160 crores to the public in one year.

Mr. George said the provisions in the proposed law on metrological and allied matters relating to packaged commodities required that the quantity contained in a package should not be less than the quantity declared.

Besides the indication of net quantity, the package should also indicate the price as well as the date of packaging and the date by which the commodity should be used. Additional information about size, concentration ratio should also be given, he said.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JANUARY 28, 1925

Oriya amalgamation problem

Delhi, Jan. 27: Messrs Phillip and Duff, who were appointed to enquire into the attitude of Oriya speaking population of Madras Presidency towards amalgamation with other Oriya speaking tracts, have submitted their report in which they state that there is a genuine long-standing and deep-seated desire on the part of educated Oriya speaking tracts of Madras for amalgamation with Orissa, under one administration. They have been informed that it was immaterial whether that administration be by Bihar and Orissa, Bengal or Madras.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Candidates contesting Delhi polls with higher secondary education

46 In per cent. According to an ADR analysis of the 699 candidates contesting Delhi polls, 46% or 324 candidates declared their academic qualification to be between Class 5 and Class 12, reflecting basic schooling. Eight candidates hold doctorate degrees. 18 candidates hold diplomas.

Number of violations of the Model Code of Conduct in Delhi polls

730 The cases were lodged between January 7, when the Model Code of Conduct came into force, and January 26. A total of 22,857 people were arrested under various legal provisions, including those under the Excise Act, during this period.

Number of candidates contesting Delhi polls in the 41-50 age range

235 According to an ADR analysis, the majority of candidates contesting the assembly election in Delhi are in the 41-50 age group. There has also been a significant rise in the number of candidates aged over 70. Aam Janmat Party candidate Rajender is the oldest in the fray at 88.

Number of Ahmadiyya graves desecrated in Pakistan by extremists

40 Nearly 40 graves belonging to the minority Ahmadiyya community have been desecrated by religious extremists believed to be the members of a radical Islamist party in Pakistan's Punjab province. Pakistan's Parliament in 1974 declared the Ahmadiyya community as non-Muslims.

Number of dead Olive Ridley turtles washed ashore in Chennai

1,000 Several hundreds of Olive Ridley turtles have been washed ashore dead along Chennai's coastline for the past few days, causing concern to environmentalists.

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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Does cow urine have anti-infective properties?

Why did IIT-Madras director V. Kamakoti's statements on cow urine spark outrage? Which are the papers he listed which elaborated on the benefits of bovine urine? Have any conclusive studies been undertaken in India about the same?

EXPLAINER

Arkatapa Basu
Privali Prakash

The story so far:

In January 15, IIT-Madras director V. Kamakoti said that cow urine had antifungal, antibacterial, and anti-inflammatory properties at a goshala in West Mambalam in Chennai. In a media interaction five days later, Dr. Kamakoti listed five peer-reviewed papers that he said validated the "anti-infective" properties of cow urine. His statements have since gone viral on social media as many questioned his claims and deemed his observations to be inappropriate as the head of a scientific institution.

What did the papers state?

One paper titled 'Peptide profiling in cow urine reveals molecular signature of physiology-driven pathways and in-silico predicted bioactive properties' was published on June 14, 2021, in the journal *Nature Scientific Reports*. "The researchers have experimented and presented their findings. *Nature* is one of the top journals in the United States of America. The output in the research papers is the evidence," Dr. Kamakoti said. However, *Nature* and *Nature Scientific Reports* are two different journals. Independent experts said the research article itself "does not seem bad" but that it is just an analysis of bovine urine. "Authors say that there are a lot of studies of peptides in human urine, but not much work has been done in the case of bovine urine."

Aniket Sule, associate professor at the Homi Bhabha Centre for Science Education in Mumbai, told *The Hindu*. "There are also similar studies about donkey urine. Essentially, all mammals pass some peptides in their urine and those peptides give a lot of indications about the health of that individual. That is also the reason why we do urine analysis



Exaggerated claims: Cows covered in jute blankets to keep warm at a barn in Surat in 2024. *ANI*

in pathology labs. So, they are just presenting their analysis of bovine urine. There is no claim beyond that." Dr. Sule added that there have been papers from China discussing the use of cow dung as fertilizer. "However, developing a fertilizer from mammal urine/excreta is a different thing from human consumption of urine/excreta," he said. Dr. Sule quoted the example of U.S. President Donald Trump asking scientists in his first term, during the COVID-19 pandemic, about the alleged benefits of drinking bleach. "Just because bleach is anti-bacterial on the floor doesn't mean it is medicinal for humans," Dr. Sule said.

Gautam Menon, dean of research and professor of physics and biology at Ashoka University in Sonapat, said the paper is "perfectly reasonable scientific work, although whether it is interesting or not is another matter". "Checking

antibiotic effects on two standard bacterial species is a common thing to do. Their result is not particularly surprising nor is it claimed to be," he added.

The second paper Dr. Kamakoti referred to was entitled 'Benefits of cow urine' and published in the *International Journal of Recent Advances in Multidisciplinary Research* on September 29, 2017. The paper reviews previous research articles describing the medicinal benefits of cow urine, a form of research called a meta-analysis. According to the paper, "Many researches have also been done, which shows its use for treatment of skin diseases, stomach diseases, kidney diseases, heart diseases, stones, diabetes, liver problem, jaundice, athlete's foot, cyst, haemorrhoid, etc. and show its immunostimulant, bioenhancer, anticonvulsant, anti-cancerous, wound-healing, antioxidant, and

antimicrobial properties." The abstract of the study concludes by calling for more public awareness of the importance of cow urine. However, Dipshikha Chakravorty, professor at the department of microbiology and cell biology at the Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, said in an email to *The Hindu*, "Consumption of any urine is detrimental and dangerous, including healthy individual urine. Urine contains resident bacteria, and that can be detrimental." She added that there have been reports of various types of urine containing bacteria that could be pathogenic. The prevalence of grammatical and typographical mistakes in the paper indicate the journal's editors didn't copy-edit it, a symptom – albeit not a conclusive one – of low-quality publishers.

What do other studies say?

In 2022, Bhoj Roj Singh, who recently retired as the epidemiology head of the Indian Veterinary Research Institute, Bareilly, led a study that showed the undesirability of humans consuming cow urine. In the study, the team found that fresh urine from cows and bulls contains at least 14 types of harmful bacteria, including *Escherichia coli*. The study also reported that urine can't inhibit bacterial growth. "In case one gets infected from the bacteria, [the infections] can lead to life-threatening infections, particularly among those consumers who are already sick or have weak immune systems," Dr. Singh said.

He also said proponents of drinking cow urine had criticised the study for using fresh urine while they advocated the consumption of urine distillates. His lab analysed these distillates as well as packaged urine found in the market. "We reported those too to be risky and full of microbes (no-quality control practised). Moreover, the antimicrobial activity detected may hardly be of any therapeutic utility as it may not be feasible to consume such a large amount of urine safely to get its antibacterial action in our bodies," he said.

THE GIST

One paper titled 'Peptide profiling in cow urine reveals molecular signature of physiology-driven pathways and in-silico predicted bioactive properties' was published on June 14, 2021, in the journal *Nature Scientific Reports*.

The second paper Dr. Kamakoti referred to was entitled 'Benefits of cow urine' and published in the *International Journal of Recent Advances in Multidisciplinary Research* on September 29, 2017.

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Is the Guillain-Barré Syndrome life-threatening?

What are the causes and symptoms of Guillain-Barré Syndrome? What are the treatment methods, and is a full recovery possible? What is happening in Pune?

Zubeda Hamid

The story so far:

Following a reported outbreak of Guillain-Barré Syndrome, a rare neurological disorder, in Pune, with 73 cases so far, the Union Health Ministry has now sent a team to the city to assess the situation. The Maharashtra government has also set up a Rapid Response Team to investigate the sudden rise in infections. A total of 47 men and 26 women have been affected, with 14 on ventilator support, the State Health Department has said, as of Saturday, January 25, 2025.

What is Guillain-Barré Syndrome?

Guillain-Barré Syndrome (GBS) is an autoimmune neurological disorder in which a person's immune system attacks their peripheral nerves, leading to muscle weakness that can progress to paralysis.

People of any age can be affected, but it is more common in adults and males. The condition is rare, with an estimated incidence of 1/2 per 1,00,000 population.

While the causes of GBS are still not fully understood, in most cases, it occurs after a viral or bacterial infection. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), infection with the bacteria *Campylobacter jejuni*, which causes gastroenteritis (including symptoms of nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea), is one of the most common risk factors for GBS. People can also develop GBS after having the flu or other viral infections from cytomegalovirus, Epstein-Barr virus, and the Zika virus.

How does it affect the body?

In autoimmune conditions, the body's immune system begins to attack its own cells. In GBS, the immune system destroys the myelin sheath – a fatty layer wrapped

around nerve cells. This impacts the nerves' ability to send signals to the brain, which causes weakness in the muscles. GBS affects the peripheral nervous system – the part of the nervous system outside the brain and spinal cord – that controls the movement of muscles, temperature, touch and pain sensations.

The first signs of GBS are usually tingling and weakness that start in the feet and legs before spreading to the upper body, arms and face. Symptoms include a pins and needles feeling in the toes, fingers, ankles or wrists, back pain, pain in the legs, not being able to walk or climb stairs, trouble with facial movements and double vision. For some people this can lead to paralysis of the legs, arms or face. The severity of the symptoms can range from mild to severe. In approximately one-third of people, the chest muscles are affected, making it hard to breathe, the WHO says. The ability to speak and

swallow can become affected in severe cases. GBS can lead to life-threatening complications when it affects the autonomic nervous system which controls your blood pressure and heart rate.

How is it treated?

There is no known cure for GBS. However, there are some treatments that aid in recovery. Most people can make a nearly full recovery. The treatments primarily include plasma exchange and intravenous immunoglobulin therapy. In plasma exchange or plasmapheresis, the plasma (liquid part of the blood) is removed, treated and then returned to the body. This removes the antibodies from the plasma that are attacking the nerves. Intravenous immunoglobulin therapy involves injecting the body with immunoglobulins, which are proteins that the body makes to identify and neutralise pathogens. This helps decrease the immune system's attack on the nerves. Supportive treatment is also given and rehabilitation including physical and occupational therapy may be required. Recovery can take a long time.

The WHO says Guillain-Barré syndrome is potentially life-threatening. People with Guillain-Barré syndrome should be treated and monitored as quickly as possible and some may need intensive care. If you experience sudden muscle that gets worse over some days, see a doctor immediately.

THE GIST

Guillain-Barré Syndrome (GBS) is an autoimmune neurological disorder in which a person's immune system attacks their peripheral nerves, leading to muscle weakness that can progress to paralysis.

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While the causes of GBS are still not fully understood, in most cases, it occurs after a viral or bacterial infection.



First resort

Trump should use diplomacy, not coercion, in deportation of migrants

Donald Trump's mass deportation drive hit its first hurdle on Sunday when Colombian President Gustavo Petro refused permission to two United States military planes carrying migrants to land. A furious Mr. Trump announced that the U.S. would impose a 25% tariff on all Colombian goods, which would be raised to 50%. The U.S. also threatened to impose banking and financial sanctions and issue travel bans on Colombian officials and associates. Mr. Petro, a former guerrilla, responded in kind by saying Colombia would also impose tariffs up to 50% on American goods and refused to "shake hands with white slaveholders". But Bogota, under pressure, eventually accepted to take back the migrants "with dignity and respect". A trade war would have been bad news for both countries whose bilateral trade stood at \$53.5 billion in 2022, with a \$4 billion surplus for the U.S. High tariffs would have been a body blow for Colombia, as the U.S. is its largest trading partner. With tariffs and financial and political sanctions, America could cripple Colombia's economy and destabilise its polity at a time when its fight with guerrillas is escalating after a lull. Unsurprisingly, Mr. Petro backedtrack and agreed to accept what the White House said was "all its terms".

Colombia and other South American countries have been taking undocumented migrants back from the U.S. in recent years. In January, there were 90 deportation flights from the U.S. to its southern neighbours, eight of which landed in Colombia. But what turned a regular exercise into a controversy was the handling of the deportation by the Trump administration – the use of mostly military planes, which angered the Colombians. Mr. Petro also raised concerns about the way migrants were treated by the U.S. Earlier, Brazil had also raised complaints of "degrading treatment" of its deported citizens. They were handcuffed, and some of them were not given water or allowed to use the washroom during the flight, according to Brazilian officials. But Mr. Trump does not seem to care. He wanted to make an example of Colombia so that other neighbours will not challenge his handling of the mass deportation. He may have forced Colombia to backtrack for now, using America's economic muscle, but this kind of coercion could backfire in the long run in a region where America has always tried to maintain its geopolitical hegemony. And the inhumane conditions in which hundreds of migrants are being deported everyday is a blot on America's tall claims of protecting human rights. A better way of handling this crisis is through diplomacy. Instead of imposing his will on other countries through threats of tariffs and sanctions, Mr. Trump could use the diplomatic channel, seek consensus and then implement his policy in a much more cordial way. But for Mr. Trump, alas, coercion is the first resort.

Wide open

Sinner's win in Melbourne marks a new era in tennis

The 2025 Australian Open has pushed world tennis into hitherto uncharted territories. Jannik Sinner's straight sets victory over Alexander Zverev made him the first man other than Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal to defend his maiden Major title this century. This, perhaps, is the clearest sign that the sport has decisively moved on, even as 24-time Slam winner Novak Djokovic, the last man standing from the Big Three era, limped out of the semifinal against Zverev. Among women, Madison Keys may have become yet another first-time Major champion, but the presence of No.1 Aryna Sabalenka and No.2 Iga Swiatek at the byline end shows that the women's field is a maturing marketplace, leaving behind the turbulence of the past few years. Sinner's success was his third straight in hard-court Slams. Such has been the World No.1's dominance that of the 26 tournaments he has entered starting from the Toronto Masters in August 2023, he has won 14 and finished semifinalist or better in five others. Keys, in contrast, was a bolt from the blue and had last reached a Major final at the 2017 US Open. But the fact that the 29-year-old overcame Swiatek in the semifinal after erasing a match-point and thwarted Sabalenka in the final despite a stirring comeback from the Belarusian made hers a top-draw performance.

While Sinner, on current form, appears ahead and shoulders above the rest of the Tour, he still has to contend with Carlos Alcaraz, his generational rival and winner of four Slams. The Spaniard may have lost in the quarterfinals to Djokovic, but he handed Sinner three of his six defeats in an otherwise sensational 2024 for the Italian. There is, however, a chance that this duel might come to an abrupt halt in April when the Court of Arbitration for Sport hears the appeal filed by World Anti-Doping Agency against Sinner's acquittal over two failed dope tests (March 2024). Whether this saga gives the likes of Zverev and Daniil Medvedev an opening is another thing to watch out for. The two, who looked set to take over from the Big Three only to be ambushed by Sinner and Alcaraz, have collectively won just one of nine Major finals they have taken part in. Only a title in 2025 will keep them relevant. The women's game, which in recent times has traded predictability for novelty, might see the two aspects march in tow for the foreseeable future. Sabalenka's consistency, Swiatek's return – Melbourne was her best run at a Slam since January 2023 outside the French Open – and Keys' win point in that direction.

A recent judgment of the Supreme Court of India, in *Bhagwati Medical Hall vs Central Drugs Standard Control Organization & Ors.*, has, once again, turned the spotlight on the impossible challenge faced by State governments in regulating a significant public health hazard – that posed by alcoholic tinctures marketed in India as homeopathic remedies. Feeble attempts by the Union Government to tackle the problem have often been frustrated by ruthless lawfare conducted by the very formidable homeopathic industry.

The regulatory maze

A good starting point to explain this issue is the exceptionally complicated regulatory architecture under the Constitution for these alcoholic tinctures, which are liquid extracts of herbs dissolved in alcohol. As per Schedule VII of the Constitution, only States can enact legislation in relation to public health and the taxation of alcohol. The exception to this rule of taxation is if the alcohol is meant for medicinal purposes, in which case, Entry 84 of List I allowed the Union to decide the rate of taxation.

In the pre-Goods and Services Tax (GST) era, alcohol for medicinal preparation was taxed at a tiny 4% under the now repealed Medicinal and Toilet Preparations (Excise Duties) Act, 1955. Post the 101st Constitutional amendment which paved the way for the GST, the issue of taxation of alcohol meant for medicinal purposes is not clear since the exception created for alcohol meant for medicinal purposes is no longer mentioned in Entry 84. Nevertheless, the Union has prescribed a 18% tax slab for alcohol meant for medicinal purposes, which is still significantly lower than State taxes on alcoholic beverages.

The third aspect of this regulatory architecture is that drugs are on the Concurrent list, which means that both the Union and States can enact law but since the Drugs and Cosmetics Act, 1940 is the Union law laying down quality standards for homeopathic products, States need presidential approval for State-specific amendments.

This complex regulatory architecture has meant that manufacturers of these homeopathic alcoholic tinctures have historically been immune from any form of quality regulation or taxation by States despite having a direct impact on public health which again is the responsibility of States, per List II of Schedule VII. Moreover, due to the difference in taxation rates for alcoholic tinctures sold as homeopathic remedies and alcoholic beverages, alcoholic tinctures manufactured by the homeopathic industry are more affordable



Dinesh S. Thakur
is the author of 'The Truth Pill: The Myth of Drug Regulation in India'



Prashant Reddy
is the author of 'The Truth Pill: The Myth of Drug Regulation in India'

Alcoholic tinctures marketed in India as homeopathic remedies are a significant public health hazard

than alcoholic beverages. For a less discerning consumer of alcohol whose sole aim is to get intoxicated, these alcoholic tinctures are the perfect substitute for alcoholic beverages especially since many of these tinctures contain a very high volume of alcohol. The Drugs and Cosmetics Act permits alcoholic tinctures for homeopathy to contain 12% alcohol by volume. For comparison, the most popular varieties of "strong beer" sold in India generally contain 7% alcohol.

State governments have viewed the issue primarily through the lens of revenue loss caused by citizens who consume homeopathic alcoholic tinctures as a substitute for alcoholic beverages taxed at a higher rate. This loss of revenues was one of the reasons for the administrative actions taken by the Government of Uttar Pradesh, under Section 22 of the Drugs and Cosmetics Act, 1940 in the *Bhagwati Medical Hall* case, except, as correctly held by the Supreme Court, only the Union government can regulate the sale of homeopathic tinctures.

Health concerns, industry lawfare

The taxation story however pales in comparison to the public health nightmare posed by these alcoholic tinctures. Since States have no ability to regulate alcoholic tinctures, they are required to permit the sale of these products even if the State law prohibits the sale of alcoholic beverages, as in Gujarat and Bihar. Both States have reported a string of deaths of those who consumed homeopathic remedies containing spurious alcohol. In effect, the public health objectives of these State prohibitions on alcohol have been frustrated by a Union law. Technically, they can enact a State-specific amendment to the Drugs and Cosmetics Act, 1940 but that requires presidential assent.

The larger public health hazard of these alcoholic tinctures are unsuspecting citizens who consume these products on the assumption that they are going to be cured of their ailments without being fully aware of the alcoholic content in these products. Except that consuming such products containing high levels of alcohol, on a daily basis, can cause serious illnesses such as alcoholic hepatitis in patients who are otherwise perfectly healthy. Indian doctors have been presenting an increasing amount of anecdotal data of such patients presenting symptoms consistent with those demonstrated by alcoholics.

The Union government has been aware of the public health hazards posed by these alcoholic tinctures and introduced Rule 106B of the Drugs and Cosmetics Rules, 1945 in 1994 after a tragedy

took many lives. This new rule, which appears to lack any scientific basis, allows the homeopathy industry to sell in the retail market, alcoholic tinctures containing 12% of alcohol in a bottle of maximum 30 ml. Larger bottles of 100 ml can be sold only to hospitals.

As soon as Rule 106B came into force, the homeopathy industry unleashed a campaign of unmitigated lawfare against this rule because it wanted to sell tinctures with higher alcoholic content. In the first round of litigation, the homeopathy industry challenged the constitutional validity of the rule on the grounds that it was an unreasonable restriction on its fundamental right to conduct trade and that the government lacked the power to make the rule. The industry lost before five High Courts and eventually the Supreme Court, except it took until 2014 for this litigation to be resolved. The very next year, in 2015, the homeopathy industry launched a second round of lawfare by filing 13 lawsuits before seven different High Courts, on the grounds that Rule 106B was invalid since it was not placed before Parliament for a period of 30 days, as required by Section 38 of the Drugs and Cosmetics Act. Since a statutory requirement was not met, at least four High Courts temporarily stayed the operation of the rule in 2015, restraining government from enforcing it until the legal challenge was disposed of.

The simplest solution to these lawsuits was for the Union Government to simply lay Rule 106B before Parliament for 30 days thereby knocking out the basis of the legal challenge. Except, India's famed bureaucracy made the malicious decision to pursue the route of more litigation by filing a transfer petition in 2017 requesting for all 13 cases to be transferred to the Supreme Court. The Court agreed to do so and transferred all 13 cases to itself in 2017, where the matter has since languished unheard. Delays of such nature before the Supreme Court, when it comes to regulations meant to protect public health, are nothing unusual and end up costing lives of citizens.

Key question

The more important question is whether the law should permit the use of any alcohol in not just homeopathic products but also ayurvedic products, especially when other countries are contemplating compulsory cancer warnings on regular alcoholic beverages. It is one thing for these homeopathic and ayurvedic products to not cure any ailments, as claimed by their manufacturers, but quite another for them to cause further harm to unsuspecting and poorly informed citizens.

The Union Budget as a turning point for climate action +

All eyes will be on Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman when she takes centre stage on February 1 to present the Union Budget. As the nation grapples with increasingly frequent extreme weather events and mounting pressure to meet its climate commitments, the FY26 Budget carries the weight of both urgency and opportunity. With just five years left to achieve India's first interim Net-Zero target, the Budget must take decisive steps to protect those on the frontlines of climate change.

Previous Budgets have demonstrated the government's commitment to climate action, notably through initiatives such as the PM Surya Ghar Muft Bijlee Yojana, support for electric vehicle charging infrastructure, viability gap funding for offshore wind energy, and increased allocations for the National Green Hydrogen Mission. Yet, with a total renewable energy installed capacity of 203.18 GW, far short of the 2030 target of 500 GW, accelerated investment and policy support are imperative.

There is much work to be done

The Budget must prioritise key policy measures to strengthen India's climate response and accelerate progress on both adaptation and mitigation fronts. First, to accelerate India's green energy transition, the PM Surya Ghar Muft Bijlee Yojana needs a comprehensive review. While the scheme has seen around 1.45 crore registrations, the completion rate of only 6.34 lakh installations (4.37%) indicates the presence of significant implementation gaps. To address this, the FY26 Budget must take a multi-pronged approach. In the first instance, fiscal allocations should prioritise the Renewable Energy Service Company (RESCO) model, effectively transforming the prohibitive upfront costs into manageable operating expenses for lower-income households through innovative financial instruments and credit guarantees.

In the second instance, the Budget must expand the scope of production-linked incentives (PLI) across the solar module supply chain, addressing the critical supply-demand mismatch, where domestic manufacturing fulfils only 40% of



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The Budget should reflect the seriousness of the government in integrating climate competitiveness into India's fiscal framework

current requirements. This expansion would boost manufacturing capacity and create economies of scale, potentially reducing costs that are 65% higher for domestically manufactured panels than those imported to the country.

In the third instance, India's vast railway network offers untapped potential for renewable energy generation. Estimates suggest that the Railways' extensive land banks and track corridors could host up to 5 GW of solar and wind installations. The Budget should encourage innovative public-private partnership models to unlock this opportunity.

EU mechanism and India

Second, the European Union's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), which will take effect on January 1, 2026, necessitates urgent budgetary interventions to protect India's export competitiveness. India's total exports of CBAM products to the EU amount to \$8.22 billion annually and will likely face carbon levies ranging from around 20% to 50%.

This presents an existential challenge for India's Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), which have a contribution of 30% of GDP and 45% of exports. The Budget can establish a dedicated 'Climate Action Fund', modelled after successful initiatives such as Japan's Green Transformation (GX) Fund for industrial decarbonisation, particularly across the most vulnerable export sectors. The Fund can also support the capacity-building initiatives for MSMEs to ensure proper compliance and reporting under CBAM.

Third, the Budget must accelerate India's transition to a circular economy. A recent study by the Council on Energy, Environment and Water estimates that the benefit of adopting a circular economy can yield an annual profit of ₹40 lakh crore (\$624 billion) for India by 2050 while reducing greenhouse gas emissions by about 44%. A weighted deduction of 150% on investments in recycling infrastructure and refurbishment technologies, complemented by accelerated depreciation benefits for circular economy assets, can encourage businesses to

invest in recycling and refurbishment technologies. The Budget should establish a sovereign green bond framework specifically for financing circular economy infrastructure.

On insurance products, green finance

Fourth, there is a strong need to strengthen climate resilience. India's insurance penetration remains worryingly low. According to the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI) 2023-24 Annual Report, it has declined from 4% in FY23 to 3.7% in FY24. To address this challenge, the Budget could offer tax deductions to insurance companies on income from climate-linked policies and advocate lower Goods and Services Tax (GST) rates on premiums for insurance products specifically designed for climate resilience and disaster protection.

Finally, some estimates indicate that standardising green finance definitions could help build investor confidence and help India get part of the \$162.5 trillion (\$2.5 trillion) needed to achieve the Nationally Determined Contributions by 2030. The Budget should allocate funds to build the institutional and technical infrastructure required to implement the climate finance taxonomy effectively, including for market readiness programmes, verification systems, and capacity building of financial institutions.

The Budget can further catalyse this transition by introducing differential tax treatment for taxonomy-aligned investments and committing to classify government expenditure according to green criteria.

Climate-linked economic policies are no longer peripheral but central to maintaining competitiveness in international trade and investment flows. With rising global demand for low-carbon goods and the increasing alignment of capital markets with sustainability metrics, India must act decisively and integrate climate competitiveness into its fiscal framework. The Budget will indeed signal the seriousness of the government's intent in this regard.

The views expressed are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The reality

The Constitution of India is increasingly being overshadowed by the actions of those sworn to uphold it. A deep chasm is emerging between the ideals enshrined in the Constitution and the realities of contemporary Indian politics. It is deeply troubling to witness the

erosion of ethical values. Honesty, sincerity, and integrity – core to the vision of the Constitution – appear to be increasingly absent in today's political landscape. It is distressing to see institutions designed to uphold the Constitution being manipulated for political advantage rather than serving public interest.

What we need are leaders in India who embody the highest standards of morality and conduct.

V. Nagarajan,
Chennai

Trump's 'vision'
The unbridled arrogance of U.S. President Donald Trump's idea to "clean-out" Gaza of its Palestinian

natives is abhorrent, but should not be viewed as anything new. There is perhaps a theological justification for such an excommunication. Mr. Trump, despite his claims of not subscribing to such a narrow interpretation of the scripture, is ready and willing to be the tip of this toxic sword, because it is in

convergence with American strategic interests in West Asia. His background as a real estate developer must be salivating at the prospect of gaining access to a Mediterranean seafloor location that will enrich his personal coffers. Donald Trump is the new imperial reincarnation of Dickens' "Dombey and Son" that

sees the entire world as a borderless realm for his business activities. If any uncomfortable truths like the Palestinians are in the way, they will be brutally swept aside.

G. Parameswaran,
Coimbatore

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

SCIENCE

In Odisha, coal dust is clogging leaves, blocking carbon uptake

A recent study found that plants covered in mining dust absorbed 2-3 grams less carbon per square meter, emitting more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, potentially exacerbating global warming; the dust also diminished the plants' capacity to release water vapour through transpiration

Sayanant Datta
SRI CITY

The Bengal Nagpur Railway had been tasked by the British Indian government with developing rail networks in eastern and central India. In 1900, when its workers were digging in Jharsuguda, now a district in Odisha, they stumbled upon large coal deposits. Nine years later, Jharsuguda's first coal mine was established and a century later the region was producing more than 15 million tonnes of coal in a year.

Coal is a fossil fuel produced by the decomposition of dead plants trapped in layers of soil. Around three-fourths of India's electricity is produced by coal-fired power plants. It is also critical in the iron, steel, cement, and fertiliser industries. India is one of the largest producers and consumers of coal worldwide, second only to China.

A patina of dust

In Jharsuguda, most coal mines are open-cast. Miners here start at the surface of the soil, removing soil and rocks to expose the coal deposits. This is more cost-effective than underground mining, which requires digging tunnels to access the deposits.

But open-cast mining pollutes the air more. The dust from blasting rocks, drilling holes in the ground, and transporting the coal and rock waste disperses through the air and can choke lungs when inhaled. The dust also settles on the leaves of plants nearby. When this happens, stomata – the small pores on leaves through which plants exchange carbon dioxide, water vapour, and oxygen – are clogged, affecting photosynthesis and temperature regulation in the plants.

Estimating the impact of mining dust on nearby vegetation requires researchers to collect a large number of dust-laden leaves from plants spread in the area surrounding a mine. With the dust spreading as far as 30 km away from the mining site, this is a Herculean task.

In an October 2024 study published in the *Journal of Geophysical Research: Biogeosciences*, researchers from the University of Southampton in the U.K. and the National Institute of Technology (NIT), Rourkela, reported using freely available data from several satellites to investigate how plants are affected by mining dust.

"Use of satellite data provides a great opportunity to efficiently monitor larger areas," Jadu Dash, study co-lead and University of Southampton professor of remote sensing, said.

The data suggest the dust has significant effects on the ability of vegetation to absorb carbon dioxide.

Amit Kumar Gorai, professor of mining engineering at NIT Rourkela and the other lead, added, "The study emphasises the importance of tackling dust pollution to protect vegetation and promote sustainable urban and industrial development."

Eyes in the sky

The study was performed by Avinash Kumar Ranjan, who undertook the project as a part of his doctoral research at NIT Rourkela.

He began by estimating the amount of



An open-cast coal mine in Jharkhand. UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON/SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

mining dust settling on leaves in areas surrounding coal mines in Jharsuguda. To do this, he used data from two satellites, Landsat-8 and -9, and two satellite clusters, Sentinel-2 and PlanetScope. The U.S. Geological Survey and NASA launched the Landsat satellites in 2013 and 2021 while the European Space Agency launched Sentinel-2B (which supplied data for the study) in 2017 and Planet Labs launched PlanetScope in 2016-2022.

Light falling on leaves is composed of different wavelengths: we can see some (blue, green, red) but not others (e.g. infrared). The leaves absorb some of these wavelengths and reflect the rest. Like a camera snaps our photographs by capturing the visible light reflected by our bodies, satellites can capture images of an area in different wavelengths using special instruments.

When dust settles on leaves, it changes how much of a certain wavelength of light the leaves reflect. This changes the images of an area captured by a satellite for that particular wavelength.

By comparing satellite images of areas farther from the coal mines with those that were closer, the researchers could estimate the amount of dust settling on leaves.

To validate their estimates, the team also visited two sites in Jharsuguda and collected 300 leaf samples with dust on their surfaces. In their laboratory, they weighed each dusty leaf, and brushed the dust off and weighed the leaf again. The difference between the two readings yielded another estimate of the amount of dust settling on plant leaves around the coal mines.

Finally, they used statistical methods to find that the actual readings were remarkably close to those calculated from

Around three-fourths of India's electricity is produced by coal-fired power plants. Coal is also critical in the iron, steel, cement, and fertiliser industries. India is one of the largest producers and consumers of coal worldwide, second only to China

satellite data, demonstrating that satellite images could be used to estimate the amount of mining dust settling on the local flora.

Narayan Kayet, a scientist at the Environmental Management and Policy Research Institute, Bengaluru, said the strength of the study lay in "the use of data from multiple satellites, which ensures comprehensive coverage and cross-validation of results."

Mr. Kayet has previously studied the amount of mining dust settling on plants surrounding coal mines in Jharkhand. He wasn't involved in the new study.

"Incorporating measurements from the field strengthens the credibility" of estimates derived from remote-sensing data, he added.

Dusty leaf, sick plant

The researchers also used statistical models to correlate the amount of dust on leaves with vital physiological processes. For the latter, they used readings from two other space-based instruments called ECOSTRESS and MODIS. Their data can be used to compute the temperature of plants in an area and the amount of water vapour they release, both in high resolution.

The team's models suggested that plants with one gram of mining dust on their leaves absorbed "approximately 2-3

grams less carbon per square meter of area," Mr. Gorai said.

While the amount might seem small for an individual plant, "when you multiply it across large areas of forests or vegetation near mining sites, the loss of carbon absorption becomes significant over time," he added.

Apart from being important for photosynthesis in plants, carbon absorption lowers the amount of carbon dioxide in the air. But when dust clogs the stomata, the plant absorbs less carbon and leaves more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. This could worsen global warming over time.

Another effect of clogged stomata is that plants become less able to exude water vapour in a process called transpiration. Plants that transpire well are able to maintain their temperature better; those that don't become warmer.

"When leaves are too hot, they struggle to photosynthesise efficiently," Mr. Gorai explained. "Over time, this can lead to stunted growth or even the death of plants." This then leads to long-term damage to local ecosystems.

Mr. Dash and Mr. Gorai also said their study provides a quick and effective way for governments to monitor dust pollution in and around coal mines, identify hotspots, and implement timely measures to prevent long-term damage to surrounding vegetation and local ecosystems.

Such measures could include water sprays and dust barriers, Mr. Dash said.

Mr. Kayet agreed: "We need stringent measures to reduce dust emissions in mining regions to mitigate vegetation stress."

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An impression of WASP-127b shows its newly discovered supersonic winds. REUTERS

Astronomers spot ferocious winds on alien planet

Reuters

In the earth's upper atmosphere, a fast-moving band of air called the jet stream blows with winds of more than 442 km per hour, but they are not the strongest in our solar system. The comparable high-altitude winds on Neptune reach about 2,000 km per hour. Those, however, are a mere breeze compared to the jet-stream winds on a planet called WASP-127b.

Astronomers have detected winds howling at about 33,000 km per hour on this large gaseous planet, located in our Milky Way galaxy approximately 520 lightyears from the earth in a tight orbit around a star similar to our sun.

The supersonic jet-stream winds circling WASP-127b at its equator are the fastest of their kind on any known planet. "There is an extremely fast

WASP-127b is a type called a hot Jupiter, a gas giant that orbits very close to its host star.

WASP-127b's diameter is about 30% larger than Jupiter, our solar system's largest planet

circumplanetary jet wind found on the planet. The velocity of the winds is surprisingly high," said astrophysicist Lisa Nortmann of the University of Göttingen in Germany, lead author of the study published on Tuesday in the journal *Astronomy & Astrophysics*.

More than 5,800 planets beyond our solar system, called exoplanets, have been discovered. WASP-127b is a type called a hot Jupiter, a gas giant that orbits very close to its host star. WASP-127b's diameter is about 30% larger than Jupiter, our solar system's largest planet. But its mass is only about 16% that of Jupiter, making it one of the puffiest planets ever observed.

"WASP-127b is a gas giant planet, which means that it has no rocky or solid surface beneath its atmospheric layers. Instead, below the observed atmosphere lies gas that becomes denser and more pressurized the deeper one goes into the planet," said astrophysicist and study co-author David Cont of Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich in Germany.

It orbits its star every roughly four days at just about 5% of the distance between the earth and the sun, leaving it scorched by stellar radiation. Like our moon is to the earth, one side of WASP-127b perpetually faces its star – the day side. The other side always faces away – the night side. Its atmosphere is about 2,060 degrees Fahrenheit (1,140 degrees Kelvin/1,127 degrees Celsius), with its polar regions less hot than the rest.

Like Jupiter, WASP-127b is composed mainly of hydrogen and helium, but its atmosphere also contains traces of more complex molecules such as carbon monoxide and water, which were identified in this research.

The fact that a hot Jupiter's day side is highly irradiated is believed to be a major driver of atmospheric dynamics.

"Answering the question of what drives these intense winds is challenging, as several factors influence wind patterns in exoplanet atmospheres," Mr. Cont said.

"The primary source of energy for these winds is the intense irradiation from the host star," Mr. Cont added, but other factors also play an important role in shaping the wind patterns.

Higher atmospheric wind speeds have been detected on two other exoplanets, in winds from their day side to night side, but not in winds flowing around the entire planet.

For feedback and suggestions
for 'Science', please write to
science@thehindu.co.in with the
subject 'Daily page'

THE SCIENCE QUIZ

Newly minted words for new experiences

Vasudevan Mukunt

QUESTION 1

A 2015 article in the journal *The Lancet* included X among the effects of climate change on humans. X is derived from the Latin for 'solace' and the Greek for 'suffering'. What is X?

QUESTION 2

What is the name given to modes of public transport whose proponents have said are futuristic but which are in reality less feasible or efficient than existing modes of transport?

QUESTION 3

In biological conservation, it is sometimes the case that efforts to

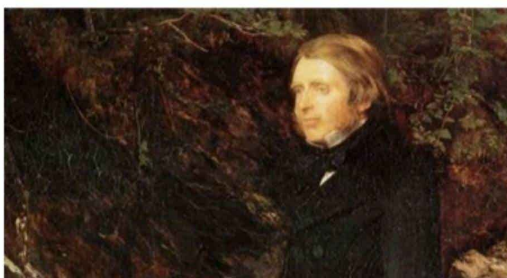
protect one endangered species lead to destruction of a different, but related, species. What is this phenomenon called?

QUESTION 4

Often, a species that lives in a city will develop adaptations to the urban environment that members of the same species living in the wild won't. What is this phenomenon called?

QUESTION 5

First-hand smoke is smoke inhaled through a burning cigarette. Second-hand smoke is smoke exhaled by a smoker plus emissions from the cigarette. What is third-hand smoke?



This English polymath coined the term pathetic fallacy for when people ascribe human emotions to nonliving natural things, like when someone says 'nature abhors a vacuum'. Name him. PUBLIC DOMAIN

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

Answers to January 23 quiz:

- Condition of which chromesthesia is a form – **Ans: Synaesthesia**
- When a person sees colours in an image that aren't there – **Ans: Colour constancy**
- Axis other colour temperature on a Kruithof curve – **Ans: Illuminance**
- Non-physical entity the opponent process offers to explain – **Ans: Impossible colours**
- Eyes' tendency to see an image after it's been taken away – **Ans: Afterimage**

Visual: Ishihara
First contact: K.N. Viswanathan |
Viswanadha Rao Batchu | Priya
Dharshini

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Punjab's plight

Poor fiscal health calls for course correction

PUNJAB is sinking deeper into the fiscal mire. Every political party that has ruled the state during the past two decades must take its due share of the blame for making things reach such a pass. The writing was right there on the wall when the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) tabled a damning audit report on the debt-ridden state's finances in the Assembly in September last year. The report flagged a worrying trend—expenditure growing at a much faster rate compared to revenue receipts. Now, in another embarrassment on the financial front, Punjab has finished last among 18 major states on the NTI Aayog's Fiscal Health Index (FHI).

The state has turned out to be a laggard on key sub-indices such as quality of expenditure and fiscal prudence. In simple terms, Punjab is not spending enough to boost development, for which a marked improvement in infrastructure and social services is a must. This has adverse implications for the state's long-term economic growth as well as its potential as an investment destination. The indiscriminate rollout of subsidies and freebies has brought the state exchequer to its knees. According to the CAG report, subsidies constituted 11.18 per cent of the revenue expenditure during 2018-23. Successive governments have shied away from discontinuing or rationalising subsidies for an obvious reason—the fear of a backlash from the farming community, which is a major vote bank. The AAP government's 'zero bill' guarantee for electricity consumers has not been matched by all-out efforts aimed at revenue mobilisation.

There are just two years to go for the Assembly elections. In its bid to woo voters and regain power, the ruling party will be tempted to fiscal discipline the go-by. This is a vicious cycle that is stifling Punjab's growth. The least that can be done is to find out how top performers like Odisha, Chhattisgarh and Goa have got it right. Hopefully, the FHI wake-up call will shake the state government out of its self-congratulatory reverie.

MGNREGS funds

Annual crunch demands urgent fixes

THE Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), a lifeline for rural livelihoods, is once again grappling with an acute fund shortage. For the fiscal year 2024-25, the government allocated Rs 86,000 crore, yet Rs 43.15 crore worth of wage payments remain pending. In 2023-24, the scheme ran a deficit of Rs 6,146 crore just six months into the year. Similarly, in 2022-23, the revised allocation of Rs 89,400 crore was 33 per cent higher than the original budget. This annual struggle to meet financial requirements raises critical questions about the scheme's implementation and funding priorities. It is riddled with glaring inefficiencies. The Congress' demand for increasing MGNREGS wages to Rs 400 per day reflects political optics rather than a sustainable solution. It is a popular move and fails to address the root cause: a systemic shortfall in timely fund allocation.

Technical interventions such as the Aadhaar-Based Payment Bridge System and the National Mobile Monitoring System have exacerbated delays. Frequent connectivity issues and stringent Aadhaar seeding requirements have led to widespread deletions of job cards, with nearly nine crore workers losing access since 2022. While touted as measures to enhance transparency, these systems have become barriers to livelihoods. The MGNREGS was designed as a demand-driven scheme to ensure livelihood security for rural households.

The MGNREGS has consistently highlighted rural distress, with elevated demand for work signalling urban job shortages. Its role in alleviating poverty cannot be overstated. The government must prioritise realistic budgeting, transparent implementation and the removal of administrative roadblocks. That allocations are consistently falling short of demand and fund exhaustion is becoming a predictable mid-year crisis indicates a structural gap in policy implementation. The policy failure must be corrected.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune

LAHORE, WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 28, 1925

India in 1923-24

FOR a purely official publication, India in 1923-24 by Prof Rushbrook Williams, to whom the task of preparing these annual reports for presentation to Parliament has been entrusted by the Government of India, contains statements remarkable both for their independence and impartiality. It is probably for this reason, as well as because this report is now presented under the authority and with the general approval of the Secretary of State, that the author has seen fit to introduce the volume with the explanatory observation that "it must not be understood that the approval either of the Secretary of State or of the Government of India extends to every particular expression of opinion". In the very first chapter, we have a lucid statement both of the revolution that has taken place in India's outlook and aspirations in recent years, and of the problems which this revolution has brought in its train. "These changes," says the writer, "have but served to point the contrast between the natural aspirations of India and the imperfect measure in which these aspirations are at present satisfied. The impatient indignation, which now characterises the political life of the country, is leading men to ask whether India can ever attain her rightful position within the ring-fence of the British Commonwealth; and whether any misfortune that can befall a people may not be ultimately preferable to a position of inferiority at home and of humiliation abroad. It is the task of British statesmanship to convince India that whatever the remote future may hold for the Indo-British connection, there is room for her within the Commonwealth to rise to the full height of her national stature."

26/11 probe gets a new lease of life

Tahawwur Rana's extradition to India will help investigators fill important gaps



MANOJ JOSHI
DISTINGUISHED FELLOW, OBSERVER
RESEARCH FOUNDATION, DELHI

IT is an irony that the US has decided to extradite Canadian national Tahawwur Hussain Rana to India for his supporting role in the Mumbai terror attacks that killed 166 people in November 2008, but has refused to part with one of the primary perpetrators—Daoud Gilani aka David Coleman Headley. Rana, a doctor who had deserted from the Pakistan Army, and Headley were old friends and classmates at the Hassan Abdal military academy near Islamabad. Both were tried on 12 counts by a US court and sentenced to 15 and 35 years in jail, respectively, in 2013.

Details of the Rana-Headley connection come to us from their indictment and trial in the US on terrorism charges. These were confirmed by the interrogation report of Headley by the National Investigation Agency in June 2010.

In September 2023, the Mumbai police filed a 400-page supplementary chargesheet that came up with a surprise revelation: Rana had visited Mumbai a week ahead of the attacks. The US court documents did not have this information, which suggest that he may have had a more sinister role to play in the attacks.

Rana came into the picture when Headley met him in Chicago in 2006 and told him about his Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) links and his decision to change his name to conceal his identity. He also told him about his association with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and his assignment to conduct surveillance in Mum-



TRAGEDY: A full reckoning for the Mumbai attacks is still some distance away, as seen in the image of the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel.

bai. He asked Rana whether he could set up a branch of his First World Immigration office there, and Rana agreed.

After subsequent visits in 2007 and 2008, Headley kept Rana abreast of his activities there, including video surveillance of Taj Mahal hotel and surveying a possible landing site. He also briefed him on his conversations with Sajid Mir and Major Iqbal, two Pakistani ISI operatives. At least twice in his five visits to Mumbai, Headley received money from Rana at a bank close to the Oberoi hotel.

Count 12 of the US indictment noted that since 2005, the two had "knowingly provided" material support—personnel, currency, tangible property, and false documentation and identification—to the LeT.

Despite this, Rana was actually acquitted on the counts relating to the Mumbai attacks. His conviction was on count 11 connected to the subsequent plot, of which Headley was also a part, to target Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* and on count 12 for providing material support to terrorists.

Intelligence agencies have followed other trails, which suggest that some more locals were part of the support framework of the Mumbai attackers.

Rana's defence counsel claimed that he was "easily the least culpable of all the members of the plot". But there are many gaps in the American proceedings and this is what the Indian authorities hope to fill after they obtain Rana's custody.

Headley was not extradited to India because of his plea agreement with the US, which barred a death sentence and extradition

to either India or Denmark. The US authorities said they were provided significant information by him about the association and the involvement of the ISI in the attacks, about the personnel, structure, methods, abilities and plans of the LeT, that his testimony helped convict Rana and that he had also answered the questions of Indian authorities for seven days. In addition, Headley's actions also enabled the authorities to file criminal charges against six others—Sajid Mir, Abu Qahafa, Mazhar Iqbal, Major Iqbal, Ilyas Kashmiri and Abdur Rehman Hashim Syed.

Rana did not enter a plea deal or fully cooperate with US authorities, and hence his extradition is taking place, albeit after a lengthy process. India did make efforts to extradite Headley. A request was sent to the US in December 2012 by the government, but despite this, America refused.

There is no easy closure on 26/11. Though Lashkar chief Hafiz Saeed is serving a 78-year sentence for terror financing and his deputy Zaki-ur-Rehman

Lakhvi and Rana are serving a 15-year jail term for terrorism, the whereabouts of other perpetrators—Sajid Mir, Abu Qahafa, Mazhar Iqbal, Major Iqbal, Hashim Syed, Muzammil and Zarrar Shah—are not very clear.

Ilyas Kashmiri was killed in a US drone strike. After claiming that Sajid Mir, the main planner of the Mumbai attacks, was dead, the Pakistani authorities said they arrested him in July 2022 and have sentenced him to eight years in prison for terror financing. Details of this matter are murky because the US, which has indicted Mir, along with Headley, and which has a \$5-million reward for him, would like to extradite him. Both Saeed and Mir were convicted of terror financing, not terrorist acts, in a successful bid to get Pakistan out of the grey list of the Financial Action Task Force.

Going by the US proceedings, which saw his acquittal on charges relating directly to the Mumbai attacks, Rana claimed a peripheral role in 26/11. But the account above is suggestive of a much deeper role. The visit to Mumbai days before the attacks, too, suggests this. The Indian authorities have not been satisfied by their investigations, especially the role of locals who may have been involved in the conspiracy. There is reference to a "Bashir Sheikh", who received Headley on behalf of Rana in Mumbai during his first visit there and was his contact during his subsequent visits as well. He has not been identified, leave alone arrested.

Intelligence agencies have followed other trails, which suggest that some more locals were part of the support framework of the Mumbai attackers. Rana's extradition will help fill important gaps in the probe into a tragedy that traumatised the country. But sadly, a full reckoning for the Mumbai attacks is still some distance away.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

No religion is responsible for terrorism. People are responsible for violence and terrorism. —Barack Obama

The green message of two tongas

STANLEY CARVALHO

AT a green energy conference held recently, a speaker waxed eloquent on solar power and fuel-efficient vehicles of the tiny South Pacific island of Tonga. While industry delegates listened with rapt attention, my mind dreamily veered to another tonga, the horse-drawn carts of Bangalore and Mysore.

Today, the tonga or 'jutka', as it was called, may be a rare sight in these cities, but until the 1980s, these carts commonly plied the roads.

Although it was a decent mode of transport in the 1960s and 1970s, our parents preferred the more comfortable and faster autorickshaws, taxis or buses. Besides, it seemed infra dig to be seen in a tonga, especially in the cantonment areas. With our pleas falling on deaf ears, we had little hope of enjoying tonga rides.

So, when an uncle who came to pick us up at the Mysore railway station suggested that we hire two tongas to go to his house, our joy knew no bounds. Before our mother said yes or nay, my brother and I clambered inside and soon we were enjoying the bumpy ride.

During our stay there, we were treated to a few more 'pony express' rides. Back in Bangalore, life moved on as we grew up with our cycles and mopeds, letting the tonga slip from our memory. In the early 1980s, we once took our visiting cousins from Bombay to a movie. Later, the five of us walked towards Shivajinagar bus stand after being ignored by autorickshaw drivers. Suddenly, out of the blue, a tonga appeared.

In a flash of excitement, all of us scrambled in and off it went clip-clop, clip-clop. We sat rather periscope with our legs dangling outside the cart, while our hands hung on to the clasp above. The cousin, who sat next to the tongawallah, had the good fortune to hold the reins of the horse for a few minutes. The friendly man compared her to actress Hema Malini, who played a 'tongawali' in the 1975 blockbuster *Sholay*.

As we entered our neighbourhood, the tonga invited curious stares from shopkeepers and passersby, which frankly didn't bother us. As for our cousins, they were enjoying every moment of their first-ever ride in a tonga.

When the tonga stopped opposite our gate, the loud and incessant barking of our dogs startled the horse, which let out frightful neighs. The sudden and rare equine-canele ocochony brought our parents scurrying outside. They were annoyed, but we got away with a light rebuke.

My reminiscences of the vintage tonga romance ended abruptly when the audience at the conference clapped, signalling the end of the speech.

As we walked out, a colleague lauded the island's futuristic renewable energy plans. I silently saluted the humble, non-polluting horse power of the past.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Trump prioritising business

APROPPOS of 'Better to jaw-jaw than to war-war' (*The Great Game*), the collaboration between Elon Musk and Donald Trump has proved that America just needs (and means) business. This is the reason that 'Naya' America has no problems talking to anyone, be it its archrival China. On the other hand, India allows emotion to come in the way of the big games played by big nations. India gave a safe haven to ousted Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina when several powerful countries, including the UK, did not show any interest in giving her political asylum. All nations must remember—war is costly, but peace is inexpensive. Big and influential countries like America and China need to play a pivotal role in this regard.

BIR DEVINDER SINGH BEDI, SANGRUR

Reach out to neighbours

REFER to 'Better to jaw-jaw than to war-war'; the writer has nicely dwelt upon Maha Kumbh and *Makar Sankranti* to symbolically allude to the big changes in international politics. Many of us too felt that the Indian PM should have been invited to Trump's inauguration ceremony. The US President is talking tough on illegal immigrants, imposing tariffs against China and bringing Russia and Ukraine to the negotiation table. In our neighbourhood, the bonhomie between Bangladesh and Pakistan cannot be ignored, though India has shown moral courage to stand by Sheikh Hasina. If 'Naya' America can hold talks with any country, we should also do the same in case of our neighbours.

RAJ BAHADUR YADAV, FATEHABAD

A vision for 'golden' India

AS India celebrated its 76th Republic Day with the inspiring theme 'Golden India: Heritage and Progress', it reflected a harmonious blend of India's rich cultural heritage and its modern advancements, celebrating a nation that honours its past while embracing innovation. The intangible treasures of our nation's traditional art forms continue to inspire the world. Simultaneously, India has established itself as a global leader in technology, space exploration, healthcare and renewable energy, with initiatives like 'Digital India' and 'Make in

India'. The theme is a call to preserve the cultural wealth handed down over decades and centuries and to drive transformation that empowers future generations.

HARPREET SANDHU, LUDHIANA

Recognition for social workers

THE Indian Government must earmark at least 50 per cent of the Padma awards (and Bharat Ratna) for selfless social workers and schoolteachers. Many of them are sincere and proactive in their work. Industrialists and other professionals (sports persons, film personalities, etc) work for the sake of profits. Moreover, they have prestigious awards in their respective professions. Why should Padma awards and Bharat Ratna be given to them?

SREELEKHA, BY MAIL

Grandparents' role

WITH reference to 'A grandfather who became a godfather', grandparents are like gardeners who plant seeds of strength and values in their grandchildren, ensuring they flourish in life. Their sacrifices and unwavering support build a foundation for success. Sadly, in today's fast-paced world, the younger generation often overlooks the priceless treasure of their elders' wisdom. It is vital for the youth to embrace the experience and guidance of their elders. Their stories and values are timeless lessons that can inspire us. Respecting and learning from them not only honours their sacrifices but also enriches our own lives.

PAWAN JOSHI, MOGA

Women's woes continue

DESPITE efforts made by the Central Government regarding women's empowerment, their position in society remains far from satisfactory. A skewed sex ratio in states like Haryana and Punjab belies all the tall claims. The plight of women can be ameliorated by taking stringent action against erring parents and unscrupulous physicians who conduct sex determination tests. Sensitising people about the problems arising out of a skewed sex ratio and highlighting women's contribution to society and the country can go a long way towards making their empowerment durable and sustainable.

VIMAL SETHI, KAPURTHALA

Fight for the eyesight of premature babies



ANAND GUPTA
EMERITUS PROFESSOR,
PGI, CHANDIGARH

OXYGEN is the elixir of life, and this was brought home during the Covid-19 pandemic when millions of lives perished because of the worldwide scarcity of the much sought-after oxygen cylinders. However, it is not widely known that oxygen is also a double-edged sword. When given to yet-not-fully-developed babies born too soon, high-concentration oxygen may devastate their eyesight.

An estimated 18,000 babies thus go blind for life every year in India alone. Using unmonitored, high-concentration supplemental oxygen in newborn care units undoubtedly saves lives, but often at the cost of blindness. The blindness results from the consequences of scarring and unfettered growth of abnormal blood-supplying vessels in the immature retina. It is now known as retinopathy of prematurity (ROP).

Babies mature in the womb for 40 weeks before entering the world. The eye's light-sensitive layer, the retina, is

fully matured only if the baby attains at least 2,000-gm weight. If born before 31 weeks, several vital organs, especially lungs and retina, are not fully developed. A vast swath of the retina remains without a blood supply, especially in babies weighing less than 1,500 gm.

Around the turn of the 20th century, doctors realised that babies born too soon could be saved if given oxygen. In the early 1940s, Dr Theodore Terry from Boston (USA) first flagged the issue of a visible white reflex due to massive scar tissue seen in the eyes weeks after birth of premature babies, all of whom weighed less than three pounds at birth. For several years, exposure to light was wrongly blamed.

It was a pathologist in London, Norman Ashton, who fortuitously discovered that the retina of the kitten till three weeks of birth was similar to that of a human baby born too soon. He created an ROP-like picture by first exposing these kittens to high-concentration oxygen and returning them to room air. Anall Patz at Johns Hopkins was to discover almost simultaneously that if oxygen delivery in premature babies was monitored, they did not develop ROP.

According to Dr Sourabh Dutta, Professor at the Neonatology Department, PGI, Chandigarh, India is experiencing an epidemic of ROP-induced blindness due to increased survival of pre-



RECOMMENDED: Indian babies born before 34 weeks or weighing less than 2,000 gm or even higher if oxygen support is required must be screened for ROP. FILE PHOTO

mature babies, unregulated oxygen use, lack of pulse oximeters and oxygen blenders in the newborn care units mushrooming all over urban India. Highly skilled manpower is required to care for these babies and counsel the parents. Although at-risk babies continue to be born, albeit in small numbers, in high-income countries of Europe, North America and Southeast Asia, hardly a baby goes blind from ROP because of the advanced infrastructure in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU).

Almost four decades after what led to ROP was understood, experts reached a consensus on grading the stage and severity of ROP and developed guidelines for treating the immature retina in these babies. While many

Using unmonitored, high-concentration supplemental oxygen in newborn care units undoubtedly saves lives, but often at the cost of blindness.

early-stage cases resolve without treatment, some babies may require laser therapy or injections into the eye of drugs to block the abnormal retinal vessel development. If treated appropriately, success rates exceed most medical procedures. This protocol has also become the most cost-effective procedure by saving sight for the rest of life.

Dr Joy Lawn from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and colleagues estimated that nearly 15 million babies worldwide are born too soon (less than 37 weeks). With India topping the charts, almost eight million babies are born too soon in resource-limited middle- and low-income countries. Those born too soon in low-income countries with poor resources barely have any

chance of survival.

Timely detection, staging and treatment within 48 hours of at-risk babies is the key to saving their sight. The American Academies of Paediatrics and Ophthalmology recommend screening babies born with a birth weight of less than 1,500 gm, gestational age of 30 weeks or less, or any newborn with a higher weight (up to 2,000 gm) who received oxygen even for a few days.

Dr Praveen Kumar, head of the Neonatology Department in PGI, however, recommends that Indian babies born before 34 weeks or weighing less than 2,000 gm or even higher if oxygen support is required must be screened for ROP. Starting at 28 days of age or discharge from NICU, whichever is earlier, the eye surgeon needs to monitor the newborn until the retina is fully matured. Training thousands of eye surgeons and equipping them with the necessary skills nationwide to screen and treat these tiny babies is a herculean task. Dr Subhadra Jalali in Hyderabad and Anand Vinekar in Bangalore, both PGI alumni, have devoted their careers to saving the right of sight of these hapless babies.

More than 50 years ago, Prof ON Bhakoo set up a modern neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) in the PGI, Chandigarh, and started training super specialists (DM) in neonatology. They were successful in saving the lives of very low birth weight babies. I

remember Dr Anil Nanang, who trained at Oxford and followed Professor Bhakoo, asking me the big question — who among us would undertake the onerous task of examining and treating those at risk of ROP in these tiny incubator-bound babies?

Dr Mangat Dogra, fresh from his training in the US, volunteered. As they say, the rest is history. Applying a cold probe at 40°C Celsius (cryotherapy) to the retina that lacked blood supply was the standard of care back then if these babies had to have any eyesight in their lifetime. The babies had to be put under general anaesthesia. I remember the long hours he spent in NICU, examining babies, selecting those requiring treatment, and chasing anaesthetists, who, in those days, had little experience in giving anaesthesia to 1,000-1,200-gm babies. He would regularly share the day's story with me. I remember the pride on his face, a million-watt smile, announcing that the baby would see as the ROP had regressed.

Over the decades, cryotherapy was supplanted with lasers and injections that do not require anaesthesia. In the last 35 years, Dr Dogra has treated the retinas of hundreds of premature babies and trained many ophthalmologists across India, including Anand. Happily, many of the same teeny-weeny babies he saved the sight are having babies with normal sight.

UGC draft rules: Guv's control sparks federalism debate



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FIRST formulated in 2010 and amended from time to time since then, the University Grants Commission (UGC) has again revised its rules on the "minimum qualifications for appointment of teachers and other academic staff in universities and colleges and measures for maintenance of standards in higher education."

The draft regulations 2025 have triggered a mixed response from academic circles as the intended modifications in certain contentious issues have far-reaching consequences on appointments, service conditions and promotions of teachers as well as the autonomy and control of the state on higher educational institutions (HEIs).

With the aim of achieving the goals of National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, emphasis has been laid on the use of Indian languages, societal engagement and teaching, learning and research in the Indian knowledge system. The numerical score-based academic performance indicator (API) system for the recruit-

ment and promotions of teachers has been replaced with a subjective evaluation system that involves contributions towards teaching, research and digital content creation. This system has inherent limitations, which have been already experienced prior to the API system era. Emphasis has been laid on non-measurable accomplishments, to be considered by selection committees. The new system lacks transparency, leaves room for irrational evaluation and manipulation, which is of serious concern.

Apparently envisioned to promote academic flexibility, allowing teachers to teach subjects based on their highest specialisations without having degrees in the same subjects at the lower academic levels may create problems in case of collaborative multi-disciplinary studies and discourage the much-needed interdisciplinary research approaches.

The draft document lacks a transparent mechanism for foolproof and acceptable implementation of its provisions to eliminate suspicion, partiality and undue preference to subjective evaluations. It is feared that de-capping of the limit on contractual appointments of teachers will encourage this practice, compromising the quality and creation of committed and innovative professionals. Such appointments need to be curtailed as they are only an emergent temporary solution.

The minimum qualifications and procedure for the selection of vice-chancellor (VC) have been revised. Now, absolute powers are vested in chancellors (governors in case of state universities) to select VCs through search-cum-selection committees. The VCs post has also been opened for non-academicians from the industry, public administration and public policy. This is a cause of disappointment and discouragement for distinguished and accomplished academicians.

These ill-conceived, unsustainable solutions have probably been envisioned due to the recent rows between some opposition-ruled state governments and their governors over the appointment of VCs.

The role of state governments in the appointment of VCs has been eliminated though, constitutionally, education is a state subject and under the Concurrent List.



DISRUPTIVE: The UGC draft regulations 2025 will lead to academic chaos. FILE PHOTO

Being contrary to the federal principles of governance, the Tamil Nadu and Kerala governments have rejected the draft document. The document is also unacceptable to the All-India Federation of University and College Teachers Organisation. Some other quarters may also oppose it.

Views have been expressed against making the VCs post open to non-academicians. Questions like whether we appoint businessmen as civil servants have been raised in this context. AVC is essentially an academic leader and scholarly role model for the faculty, staff and students.

The HEIs are neither factories nor business franchises. They are institutions where excellence in teaching and learning is ensured and young minds are groomed for free thinking in a research-undertaking environment. These

The role of state governments in the appointment of VCs has been eliminated, though education is a state subject and under the Concurrent List.

values cannot be appreciated by non-academic paratroopers or persons not exposed to the rigorous academic ecosystem of HEIs and lacking in academic and research knowledge and orientation, no matter how expert they may be in their field of specialisation.

It will open the VCs post to persons with political and ideological affiliations, compromising the eminence, propriety and commitment to academic excellence that is expected from this position. The appointment of non-academicians as Professors of Practice in universities with similar expectations, too, is yet to show tangibly beneficial results.

It would be in the interest of the nation to avoid such experiments with HEIs. A balance of the role of state governments and governors in the selection of VCs is needed. Further, it should be provided that none of the selection committee members is below the rank of a VC; that a non-academician is not appointed VC even as a stop-gap arrangement; and that the post does not stay without a regular VC for a long time.

Instead of inviting applications, nominations may be invited from current and former VCs, directors of institutions of importance, acclaimed intellectuals, etc. elucidating the achievements, integrity and calibre of the aspirant.

Though questionable, the draft regulations are mandatory in nature and impose stringent penalties on their viola-

tion. The penalties include debarment of the institution from getting UGC schemes and disqualifying it not only from offering any degree but also the institution as a whole.

These regulations, ostensibly asserted as "measures for maintenance of standards in higher education", are, in fact, a blatant effort to erode the autonomy of universities, impose Central control, compromise the quality of education, curtail academic freedom, undermine academicians and overstep the UGC mandate. The UGC Act of 1956 does not clearly contain any provision related to VCs' selection. Having no regulation till 2010, introducing the UGC nominee on the search panel in 2010, withdrawing it in 2013, reintroducing it in 2018 and expanding it for greater control over HEIs in 2025 reflects that the UGC itself is not clear about its role in VCs' appointments.

The regulations will lead to academic chaos and put the state universities in a disadvantageous position. The UGC must not go ahead with the disruptive revisions. Especially so, when the formation of an umbrella organisation — the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) — as envisaged in NEP 2020, subsuming the UGC, is in the pipeline. The HECI would have responsibilities, like maintaining academic standards and specifying the eligibility criteria and mode for selection of VCs.

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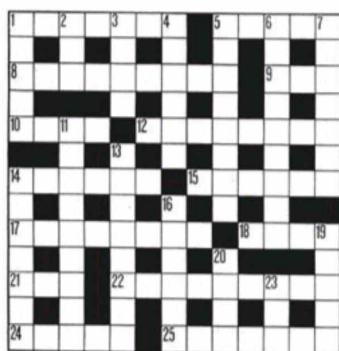
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QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1 Ardent (7)
- 5 Raise with tackle (5)
- 8 Outward bearing (9)
- 9 Swindle (3)
- 10 A cardinal point (4)
- 12 Extravagant publicity (8)
- 14 Pester continually (6)
- 15 Open out for inspection (6)
- 17 Satisfactory (3,5)
- 18 Title of former Russian emperor (4)
- 21 A bond (3)
- 22 No doubt (9)
- 24 Clemency (5)
- 25 Whet (7)

DOWN

- 1 Make slightest movement (5)
- 2 Spirit distilled from molasses (3)
- 3 Leader of prayers in mosque (4)
- 4 Worldwide (6)
- 5 Uncompromising attitude (4,4)
- 6 Cuddling (2,7)
- 7 Silver paper (7)
- 11 Trifling matter (5,4)
- 13 Person of prominence (8)
- 14 Ghost (7)
- 16 Proposition to be proved (6)
- 19 An artificial textile fabric (5)
- 20 Region (4)
- 23 Immerse briefly in liquid (3)

Saturday's solution

Across: 1 Rosemary, 5 Crab, 9 Donor, 10 Trouble, 11 Strike it rich, 13 Homage, 14 Bangle, 17 Steel oneself, 20 Inverse, 21 Idiot, 22 Elsie, 23 Stand out.

Down: 1 Rude, 2 Sanctum, 3 Morning glory, 4 Ratner, 6 Rabbi, 7 Brethren, 8 Most question, 12 Chastise, 15 Galileo, 16 Intent, 18 Eaves, 19 Frey.

SU DO KU



SATURDAY'S SOLUTION

3	9	6	1	7	4	8	5	2
1	7	4	8	5	2	6	3	9
2	8	5	6	9	3	1	4	7
5	4	2	7	8	6	9	1	3
7	6	1	4	3	9	5	2	8
8	3	9	2	1	5	7	6	4
4	1	8	5	2	7	3	9	6
6	5	3	9	4	8	2	7	1
9	2	7	3	6	1	4	8	5

CALENDAR

JANUARY 28, 2025, TUESDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1946
- Magh Shaka 8
- Magh Purnima 15
- Hijri 1446
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 14, up to 7.37 pm
- Vijaya Yoga up to 11.51 pm
- Purnvashadha Nakshatra up to 8.59 pm
- Moon enters Capricorn sign 2.52 pm

FORECAST

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	22	06
New Delhi	24	08
Amritsar	20	04
Bathinda	24	04
Jalandhar	21	03
Ludhiana	22	04
Bhawan	22	06
Hisar	22	06
Sirsa	23	04
Dharamsala	20	06
Manali	17	03
Shimla	20	09
Srinagar	12	-04
Jammu	20	06
Kargil	-01	-13
Leh	00	-14
Dehradun	—	—
Mussoorie	19	08

ENRICHMENT '25