

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

—Rannath Goenka

DUMPING THREAT LOOMS ELSEWHERE AS INDIA NEARS U.S. DEAL

DONALD Trump has dropped a big hint about signing a "very big" trade deal with India. The remarks, coming ahead of his July 9 deadline for striking deals or resuming "reciprocal" tariffs, offer a significant relief for markets, policy makers and industry. Tariff-related uncertainties have triggered a massive sell-off in global and domestic equity markets, with foreign portfolio investments remaining volatile. While the contours of the proposed deal are unknown, it's likely that it would enhance economic partnership, transform bilateral trade and lower tariffs, making products competitive across sectors such as energy, agriculture, defence and aviation. It's also possible that India would gain market share in some American sectors owing to lower tariffs; although the gains would depend on India's comparative advantage against other countries. The anticipated direct export loss is pegged at \$14 billion, amounting to 0.38 percent of India's GDP, according to a working paper published by the National Institute of Public Finance and Policy.

The export basket might change, too. Some of India's top 10 exports to the US—including electronic goods and gems & jewellery—may lose market share as competing countries are subject to lower tariffs on these products. On the other hand, we may gain in the footwear, apparel, electrical machinery and toy markets. For instance, according to the NIPFP paper, China, Vietnam, Indonesia, Italy and Cambodia account for 45.5 percent of the total in footwear exports to the US. Even if China is excluded, India can potentially corner a bigger share from Vietnam and Indonesia, which are subject to much higher tariffs of 46 percent and 32 percent, respectively. Similar opportunities exist in the furniture and sports equipment markets, too.

At the same time, a multi-product, multi-country dumping threat looms over India. We should be watchful as China, Vietnam, Taiwan and others facing higher tariffs look to flood us with cheaper goods. While India reduces the tariff deficit with the US, it needs to offer calibrated concessions on select US goods like aerospace components. We should secure sector-specific exemptions, negotiate duty waivers for auto components and electronics, and diversify export markets away from the US, pursuing opportunities in the EU, the UK and ASEAN. Above all, India should strengthen domestic manufacturing, boost Make in India initiatives in key areas such as semiconductors, renewable energy and electronics to reduce import reliance and attract investments.

AXIOM-4 TAKES INDIA'S SPACE DREAMS HIGHER

JUNE 26 is a new red-letter day in India's decades-long space odyssey. The Axiom-4 mission, with Group Captain Shubhanshu Shukla as its pilot, made Shukh (his call sign) the first Indian astronaut to enter the International Space Station, a multi-country collaboration. On another red-letter day—April 2, 1984—Squadron Leader Rakesh Sharma, the first Indian in space, had made history by entering the Soviet space station Salyut 7. Although it took 41 years for India to send its second astronaut to space, the Axiom-4 mission has opened the gates for sustained efforts by the Indian Space Research Organisation for our own manned space missions, besides other ambitious projects such as having our own space station and sending manned missions to the Moon and beyond.

This January 16, Isro's Space Docking Experiment (SpaDeX) saw two unmanned spacecraft attaching with each other in space, making India only the fourth country to achieve such a feat after the US, Russia and China. SpaDeX itself was part of Isro's fourth Orbital Experiment Module, which carried 24 payloads from the government's department of space and non-government entities such as academic institutions and startups. Payloads from startups were received through the National Space Promotion and Authorisation Centre, the nodal agency promoting space-related activities in the country. That mission allowed the scientific community to carry out various in-orbit microgravity experiments that will help the missions planned for the future.

On his 14-day Ax-4 mission, Shukh will carry out seven experiments aboard the space station to study the impact of microgravity and space flight on the germination and growth of two strains of seeds, on the genetic activity of microalgae, on skeletal muscles, on computer screens' cognitive effects, and on tardigrades, the highly resilient micro animals. The momentum and range of India's space experiments—involving the government, private startups and the academia—have never looked more intense. That holds a lot of promise for a country planning to send its first human space flight under the Gaganyaan mission by 2027, set up the Bharatiya Antariksh Station by 2035, and send astronauts to the Moon by 2040. So far, India's space odyssey is on course.

QUICK TAKE

LET'S NOT FORGET GAZA

WHILE the world's eyes were peeled on the Israel-Iran-US missile exchanges, Benjamin Netanyahu's government intensified its killing of famished Gazans who were desperately seeking food aid. During the 12 days of bombing, Israeli forces killed hundreds of Palestinians, and then continued space even after a ceasefire was agreed with Iran. At the same time, Zionist 'settlers' and Israeli troops have stepped up attacks on resident Palestinian in the Occupied West Bank. Even if not for the sake of protecting international laws, Western governments should introspect on the recent political reversals that pro-Israel establishment figures have suffered at home. Let cynicism save lives where humanity has lost.

THE Election Commission of India (ECI) has announced a special intensive revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in Bihar just weeks before the likely notification of assembly elections. Such revisions, when conducted this close to polling, are extraordinary and must meet a high bar of justification. Yet no explanation, let alone evidence, has been offered for why this exercise is necessary now. Instead, the justification has taken a familiar and troubling shape: vague and unsubstantiated claims about "illegal voters" and "cross-border infiltration".

If this is not a damning indictment of the ministry of home affairs' failure in protecting our borders, then it is definitely dog-whistling to create a pretext for the possibility of large-scale manipulation. The pattern is unmistakable and, to the opposition parties, the objective seems transparent: to manipulate voter rolls in a manner that systematically excludes minorities and the poor.

This is not the first time such tactics have been deployed. In the run-up to the 2024 Lok Sabha elections and subsequent state elections in Maharashtra, lakhs of names were added to the electoral rolls in a short period. Opposition parties have raised valid concerns about the sudden spike and the unusually high late-evening turnout surges. The ECI has refused to release digital, machine-readable electoral rolls or polling-day CCTV footage.

Also, ahead of the elections, right-wing commentators and academics belted out dubious 'studies' raising unfounded alarms about "illegal voters". The exercise was repeated in Delhi right before the 2025 assembly elections. No other official data supported these claims.

The fear-mongering in the name of "illegal migrants" or "bogus voters" used to be an ideological fringe position—it has become a tool of institutionalised disenfranchisement. This framing is used to justify aggressive and opaque revisions of electoral rolls that disproportionately target Muslim, Dalit and poor migrant communities. Now the ECI is echoing this language without any evidence and without accountability.

There is a conspicuous absence of data and a deliberate location of public anxiety around border security and demographic change. The shift from dog-whistle politics to executive action—particularly by a constitutional body like the ECI—is a dangerous point.

The ECI must conduct a thorough and honest investigation into these allegations if India's reputation as a democracy is to survive. The Constitution of India, under

Asking voters to prove their eligibility afresh can disenfranchise large sections in a poor state like Bihar where lakhs work outside. The Election Commission must explain why it's required

VOTER ROLL REVISION NEEDS SOUND REASON

MANOJ KUMAR JHA

Member of Rajya Sabha and national spokesperson, RJD



SOURAV BOY

Article 324, entrusts the ECI with the conduct of free and fair elections. This does not mean ballot secrecy or smooth polling logistics, it means ECI is constitutionally bound to protect the integrity of the electorate. This integrity is compromised when entire communities are asked to prove their right to vote without a shred of evidence against them.

These allegations are not speculation of losers. Research by Sabyasachi Das has demonstrated that in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, BJP candidates won a disproportionate number of tightly contested seats, especially in BJP-ruled states. His analysis points to patterns consistent with the possibility of 'manipulated' rolls and irregularities in voter turnout data, not campaign strength. Economist Abu-saleh Shariff, who was a member of the Sachar Committee, conducted voter roll

audits in Karnataka that revealed nearly 20 percent of adult Muslims were missing from the electoral list, while 30-35 percent of Muslim households had only one listed voter. These patterns are not random—they are engineered exclusions.

Reports suggest that verification for the SIR will require individual voters in Bihar to furnish documentation proving their eligibility and citizenship. These requirements bear an uncanny resemblance to the discredited National Register of Citizens (NRC) exercise in Assam, where millions of Indians were forced to dig up decades-old documents to prove citizenship, often arbitrarily.

According to government data, over 70 lakh citizens of Bihar work outside the state. Introducing these hurdles now will not only suppress turnout and bar legitimate voters from participating, but the re-

WHOSE TONGUE IS IT ANYWAY?

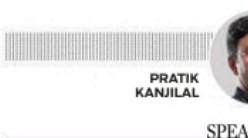
LANGUAGE remains an attractive business opportunity in Indian politics. Union Home Minister Amit Shah joined a long line of political entrepreneurs when he recently said, at the launch of a book by Hindi poet and administrator Ashutosh Agnihotri, that the days of English are numbered, and that English-speakers in India would soon "feel ashamed". But what exactly was the venture about, and was it a losing proposition?

In the language business, north Indian politicians usually propose to replace English, the working language of the British Raj, with Hindi, the language in which governments after independence hoped to bind together the states, which were demarcated on linguistic basis. Indira Gandhi established the department of official language in the 1970s to give teeth to the Official Language Act, 1963. Its core project was to promote Hindi in the work of the Union government.

The first step was to create vocabularies to describe the functions and processes of government. Words like *nyayalaya* (court) were not in common use in the 1970s. The Urdu adab prevailed. And newfangled terms like *urja mantri* (minister for energy) sounded unnatural. Delhi's governments had always relied on English, Urdu and Persian to conduct affairs of the state. Now, a new Hindi vocabulary had to be assembled quickly—and awkwardly. The news on state-controlled media baffled millions. State-sanctioned school curricula featured monstrosities like *vismaya dibodhakchinh*, Hindi for the exclamation mark. Only a language bureaucrat could have dreamed that one up.

But yesterday's monsters are now familiar friends. Across the land, we know what a *nyayalaya* is. Sporadically, political leaders from Devi Lal to members of the present government have even sought to make technical education accessible in Hindi. But the task of making up a fresh vocabulary is challenging. What's the Hindi for albedo? For the sterno-cleido-mastoid muscle? It's better to teach children English, the language in which most of the world's useful knowledge is encoded today. The children of so many people in government have been educated in precisely that language, often overseas, and they do not want to be ashamed.

In the English versus Hindi struggle, some states sensitive to cultural domination had caught on right away; their mother tongues would become collateral dam-



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SPEAKEASY

age in any attempt to unify India through one Indian language, which would push down all others to a lower status. Now, Shah seems to have pitted English against the Indian languages; more recently, he has called Hindi a "sakh" (companion) of all Indian languages. Nevertheless, linguistically sensitive states like Tamil Nadu and West Bengal would fear that Hindi is hiding in the shadow of the English bogey. The department of official language is today under Shah's ministry.



ANURAG CHANDRA

Even if we place poets Dom Moraes and Namdeo Dhasal at two ends of the language spectrum, there were others like Arun Kolatkar and Dilip Chitre who proudly straddled the middle ground with bilingual works. They embodied the multicultural, multilingual country India was expected to be

Setting aside the rhetoric, Shah's main point concerns cultural authenticity. Ever since the rise of the right in the 1980s, we have been told that India can be authentically understood only by autochthonous Indians who spring directly from Mother Earth, like cabbages. Unfortunately, there is some truth in this.

A distressing example: bestselling anthologies of Indian literature mostly turn out, on closer inspection, to be collections of Indian writing in English. No Maithili or Malayalam, please, we're Indian. It is also true that schooling has divided the nation into a tiny elite comfortable in

English, and the majority which identifies with mother tongues. But a handful have also made the effort to cross this man-made border, to see how the other side thinks, and some have learned to settle comfortably in no man's land.

In the world of Mumbai poetry, we could place Dom Moraes at one end of the cultural spectrum. He attended missionary school, went to Oxford, travelled the world and was steeped in the modern English poetic tradition. Reading his work, you could imagine the poet gazing upon the rolling dunes from the window of a crofter's cottage.

We could place Namdeo Dhasal at the other end of the spectrum—a Buddhist born in Pune, raised in poverty in Mumbai, a Dalit Panthers founder, poet of Kamathipura and other gritty realities—was very Marathi. He reached English-speaking audiences via the bilingual poet Dilip Chitre's translations.

Now, consider the man in the middle, Arun Kolatkar. He had common ground with his friend Chitre—both had translated Tukaram. But Kolatkar had attended a Marathi school in Kolhapur and went to college in Gulbarga, came to Mumbai dirt-poor but rose in advertising and graphic design, in the orbit of the legendary Kersy Katrak. Like Chitre, he led a bilingual creative life, writing in Marathi and English. And that made him the ideal poet to write, in English verse, of the road to Khandoba's shrine in Jejuri, one of India's most deeply layered folk pilgrimages.

People like Kolatkar and Chitre embodied the India that independence was supposed to create—multicultural, multilingual, progressive and not ashamed of any of it. It was expected that depressed communities would find liberation in English (the Dalit activist Chandrabhan Prasad still works tirelessly on the project), and the English-speaking minority would get over the colonial hangover and seek out their roots again. The language wars that pockmark our modern history were never supposed to happen—at all.

(Views are personal) (Tweets @pratik_k)

requirement to establish citizenship by poor Bihar residents and migrants living in other states is designed to produce large-scale chaos, deliberate confusion and fear.

The Representation of the People Act, 1950 lays out clear procedures for the inclusion and deletion of names from the electoral roll. It does not authorise open-ended 'special' revisions based on speculative narratives. Any extraordinary revision must be justified by credible demographic evidence, transparent methodology, and inclusive consultation with all political parties. None of these conditions have been met in Bihar.

It is not just about individuals losing their right to vote or padding up a party's votes by fictitious voters. It is a structural move to tilt the electoral field. If even 2-3 percent of votes are strategically suppressed or added in a tightly contested state, it can alter outcomes in dozens of seats.

The legitimacy of an election begins before the first vote is cast. The credibility of polling is at risk if people perceive they are being prevented from voting. With the state appearing to use bureaucratic tools to reshape the voter base, people—especially the poor and the powerless—will have to contend with a situation wherein they themselves do not count as voters. Democracy is not just backsliding, but dying little by little.

The opposition demands an immediate and complete halt to the special revision process in Bihar until the ECI publishes a full justification of the basis and methodology of the exercise. Secondly, all documentation requirements should be reviewed for legality and consistency with the RPA, 1950. We also call for independent audits in constituencies where large-scale deletions or additions have occurred in the past five years. Furthermore, we demand the release of machine-readable voter rolls, as well as demographic breakdowns of additions and deletions.

If the SIR is allowed in Bihar without this, it will be taken as a clear case of voter-base manipulation. It will be disenfranchisement masquerading as vigilance. The ECI must be held accountable—not just by the courts, but by the public, civil society, and every political party that believes in constitutional democracy. We will oppose this abuse of power to protect our unalienable rights.

The electorate will bear witness that the opposition parties had to not only counter the programme and promises of the ruling coalition, but struggle to foil attempts to disallow people from voting by the very institutions that had the job of protecting their franchise.

(Views are personal)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Aviation imperative

Ref: Develop a robust aviation maintenance ecosystem in India (Jun 27). While safety is non-negotiable, high vacancies, poor infrastructure and procedural inefficiencies are endangering lives. Deep structural reforms and investments in safety oversight, skilled manpower and certified infrastructure are urgently required. It is not just a technical upgrade, but a life-saving imperative. Rajakumar Arulnandham, Palayamkottai

Railways' responsibility

Ref: Fare hike must not jolt affordable rail travel (Jun 27). Mobility is a distinguished indication of life, for which the Indian Railways is hailed as a lifeline. Any move must take into account the socio-economic impact on passengers travelling in general class for compelling reasons like livelihood and health issues, unlike the relatively well-off co-passengers travelling in AC compartments. Sachidananda Satpathy, Sambalpur

Calculated compromise

Ref: J P Nadda: BJP president with nine lives (Jun 27). J P Nadda's retention could purely be coincidental. The BJP has learnt a lot from an extended exposure of power. Politics is an art of possibilities, science and calculated compromises. Prahad Chebbi, Dhawad

One love

Ref: Protecting love in all forms (Jun 27). Love, in all its forms, is the only correct definition of God. All schools of philosophy—Vedanta, Christianity, Islam, etc.—agree with it and express the same truth in their own ways. To love and to be loved is the greatest joy. R Pichumani, Kumbakonam

Prioritised cooperation

Ref: Rajnath refuses to sign joint SCO statement (Jun 27). No peace-loving nation would deliberately omit the recent Pahalgam terror attack in the draft. Since terrorism is a universal menace, to the peaceful ambience of the world, all SCO members must unite to combat terrorism in all its forms and manifestation as asserted by Rajnath Singh. Rajamani Chelladurai, email

Crash updates

Ref: At black box in, being analysed: Soot (Jun 27). The crash would have some relief to the grieving families of the passengers who lost their loved ones in the Ahmedabad plane crash. Thorough investigation should be taken up in this matter and major leads should be relayed to commuters. Adinarayan Prabhukhot, email

Chic Can Be Local, It Must Go Global, Too

Our crafts, Kolhapuris included, need lux branding

When models strut down the Prada Spring/Summer 2026 runway in Kolhapuri chappals — rebranded as ‘leather flat sandals’ and priced at a cool ₹1.2 lakh a pair — it kicks up the usual storm over cultural appropriation, or ‘theft’, as some call it. While the outrage over ‘stealing our art’ is understandable, the question is: what’s stopping us from turning handicrafts into high fashion through savvy marketing? India is a treasure trove of traditional art, ready to be monetised. Consumers are willing to pay more for fashion — if they’re told why it’s fashionable. Creativity in the business is as much about shaping the narrative as it is about aesthetic identity. Instead of a chappal, choli or dupatta being inserted into a Western canvas, the chic can be mainstreamed in its native habitat — for global consumption.

To scale in value, Indian handicrafts must plug into the high-fashion distribution network. This calls for closer interaction between European labels and Indian artisans. The higher value delivered by the Veblen effect — where demand increases with price — may not be shared equally, but some of it will accrue to workmanship. A Lehenga crafted to meet quality standards acceptable to international buyers benefits the entire value chain. Handicrafts can reinvent themselves through production methods that add value. High fashion, in turn, lowers the cost of creative inspiration.

This model marks an improvement over the existing global supply chain, where design is retained in consuming economies and production is outsourced. As a result, designers and producers lose some skin in the game. But as more production markets evolve into fashion consumption markets, aesthetic choices shift accordingly. Instead of functioning as a two-way street — with ideas flowing in one direction and products in the other — the fashion industry could operate more effectively as clusters. These clusters need not be located only where the clients are; they can also form around skills. It’s about finding greater efficiency in design, production and distribution.

Don’t Bother With ‘Mother Tongues’

The term ‘mother tongue’ is so soaked in sentimentality that it often escapes scrutiny. It suggests an innate, genetic allegiance to a particular language — usually the first one spoken at home, the one coded into lullabies and scoldings. But peel back that emotional varnish and what remains is a concept more sociopolitical, less linguistic fact. So, when anyone waxes eloquent on the ‘specialness’ of a mother tongue, know that such ‘maternal’ linkage is — in today’s era of locational, societal and linguistic fluidity — anachronistic.

Language isn’t umbilical. It’s circumstantial. You don’t speak Marathi, Malayalam or English because of maternal osmosis. You speak it — or a mixture of all three — because of proximity, social dynamics, schooling, etc. The 3-5-year-old child in a blank slate soaking in the world, languages (and biases) included. She is likely to pick up the conversational language of, say, her ayah, rather than of her mum. If a Gujarati-speaking mother, who has a job in Dubai and has enrolled her kid in an English-medium school, the kid’s so-called ‘mother tongue’ might be armed with diphthongs and shaky Gujarati.

‘Mother tongue’ implies that linguistic identity is permanent and singular — that there is one true language nestled in ‘one’s soul’ while all others are ‘foreign’ implants. This is romantic bunkum: people outgrow languages, switch them for communicative ease, or lose them entirely in diaspora. The term also smacks of some kind of purity test. Bureaucrats ask for it in forms, ministers extol its virtues. It’s really complex-ridden linguistic gatekeeping disguised as heritage preservation. Retire the phrase, not because it’s silly but because it’s inaccurate. Call it ‘comfort language(s)’, instead.



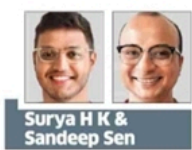
Bring on the Khichdi So That It Can Rain

There’s superstition. And then there’s the smart superstition. Take the notion of smiling even when you don’t feel like it — to induce happiness. Essentially, the plan is to fool the brain (yes, it has its foolishish side) into thinking, ‘Oh, the face is smiling! Maybe I was caught napping — I better start firing happy-making serotonin pronto!’ This can result in that happy feeling enveloping you even when you weren’t feeling that happy — until you replicated a smile. Now, parts of the country are waiting eagerly for the rains to arrive. Not the drizzle that’s nothing but god’s spittle, but the real deal, the genuine Monsoon.

Now, you don’t have to read Meghaduta to know that khichdi is your go-to dish when the rains have come. The delightful mush — with mandatory ghee and pickle — is already being ladled, like there’s no climate change, in places where it’s already started to rain. It is, after all, the rainy day dish. Now, why not flip the cause-effect and try and cause it to rain by having khichdi anyway? You really think any cumulonimbus can resist that smell? If mass synchronised banging on utensils chased the pandemic away surely mass khichdi consumption can act as a rain-seeding magic exercise. Hot khichdi doesn’t need rain. Rain needs hot khichdi. And, if that fails, what the hell, you still get to have a smacking good meal.

University rankings skew priorities — build a system that values impact more than numbers

Don’t Be Just Rank and File



Surya H K & Sandeep Sen

University rankings suffer from a fundamental flaw: they measure what is easy, not what is essential. To understand the problem, let’s consider this analogy: The train journey from New Delhi to Chandigarh takes 5 hrs. Engineers propose a 5,000-cm plan to lay new tracks and introduce high-speed trains, reducing the journey time by 30 mins. The assumption is that faster equals better. But for most passengers, real improvement means cleaner washrooms, another ride quality and better F&B options. This is precisely what university rankings do. By prioritising indicators such as research output, faculty credentials or internationalisation, they neglect what students value: excellent teaching, inclusive opportunity and meaningful learning outcomes. Until we shift focus from speed to substance, from prestige to purpose, universities will continue to chase rankings that reward surface-level performance over transformative education.

Each year, the release of university rankings by organisations like QS, and India’s National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF), causes excitement and anxiety. The purpose of NIRF’s existence is that most Indian institutions don’t feature in global rankings like QS and Times Higher Education (THE). Institutions celebrate their rise in rank, while others scramble to climb the ladder. But are these rankings serving needs of students and ecosystem? Or are they pushing universities to chase prestige at the expense of genuine academic and research excellence?

These rankings place emphasis on superficial factors like placement rates, graduate salaries and diversity metrics, which often fail to capture the true quality of education, research and societal impact. Key indicators, such as employer reputation, salaries, faculty-student ratios and internationalisation, contribute to a distorted understanding of what makes an institution successful.

In instance, the QS World University Rankings — the latest rankings were released on June 22 — places 10% of its score on employer reputation, a subjective measure. Similarly, metrics like placement rates and median salaries in NIRF and THE rankings favour fields like finance and tech, sidelining disciplines like social sciences, humanities and fundamental research that play a vital role in societal progress.

To add to this, the score obfuscation, every survey has a ‘perception rating’. This makes up the score. This rating boils down to how popular an institution is among students and other stakeholders. In India, fewer than 20% of the top NIRF-ranked institutions have substantial partnerships with local industries, highlighting the disconnect between rankings and real-world relevance.

The obsession with rankings pushes

universities toward profit-driven models, undermining the development of well-rounded professionals.

► **Knowledge to profits** Universities are adopting business-like models, designing curricula that prioritise marketable, high-paying skills rather than fostering intellectual curiosity.

► **Encourage interdisciplinary learning** Institutions that promote interdisciplinary collaboration — combining sciences, humanities and social sciences — should be rewarded, as this fosters innovation and societal development.

► **Focus on local and regional impact** Universities that engage in local research, address community problems and solve social issues should be given more weight in rankings, as their impact is more immediate and relevant to the region they serve.

► **Neglect of local needs** Global rankings devalue universities focused on local knowledge, skills and creating bias against institutions that prioritise community-driven research over international collaborations.

► **Devil in details** Rankings are not as well-constructed as they seem. Studies show that reputation-based surveys make up to 40% of a university’s ranking score. In practice, this means universities are often evaluated based on perception, not performance. In India, fewer than 20% of the top

NIRF-ranked institutions have substantial partnerships with local industries, highlighting the disconnect between rankings and real-world relevance.

To make rankings more meaningful, they must evolve to reflect true academic impact, student success and societal contribution. Here’s how:

► **Look beyond publications** Universities should be evaluated not just by volume of published papers, but by societal impact of research, such as patents, policy contributions and grassroots innovations.

► **Redefining grad success** Instead of focusing solely on starting salaries, rankings should also consider the long-term impact of graduates in terms of entrepreneurial ventures, public service contributions and career trajectory.

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Itihas, the New Game in Town



Amish Tripathi

In an age where cultural stories travel globally at the speed of light, it remains astonishing that the vast tapestry of Indian Itihas — often dismissed in the West as mythology — is yet to have its own AAA — high-budget, high-profile games developed by large studios or publishers — despite the fact that Itihas, however, also represents a monumental opportunity.

Globally, the gaming industry, valued at over \$200 bn, and, in particular, the action-adventure genre, thrives on compelling narratives and immersive worlds. Titles like *God of War*, inspired by Greek and Norse epics, and *Black Myth: Wukong*, rooted in China’s journey to the West, highlight universal appeal and immense commercial potential of folkloric narratives. Yet, India’s ancient epics, rich with profound storytelling and nuanced characters, remain largely untapped in AAA gaming landscape.

Itihas, comprising the Ramayana and Mahabharata, along with the intricate epics of Shiva and Krishna, provides narratives brimming with dramatic depth, moral complexities and philosophical richness — ideally suited for immersive gaming and universal appeal.

Unlike myths from other cultures, these narratives have traditionally been presented not just as stories but as recorded histories of Shiva and Krishna, with layers of philosophy embedded in cultural and social fabric of Indian civilisation.

Why then, has Indian Itihas remained unexplored on global entertainment platforms like gaming? The answer, in part, lies in India’s colonial past. Colonial rule significantly disrupted indigenous storytelling, sidelining local narratives in favour of Western literary and cultural traditions. The Western approach tended to look down upon indigenous cultures. Consequently, India’s ancient epics, despite their timeless appeal and universal themes, remained largely confined to local indigenous traditions or simplified adaptations, preventing their true global recognition and appreciation.

Our traditional storytelling must evolve and reclaim its rightful space in the world. There was a time when our stories impacted many abroad — traces of which are still visible in Southeast Asia. While modern Indian literature and cinema have a strong domestic following, their global reach has been limited to those interested in India or our diaspora. A true mass mainstream crossover, like what has happened with Korean stories, is yet to happen.

AAA gaming offers a dynamic, participatory immersion unlike any other medium — perfectly suited to bring depth and authenticity of Indian Itihas to a global audience and the youth.

However, creating AAA gaming experiences demands more than compelling narratives. It also requires technical excellence, high production standards. Cultural legitimacy is also indispensable.

The moment is ripe. Gaming today is more than entertainment — it’s a cultural force. Immersive gaming market is rapidly expanding, with one of the largest youth populations in the world, uniquely positioned to create and consume this content.

Furthermore, gaming represents a potent form of cultural soft power. Countries like Japan and South Korea have successfully exported their cultures globally through gaming, shaping perceptions and fostering international cultural dialogue. India’s rich narratives provide a similar opportunity to establish its cultural influence globally, fostering deeper understanding and appreciation.

It’s not just about entertainment, but a deeper engagement with India’s consciousness through compelling interactive experiences.

The writer is an author and co-founder, Turn Gaming Ltd



Let's do some epic stuff

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It’s not just about entertainment, but a deeper engagement with India’s consciousness through compelling interactive experiences.

The writer is an author and co-founder, Turn Gaming Ltd

Dance with the Dragon, But Set Pace



Muralikrishnan B

A recent social media post by Chinese ambassador to India Xu Feihong mentioning a partnership between China’s SVOLT Energy and an unnamed Indian company involving two energy storage projects in Mumbai and Gujarat, was overlooked in the media. Yet, it underscores an evolving India-China investment dynamic.

Over the past decade, bilateral relations have spanned a wide arc, and rebuilding trust is a gradual process. But in an environment of geopolitical and trade volatility, India and China have a strategic opening to reevaluate their ties. With Covid exposing risks in single-point global supply chains and rising Chinese labour costs, corporations now pursue a ‘China plus One’ policy — offering India a chance to position itself as a neutral, rules-based manufacturing hub.

India has a proven PLI model policy for smartphones. Having shifted from an import-focused to an export-oriented smartphone sector, India wants to scale the electronics industry to \$300 bn by 2026 through increased domestic value addition (DVA) and exports.

Despite positive momentum, Chinese firms have yet to play a significant role. This can change. ► Greater Chinese participation

could boost electronics manufacturing. Potential partnerships or joint ventures, involving Indian partners and Chinese companies such as Haier or Huawei, through highly and Luxshare ICT, could help accelerate electronics manufacturing in India.

► India has multiple routes to capitalise on the ‘China plus One’ opportunity by deepening ties with Chinese supply chains, attracting Chinese FDI to set up manufacturing or pursuing exclusion. However, given the global reliance on Chinese supply chains, exclusion is not pragmatic.

► Selectively drawing Chinese investments to scale manufacturing in, and exporting from, India will benefit the country.

► India must build strategic autonomy in key technologies — green energy, robotics, EVs, batteries and semiconductors. China leads globally in some areas, where high-quality, cost-efficient solutions can benefit India.

► India should expand export-oriented manufacturing, strengthen domestic value chains via clusters, boost MSME development, and enforce strict national security and data privacy safeguards.

India could welcome Chinese investment by prioritising interests and setting clear rules: ► Allow joint ventures with Indian majority control, requiring time-bound domestic value addition.

► Mandate tech transfer, and enforce transparent transfer pricing and accounting.

► Establish strict local data storage requirements.

With these guard rails, Chinese investment can help India evolve beyond low-cost competition and climb the value chain ladder. At the same time, it is essential to walk the policy tightrope in addressing Chinese companies’ concerns about investment approvals, visa issuance, and regulatory or operating challenges.

Solutions that drive positive-sum outcomes without sacrificing strategic autonomy are required to navigate low-cost competition and climb the value chain ladder. At the same time, it is essential to walk the policy tightrope in addressing Chinese companies’ concerns about investment approvals, visa issuance, and regulatory or operating challenges.

Solutions that drive positive-sum outcomes without sacrificing strategic autonomy are required to navigate low-cost competition and climb the value chain ladder. At the same time, it is essential to walk the policy tightrope in addressing Chinese companies’ concerns about investment approvals, visa issuance, and regulatory or operating challenges.

In electronic components, where Chinese suppliers play a substantial role in global supply chains, the ₹22,219 cr Electronics Component Manufacturing Scheme (ECMS) 2025 will benefit from Chinese participation via investments in joint ventures and technology transfer.

In sectors where ‘Make in India’ has created a track record, such as electronics manufacturing services (EMS), we could pursue the goal of cluster-led ecosystem development. In essence, this could be conceptualised as a 3+3 matrix, with risk assessment on one axis and India’s capability gap on the other, leading to a spectrum of options based on the nature of the sector and its potential.

► PLI-plus-DVA approach in electronics is WTO-compliant and has worked well in smartphones and IT hardware.

► Joint ventures with Indian-controlled boards ensure oversight, tech transfer builds capabilities, and cluster-led SME development fosters innovation and supply chain resilience.

India should adopt a pragmatic stance on Chinese investment — neither fearful nor indiscriminate — opening sectors via a rules-based sector-by-sector FDI filter supporting joint ventures, local value addition and SMEs, while excluding sensitive or critical sectors. Calibrated openness with safeguards attracts capability and talent without compromising sovereignty. It’s time to open the gates while guarding the house.

The writer is a former executive in the consumer tech sector



THE SPEAKING TREE

Better than Revenge

MAULANA WAHIDUDDIN KHAN

According to Quranic teachings, revenge is not an option. Revenge only increases the problem. The chapter Al-Nahl (Bees) of the Quran gives practical advice. The relevant verses are translated as follows: If you want to retaliate, retaliate to the same degree as the injury done to you. But if you are patient, it is better to be so. (6:126)

What is revenge? Revenge is inflicting hurt or harm on someone for an injury or wrong suffered at their hands. According to Quranic teachings, there are two levels of revenge — one may be called expedient revenge, and the second may be called forgetting the bad experience received from others.

Although revenge or retaliation is allowed, but with a strict condition: it must be an equal revenge, not exceeding the others’ bad action. After a seriously thought, one realises this is not an option. No sincere person can take this option because no measurement may tell you that your retaliation was completely equal to the action you received from the other.

Any sincere person will not take this option, because if you exceed the limit during the retaliation, the Almighty will punish you, and you cannot bear to do so. So, there is only one option, and that is forgiveness. While revenge may open a new chapter, forgiveness means you have put a full stop. While revenge, in this case, means you have placed a comma. Forgiveness is a rewarding action. Forgiveness is a highly valuable deed. You will find your reward in the world hereafter, and that is far better for a believer.



LOLLING ON SATURDAY

App Jaisa Koi Meri Zindagi Mein Aaye...

A tech firm launched FrappMatch™, the Tinder for apps. While it might seem like a gimmick, maybe like, swipe left on ones you’re ashamed to admit you used.

After two weeks, users realised FrappMatch suggested apps to delete FrappMatch. The cycle continued until one user achieved enlightenment by deleting everything and starting over.

Today, the startup is a cult that teaches ‘How to Fail with Confidence’.

PS. How many developers does it take to change a lightbulb? None. That’s a hardware issue — please file a ticket with Facilities on Jira. ETA: Next quarter.

Startup, Stand Down

A startup launched with the goal to ‘Uberise’ mindfulness. By Series A, the startup’s mantra was ‘How to Fail with Confidence’.

By Series C, their revenue costs surpassed Jaro’s moon budget. By Series D, the costs surpassed NASA’s. By Series E, they pivoted to seedling NFTs.

Today, the startup is a cult that teaches ‘How to Fail with Confidence’.

PS. How many developers does it take to change a lightbulb? None. That’s a hardware issue — please file a ticket with Facilities on Jira. ETA: Next quarter.

Chat Room

Neighbour Not Pak, US Not Us

Apologies: We, We’re Post 9/11 Again! by Indrani Bagchi (Jun 27). Asim Munir, Pakistan’s unelected power centre, remains diplomatically sidelined globally except for the UN Security Council. Yet, in a confounding act of strategic incoherence, Donald Trump’s White House extended the registration principle to its regime. This move exemplifies the moral vacuity and historical amnesia underpinning Trump’s foreign policy, driven more by impulsive ego than principle. It is a grim reaffirmation: no external actor, particularly a volatile US, can be trusted as a consistent partner. Strategic autonomy, rooted in sovereignty and realism, must define India’s foreign policy doctrine in an increasingly duplicitous and transactional global order. N. Sudhakar Reddy, Bengaluru



Missed opportunity

India should convince SCO to take a strong stance against terrorism

The Qingdao meeting of Defence Ministers of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), that ended without a joint communiqué, indicates trouble within the 10-nation grouping. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh was forced to withdraw from the joint declaration as it contained no reference to terrorism at the behest of "one nation" — a reference to Pakistan. This is understandable, given that the meeting comes just weeks after the Pahalgam attack, and Operation Sindoor, after which India's resolve to fight terrorism has redoubled. What sounds more surprising is that not only did the draft resolution fail to mention terrorism but member-states including host China and Russia had even reportedly considered referring to "disturbances in Balochistan", at the instance of Pakistan, while leaving out mentions of the Pahalgam attack and cross-border terrorism, that India asked for. This is stark given that the SCO's founding Charter in 2002 focused on the need to build "mutual intra-regional efforts to curb terrorism, separatism and extremism", and the Director of SCO's signature Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure was present. Statements by the SCO Secretariat and the Chinese Foreign Ministry stuck to anodyne statements such as "...cooperation...on modern security challenges and threats". All eyes will now be on the SCO Foreign Ministers' July meet and the SCO Summit in August-September to see if India's concerns are more appropriately addressed.

New Delhi must study whether there are shortcomings in delivering its message on the three-pronged "new normal" Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced after Operation Sindoor. In particular, China's unhelpful role as Chair on the issue is disquieting, given its recent thaw with India. Unlike the SAARC grouping, where India held sway, the SCO is more focused on the original founders China, Russia and Central Asian States. Mr. Singh's participation followed closely on the heels of India disassociating itself from a statement on Israel's June 13 attack on SCO member Iran as it was critical of India's Post-Operation Sindoor, the government sent parliamentary delegations to 32 countries, but not to any SCO member-country. It is possible that the government lost a chance to give the grouping any prominence by doing so, although External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar chaired a meeting of the India-Central Asia forum in June. India's decision to skip hosting an in-person Summit of the SCO during its term in 2023 could also still rankle. Breaking with the grouping, which is an important regional forum, will simply leave an open platform for Pakistan. Instead of crying foul, the government must convince members that their interests lie in strengthening cross-regional support against terrorism.

No time to rest

India did well in climbing up SDG rankings, but falls short in governance

India has been ranked among the top 100 countries in the Sustainable Development Report for the first time since this data began to be published by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) since 2016. The SDSN is an independent body under the aegis of the UN, whose publications are tracked by policy-makers and governments. In 2016, India was ranked 10th out of 157 countries, making steady progress to reach 99 this year out of an expanded basket of 167 nations with better metrics and more granular comparisons. But it is no time to rest on this laurel. India must look at why this incline, by 11 points, was not achieved any sooner and the gaps to focus on. From a developmental perspective, the SDSN ranks India as having fared better in poverty reduction (SDG 1) even as India's poverty estimation continues to be mired in controversy due to a lack of publicly available consumption expenditure data since 2018 and the poverty line (Rangarajan line - ₹33/day rural, ₹47/day urban) not having been updated. Proxy data suggest a considerable poverty reduction, almost halving between 2012 (22% based on NSSO data) and 2023 (World Bank - 12%).

But SDG 2 (zero hunger) has remained a cause for concern. It also reveals the wide disparity between income groups and rural and urban areas on access to a nutritious diet. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS) estimates that over a third of Indians (35.5%) were stunted (NFHS-5, 2019-21), only marginally better than 38.4% (NFHS-4, 2015-16). Similarly, wasting, which is low weight for height, reduced from 21.0% to 19.3%. Obesity in the working age population (15-49 years) has almost doubled between 2006 and 2021, and concentrated in wealthier urban areas. Electricity access (SDG 7) is another indicator where India has done well. While the country has achieved near universal household electrification in the past two decades, the quality of power and duration vary vastly based on regions and urban/rural fault lines. It is, however, laudable that India today ranks as the fourth largest renewables capacity deployer, mainly solar and wind. And while India has bettered its score in infrastructure provision (SDG 9), noteworthy additions being rapid mobile penetration and financial inclusion through UPI-linked digital payments gateways, COVID-19 revealed the stark difference between rural and urban Internet penetration, which must be addressed to achieve even higher educational outcomes (SDG 4). It is telling, however, that throughout the Modi years, India's performance in governance, the rule of law, press freedom and strong and independent institutions (SDG 16) has been lagging.

Recently, the Supreme Court of India decided to re-examine the methodology and the criteria for designating lawyers as senior lawyers. In *Jitender @ Kalla vs State (Govt.) of NCT of Delhi* (2025), the Court revisited the earlier judgments in the *Indira Jaising vs Supreme Court of India* cases of 2017 and 2023 and directed the High Courts in the country to frame rules in the light of the instant judgment. Delivered on May 13, 2025, it did not earn much public attention because of an erroneous notion that it dealt with an internal issue within the judiciary.

The legal profession has a public character. Therefore, the inequality within the judiciary impacts not only judicial democracy but also the country's political democracy. The legal plutocracy in India is essentially systemic and it is perpetuated by the political and judicial wings of the state.

The Orwellian notion that some are more equal than the others was imported to the legal profession in the country as Section 16 of the Advocates Act, 1961. It classifies advocates into two: senior advocates and advocates. It says that, based on ability, standing at the Bar or special knowledge or experience in law, a "deserving" advocate could be designated by the constitutional courts as a senior advocate. The very incorporation of this provision in the statute was problematic as it accepted the idea of unequal treatment of those who are otherwise equals. This led to a sharp division in the legal profession and created a legal oligarchy, which in turn deeply impacted our idea of justice. This division also had the tendency to accelerate the commercialisation of the legal profession, making it almost resemble the scene in the United States.

Situation in the U.S.

A Reuters report titled "The Echo Chamber" (2014) says that in the U.S., "an elite cadre of lawyers has emerged as first among equals, giving their clients a disproportionate chance to influence the law of the land". The report added that a survey of cases between 2004 and 2012 showed that "66 of the 17,000 lawyers who petitioned the Supreme Court succeeded at getting their clients' appeals heard at a remarkable rate". The report demonstrates that during this period, less than 1% of lawyers were handling 43% of the appeals to the U.S. Supreme Court. It adds that 51 out of 66 were the most influential members of the profession and represented the corporate firms. This resulted in "a decided advantage for corporate America, and a growing insularity at the court", says the report.

It is not as if we have followed suit in India. The point is that our system is vulnerable to the



Kaleswaram Raj

is a lawyer at the Supreme Court of India

The top court should not have abetted the systemic disparity within the legal fraternity in India

danger indicated by the U.S. experience.

Therefore, India must guard against the perils of growing inequality in the legal profession. The judgments in *Indira Jaising* and *Jitender* fail to address this fundamental issue and endorse Section 16 of the Advocates Act with inadequate reasoning. By way of these judgments, not only has the Court failed to put its house in order but has also perpetuated the inequality that can damage the justice delivery system enormously.

The basic judgment in *Indira Jaising* (2017) authored by Justice Ranjan Gogoi, sought to 'reform' the existing practice. The Court also considered a writ petition by the National Lawyers' Campaign for Judicial Transparency and Reforms, that challenged the classification of lawyers. The validity of Section 16 of the Advocates Act alongside the corresponding provisions in the Supreme Court Rules 2013, were assailed. The prescription for pre-audience for senior advocates was also challenged. The Court, however, did not accept the contentions. In *Jitender* also, the Court endorsed the validity of these clauses and asked for peripheral reforms in the process of finding out the most 'deserving'.

Unaddressed questions

The latest judgment said that the point-based assessment followed hitherto "can hardly be objective" and that "it tends to be highly subjective". Yet, the Court permitted the application system to continue, saying that the application for designation could be treated as a consent for designation, as required by the Statute. That the Court wanted the High Courts to frame new rules for 'designation' does not eliminate the possibility for errors or extraneous considerations. Thus, the questions whether there could be a classification among lawyers at all and whether it passes the constitutional muster remain unaddressed.

The Court, in *Indira Jaising* (2017) said that the wrong or improper exercise of power is not a ground to invalidate the provision in the Act. But the contention was that the classification is inherently arbitrary and discriminatory. It was argued that "even if an objective criteria is laid down and is followed, the distinction between the two classes of advocates has no nexus with... (the) advancement of the legal system, which in any case is also and in fact, effectively serviced by advocates who are not designated as senior advocates".

The Court, however, ignored this submission by saying that as long as the parameters to be followed could be prescribed by the Supreme Court, the classification would hold good. This answer begs the question. It is ironic that these norms and guidelines laid down in 2017 are held

to be fallacious and subjective by the Court in 2025 in *Jitender*. Yet, the Court did not revisit the basic contention against the offending clauses in the laws on lawyers, by referring the case to a larger Bench.

Towards a fairer system

The Indian legal profession has a symbiotic relation with the country's freedom struggle. The national movement, which was led predominantly by lawyers, presented a legal fraternity that was deeply societal and sacrificial. This was followed by the political era of Nehruvian socialism which lasted a few decades after independence, visualising India as a socialist republic. The word 'socialist' was added in the Preamble, with effect from January 3, 1977, by way of the 42nd Amendment to the Constitution.

Instead of taking note of this historical trajectory in light of the equality clauses in the Constitution, the Court, in *Jaising*, rather mechanically noted the practice in other jurisdictions such as Nigeria, Australia, Singapore and Ireland. That there has been such a practice of classification elsewhere cannot justify its adoption when the statutory scheme was seriously challenged on constitutional and empirical grounds in the Indian context.

The result was devastating. The lack of objectivity in the process led to arbitrariness that created a legal plutocracy. Jurist F.S. Nariman lamented that we have established a caste system among lawyers. It is widely felt that the judges often get impressed by persons in their own image in the matter of designation. This is termed as 'homosocial morphing' in academic circles. In this, women and the marginalised groups were sidelined. A creamy layer was segregated based on parameters which are flawed, as acknowledged by the Court.

The systemic disparity within the legal fraternity is so horrendous that thousands of eligible and deserving lawyers remain unheard and go unnoticed in court halls in India. Very often, "star lawyers" monopolise the system, without any legitimacy whatsoever, leading to intellectual apartheid. This situation negates judicial diversity based on a sense of egalitarianism and deprives the Court of the representative character of the bar. Sometimes, important national issues are adjudicated based on submissions of a chosen few, as illustrated by the recent Waqf (Amendment) Act Challenge. This too creates a situation where litigation, especially in the Court, becomes the privilege of the rich which is incompatible with India's constitutional scheme. In a profession where equality is an imperative, the Court ought not to have abetted the prevailing disparity.

A China-led trilateral nexus as India's new challenge

Last week, China, Pakistan and Bangladesh held their first trilateral meeting in Kunming, China. The discussions focused on furthering cooperation and exploring the possibilities of deeper engagement. This meeting closely follows another trilateral meeting between China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, held in May, with the aim of extending the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and increasing cooperation. These trilaterals, led by China, come at a time of Pakistan's little relevance to the region, India's increasing relations with Afghanistan, and New Delhi's deteriorating ties with Bangladesh. The use of trilaterals underscores China's fresh attempts at making Pakistan a stakeholder in the region and keeping New Delhi preoccupied with immediate concerns.

A war that shaped alignments

The 1962 war between India and China has largely shaped regional alignments and geopolitics. Following the war, China found Pakistan to be an ally that could keep India engaged with immediate threats and limit it from challenging Beijing's interests, security, and status. On the other hand, Pakistan deemed China to be a country that would unquestionably offer economic and military assistance to support its aggression against India. To date, Pakistan is highly dependent on China for assistance, investments and infrastructure development. In fact, by the end of 2024, Pakistan had a loan of over \$29 billion from China. It is estimated that over 80% of Pakistan's arms imports are from China. In addition, China has also shielded Pakistan-backed terrorists at the United Nations Security Council and other multilateral platforms.

This camaraderie was largely visible during India's Operation Sindoor in May 2025. China termed India's retaliation to the Pakistan-sponsored attack in Pahalgam as "regrettable" and urged a political solution and dialogue. It backed Pakistan's stance of initiating an investigation into the Pahalgam terror attack in April 2025. The latest escalation also saw Pakistan deploying various Chinese-made hardware and weapons that ranged from surveillance radars, drones, missiles, guidance



Harsh V. Pant

is Vice-President, Observer Research Foundation



Aditya Gowdara Shivamurthy

is Associate Fellow, Neighbourhood Studies, Observer Research Foundation

The Beijing-led trilaterals are aimed at challenging India's long-term interests

systems, and fighter jets. In the immediate aftermath of Operation Sindoor, Pakistan's Foreign Minister met his Chinese counterpart to reaffirm its "iron-clad friendship." The trilateral with Afghanistan and other countries likely emerged from this meeting.

The resurfacing of an idea

This idea of China and Pakistan using plus one against India is not a new phenomenon. Even in 1965, Pakistan flirted with the idea of using East Pakistan, China and Nepal to cut off India from its strategic Siliguri corridor. This idea of using South Asian countries seems to have resurfaced as both China and Pakistan face a confident India. Pakistan-sponsored terror attacks in Uri (2016), Pulwama (2019), and Pahalgam have seen India retaliate in a befitting manner. It has shown that India will no longer tolerate Pakistan's nuclear blackmail. India has also used its diplomatic clout and growing economy to isolate Pakistan. India's suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty, halting trade, restricting port access, and targeting military installations — all as a part of its retaliatory measures against the Pahalgam attack — has damaged Pakistan's military's operational capacities and confidence, highlighting Rawalpindi's limitations and weaknesses. India's military and diplomatic responses to Chinese border intrusions in Doklam and Galwan have also likely taken Beijing by surprise. New Delhi has also increased close cooperation with like-minded countries to limit Chinese aggressions.

At the same time, India's pragmatic engagement and domestic policies of the region have slowed down China's momentum in South Asia. In the Maldives, Beijing appears reluctant to trust President Mohamed Muizzu and the country's economy, despite his initial anti-India rhetoric. Mr. Muizzu has now turned to India to keep the country's economy afloat. In Nepal, despite signing the framework for Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) cooperation, major differences in funding remain unresolved and the progress of projects has been slow. In Sri Lanka, President Anura Kumara Dissanayake is developing close ties with India by respecting its redlines. Despite ideological and historical differences with Delhi,

he visited India before China. In the case of Bangladesh, despite differences, India has not hindered the trilateral energy cooperation with Nepal.

These increasing anxieties are likely to have motivated China to push for trilaterals with Afghanistan and Bangladesh. Before their respective regime changes in 2021 and 2024, both countries were staunch supporters of India's fight against both Pakistan and its state-sponsored terrorism. With the change in regimes, however, Pakistan and China have attempted to draw both countries closer to their orbit. They remain cautious of pragmatic engagement between India and the Taliban, fearing that Pakistan would lose its leverage. At the same time, Pakistan has increased security, economic and political engagements with the new government in Bangladesh.

Historically, both Bangladesh and Afghanistan have enjoyed close ties with Pakistan and provide a fertile ground for cross-border terrorism. Pakistan's influence, supported by China and its economic clout, could thus create new terror and security-related challenges. This will help Pakistan become a relevant country in the region, create rifts between India and its neighbours, and keep Delhi preoccupied with immediate security and terror-related challenges, making way for Chinese BRI projects, interests and investments in the region.

China efforts and setbacks

The developments in the region demonstrate, once again, that China, and not Pakistan, is India's biggest challenge. With both Pakistan and China confronting a confident India, China sees an opportunity to challenge India through the trilateral nexus. At a time when India is seeking support from South Asian countries to fight terrorism, Chinese efforts will create new setbacks. South Asian countries will thus have to learn to balance between India and China, as Beijing uses Islamabad to create new complexities in the region. On its part, Delhi will have to continue to express redlines and convey the point that any misadventures by its neighbours could have severe economic, military, and political costs.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Setting foot in space

What an historic leap for India in space after decades (Front page, June 27). The cost of the Gaganyaan mission and the budget spent on Shubanshu Shukla's seat on Ax-4 are not relevant if one considers the success rate of the

Indian Space Research Organisation's missions. It must be viewed as an investment in advancing India's scientific progress.

J.P. Reddy,
Nalgonda, Telangana

More importantly, the research work during the

space odyssey is sure to rekindle scientific curiosity among schoolchildren.

G. Ramasubramanyam,
Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh

Tharoor versus Congress

It is unfortunate that the Congress party appears to be intolerant of individual

opinions within its ranks. There is a contrast between Shashi Tharoor's balanced perspective and the Congress critical stance toward the government at the Centre, which seems to be its primary agenda.

Manicklal Chakraborty,
Chennai

Law and order

I am sure that I am not making a mountain out of a molehill, but there is concern about the law and order problem in Tamil Nadu. The series of incidents that have been reported from across the State show Tamil Nadu in a

bad light. The points that are being raised by the Opposition parties cannot be dismissed. The political dispensation needs to act.

Mani Natarajan,
Chennai

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

GROUND ZERO

Fear, flight, and an uncertain future



A Kashmiri student hugs her mother in Srinagar. She was evacuated from Iran by the Indian government as part of Operation Sindhu. IMRAN NISSAR

Soon after the most recent conflict in West Asia broke out, the Indian government evacuated more than 1,400 Indian nationals from Iran and more than 1,100 from Israel under Operation Sindhu. Many of them are medical students. **Alisha Dutta** reports on their anxiety about their courses even as a fragile peace holds in the region

In New Delhi's Indira Gandhi International Airport, Suhail Qadri, 57, paces nervously in front of an 'arrivals' gate as he waits for his two children — Imroz Qadri, 20, and Raiban Qadri, 23 — to land from conflict-torn Iran. When he finally sees them, quietly exiting from another gate to avoid the glare of cameras, his face lights up with relief. The brother and sister drop their luggage and run into his arms in a dimly lit corner.

Imroz and Raiban are students of the Tehran University of Medical Sciences in the capital of Iran. Suhail, a resident of Srinagar in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), says he had lost touch with them from the fifth day of the conflict that broke out between Israel and Iran on June 13.

"For the last two days, I have been glued to my phone, waiting for an international number to pop up on my screen. I was hoping that the caller would either be my children or an embassy official telling me where they are," he says.

In J&K, every fifth house has a child pursuing an MBBS degree in Iran, explains Suhail. When news first broke about heightened tensions between Iran and Israel, Suhail and some of his neighbours quickly reached out to their children.

The students were not perturbed at first. They became alarmed only when they began to spot missiles. "Imroz called to say Israeli bombs had hit Tehran on June 13," he says. "They saw many missiles and got messages on WhatsApp that two Kashmiri students were hurt."

On June 13, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) instructed people in Tehran's District 18, which includes military buildings and residential neighbourhoods, to evacuate.

When the IDF launched the attack on Iran's capital, several residential buildings and university complexes were impacted. Following this, the Indian Embassy in Iran posted on X that Indian students had been moved out of Tehran. The Embassy requested other residents with access to transportation to leave the capital too.

On June 18, the Indian government launched Operation Sindhu to evacuate Indian nationals first from Iran and then from Israel as well. Imroz and Raiban were two of the 160 people evacuated and flown directly to India on June 20. So far, under the mission, India has evacuated more than 1,400 Indian nationals from Iran and more than 1,100 from Israel.

Missiles in Iran

When the attack began, Imroz recalls sitting inside the women's dormitory room with her friends. "We were having a sleepover when we heard a thud. We thought crackers were being burst. But when the noise continued, we realised that there was an attack," she says.

Minutes later, Imroz and her friends, who had been following the news on the tense situation in West Asia, realised that the street in front of their dormitory had been bombed by the Israelis. Panic-stricken, they rushed to the basement and huddled around the guards trying to understand what they should be doing next.

Hania, 23, a fourth year MBBS student at the Tehran University of Medical Sciences, saw the Israeli air strikes hit the university complex. "The bomb dropped on the men's dormitory and the glass windows broke. Shards of glass injured at least two Indian students in the dorm," she says over a call from Qom, about 160 kilometres away from Tehran, while waiting to be evacuated.

Hania says the Indian Embassy contacted Indian students in Tehran and asked them to relocate to Qom, a relatively safer city. Many students chose to move out in buses provided by colleges.

Many of us chose to pursue an MBBS degree in Iran because the tuition fees is far lower than in private medical colleges in India. **NARGIS Student**

Some, like Hania, booked private cabs. "There was no time to pack properly, so I left with my documents, some clothes, food, and some cash lying around," says Hania, who is also from J&K.

Tamheed Mughal, a third year student at the same university, says he has lived in a conflict zone (J&K). "But when I found myself in another country hearing the incessant sound of bombing, I began palpitating. My anxiety got worse when the U.S. entered the war," he says. Some of his peers have heard that the university will be holding a meeting on June 30. This, he thinks, may help him decide his future course. Tamheed is keen to go back and complete his degree.

Iran's Health Ministry claims that 224 people have been killed so far in the conflict.

Accustomed to conflict

Indian nationals enrolled as students in Israeli universities say they had become accustomed to the stress of being at the centre of a conflict zone even before the latest round of attacks began between Iran and Israel.

Sreyashi Bhowmick, 31, a postdoctoral student enrolled with the Tel Aviv University, says, "Whenever Israel senses an attack coming its way, the civil defence force warns us of a possible attack from another country. The sirens then go off and we are expected to rush to the nearest bunkers or bomb shelters."

Sreyashi had earlier been evacuated in October 2023, under India's Operation Ajay, launched in response to the conflict between Israel and Gaza. She went back in February 2024, to continue work at the Geological Survey of Israel.

"It is exhausting to be on alert always," says Sreyashi. "It is bound to take a toll on your mental health, especially when you are living on your own, but the government here is very organised regarding wartime protocol," she adds.

On the evening of Israel's attack, when Iran hit back, Sreyashi was alone in her apartment. "It was the middle of the night when messages started coming in, asking us to move to bunkers and bomb shelters. But to do that, I had to step out alone and walk to my landlady's house, since my apartment does not have any bunkers. So I decided to stay put," says the student, who hails from Kolkata in West Bengal.

Sreyashi is still in Israel. She says, "If something drastic happens, the Indian Embassy will arrange for our evacuation."

Another postdoctoral student from Weizmann Institute of Science in Rehovot, a city about 20 km from Tel Aviv, says panic had not set in until missiles hit his university. "Everyone living here told me that they had seen missiles be-

ing constantly launched and intercepted. Only when my university was hit did I realise that I was living in a conflict zone," he says.

He has been living in Rehovot for more than a year. About his decision to study in Israel, which is already at war with Gaza, he says, "I was aware that Israel was at the centre of a geopolitical conflict, but since it is so invested in scientific research, it seemed like a good choice."

He reached Delhi after U.S. President Donald Trump declared a ceasefire on June 23 between the warring nations and is now home in Kolkata.

Living with worry

During the early hours of June 19, a flight with 110 students from Iran's Urmia University landed in New Delhi. Like many others, Nargis, 22, a resident of Mumbai, Maharashtra, was in the midst of her semester exams when she was given a few hours' notice to leave. With just a cabin-sized bag, she travelled from Urmia to Qom and then to Yerevan in Armenia and then to Doha before finally reaching home.

After spending 52 hours in transit, Nargis is elated to be in India, but she is also worried. Wiping beads of sweat off her forehead, the second year MBBS students says with a faint smile that she is hoping for stability in Iran soon.

"I took a loan to pursue an MBBS degree there," she says. "Many of us chose to pursue an MBBS degree in Iran because the tuition fees is far lower than in private medical colleges in India. A mediocre private medical college in India costs a minimum of ₹1 crore. In Iran, we can complete the same degree by paying ₹30 lakh without compromising on the rigour of education."

Sitting inside an apartment in a colony in Sul-tanpuri, Delhi, Aman, 21, a first-generation medical student in his family, is anxious. "Going by conversations on WhatsApp groups, several universities in Iran might open up for local students in a couple of weeks, but the university is yet to share any information with international students," he says.

Aman says if he is unable to go back, he may not be able to complete his foundational degree. "Universities in Iran have tie-ups with other foreign universities, but the National Medical Council of India does not take cognisance of medical degrees from every other country. This degree is the only way my family and I can climb the societal and financial ladder," he adds.

Imroz left Iran during her semester exams. She spends all her time chatting with worried friends on WhatsApp and following the news. "We have not received a single notification from our university about when our classes will resume, so my brother and I have no clue what lies ahead," she says. Imroz has left all her books and notes in Iran, so even if she is asked to study online, she believes it is going to be a challenge.

The parents of these students are equally worried. Md. Kachakkarel, 55, from Malappuram in Kerala, has spent nearly all his savings to educate his youngest daughter. "I have spent more than ₹45 lakh for her degree and stay in Iran," he says. "If she cannot complete her degree, what was the point of my working in the Gulf for 25 years?"

Kachakkarel says he went to work at construction sites in Saudi Arabia to save enough to fund the education of his three daughters. "I saved every penny doing manual labour to ensure that my children could pursue higher education, which I could not. My youngest daughter has come back from Iran. The older two had to live through extreme stress while pursuing medical degrees from Russia, which is at war with Ukraine," he says.

While Indian students from Iran are unsure about when they can go back, those studying in Israel are more certain that they will be able to go back soon. The postdoctoral student studying in Israel says considering how prepared the



I have spent more than ₹45 lakh for my daughter's degree and stay in Iran. If she cannot complete her degree, what was the point of my working in the Gulf for 25 years? **MD. KACHAKKAREL**

Father of student

country seems to be in dealing with emergencies, he is certain that things will get better soon and he will be able to resume his research.

A sense of déjà vu

Reports and videos of students deplaning after being evacuated from Iran and Israel with nothing but backpacks and small trolleys brought back many unhappy memories for Dr. Jeetender Gaurav. The 30-year-old resident of Patna, Bihar, was one of the many students evacuated from Ukraine in 2022. He was relieved then, but that warm feeling quickly turned into fear as the situation in Ukraine worsened with time.

When war broke out between Russia and Ukraine in February 2022, nearly 18,000 Indian medical students were evacuated from Ukraine under the Indian government's Operation Ganga. Among them were several students pursuing an MBBS degree. Following petitions from the students who had returned, the Central government committee recommended to the Supreme Court that the medical students be allowed to take the final MBBS exams in two attempts, according to the existing National Medical Council syllabus and guidelines. The Court agreed. Once they passed the exams, the students were required to complete a compulsory rotatory internship. The government clarified that this was an exception and would not set a precedent for the future.

Those who had not finished their five-year course and chose to stay in India had to either take the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test to redo their medical degrees or explore other career options. Ukraine universities also offered to help students migrate to other foreign universities to complete their degrees.

Some Indian students went back to Ukraine to finish their medical degrees. Jeetender, who had been pursuing a degree from Ternopil National Medical University and was in his third year, was one of them. He says his university was offering a transfer to universities in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Georgia. But since a medical degree from these countries was not valid in India, many students waited and eventually went back to Ukraine.

But on reaching Ukraine, the students realised that the situation was much worse than what they had imagined. After nearly eight months of continuous conflict, they were hit by skyrocketing inflation. Electricity supply, too, was limited.

"Russia had hit most of the major power grids, so we would get only two hours of electricity a day. For the rest of the day, we had to manage with candles. Our phone batteries would die often," recalls Dr. Jeetender. While those like him, who went back and completed their degree, are now expected to clear the Foreign Medical Graduate exam and complete a year's internship, many who chose to pursue the last leg of their degree online are expected to take the same exam and follow it up with at least two or three years of internship before getting a licence to practise.

Dr. Jeetender says that unless the universities in Iran open their doors again for students, the road ahead will be as rocky as it was for him and his peers. "The low availability of seats in Indian medical colleges makes it impossible for stranded students to be absorbed in," he says.



A student from Iran's Urmia University hugs her mother at the airport in Delhi. SHASHI SHERKAR KASHYAP

KARNATAKA

The big AI shake-up

While Bengaluru is home to more than a lakh artificial intelligence professionals, AI has also brought with it fears of job loss. The launch of a survey recently by Karnataka's Department of Information Technology and Biotechnology to assess the impact of AI on the workforce is an indication of the State getting set to face up to this multi-dimensional issue, writes

Shilpa Elizabeth

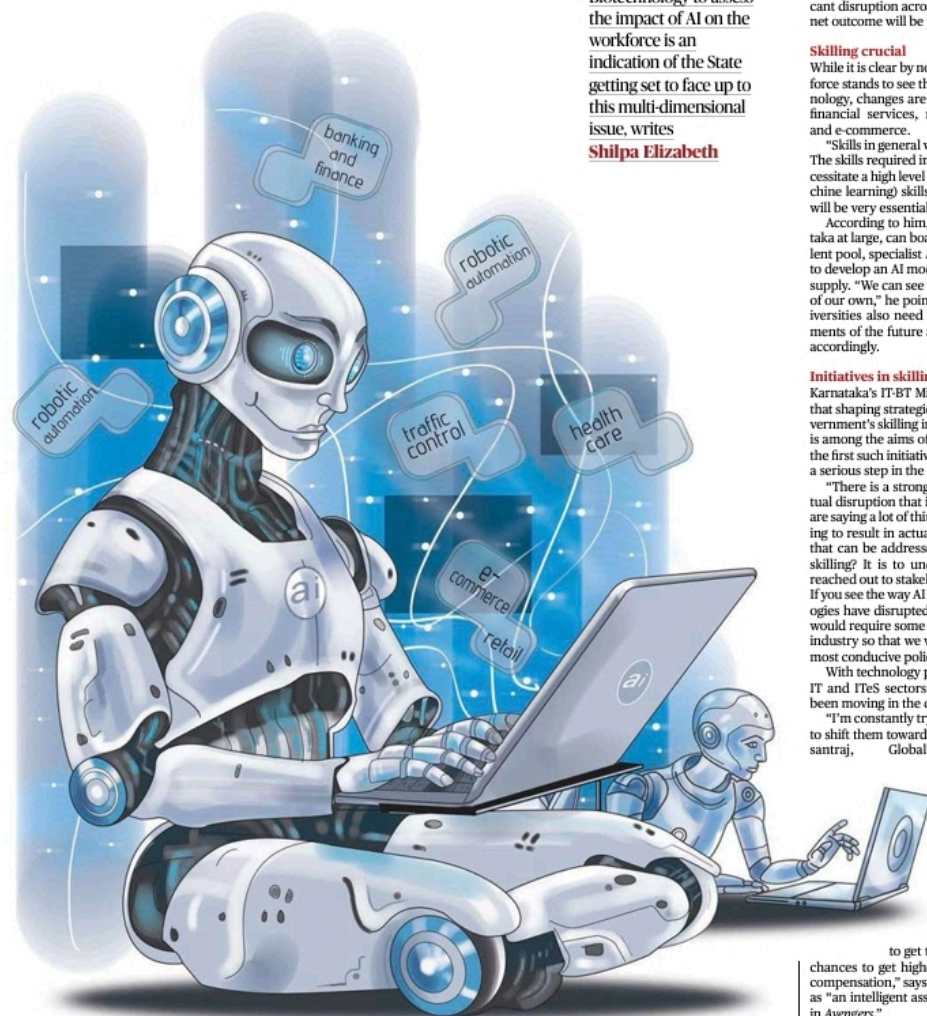


Illustration: Satheesh Vellinezhi

At a leading hospital in Bengaluru, an artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled invoice digitisation system was implemented around four months ago.

"Initially, the invoice details were documented on paper, and later entered manually into the system. Now, the job is being done by AI, which extracts details from the soft copies of invoices," says Vijay (name changed), who is overseeing the project and a few other AI initiatives at the hospital.

According to him, automation brought down human intervention in the process by at least 50%. "No one has been laid off. People were only repurposed," he says while admitting that the development may affect recruitments in the future.

Hima (name changed), a consultant at one of the biggest accounting firms, was part of an office meeting recently where people were encouraged to share their apprehensions on the firm's AI implementations. "Some of our coders were very upset about the introduction of AI. There is a resource crunch in the coding team, and they are often very stretched. But with the firm investing in AI tools and code assistants, they say life has become easier for them," she notes.

Multifaceted effects

As AI reshapes the workforce across sectors, its effects are proving to be multifaceted, and far from uniform.

Bengaluru is today home to more than a lakh AI professionals. The city was also recently ranked among the top five AI ecosystems in the Global Startup Ecosystem Index. With Bengaluru positioning itself in the thick of AI advancements and the Karnataka government now on the cusp of launching the next IT policy, the State's Information Technology and Biotechnology Department recently launched a survey to assess the impact of AI on the workforce.



Skills in general will undergo massive change. Those required in the new world of AI will necessitate a high level of digital literacy. AI-ML skills even in non-technical roles will be very essential now.

GURUPRASAD MUDLAPUR, vice-chairman of CII Karnataka and vice president of Bosch Group in India

Among other things, it aims to understand how AI is being integrated into day-to-day operations across organisations, which business functions are seeing the biggest changes, and which job roles are most vulnerable to automation.

The survey is an indication of the State taking serious note of the big shake-up that is on our doorstep.

The AI-augmented future

From enhancing precision in surgeries to detecting fraud in banking and finance, enabling robotic automation in manufacturing, powering personalised recommendations in retail, and optimising traffic control in cities, AI is becoming increasingly ubiquitous and almost indispensable. According to the United Nations, the global AI market is projected to reach \$4.8 trillion by 2033.

The other side of this, however, is the fears of lay-off and displacement, especially in jobs involving routine and repetitive tasks, coupled with a growing sense of overwhelm as workers struggle to adapt to an ever-evolving workplace. A recent report by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development predicted that

AI would impact 40% of the jobs worldwide and widen inequality. Amazon CEO Andy Jassy's recent comment about the company moving to a smaller corporate workforce due to the adoption of generative AI tools and agents has not helped allay fears, particularly as the tech giant has laid off more than 27,000 employees since 2022.

What is going to be the net result of this disruption and how is it going to play out in India?

"I think, in the future, all of us will be AI-augmented humans," says Guruprasad Mudlapur, vice-chairman of the Confederation of Indian Industry, Karnataka, vice-president of Bosch Group in India, and managing director of Bosch Ltd. While acknowledging the possibility of significant disruption across industries, he believes the net outcome will be positive.

Skills crucial

While it is clear by now that the IT and ITes workforce stands to see the biggest impact of the technology, changes are expected in sectors such as financial services, manufacturing, healthcare, and e-commerce.

"Skills in general will undergo massive change. The skills required in the new world of AI will necessitate a high level of digital literacy. AI-ML (machine learning) skills even in non-technical roles will be very essential now," remarks Mudlapur.

According to him, while Bengaluru, or Karnataka at large, can boast of the highest AI-ready talent pool, specialist AI talent — which is required to develop an AI model, for example — is in short supply. "We can see why we have not built a GPT of our own," he points out, while adding that universities also need to take note of the requirements of the future and act on training students accordingly.

Initiatives in skilling

Karnataka's IT-BT Minister Priyank Kharge notes that shaping strategic interventions under the government's skilling initiative, NIPUNA Karnataka, is among the aims of the AI survey. The survey is the first such initiative by a State government and a serious step in the direction of skilling.

"There is a strong need to understand the actual disruption that is happening. A lot of people are saying a lot of things, but is that disruption going to result in actual job loss, or is it something that can be addressed through reskilling or upskilling? It is to understand this that we have reached out to stakeholders through the survey... If you see the way AI and other emerging technologies have disrupted over the last four years, we would require some collective feedback from the industry so that we would be able to give out the most conducive policy for growth," he says.

With technology poised to change the way the IT and ITes sectors work, companies too have been moving in the direction of skilling.

"I'm constantly trying to repurpose my people to shift them towards the demand," says Ravi Vasantraj, Global Delivery Head, Mphasis.

"I'm now changing my talent management systems to start allowing for people to get trained or hyper-personalised in their training. Let's say someone is a full-stack Java developer, but we are seeing demand for people with React.js or Node.js skills. We will start prodding this person to get trained in them, showing his chances to get higher billing and hence higher compensation," says Vasantraj who likes to see AI as "an intelligent assist — like J.A.R.V.I.S. to Stark in Avengers."

Sindhu Gangadharan, MD of SAP Labs India and chairperson of the National Association of Software and Service Companies, notes that the company offers curated learning journeys tailored to individual skill profiles, leveraging internal platforms, global partners, and partnerships with institutions such as IIM Bangalore, IIT Bangalore, BITS Pilani, and Northwestern Kellogg.

"The result is a future-ready workforce empowered to lead with an AI-first mindset. Today, 50% of our employees are already AI-enabled. Over the past year alone, they've completed more than 35,000 courses and clocked over 2,00,000 learning hours," she says.

Multiplying demand?

With almost every corporate investing in AI and demand for AI agents and tools increasing, the number of AI roles has also risen, creating a large demand for people trained in the same. A recent report by Naukri JobSpeak recorded a 25% year-on-year rise in hiring for AI and ML roles in India.

"(AI) will create more than it will alter," says Vasantraj, who believes that not only will the technology not take away jobs, but will probably multiply the demand 10 times and enhance the productivity of employees.

"The combined industry of North America, Europe, and Asia-Pacific spends anywhere between \$1.8 trillion and \$1.9 trillion to support lega-

cy technology. This is known as tech debt. People are worried that they will lose their jobs to AI. But our premise is that these \$1.9 trillion will come into the market because now it's viable."

According to him, the latent demand from clients who were earlier reluctant to deploy AI is now getting activated. Mphasis witnessed its pipeline jumping up by an unprecedented 70% between quarters three and four in the last financial year, he notes.

The other half

The high demand for AI talent in IT and ITes is, however, only half the story, say sources within the industry. While there is demand, the elephant in the room is the immense pressure on AI development teams within companies, says Radhika (name changed), who works as a project manager at the Bengaluru office of a global technology and service supplier.

"Companies like ours have purchased AI technologies from behemoths like Google or OpenAI for huge prices. The investment has been massive, and they need returns. To get the desired results, they put immense pressure on AI development teams, often pushing them to the brim," she notes. According to her, most IT and ITes companies have so far not been able to achieve the expected efficiency or profits by deploying AI in place of people. "Coding assistance is the only use case that is working to some extent," she says.

The way forward then, has been to extract more out of the remaining employees, alleges Radhika.

"Even when they haven't fixed the issues with the existing AI tools, they invest in more. This will not only burden the employees, but also reduce the quality of products and services in the industry going forward," she says, citing the example of the customer services function, where several companies witnessed lower customer satisfaction after trying to replace executives with AI bots.

RAVI VASANTRAJ, Global Delivery Head, Mphasis

Technology vs. labour

Balaji Parthasarathy, professor at IIT Bangalore and principal investigator of the Fairwork India project, argues that in India, the impact of AI on the workforce will pan out differently as compared with the West. He points out how some companies, for example, have abstained from deploying AI in certain roles in India, simply because the labour is cheap and pliant, and labour laws are loosely enforced.

"If you look at the warehouses of big companies like Amazon in the U.S., there are high levels of automation. In many parts of the world, they are experimenting with drones for delivery. But in a country like India, where labour is relatively inexpensive, it doesn't make as much sense. It may, in fact, be costlier for companies to bring in these technologies. Here, workers are replaced easily because there is high levels of unemployment and labour rights are not strictly enforced."

Sector-specific debate

He notes that the AI vs. jobs debate is also sector-specific and a function of whether the AI tools can deliver on the organisational priorities. "In areas where you require precision or the job is hazardous, deployment of AI or robotics is critical. If there are tasks that can be easily automated at very low costs, AI will be used for them. Then there are fields where the technology will enter but will require human beings to know how to use them to augment what they do, rather than displace them. I think the word 'augmentation' is not considered enough," says Parthasarathy.

The fear of job loss is not entirely baseless though, admits Mudlapur. Repetitive manual skills may be the most vulnerable, and these might involve job roles such as coding, invoice processing, accounting, and research assistance. Mid-skilled white-collar jobs like analyst might also go replaced if they do not have deep domain knowledge, he remarks.

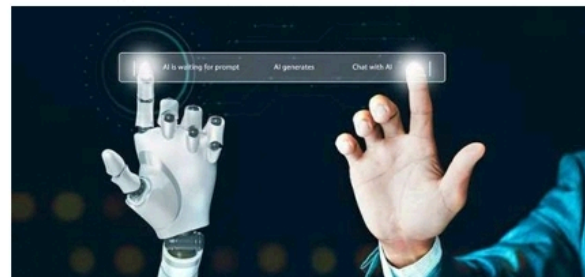
"We see the coding efficiency going up by 30% if we adopt AI, GPTs, and other tools to enhance the codes. But we can also say we may not require 30% of the software talent. But a positive way to look at it is this 30% could do more sophisticated work, like building models and so on," he says. "Overall, there will be a shake-up in the job market. That is very clear."

The shape-shifters

Vasantraj of Mphasis feels the anxieties, at least concerning the job losses in the IT/ITes sector, are part of the usual fears before any new technology takes off. "Our industry evolves very quickly. This industry was written down after Y2K. But we are shape-shifters, and we keep learning. My view is that there will be a decoupling between revenues and headcount, which means that with the same number of people, you'll be able to multiply revenues," he notes, attributing the lay-offs at the companies to macro-economic factors rather than AI.

According to Vasantraj, regulations, responsible AI, and data breaches should be the bigger concerns.

"If AI is combined with quantum, you have a real problem. Your Gmail could be hacked in 30 seconds. Given the kind of geopolitical situations, there will be characters that might start using it in an obtuse manner. It's similar to nuclear energy in that sense. If you have a J.A.R.V.I.S. with Stark, you will also have a Thanos somewhere. But that's a problem for tomorrow," he says.



In contrast: Balaji Parthasarathy, professor at IIT Bangalore and principal investigator of the Fairwork India project, argues that in India, the impact of AI on the workforce will pan out differently as compared with the West. GETTY IMAGES



Glossy on the outside, glitches inside: The newly constructed Government General Hospital, Siddipet, which was inaugurated in October 2023 but remains non-functional till date; (below) MBBS students attending a class at the Government Medical College, Siddipet; the duty doctor room at the same hospital which has a large corrugated metal shutter in place of a wall. RAMAKRISHNA G.

Built to heal, but left to rot

From shuttered duty rooms and unsafe hostels to sprawling, unopened hospitals, Telangana's bold push to set up a government medical college in every district has led to an overstretched, understaffed system. Students are left to teach themselves, doctors go unpaid and faculty shortage cripples learning. **Siddharth Kumar Singh** exposes a public healthcare vision mired in delays, neglect and widening gap between promise and practice

In the otherwise quiet stretch of Road Number 4 in Telangana's Siddipet district, about 100 kilometres north of Hyderabad, one building stands out – not for its design, but for the activity it draws. Rickshaws, hatchbacks, private cars and ambulances are parked in a haphazard line along the narrow tar road. With little room for four-wheelers inside, the road outside becomes a makeshift parking lot for those visiting the Government General Hospital, Siddipet.

Step past the entrance and a rectangular lobby opens up. To the left, a queue snakes around the Outpatient Registration counter. To the right, rows of plastic chairs are packed with patients and attendants – women in saris fanning themselves, elderly men on walking sticks, young parents cradling toddlers. Though outpatient hours run from 9.30 a.m. to 2 p.m., the hallway is full by 11 a.m.

Adding a splash of colour to this scene is a strip of Cherial painting across the top of the hospital walls – vivid red panels telling traditional tales, a nod to Telangana's folk art legacy. It is an oddly comforting juxtaposition: cultural flourish amid clinical fatigue.

Down the corridor is the duty doctor's room – a modest 15x8 feet, with two foldable metal beds lining opposite walls. What catches the eye isn't the squeeze, but the far wall, or the lack of it. In its place is a large corrugated metal shutter, the kind one would see fronting a *kirana* shop. Only two brick pillars frame it; a white ceramic wash-basin clings to one side.

Perched on a metal bed is a young doctor, white coat on, stethoscope around her neck. She speaks in a calm, practiced voice about juggling medical education with long government hospital shifts, her words painting a picture of exhaustion, resilience, and a system stretched thin.

"Though it is now a teaching hospital, Siddipet still runs on the infrastructure of its old identity: an area hospital with 780 beds. There is no space to add more. That is why a new 1,000-bed hospital was built nearby. But that is stuck in limbo – political disputes, budget delays, commissions. The building is ready, but has not been handed over," she says.

She gestures towards what lies just five kilometres away – a gleaming new hospital building inaugurated with much fanfare by Siddipet MLA and former Health Minister T. Harish Rao in October 2023. Built adjacent to the Government Medical College, the new Government General Hospital is a sprawling, palace-like structure, strikingly similar to a high-end corporate hospital. But behind the glossy facade lies silence. One and a half years since its inauguration, the building remains non-functional, caught in bureaucratic limbo.

When the first batch of medical students enrolled in 2018, they were promised an integrated campus: hospital, hostels and college, all in one place. That vision remains unrealised. What has arrived instead is a faculty crisis too big to ignore.

"In some departments, there are 12 to 15 post-graduate students and only three faculty mem-

bers – one professor and two assistant professors. So PGs end up doing everything: teaching, ward rounds, you name it. Recruitment has not happened. The Directorate of Medical Education keeps saying notifications will be issued, but they never do," the doctor says.

She also points to a persistent safety concern – commuting after night duty. "The road to the college becomes eerier after dark. It is so unsafe that we have to ask the boys to escort us. There have been cases of women doctors being followed. It is frightening," she says.

But this is not unique to Siddipet. Across Telangana's 34 government medical colleges, the same problems recur. Before 2014, the State had just five government-run medical colleges. Over the last decade, the Bharat Rashtra Samithi government pushed to open one in every district. By 2024, as many as 29 new colleges had come up as part of that ambitious expansion.

But the growth has been lopsided. "The rapid establishment of so many government medical colleges (GMCs) has resulted in impressive buildings that resemble fully functioning medical institutions. But inside, there are serious gaps – faculty shortage, insufficient clinical exposure and other systemic deficiencies," says a senior official from the State Health department.

A system under strain

At GMC Karimnagar, a second-year student sums up the classroom situation bluntly: "There is not enough space to sit. Two batches share one lecture hall; some of us stand or sit on the floor. The

hostel is no better. It is overcrowded and temporary. We are still waiting for the promised building."

Over at GMC Nalgonda, transportation is the biggest hurdle. "The hospital is seven kilometres away, but there are no dedicated buses. Our principal sent a request to the Director of Medical Education and even to our MLA, Komatireddy Venkat Reddy, who is also a minister. He promised two to four buses, but not a single one has arrived," a student says.

At GMC Asifabad, the problems cut deeper. "We don't have MBBS-qualified faculty. Our labs don't function. We are expected to learn without tools, without guidance," says a first-year student.

Things are no better in Bhadrachalam, where a post-graduate student shares, "Departments like Anatomy and Biochemistry are run by non-MBBS staff. That is a direct violation of National Medical Commission (NMC) norms. We have raised complaints but nothing has changed."

Most students here live in rented flats, often cramped and unhygienic.

At Rajiv Gandhi Institute of Medical Sciences-Adilabad, the situation is downright bleak. "We stay in quarter clusters with no clean water, no streetlights. The mess food is inedible, the quarters stink, and there is no CCTV cameras or security. We are working 12-hour shifts and studying through the night in such conditions," says a first-year PG student.

At GMC-Narayana, the daily commute is a risk in itself. "We lost our college bus last year. Now we travel eight kilometres at our own expense. Many of us live in distant, unsafe hostels. After 7 p.m., the road turns pitch dark. There is no fencing, no security," says a junior doctor.

The conditions are equally grim at GMC Jangaon too. "We girls are put up in an old-age home. The boys are crammed into tiny rooms. There are no labs, no gym, no sports, nothing. And we are charged ₹1,000 a month for transport," says a student.

In Maheshwaram, students attend classes on borrowed premises. "There are no proper labs. We do physiology practicals in lecture rooms. The subsidised hostels they promised never came. We are paying ₹7,000 a month in rent for rooms infested with cockroaches and spiders," a student shares.

At GMC Kamareddy, the gap between college and hospital – just 3.5 kilometres – is a daily hurdle. "With no transport, we often miss clinical postings. Some of us even skip meals just to save time," a student says.

Even at established institutions like Gandhi Medical College, cracks are showing. "We have only one assistant professor each in Radiology and Microbiology. Everything else is handled by postgraduates. Forget learning, we are barely surviving," says a student. The infrastructure hasn't kept pace either. "The elevators are constantly breaking down. There are water shortages, outdated pipelines and stray dogs keep biting students. This is not a campus, it is a battlefield."

Promises deferred

From broken hostels and pitch-dark roads to missing faculty and absent labs, the accounts echo a common story of systemic neglect wrapped in glossy expansion.

A postgraduate student from Vikarabad puts it plainly: "We are the face of public healthcare. But we are studying in the shadows of unfinished buildings, of missing mentors, of apathy."

Telangana's 34 government medical colleges collectively offer 4,140 MBBS seats. The top three – Gandhi, Osmania, and Kakatiya Medical Colleg-

es – have the highest intake at 250 seats each. The rest range between 50 and 175. In early June, the National Medical Commission issued show-cause notices to 26 of them, citing critical shortfalls in infrastructure, clinical material and faculty.

A vacancy list accessed by *The Hindu*, released by the Directorate of Medical Education in July 2024, lays bare the extent of the staffing crisis in Telangana's government medical colleges and teaching hospitals.

Of the 3,143 sanctioned Assistant Professor posts, only 1,399 have been filled – leaving 1,736 positions vacant. The shortage extends to professors as well, a senior doctor confirms.

"These gaps would not exist if the State government had a consistent, calendar-based recruitment process," says a doctor working as a contract Assistant Professor at a government medical college. "Even under contractual appointments, our salaries have not been paid this year because the contract itself has not been renewed. And this isn't just about Assistant Professors – it affects faculty across all levels."

The doctor warns that the system is nearing a breaking point: "Morale is low. Many are wondering how long they can go on without pay or clarity about their future. Some are seriously considering quitting altogether."

Another doctor points to repeated delays. "Regular recruitment was promised last year. But after the SC sub-division notification came out, everything was put on hold. Even after receiving Cabinet clearance, officials keep saying the notification will come 'next week'. It has been over two months and nothing has moved."

Fixing the cracks

Meanwhile, in response to the NMC's show-cause notice, the Telangana government has set up 10 Medical College Monitoring Committees to conduct field inspections and comprehensive assessments of all 34 GMCs and their affiliated teaching hospitals across the State. The move was formalised through a Government Order issued by Health Secretary Christina Z. Chongthuo on June 19.

The GO states that the aim is to develop a detailed action plan to ensure full compliance with NMC standards by June 2028. The committees are tasked with identifying on-ground challenges and recommending institution-specific, sustainable solutions.

Each committee includes officials such as district collectors, medical college principals and hospital superintendents. Their mandate covers a wide spectrum – from infrastructure and lab facilities to the availability of medical equipment, hostel conditions and academic spaces. They will also evaluate the clinical workload, including functioning of in-patient wards, operating theatres, diagnostics and emergency services.

Staffing gaps, both teaching and non-teaching, will be mapped and recommendations made for recruitment through Medical and Health Services Recruitment Board, Telangana State Public Service Commission or local contractual appointments overseen by district administrations.

The committees have also been asked to assess hostel safety, sanitation, food quality and the presence of support systems like anti-ragging mechanisms, grievance redressal cells and counselling services. Operational issues such as supply of essential drugs, food provisions, infection control and utility expenses are also under review.

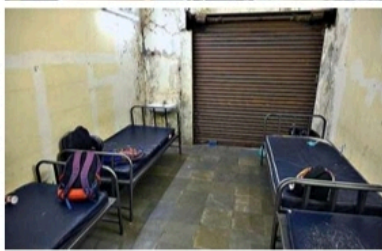
The functioning of systems such as the electronic Health Management Information System, biometric and facial recognition attendance, and CCTV surveillance – both academic and clinical – will be audited. The committees are expected to submit detailed field reports by June 30.

Whether these committees will spark lasting reform or simply become another bureaucratic ritual remains to be seen. For now, thousands of young doctors continue to study, serve and survive in conditions far removed from the promises once made to them. In Telangana's grand medical expansion, it is not the buildings but the people inside them who are being tested the most.



Rapid setting up of so many GMCs has resulted in impressive buildings that resemble fully functioning medical institutions. But inside, there are serious gaps.

A SENIOR OFFICIAL, State Health department



MAHARASHTRA



Hanging between life and death



(Top) Commuters awaiting trains during peak hour at the Nalassopara railway station in Mumbai; overcrowded trains are part of the daily commute. EMBANUAL YOGINI

On June 9, four commuters on Mumbai's local trains died when they fell off overcrowded coaches. While long, difficult commutes on the 'locals' are justified as 'the Mumbai spirit' triumphing against the odds, **Snehal Mutha** finds that the suburban railway system of India's financial capital falls short of what the city requires

Deepak Shirasat, 23, and Ketan Saroj, 23, childhood friends and neighbours, travelled together to work daily. They would board the Mumbai local train from Ulhasnagar to Airoli, changing lines once at Thane, covering 36 km. Like other days, they took the 9.38 a.m. local during peak office travel hours to the business process outsourcing company they worked at.

On June 9, Saroj, along with three other passengers, died in a train accident; nine others were injured. This week, one more person, who sustained grievous injuries in the accident, died. Railway officials say the incident could have occurred due to jerks on a curve between Diva and Mumbra stations in Thane. The bags of commuters standing on the footboards of two trains going in opposite directions — Karjat-Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus (CSMT) and CSMT-Kasar — possibly collided, causing passengers to lose balance, according to officials.

As Shirasat waits, along with his father and Saroj's family, to claim his friend's body at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Hospital, Kalwa, 39 km from Mumbai, he says, "I don't know whether I can ever step into a train. He fell right in front of my eyes. I was inside and he was standing at the door. Despite pulling the chain thrice, the train did not stop."

The Mumbai Suburban Railway System in Maharashtra serves an average of 75 lakh commuters daily, with 228 trains (138 of the Central Railway and 90 of the Western Railway) operating across eight corridors. The network witnessed 570 deaths owing to commuters falling off trains in 2024; 1,329 people were injured in such incidents. From January to March this year, the Central Railway recorded 88 deaths and 198 injuries and the Western Railway recorded 44 deaths and 131 injuries in such incidents, as per official data. Both are administrative units within India's 17 railway zones and headquartered in Mumbai.

The local trains cover the Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR), spanning 6,328 sq km, as per the Comprehensive Mobility Plan, 2021. MMR covers Mumbai City, Mumbai Suburban, and Thane, Raigad, and Palghar districts.

Over the past 20 years, over 51,000 people have lost their lives on Mumbai's locals, as per railway administration information presented in the Bombay High Court in response to a petition filed in 2024 by Yatin Jadhav, a daily commuter on the Virar-Churchgate route of the Western Railway. Virar is a coastal town in Palghar dis-



I don't know whether I can ever step into a train. He fell right in front of my eyes. I was inside and he was standing at the door

DEEPAK SHIRSAT
Working professional, whose friend died after falling off a Mumbai local

trict, about 60 km from Mumbai.

Jadhav's petition sought accountability and stated that the railway administration had failed to provide a safe mode of transport to commuters, who are compelled to use the suburban railway system as it is affordable and accessible. On June 20 this year, Justice Sandeep Marne of the High Court, referring to the affidavit filed by the Central Railway in response to the petition, said, "It is disturbing that in 2024 alone, 3,588 people died [including while crossing railway tracks]. This means 10 Mumbaiers die every day."

Tarun Kumar, Additional Divisional Railway Manager at CSMT, refused to comment on the operations of the suburban railway network.

Daily grind

As raindrops patter on the rusty tin roof of the Thane railway station, Vaishali Shirkar, 50, is waiting for a local train. She glances at her watch now and then — an ordinary scene at all stations in the city during the monsoon. Shirkar is one of many commuters caught between life and sur-

vival. She has been travelling from Badlapur to her workplace in Thane for the past 15 years.

"I dislocated my shoulder in 2018 on a Badlapur local. Since then, pain has become a part of my life," she says, adding that her knees hurt too. "Sitting at home is not an option for single mothers." She says accidents are "normal", people move on, and that is "the spirit of Mumbai". "Nothing much has changed over the years; train delays and crowding are still the same," she adds.

Western Railway spokesperson Vineet Abhishek says a lot has changed in the past 20 years. "We have increased our capacity by almost 70% through multiple projects to upgrade infrastructure and modernise the rolling stock. As of now, key projects like extension of the fifth and sixth line, and the Harbour Line are in the pipeline, which will add to our capacity," he says.

Commuters are demanding more trains to expand the network, especially on the Harbour Line. According to the Central Railway, it is challenged by the long process of land acquisition and rehabilitation of project-affected persons.

In the meantime, people continue to struggle.

"Trains are packed like grains in a sack," says Trappa Pawar, 34, who commutes daily at 8.30 a.m. from Ambivli to reach his workplace in Thane, a 30-km journey that takes 30 minutes.

Abhishek concurs, stating that the Central Railway transports around 4,000 passengers

during peak hours every day, despite having a capacity of 2,500, while the Western Railway carries double its intended capacity.

Pawar says he chooses to live in Ambivli as housing in the area is affordable. "If a person earns only ₹30,000 a month, it is impossible to live in Mumbai or Thane with a family. We live outside the city and earn inside it," he says.

Nandkumar Deshmukh, chief of the Thane Railway Pravasi Sanstha, a 12-year-old organisation that fights for the rights of commuters, says the railway administration lacks vision.

"They should have known that the city's growth would lead to increased pressure on the railways, given the expansion into suburbs like Panel and Belapur in Navi Mumbai, as well as the proposed Mumbai 3.0 (Karnala-Sai-Chirner New Town) and further development in Raigad district," he says, demanding a shuttle service from Thane to regions like Kalwa, Diva, and Dombivli, situated on its outskirts. Mumbai is a narrow, elongated peninsula stretching south to north, so a linear transport system makes it possible to run parallel lines, he says.

Railway reaction

Following the incident, the Railway Board, which regulates the Indian Railways, announced the launch of a prototype non-AC train with an automatic door closing system in January 2026.

"The new non-AC trains will be designed with ventilation in mind, featuring doors with louvers, roof-mounted ventilation units to circulate fresh air, and vestibules connecting coaches to allow passengers to move freely and distribute the crowd more evenly," says Swapnil Nila, spokesperson of the Central Railway.

Commuters, however, are sceptical about the announcement. Siddhesh Desai, an activist with the Mumbai Rail Pravasi Sangh, which was founded in 1995 to protect passenger rights, questions how the doors will function during overcrowding.

The concept of non-AC trains with doors isn't new to the suburban railway network. In June 2021, the Western Railway tested automatic doors in a few coaches during peak and non-peak hours. "However, the experiment was deemed not fruitful due to the door operation time exceeding the average halt time of 30 seconds to one minute. Moreover, carbon dioxide levels during the trials reached 2,150 ppm (parts per million), far surpassing the permissible limit of 700 ppm," says a source from the Western Railway.

In April this year, Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw had announced the launch of 238 new AC suburban trains that would replace non-AC trains in a phased manner.

Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis reiterated this on June 10, a day after the accident in Thane. "The plan for introducing more AC trains without increasing the fare has been prepared. We want to keep fares as low as possible and make AC trains accessible for everyone without any discrimination," Fadnis told mediapersons.

Sitting on a bench at the Dadar railway station's platform, Nalini Priya, a 26-year-old graphic designer from Nalgaon in Palghar district, says, "AC trains are often overcrowded to the point where the doors can't close. There's always someone who thinks the train can accommodate one more person."

The Central Railway has also explored the option of changing office timings for better crowd management, but so far nothing has come of it.

"We are laying tracks and soon work will be complete on several routes, including Kandivli-Borivali and Virar-Borivali," says the spokesperson of the Western Railway.

Experts emphasise that no city can rely on one mode of transport; a smooth commute requires a multi-modal system where the metro, buses, and other options share the load.

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Jam-packed: Commuters travelling on the footboard of a local train approaching the Thane railway station during peak hour. EMBANUAL YOGINI

Editor's TAKE

India refuses to sign SCO joint declaration

India's strong stand at SCO underlines its approach to terrorism signalling its assertive foreign policy posture

There has been a paradigm shift in India's approach to foreign policy post Pahalgaon massacre. The country has taken and rightly so, a zero tolerance policy towards terrorism. It is unflinching in its approach to condemn terrorism on all international fora. It was once again at display in China. At the recently concluded Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Defence Ministers' Meeting held in Qingdao, China on June 26, 2025, India refused to sign the joint declaration — a move that underscores its principled stance on terrorism and regional security. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, representing India, chose not to endorse the final communiqué, citing the deliberate exclusion of India's terrorism-related concerns from the draft; an issue India considers critical to regional peace and stability. This lack of consensus made it impossible for the declaration to be adopted unanimously. The SCO Defence Ministers' Meeting brought together representatives from major regional powers, including China, Russia, Iran, Pakistan, and several Central Asian nations.

It was expected to culminate in a joint declaration reinforcing collective commitment to peace, security, and cooperation in the region. However, the talks stumbled when India pressed for strong language condemning terrorism, particularly cross-border terrorism and the threat of non-state actors accessing weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). One member state's opposition to these inclusions — especially the reference to the April 22 terror attack in Pahalgaon, Jammu & Kashmir, which killed several tourists — led to a diplomatic impasse.

In his address, Rajnath Singh made India's position clear. He called for accountability for "perpetrators, organisers, financiers, and sponsors" of terrorism and insisted that no compromise should be made when it comes to combating this menace. He warned about the risks of WMDs falling into the hands of terrorist organisations, stressing the urgent need for collective, decisive action. India's objection also stemmed from what it considered a clear imbalance in the draft declaration.

While it allegedly included references to terror incidents in Pakistan, it omitted any mention of the Pahalgaon attack in India. This, New Delhi argued, undermined the credibility of the statement. India maintained that a credible security declaration must address all instances of terrorism without exception or political convenience. The failure to do so prompted India to withhold its signature. India's refusal to toe the line reflects its increasingly assertive foreign policy. Rather than yielding for the sake of consensus, New Delhi chose to send a clear message: counter-terrorism cannot be diluted or selectively applied in regional diplomacy. While this move might strain relations with some member countries, particularly Pakistan and possibly China — the host of the event — it also positions India as a nation willing to take principled stands even on contentious multilateral platforms. As the SCO continues to grapple with internal divides and conflicting priorities among members, India's position may act as a catalyst, a much-needed conversation on the need for integrity and unanimity in confronting the global threat of terrorism.

PICTALK



A glimpse of traditional fishing practices in Manipur, where sustainable methods continue to thrive.
PHOTO: NANKAJ KUMAR

Resurgent fundamentalism in Bangladesh

Fundamentalist groups in Bangladesh are positioning to enter Parliament through street mobilisation and polarising rhetoric — posing serious threat to the country's minority rights and secular governance

Militant fundamentalist Islamist parties and organisations are growing and becoming more strident in Bangladesh under the interim Government headed by Chief Advisor Muhammad Yunus. They hold processions, demonstrations and mega rallies.

The Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh's massive gathering in Dhaka on May 3, 2025, is an example. They are gearing up to contest the country's 13th general elections which seem likely to be held in February. According to a report by Salman Tareque Sakil published in the *Dhaka Tribune* on June 25, 2025, under the heading "Five religious parties on path to electoral compromise," the Islami Andolan Bangladesh (IAB), Khilafat Majlis (KM), Bangladesh Khilafat Majlis (BKM), Jamiat Ulama-e-Islam (JUeI) and Nezam-e-Islam (NI), have formed a liaison committee to push unity among themselves in the context of the forthcoming elections. What form electoral cooperation among the five will take — whether the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami (Jamaat) will be a part of it — remains undecided. The JUeI's secretary general, Maulana Manjurul Islam Afendi, told Sakil on June 24, 2025, "We have taken the initiative to make the five Islamic parties float one candidate and one ballot box. That initiative is ongoing. The entire process has not been officially finalised yet." He had added, "We have formed a liaison committee. There has been no clear decision on the election process. There are differences of opinion on how we will unite, where we will all go together, whether we will join a large alliance, this is where we are."

A number of things are clear. According to the *Dhaka Tribune*'s report, the Jamaat, which opposed the Liberation War in 1971, has not been included in this probable electoral compromise.

Nor are the five parties ready to say definitively whether it will be part of it. But then the electoral impact of a successful alliance between the five Islamist parties and the Jamaat may not be earth-shaking. Even if one ignores the outcomes of the 2024, 2018 and 2014 elections which were allegedly rigged, the results of four preceding elections are revealing. The Jamaat won 18 of the 300 parliamentary seats and 12.13 per cent of the votes polled in 1991. The corresponding figures for the elections in 1996, 2001 and 2008 are three seats and 8.6 per cent, 17 seats and 4.28 per cent, and two seats and 4.70 per cent.

It had an alliance with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party in 2001 and 2008. The figures for the Islami Oikya Jote were: one seat and 0.79 per cent in 1991, one seat and 1.09 per cent in 1996 and one seat and 0.68 per cent in 2001. It did not get a single seat in 2008 and received 0.15 per cent of the votes. Even



if the Islamist parties do significantly better in the next elections, they can only hope to get a foothold as a junior partner in a coalition Government to be formed.

The danger lies in their trying to impose their agenda through intimidation and violence, as the Jamaat had done when it was a part of a coalition Government with the BNP from 2001 to 2006. The question arises: what is the agenda of the Islamist parties? An AFP report published in the *Dhaka Tribune* of May 3, 2025, under the heading "Influential Islamists promise sharia as they ready for polls," quotes Muhammad Mamunul Haque, BKA's ameer, as saying, "We will implement sharia," and adding, "Everything will be guided by the Koran." A look at what Islamist parties and organisations are doing in Bangladesh now gives an idea of what will happen under their rule.

The AFP report states, "Islamists have demanded an end to a swath of activities, including cultural activities deemed 'anti-Islamic' — from music to theatre festivals, women's football matches and kite-flying celebrations." A report by Mujib Mashal and Saif Hasnat, dated April 1, 2025, and published in *The New York Times*, states, "As Bangladesh tries to rebuild its democracy and chart a new future for its 175 million people, a streak of Islamist extremism that had long lurked beneath the country's secular facade is bubbling to the surface." It added, "In interviews, representatives of several Islamist parties and organisations — some of which had previously been

banned — made clear that they were working to push Bangladesh in a more fundamentalist direction, a shift that has been little noticed outside the country."

Women's rights are among the main targets. Islamist fundamentalists have viciously attacked forward-looking recommendations of the Women Affairs Reforms Commission, such as recognising forced sex within marriage as rape under the criminal code and ensuring the labour rights and dignity of sex workers by amending the country's labour laws. A report by Inayatullah Haque, KM's secretary-general, said, "We make a clear appeal: grant women their just rights. Do not push them into prostitution or turn mothers into symbols of disgrace." Dr Shafiqur Rahman, Jamaat's ameer, said, "We reject the commission outright as it stands against the values and laws of Allah and the thoughts and beliefs of the nation."

There is resistance from a section of the civil society and the media. An editorial in the *Dhaka Tribune* of February 22, 2025, stated, "Time and again, the interim Government has proven itself utterly incapable when it comes to reigning in extremists who now feel emboldened to carry out their intolerant and regressive agenda — not only has the void in comprehensive law enforcement paved the way to a sharp rise in crime, but it now appears the threat of agitating extremists is also an element that must be dealt with." The same paper had said in another editorial on March 20, 2025, "While the overwhelming majority of Bangladesh still subscribes to communal harmony, the void in law enforcement

has certainly resulted in fringe right-wing groups trying to make their presence known." It added, "The onus, then, lands squarely on the interim Government to call a spade a spade and brand such groups for what they are: Extremists." Six women, including three leaders of the National Citizen Committee sent, through their lawyer, a legal notice on May 5, 2025, demanding an explanation within seven days from the Hefazat for using abusive language against members of the Women Affairs Reform Commission.

There have been civil society protests on a number of other issues as well. And the interim Government? If it has taken any action against Islamist fundamentalists for their relentless persecution of Hindus and businesses, it is of a special kind whose results are not visible.

The same applies in the case of those disrupting sporting events and cultural performances. Rather, it is doing other things. According to a BBS report published on February 28, 2025, in the *Dhaka Tribune* under the heading "Khald: Govt takes diverse initiatives to promote Islamic culture and values," the Religious Affairs Adviser is a Nayeb-e-Ameer of Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh and an advisor to Islami Andolan Bangladesh. Can one expect the Muhammad Yunus-led Interim Government to act resolutely against fundamentalist Islamist violence?

(The writer is a Consulting Editor at The Pioneer. Views are personal)



HIRANMAY KARLEKAR

Mental health and the power of identity

SECOND Opinion

In today's hyper-connected, fast-paced world — where social media, societal expectations, and external achievements often dictate how we see ourselves — the quest for inner peace and authentic mental well-being can feel like navigating a noisy, confusing maze. Amidst this clutter, one overlooked yet profoundly transformative principle offers a clear path forward: the Law of Identification. At its core, this law states that we become what we most consistently and deeply identify with. Our thoughts, emotions, behaviours, and eventually, our life outcomes are shaped by the version of ourselves we believe in. When this principle is applied with conscious intention, it becomes more than an abstract idea — it becomes a potent tool for mental and emotional transformation.

The Law of Identification is rooted not just in philosophy but in psychology. It suggests that our sense of self is not rigid or permanent, but formed through repeated patterns of thought, emotion, and behaviour linked to how we see ourselves. If you constantly think of yourself as anxious, broken, or not enough, your behaviours and habits will often reinforce that identity. But if you begin to see yourself — even tentatively — as calm, strong, and evolving, your actions start aligning with that vision. Over time, a new mental blueprint takes shape. Mental health struggles are real, serious, and

deserve compassion, support, and often professional treatment. But there's a subtle danger in fully giving our identity with our struggles. Phrases like "I am depressed" or "I am anxious" may feel like honest descriptions, but repeated often enough, they hardwire the brain to see those states as experiences, but as truths. The key lies in shifting from fixed identity language to growth-oriented statements — like "I'm learning to manage my anxiety" or "I'm healing from emotional wounds."

These reframes don't deny reality; they open up possibility. This principle finds resonance in the science of neuroplasticity — the brain's proven ability to change and adapt based on repeated patterns. In a time of widespread stress, emotional fatigue, and digital overload, the Law of Identification offers a timely counterforce.

Many, especially younger generations, are overwhelmed by curated social media personas and societal ideals, internalising harmful beliefs about who they are or should be. The pandemic years further disoriented our sense of self. Locked in survival mode, many lost touch with deeper aspects of their identity. In such a climate, choosing to identify with your ideal self — one that is resilient, balanced, and capable — is no longer just a motivational idea; it becomes a survival skill. When the outside world feels uncertain, the internal world becomes the one place where transformation is still possible. This law also plays a critical role in the current mental health discourse. As conversations around mental well-being become more open

and destigmatised, the Law of Identification offers a next step. It bridges the gap between awareness and active change. It urges people not just to name their struggles, but to begin imagining who they want to become. In a world quick to highlight what's broken, choosing to identify with what's possible becomes a revolutionary act of healing. Language is a powerful lever in this process. How we speak about ourselves becomes the scaffolding for how we think and feel. Saying "I'm terrible with stress" repeatedly wires the brain to accept that limitation. But saying "I'm learning to stay calm" or "I'm becoming more mindful" sends the brain a different message — one of growth and renewal. These are not empty affirmations; they are intentional identity shifts. Identity is shaped not just internally, but by the people and media we surround ourselves with. Immersing yourself in content, conversations, and relationships that reinforce your desired identity — ones that affirm peace, confidence, and resilience — can radically shift your mental and emotional baseline. Books, podcasts, and communities that support this identity are not luxuries; they are lifelines. The Law of Identification isn't magic, nor is it a replacement for therapy. It reminds us that while we may not control everything about our circumstances, we do have agency over the identity we choose to strengthen. And from that chosen identity, a new life can begin to take shape. Even when setbacks occur, a grounded self-image becomes an anchor — holding us steady, reminding us who we are becoming, and guiding us back to our true self.

(The writer is an educator and counsellor. Views are personal)



SAKSHI SETHI

Letters to the Editor

WHY THE LANGUAGE DEBATE IS A DANGEROUS DISTRACTION

The Union Home Minister is continuing his attack against foreign languages and his impulsive push for Hindi is visible in his message (news - 27 June 2025). Already in his over-enthusiastic speech he has mentioned that those who speak English will feel shame soon. This has been rightly answered by many from all over the country. Again, under the cover of glorifying native languages, he has spoken in favour of Hindi.

Actually, imposing Hindi is divisive, as seen in the states. It is also a fact that those who are proficient in a foreign language are equally good at their mother tongue also. Even those who are able to gain employment abroad mainly by virtue of their ability to communicate in the foreign language form forums of native languages in the countries they live, that display their love and affection for their mother tongue. The present set-up is going on smoothly and using English has not created any serious problems. Those who learn to communicate better in the foreign

language gain employment in our country and abroad, and those youth who can communicate only in their local tongues end up as migrant labourers. If speaking a foreign language is called a slavery mentality, what about seeking jobs and education in foreign countries? Many students studying automobile engineering prefer to learn German language, for which they need to be appreciated. The Home Minister repeatedly shifting the language issue under the guise of glorifying the native tongues seems to have some hidden agenda, like removing English and placing Hindi in its place as a link language in due course. If English has to be replaced, will Tamil be considered by virtue of it being the oldest living language with rich literature and being a native tongue? The Home Minister has many pressing issues like Manipur, Kashmir, Arunachal, etc., to focus attention on. The language issue is avoidable.

AG RAJMOHAN | ANANTAPUR

Please send your letter to the letterstothepioneer@gmail.com. In not more than 400 words. We appreciate your feedback.

ECI delisting 345 unreconciled parties

The Election Commission of India on Thursday, June 26, said it has started proceedings for delisting of 345 registered unreconciled political parties (RUPPs) which have failed to fulfil the essential condition of contesting even a single election in the last six years since 2019.

The offices of these parties could also not be physically located anywhere, the ECI claimed. These RUPPs are from different states and UTs across the country. The Supreme Court had earlier barred EC from "derecognising" political parties noting that it was not prescribed under law. However, the EC has found a way to "delist parties". Parties delisted can be listed again by the poll authority without getting into the process of giving them fresh recognition, a former EC functionary pointed out.

Apart from over 2,800 RUPPs, there are six national and 67 state-recognised political parties in the country. The move comes ahead of Bihar elections later this year. Parties delisted cannot field their candidates to contest elections. While the Supreme Court barred "derecognition", delisting offers an alternative.

Delisted parties cannot contest elections but may be re-listed without fresh recognition. The move precedes Bihar polls. It streamlines the political landscape, ensuring that only active and accountable parties feature in the democratic exercise.

BHAGWAN THADANI MUMBAI

National Insurance Awareness Day

Insurance is the foundational element of a sound financial strategy. It is about protecting your health, income, property, and loved ones against the financial consequences arising from unexpected and often costly events.

While no one can predict the future, the right insurance policies can help reduce the financial impact of accidents, natural disasters, illness, or other claims. Insurance can help individuals rebuild after loss, and allow families to maintain financial security during difficult times. Without adequate insurance coverage, a single event — like a car accident, house fire, or medical emergency — can have devastating financial consequences.

To bring awareness about the importance of insurance in an individual's life, "National Insurance Awareness Day" is observed annually on June 28. Different types of insurance are: health, life, homeowners, auto, flood, vehicle, property, and many more other insurances.

National Insurance Awareness Day is a great occasion to help families navigate life's uncertainties with great grace and confidence. Whether you're an individual seeking peace of mind, a parent securing your family's well-being, or a business owner looking to safeguard your livelihood, insurance can be a proactive and important risk management tool to help ensure stability.

MADHUSUDHAN REDDY BURRA | KARIMNAGAR

A great moment of pride for India

India rejoices on being able to send its Air Force Fighter pilot — a Group Captain — onto the "International Space Station" to conduct experiments in microgravity. It's a moment of great achievement and pride for the country and Shubhanshu Shukla from Lucknow.

The results and takeaways of 60 experiments to be carried out in a span of 14 days by the team will enlighten and enrich space science in a big way. Experiments on whether human life can live and thrive in outer space will form part of their space odyssey. Whether human life can be transported to outer space, the living conditions which are required to sustain life there, and whether human beings in large numbers can be lifted off from Earth using gigantic spacecrafts is a curious quest which these astronauts will experiment with.

The science and technology related to this adventurous field of science learning and high-end experimentation should kindle school students to take up the study of space, albeit in their small way. The syllabus in science should include a lesson or two in space and its science at least from the 8th standard onwards.

This can ignite students to embark on taking up a future career in space science depending upon the inclination shown by them. Suitable lessons can be devised and introduced.

NR RAGHURAM | HYDERABAD

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

[OUR TAKE]

The case for English in India

Its foreignness long gone, English is the passport to social and economic mobility

Language is politics by other means in India. Which is why Union home minister Amit Shah's clarification that the Centre is not opposed to any foreign language is significant. In the same vein, he added that "there should be an urge to glorify one's own language". A few days earlier, Shah had lit a small political fire with his remarks that "those who speak English will soon be ashamed". This remark was interpreted by Opposition leaders as a backdrop attempt to impose Hindi on non-Hindi speakers. The BJP has always been in favour of making Hindi the official language of the country and eliminating the use of English, a potentially explosive issue in the non-Hindi-speaking states of southern India. Now, Maharashtra, again a state that has a history of strong linguistic identity, has become restive over the BJP-led government's move to introduce Hindi as a language from primary classes.

The case for English in India is simple. First, it is the language of opportunity and economic mobility. Second, it is also the language of aspiration, a secular means to become urban and modern, and possibly, transcend the chains of caste and class. And, third, it is the word of the world, and the passport to the world of ideas. In the case of India, it has been a convenient link language immune to the legacies of local dominance. This is the reason the founding fathers of the republic, who fought the British, found no reason to outlaw the language in independent India. In fact, they saw the opportunity in English proficiency and encouraged its use, without discriminating against local languages. In the process, English has been well assimilated within Indian society to the extent that it may have lost its foreignness. It is no longer perceived as the language of economic and cultural imperialism, but as a vehicle that has enabled India's rise as a knowledge power. That's why China is encouraging English learning.

Does this mean a rejection of Indian languages? Certainly not. Much of India is bilingual, if not trilingual, and is likely to remain so. As per Census 2011, only 259,000 people reported English as their mother tongue or first language, but 83 million said it was their second language. In comparison, over 520 million called Hindi their first language as compared to 55 million for Gujarati. These numbers hardly suggest a threat from English to Hindi or any Indian language.

As for Indian languages, state governments could promote local languages. In fact, the Centre should call off its push to promote Hindi nationally and disperse the funds to states to promote local languages. This is important as local languages are repositories of cultural inheritance. However, the choice of learning a language should be left to citizens. It should also be kept in mind that the growth of English in India has happened without too much state patronage. People embrace it because of its economic utility. Languages that cease to be of transactional value face the threat of losing their prominence even in their motherland; no amount of polemics or policy imposition can rescue them. For instance, a report in this newspaper last week showed that the government spent ₹2,532.59 crore on the promotion of Sanskrit between 2014-15 and 2024-25—17 times the combined spending of ₹147.56 crore on the other five classical Indian languages, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam and Odia. But there's little to show for this.

A nuanced policy that does not privilege or discriminate against, any language is the sensible option for India.

Case for reviving multilateralism, a WTO-led order

As a leader of the Global South, India must reinvigorate its vision for the WTO and have a proactive and forward-looking agenda for the trade body

The G20 New Delhi Leaders Declaration of September 2023 reaffirmed the indispensability of a "rules-based, non-discriminatory, fair, open, inclusive, equitable, sustainable and transparent multilateral trading system, with WTO at its core". This was reiterated in 2024 during Brazil's G20 presidency. The 14th World Trade Organization (WTO) Ministerial Conference is scheduled for March 2026 at Yaounde, Cameroon. As a precursor, the WTO director-general met with ministers and high-level officials from nearly 30 WTO members, including India, the US, Australia, China, the EU and Brazil, earlier this month in Paris. The inconclusive end to this meeting foretells further undermining of a beleaguered WTO.

The US's disregard for multilateral rules is one of the key reasons for the deadlock, but that does not let the 165 other member-countries of the WTO off the hook. They too shoulder a significant share of the responsibility for the WTO's fate as well. A key question for India and other countries is whether the rules of WTO are worth preserving despite the unpredictability of the US's actions. There are several reasons why they are.

It is true that WTO rules are far from perfect and need reforms. Yet, however imperfect, a multilateral system of rules is the only logical safeguard against arbitrary action by any one country. The emergence of WTO in 1995 complemented India's liberalisation and economic growth. Domestic reform and liberalisation could thrive because of the global stability, certainty, and predictability that WTO rules provided.

WTO's state of disarray can be attributed to several reasons, primary among which is the

dysfunctional state of its dispute settlement mechanism since 2019, resulting from the US blocking appointment of members to the appellate body. Underpinning this is the US's desire to wrench back political control over a judicial process. Efforts to get the US to agree to a more streamlined appellate process have failed. India has highlighted the importance of a two-tier system; but to break the deadlock, we need to consider possible alternatives, including a two-tier system for all willing WTO members and a single-tier system only for disputes where the US is a party.

The second set of challenges at the WTO is a series of long-pending issues. A key pending issue is reform in the agricultural rules. This includes constraints India has faced with domestic support for agricultural products. Limited to 10% of the value of production of an agricultural product under the WTO's Agreement on Agriculture (AoA), India's domestic support entitlement is in stark contrast to the much higher AoA entitlements that are available for developed countries including the US, the EU, Japan, and Canada. India successfully negotiated the Bali Peace Clause in 2013, aimed at partially addressing this historical asymmetry. However, this was only a temporary reprieve that is yet to be translated into a firm commitment. Reform is also pending on other related issues, including removal of an absurd external reference price which has remained frozen at 1986-89 prices—completely devoid of current economic realities. Prioritising reform of these rules is important.

THE EMERGENCE OF WTO IN 1995 COMPLEMENTED INDIA'S LIBERALISATION AND ECONOMIC GROWTH. DOMESTIC REFORM AND LIBERALISATION COULD THRIVE BECAUSE OF THE GLOBAL STABILITY THAT WTO RULES PROVIDED.



RV
Anuradha

Making of the sisterhood of a writer, her translator

The collection *Heart Lamp: Selected Stories* has riches, and some repetitive moments. That said, it is undeniably one of the very few examples of its kind, available in English. Like the Tamil writer S. Balu, Mushtaq takes us to a different geography and gives us a linguistically heterogeneous, domestic world of Muslim men and women—markedly different from the North Indian fare of an Attia Hosain or Khadija Mastoor. However, my thoughts today do not so much about the original but the translation, and it involves not a comparison with the original (for I can't read Kannada) but how it comes over to us. In other words, how do I read this text as a non-Kannada reader/translator and reader from the twinness. This is also to foreground the translator's role who, unlike many translators has been rewarded, but like most translators, not engaged with.

When you open the book, you move directly into the first story. There is no dedication to the writer, or the translator's note—the opening paragraph in Deepa Bhashti's translation makes a luminous start—the long sentence is done sharply, going from the "concrete jungle" through "people, people, people" and ending with the introduction of Mujahid. The voice is that of Zeenat ("Stone Slabs for Shalisha Mahal") who then tells us how absurdly few choices there are for educated and intelligent women to introduce husbands. Mushtaq's comment on the limited language of kinship and intimacy and its repeated

failure to sustain equality is picked up by Bhashti who brings us to a witty voice, playful options such as gauda or pati and ending with how for women, Muslim women in particular, husband-as-God is sanctified in language. So, what can a Zeenat do in such circumstances? Zeenat who notices the "labour" of both Shalisha and Asifa. Mushtaq, Zeenat, Bhashti—all of them show a keen ear for what is not said, and push the conventions of language. The first striking impression is that the writer had found her translator and we have entered a world of women whose myriad spoken and unspoken words have found a place.

Women translators have often found thick histories behind women's few words, told in seriousness or in play. Every once in a while, (not always) it can't help feeling that when you read a translation that only a woman could have written this, translated this—both acts intertwine, interchange, and become inseparable. Does writing carry the gender of its creator? Perhaps. It is more evident on some days.

Bhashti's use of the words, "arey, I forgot" or "Che! I have made a mistake" also helps define Zeenat conversationally. There's comfort with which Bhashti makes rules and breaks them as she pleases. Her use of Indian repetitions such as "hot-hot" sumoia sparkles, and does not feel oriental or gimmick-like. Bhashti has a light touch, she does things but also lets them be allowing for intrigue as well as familiarity. For instance, the



Rita
Kothari



India's negotiating focus has shifted to bilateral agreements. While equally important, these are no substitute for multilateral rules.

Development of new rules across a range of emerging areas is another key challenge. Such areas include digital trade and e-commerce and trade & environmental sustainability (TES)—both of which are critical for India, given our national priorities. These are currently part of splinter-group discussions within the WTO, called joint initiatives (JIs). The e-commerce JI has 90 WTO members, the TES has 78, and both groups include the US, the EU, China, Australia, Canada, and Japan, among others. The e-commerce JI deals with elements that will have relevance for India's evolving strength in digital trade. With countries, including the US, threatening various unilateral measures, disciplines in this area need deeper engagement. The TES discussions will have significant relevance for rules on interface of trade and the climate crisis, an area where there is a rapid rise of unilateral measures, especially those adopted by the EU, and the threat of similar measures by others including the US and Canada.

It emerged as a response to challenges in driving consensus among 166 members. The first JI to conclude was on services domestic regulation (SDR), between 72 members. India had been an active participant of SDR given its centrality to India's burgeoning services sector. How-

ever, when discussions moved from the multilateral forum to the JI, India stayed out of SDR as well as all other JIs, the concern being that such fragmented rulemaking would undermine WTO's multilateral architecture.

The reality since 2017, however, is that WTO's negotiating function has predominantly rested on JIs, with some, such as the JI on investment facilitation for development (IFF), having support of as many as 126 members. It is ironic that the reason that JIs have remained JIs is because of the choice of some members not to engage. And it is only the ones that have stayed out, including India, that stand to lose any possibility to influence the shape and content of new bilateral agreements. While equally important, these are no substitute for multilateral rules, and, in fact, would even be severely undermined by lack of multilateral rules. It is time to reinvigorate our vision for the WTO. Any aspiration to be a true *vishwaguru* hinges on our ability to have a proactive and forward-looking agenda as a global player while doing all that it takes to strengthen from within.

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Like translators, readers also translate, fill gaps, and sometimes don't.

song about pigs in "Fire Rain". "Handi yendeke heegaleyuve..." which she does not translate, instead builds its meaning into the interpretive sentences of the next paragraph. "The meat of a pig is *harum*. Likewise angry. Devout Muslims believe that they become impure if they even see a pig," and so on. As a non-Kannada reader who didn't understand the song, I saw the word *handi* several times and knew that to be the pig. The corrosive effects of this prohibitive food on the body at home? I wondered. It was much too important to let it go, so I confirmed it with a Kannada friend.

However, take another instance in the same story, "Shavige payasa". I do not know what "shavige" means. The word *payasa* is close to *payasam* which I do know. So I fill in the gap and tell myself it is some kind of *kheer*, an analogical element that helps me get through. The sentence also has some context: "...that sister had come and asked for a share in the family property, and made the biryani and *shurve payasa* prepared in her hon-

our taste bitter".

On the other hand, the word "Rii" used in this collection by the women to address their husbands made me wonder if it was an elevating word of respect or an endearment. The relationships between husbands and wives in *Heart Lamp* make little room for endearments so I stay with that ambivalence, without an anxiety to find out. The word *straw* refers to the head-covering by women, but it is like a *dupatta*? Perhaps it is. Bhashti would not appreciate this Indian indiansation I am doing! It would have helped a little to know "Rii" more than *serge*. Is it untranslatable because it's too intimate or not intimate at all? My discomfort with somewhat monochromatic conjugalinity in the book comes to my aid in making some assumptions here.

Like translators, readers also translate, fill gaps, and sometimes don't, knowing that it may not be possible or even necessary. The odd Urdu word, the question tag, the Kannada word that is sometimes translated and sometimes not—is there a coherent philosophy here? It is, by Bhashti's admissions, a "sisterhood" and if I may add, one that also involved the writer and translator playing with multiple languages throwing words back and forth—Dakhini, Urdu, Telugu, Kannada and so on. The combination of shared understanding on one hand, and a rich repository of multilingual practices of speech by both women have created, I believe, a highly nimble, unapologetically "itself" and sparkling translation. What goes as the translator's note appears at the end, titled "against italics". Bhashti's translation philosophy is not only against italics. It is against taming. But so is Mushtaq's book and all the women in and around.

Rita Kothari is professor of English, Ashoka University, and co-director, Ashoka Centre for Translation. The views expressed are personal.

Emergency, seen in the cartoons of Sudhir Dar

Many see the Emergency as the harshest test the Press has faced since Independence. In the early hours of June 26, 1975, when the Emergency was declared, citing "internal disturbances", the Press was the first casualty. Challenged and threatened, the Press persevered through various means and techniques.

The *Hindustan Times* attempted reporting the events as they were, trusting their readers to read between the lines. When it became hard to get past the chief censor appointed for the purpose, Sudhir Dar's cartoons became the vehicle of the occasional satire couched in various disguises.

His activity to meet media houses had been cut off to paralyse them but the June 28 edition reported to its readers thus: "The city

edition on Friday and the dak editions of Friday and Saturday could not be brought out as no power was available from 12:45pm on Thursday till 7:45pm on Friday."

It was hard to miss the irony implied in simply placing this announcement next between two articles headlined "Mrs Gandhi believes in Press freedom" and "Press censorship for first time", respectively. The same edition of the paper also carried a blank white space where perhaps the editorial ought to have been, marking the impact of censorship. Although it caught attention, this technique of blank spaces was not a sustainable one given that the Emergency was indefinite.

Sudhir Dar's "This Is It" cartoons carried the satirical baton forward. A man in a car-

toon published on March 11, 1976, commented about the increase in rail fare: "My wife went home to Kerala three months ago... Now I can't afford to bring her back". And then, lest the cartoonist be hauled up for attacking the authorities such, he transforms the cartoon into a misogynist joke by having the male listener think to himself, "And he's complaining!"

When he really struck, Dar's political comments were marked by a scathing sense of humour. In a cartoon published on July 15, 1976, Dar makes a direct comment on the state of democracy. The domestic help of a couple in their house carries a tray in his hand but the tea-cup and saucer are precariously balanced on his head. While the man looks angry the woman consoles him: "His mind is like the De... these days... frequently cloudy". The readers' prior knowledge from reading the newspapers in these days helps them fill in the blank with the oft-used word: Democracy.



Neha
Khurana

In another cartoon on September 16, 1975, Dar uses a carefully chosen newspaper headline to set the context: "Man slashes Dutch masterpiece". Dar unexpectedly transforms this into a direct comment on censorship of the time as a reporter in the cartoon entering what looks like the office of a media house thinks to himself: "Somebody slashes Indian masterpieces every day". The comment is evidently upon the censor who rejects publications of the work of hard-working reporters.

So, what did these cartoons achieve? Before announcing the general elections in 1977, the Prime Minister consulted her Cabinet and the newspapers to know if national sentiments were conducive for the same. But both had been effectively censored. Contrary to their predictions, the ruling party lost by a significant margin. The common folks who read between the lines in the cartoons had the last laugh.

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[EDITOR'S PICK]

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

A BITE OF THE BIG APPLE

Zohran Mandandani, 33, won New York's Democratic mayoral primary this week on the back of a campaign centered on civic issues. If elected, he would be the first Muslim and Indian American mayor of New York. What explains the rise of Mandandani, so soon after Donald Trump's emphatic victory? The answers lies in the demography of New York, among the most diverse cities globally: as many as 49% of New Yorkers speak non-English languages at home.

This week, we recommend New Yorkers: *A City and Its People in Our Time*. The book is based on Craig Taylor's encounters with a diverse cross-section of the city's eight million population. It is about the uncelebrated but representative people who propel New York: a hospital nurse, an emergency dispatcher, those wiring the lights at the top of the Empire State Building, etc. The book explores new immigrants, their battles between loving and wanting to leave New York, and who gets to be considered a New Yorker.



New Yorkers: A City and Its People in Our Time: Craig Taylor

Year: 2021

EXPLAINED AGRICULTURE

ALL ABOUT THE PROPOSED GLOBAL POTATO RESEARCH CENTRE IN AGRA

HARIKISHAN SHARMA
NEW DELHI, JUNE 27

THE UNION Cabinet approved a proposal on Wednesday for setting up a regional wing of the Peru-based International Potato Center (CIP), a premier research-for-development organisation with a focus on the potato and sweet potato.

The proposed CIP-South Asia Regional Centre (CSARC) will be established at Singna in Agra, catering to farmers in India and South Asia.



A potato field in Hathras, Uttar Pradesh. Amit Mehra

What is the CIP?

Headquartered in Lima, the CIP was founded in 1971 with a focus on the potato, sweet potato, and Andean roots and tubers. The potato crop is native to the Peruvian-Bolivian Andes, and was spread across the world by the Spaniards and the Portuguese, after they colonised the continent. Potatoes reached India in the 17th century.

In 1975, the CIP signed an initial agreement for cooperation with the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR).

What functions will it carry out?

The Union government in a statement said, "The major objective of this investment is to increase food and nutrition security, farmers income, and job creation by improving potato and sweet potato productivity, post-harvest management and value-addition."

The CSARC will focus on developing new climate-resilient, disease-free, and processing-suitable varieties. The project costs Rs 171 crore, with India contributing Rs 111.5 crore and the CIP funding the remainder. The Uttar Pradesh government has provided 10 hectares of land.

Why is this significant?

Potato is the third most available food crop in the world, after rice and wheat. Sweet potato is in the sixth position after maize and cassava. India's average potato

yield is 25 tonnes per hectare — about half of its potential of over 50 tonnes per hectare. A major reason is a lack of high-quality seeds.

The sweet potato yield in India is just 11.5 tonnes per hectare, much less than the potential of 30 tonnes per hectare. With the establishment of the CSARC, India will have access to the largest global collection of germplasm (the cells or tissues from which a new organism can be generated) available with the CIP, a source said.

"Establishment of this center will boost domestic potato seed production, thereby reducing India's dependence on seed imports from neighbouring countries", the source added. It will also help increase the potential for exporting products and aid local food processing industries.

What is India's position in global production?

China is the world's top potato producer and consumer, followed by India. In 2020, China's produced 78.24 million tonnes, while India produced 51.30 million tonnes, together accounting for over one-third of the global potato production.

ANONNA DUTT
NEW DELHI, JUNE 27

DANISH PHARMACEUTICAL giant Novo Nordisk launched its blockbuster weight-loss injectable semaglutide earlier this week, months after its competitor Eli Lilly's tirzepatide hit Indian markets — and nearly four years after these GLP-1 therapies took the United States by storm.

The bottom line is this: these drugs have been shown to be extremely effective for weight loss, helping people lose 15% to 20% of their body weight, equivalent to what they would otherwise lose with bariatric surgeries.

Additionally, they have been found to be effective or are being studied for a host of other conditions, including cardiovascular diseases, kidney disease, non-alcoholic fatty liver disease, and obstructive sleep apnoea. It has also been reported that people on these drugs end up making significant dietary changes, consuming smaller, healthier meals.

So how do these "miracle drugs" work? How were they discovered? And what are other benefits of these drugs?

Understanding GLP-1 drugs

Both semaglutide and tirzepatide belong to a new class of medicines called GLP-1 (glucagon-like peptide-1) receptor agonists. They are prescribed for the management of type-2 diabetes and obesity.

- These drugs mimic certain naturally-occurring gut hormones called incretins (GLP-1 is one such incretin) produced in the small intestine, and are hence also known as incretin mimickers. They work by:
- Improving the secretion of insulin that allows more of the glucose in the bloodstream to enter cells where it can be used for energy;
 - Inhibiting the secretion of the hormone glucagon that stimulates the liver to release stored glucose into the bloodstream;
 - Slowing down the emptying of the stomach so that the glucose levels in the bloodstream doesn't spike; and
 - Reducing appetite by signalling to the brain that one is satiated.

Semaglutide and tirzepatide both mimic the action of GLP-1. Tirzepatide additionally also mimics the action of another hormone called glucose-dependent insulinotropic polypeptide (GIP).

Genesis of these meds

While incretins were known as early as 1906, research into these gut hormones was

EXPENSIVE 'MIRACLES' WITH A FEW CAVEATS

HOW MUCH DO THE GLP-1 DRUGS COST?

At the moment, price is the biggest deterrent from these drugs becoming commonplace in India.

SEMAGLUTIDE: Novo Nordisk is offering the drug at five dose strengths.

₹17,345 per month for 0.25 mg & 1.7 mg doses	₹24,280 per month for 1.7 mg dose	₹26,015 per month for 2.4 mg dose
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TIRZEPATIDE: Eli Lilly is offering two dose strengths.

₹3,500 per month for 2.5 mg single-dose vial	₹14,000 per month (approx) for 5 mg single-dose vial	₹4,375 per month (approx) for 5 mg single-dose vial	₹17,000 per month (approx) for 15 mg single-dose vial
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WHO SHOULD NOT TAKE GLP-1 DRUGS?

- These drugs can cause gastrointestinal side effects. Those prone to nausea & vomiting, or other gastric issues should avoid taking these drugs.
- These drugs should not be prescribed to those with a family history of thyroid cancers.
- While approved for children in some countries, reducing nutritional intake in growing age has other negative consequences.
- These should not be taken during pregnancy; questions remain about their impact on women.



Illustration: Suvajit Dey

overshadowed by the discovery of insulin in 1921. The substance produced by the pancreas has been used to manage diabetes for the past century.

Interest in incretins was renewed in the 1960s after several studies showed that oral intake of glucose led to more insulin secretion than intravenously given glucose — demonstrating that the gut makes hormones that regulate insulin and glucose levels. GLP-1 became the first incretin to be discovered in 1986.

Trials in the 1990s showed that GLP-1 infusion significantly increased insulin levels and lowered glucose levels in diabetic patients. But there was a problem: GLP-1 was not a very stable compound. This is where Novo Nordisk stepped in.

While the pharma giant was primarily looking for a diabetes therapy, researchers believed GLP-1 drugs could also be used to treat obesity given that transplantation of some glucagon-producing tumours in animals caused profound anorexia.

Novo Nordisk's first GLP-1 medicine was the daily-injectable liraglutide. Trial participants, however, experienced severe nausea, and when the doses were reduced, the efficacy suffered. But the trials found that nausea could be somewhat mitigated by starting at a lower dose and then gradually titrating up — a method still followed for both semaglutide and tirzepatide.

The search for a once-weekly injectable eventually led to the discovery of semaglutide. This also proved to be much more effective than liraglutide for weight loss: those on semaglutide lost up to 15% of their body weight compared to 5% on liraglutide.

This led to further clinical trials to look into the drug's weight loss effects. While it was already seeing off-label use for this purpose, semaglutide finally received approval for obesity management from the US regulator in 2021.

Other effects of GLP-1 drugs

In addition to the 15% average weight loss,

trials with semaglutide have demonstrated its ability to reduce the risk of major cardiovascular events (such as heart attacks and strokes) by 20%, and the risk of all-cause mortality by 19%. Studies have shown a 69% reduction in heart failure events.

There is also evidence that the drug can resolve fatty buildup in the liver in 63% of patients and improve liver fibrosis — the hardening of liver tissue due to fatty deposits — in 37% of cases.

Tirzepatide, which uses an additional target gastric inhibitory polypeptide (GIP), has been shown to lead to a weight loss of up to 20% of the body weight. The medicine was also approved for the treatment of obesity-related obstructive sleep apnoea — a condition where a person's breathing stops and starts while they sleep.

Trials have also shown that it can improve lipid profile, and demonstrated a 20% reduction in the risk of cardiovascular as well as all cause death.

"There is no doubt that the medicines are effective for kidney and heart conditions. There is also evidence that has emerged about fatty liver disease. But, what I am most excited about are the happy neurological side effects. There seems to be some evidence to show that the medicines are associated with lower risk of Alzheimer's and other dementia," Dr Ambrish Mithal, chairman of endocrinology and diabetes at Max Healthcare, told The Indian Express.

He added, "Interestingly, these drugs have reduced cravings in people. They are not only eating smaller meals but also healthier ones. Sweet cravings have gone down. There is also evidence to show that it helps with alcohol addiction."

Newer drugs in pipeline

Boosted by the success of semaglutide and tirzepatide, several other drugs are in the pipeline.

"There are a lot of drugs that are in the pipeline, including drugs with once-a-month dosing instead of every week and very effective oral pills," Dr Mithal said.

Trials are ongoing for drugs such as retatrutide that uses three targets: GLP-1RA and GIP used by its predecessor tirzepatide along with glucagon.

There is also CagriSema that uses two targets GLP-1 RA and a new Amylin receptor agonist.

Oral GLP-1 drugs such as orforglipron and danulipron may soon be available as well. Two other drugs, which use two targets GLP-1 RA and glucagon — Survodutide and Mazdutide are also in phase 3 clinical trials.

THE OLDEST ROCKS ON EARTH ARE IN CANADA'S QUEBEC, FINDS STUDY

ALONG The eastern shore of Hudson Bay in Canada's Quebec province, resides a belt of volcanic rock that displays a blend of dark and light green colours.

New testing shows that these are Earth's oldest-known rocks. Two different testing methods found that rocks from an area called the Nuvuagittuq Greenstone Belt in northern Quebec date to 4.16 billion years ago, a time known as the Hadean.

The research indicates that the Nuvuagittuq Greenstone Belt harbours surviving fragments of Earth's oldest crust. The Nuvuagittuq rocks are mainly metamorphosed volcanic rocks of basaltic composition. Metamorphosed rock is a kind that has been changed by heat and pressure over time. Basalt is a common type of volcanic rock.

The rocks tested in the new study

were called intrusions, meaning they formed when magma penetrated existing rock layers and then cooled and solidified underground.

Future analyses of these rocks could provide insight into Earth's conditions during the Hadean, a time shrouded in mystery due to the paucity of physical remains.

"These rocks and the Belt being the only rock record from the Hadean, they give a unique window into our planet's earliest time to better understand how the first crust formed on Earth," said Jonathan O'Neil, a researcher at the University of Ottawa and lead author of the study published on Thursday in the journal Science. Until now, the oldest-known rocks were ones dating to 4.03 billion years ago from Canada's Northwest Territories.



NEW RESEARCH

REUTERS

What is the legal dispute over Tansen's tomb?

ANAND MOHAN J
BHOPAL, JUNE 27

MADHYA PRADESH High Court last week rejected a plea by a private person to allow religious and cultural practices at the tomb of the Sufi saint Hazrat Sheikh Muhammad Ghous in Gwalior, a protected monument of historical importance.

The grave of Tansen, the legendary musician of Emperor Akbar's court, is located on the premises of the monument. Sufi tradition describes Tansen as a disciple of Sheikh Muhammad Ghous.

The monument in Gwalior

The tomb, built some time after the death of Sheikh Muhammad Ghous in 1563, has significant architectural and historical value, and is considered one of the most notable structures of Akbar's reign (1556-1605).

The tomb is listed as a Centrally Protected

Monument under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1958, and has been maintained by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) since 1962.

The square building is topped by a large square dome, and is flanked by *chhatris*, giving it a multi-tiered appearance. Around the tomb's central chamber runs a verandah with intricate stone screens, a design influenced by the tomb's architecture, and a situation where the saint had spent considerable time.

Tansen lies next to the tomb of the Sufi pir. His association with the site has deepened its cultural resonance, and for decades attracted both pilgrims and music lovers.

Petition and petitioner

The petition was filed by Syed Sabia Hasan, who claimed to be the Sajjada Nashin, or spiritual caretaker of the tomb, as well as the saint's legal heir. He sought permission to perform religious and cultural practices at the tomb, including the annual Urs, Hasan argued that

these practices had been carried out for more than four centuries at the site, and that restrictions on them were arbitrary and unlawful.

The ASI submitted that the petitioners were making false claims, and were interfering with the upkeep and protection of the monument.

It told the HC that unlawful activities were being carried out on the premises, nails were being hammered into walls, and a situation was being created that hampered tourism and undermined the structural integrity, and cultural and architectural dignity of the monument.

The court agreed with the ASI that religious and cultural events could not be permitted at a Centrally Protected Monument.

Similar challenges earlier

The court held that neither the petitioner nor his family had any legal right or title to the tomb, and that the matter had been litigated and settled multiple times over the

past three decades. The ASI and the Union of India have consistently maintained that the matter had attained finality in law.

■ Back in 1995, one Peerzada Syed Ali Hasan filed a civil suit in the court of the Civil Judge Class-II, Gwalior, seeking ownership of the tomb.

■ After the court dismissed the 1995 suit, Ali Hasan's children filed a First Appeal, which was dismissed in 2004 by a detailed judicial order.

■ In 1996, Ali Hasan's son Syed Muhammad Hasan filed a separate civil suit, which was dismissed in 1999.

■ A civil revision petition was filed against that ruling, which was rejected in 2002.

■ A second appeal was rejected in 2015.

■ A review petition filed before the Supreme Court was dismissed in 2016.

■ Syed Sabia Hasan filed a case before the MP Waqf Tribunal in 2019, seeking the ownership and religious control over the tomb. In 2022, this plea was dismissed.

How India 'added' more than 3,500 km to its coastline, 7 new islands

AMITABH SINHA
NEW DELHI, JUNE 27

INDIA'S COASTLINE is now far longer than it used to be — almost 50% more than the previous length. This increase has happened not because of any acquisition of territory, but due to more accurate measurements that have recently been carried out.

Additionally, the number of islands in India has increased slightly. This rise in the number has taken place due to India's re-assessment and recount of its offshore islands.

Longer coastline

The length of India's coastline used to be 7,516 km, based on data from the 1970s. It is now 11,098 km — an increase of 3,582 km or nearly 48%. The reason lies in the scale or resolution of data used for measurement.

The earlier estimate was based on data that had a scale of 1:45,00,000. However, over

the years, the resolution of data has significantly improved, leading to more accurate measurements. The latest measurement used data that had a 1:2,50,000. In map scales, the smaller the denominator, the larger the scale, and thus, the higher the resolution.

Increasing the resolution of data is like reducing the ruler being used for measurement. So, an imaginary 1-km ruler will ignore many small irregularities in the land structure that at a 1-metre ruler will be able to map.

Higher resolution data can capture the coastline, its bends and curves, in better detail. In

lower-resolution data, these details are smoothed out, and appear as straight lines. Also, the previous estimation was a result of more conventional and manual calculations. These have now been replaced with modern GIS software, which can capture the irregularities of the landmass more accurately.

The increase in length has also been due

LENGTH OF INDIA'S COASTLINE ALONG STATES

State/UT	Coastline length (in km)
Gujarat	2340.62
Maharashtra	877.00
Karnataka	343.30
Kerala	600.15
Tamil Nadu	1068.69
Andhra Pradesh	1053.07
Odisha	574.71
West Bengal	721.02
Daman and Diu	54.38
Pondicherry	42.65
Lakshadweep	144.80
Andaman & Nicobar Islands	3083.50

Source: Ministry of Ports, Shipping

to the inclusion of coastlines of many offshore islands that were left out of previous calculations. Some of these islands were either not visible in smaller-scale data or were omitted because of the practical constraints of manual methods of measurement.

The coastline paradox

While the new length of India's coastline is a more accurate estimate, it still isn't the actual length. In fact, the actual length of a coastline cannot be measured — something that is known as the coastline paradox.

A coastline's 'length' depends on the scale or resolution at which it is measured. Observation and measurement in greater detail produces a 'longer' length.

The coastline paradox extends to many natural features such as river networks and mountain ranges. The path that a river takes is very irregular. Calculating a river's length along its banks would lead to the same kind of problems. However, river lengths are mostly calculated along the main stream, and not along the banks.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the length of India's coastline has changed significantly. This length would increase further as greater precision becomes available due to technological advancements. For this reason, the exercise of measuring India's coastline has now been mandated to be carried out every 10 years.

Reassessment of coastal lines, which other countries do as well, is also necessary on account of natural processes such as coastal erosion and human interventions like land reclamation.

Additional islands

There are no measurement problems with islands. But there are other kinds of ambiguities. For example, a location might be an island during high tide, but only an extension of the mainland during low tide.

In 2016, an exercise by the Office of the Surveyor General of India listed 1,382 offshore islands. However, a count by state governments, and some other agencies such as the Coast Guard and Indian Navy, yielded a

smaller number of 1,334.

A subsequent data reconciliation exercise removed the ambiguities in definitions and standardised the classifications to arrive at a new number of offshore islands in India, which was 1,298. This exercise also listed 91 inshore islands. Thus, the total number of islands now is 1,389. This does not include the large number of river islands in states such as Assam and West Bengal.

Implications of changes

While the ground situation has not changed, the new numbers are not irrelevant — they provide a better understanding of India's territory and terrain. They have administrative, developmental, and security implications.

The new coastline length could impact areas covered by CZ rules in some places. Efforts to check coastal erosion, or to strengthen the coastline to make it more resilient from climate change threats, would also be impacted. Tourism and infrastructure development are also likely to be affected.

13 THE IDEAS PAGE

A multilingual classroom

That's what we need. CBSE's turn to the mother tongue demands structural shifts and classroom autonomy



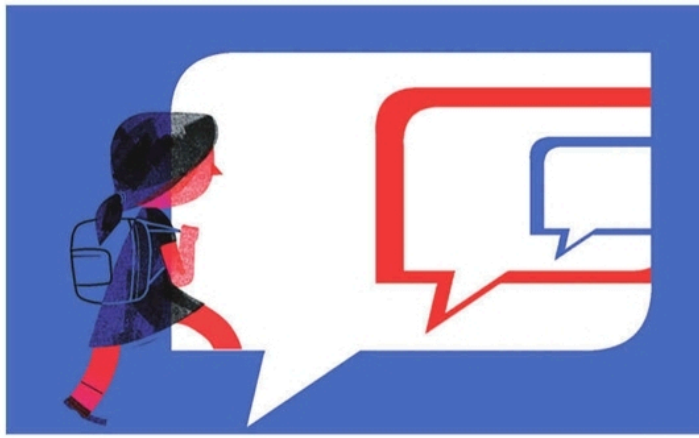
KRISHNA KUMAR

THE DECISION TAKEN by the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) to switch the focus of early primary years to the mother tongue is, to say the least, momentous. With a circular, the board plans to upend the history of education in its prestigious schools. If the circular succeeds, the outcome will be nothing less than a revolution. Future historians will struggle to explain this accomplishment. Some will surely ask: "If it was so simple, why couldn't the board do it many years ago?" The CBSE is a relatively small board compared to the state boards, but it enjoys higher status and influence. Barring exceptions, CBSE schools use English as a medium from the earliest grades. Several state boards have conceded the centrality of English relatively recently, apparently to align themselves with the CBSE. Now that the latter has announced its resolve to displace English in the early years of schooling, will these state boards follow? If that happens, it will doubtless be a beautiful dawn of systemic sanity.

No philosopher or policymaker has ever endorsed the centrality of English over the child's mother tongue. Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, M.K. Gandhi — they all advocated the primacy of the mother tongue. J.P. Naik — the designer of educational policies in the early years of Independence — saw the dominant position of English in leading schools as a terrible contradiction. As the member-secretary of the Kothari Commission (1964-66), he pleaded for a sincere implementation of the three-language formula. Under this hallowed mantra, the child's mother tongue ought to be treated as the first and most important language at school. In his book published soon after his death in 1981, Naik lamented the fact that the three-language formula had been implemented piecemeal or sidelined entirely.

He once told me a story that rings like an allegory today. Following the Kothari Commission report's approval, Naik said to the Maharashtra government issued a circular. It referred to the commission's recommendation of "child-centred education". The Maharashtra circular directed all schools to ensure that child-centred education was practised with immediate effect. In fact, the circular threatened official action against defaulting school heads. The point of this story was that circulars don't necessarily work, especially when they intend to soften an entrenched practice. Wider effort, involving social collaboration, is required.

It is now a popular, socially accepted fact that English is the language of upward mobility. The parallel view that English is a colonial legacy and should therefore be displaced may have political utility, but it has little traction, particularly among the traditionally deprived social groups. They recog-



C.R. Sasikumar

nise that the children of the dominant classes and their leaders benefit from their ease with English. This view goes along with the notion that command of English requires early induction. By sticking to the use of English as a medium of teaching in every subject, elite schools — as most CBSE schools are — have consolidated these popular perceptions of English. Indeed, this perception is a key factor driving the growth of private schools, especially in the northern belt where the state system is weak and poorly managed.

The CBSE's move blinks at this wider reality. Instead of explaining what is problematic about early induction into English, the CBSE wants to sound innocent in its sudden advocacy of the mother tongue or the regional language. Laudable though this new mission is, it calls for sustained preparation and considerable investment. Apart from private schools, Kendriya Vidyalayas (KV's) will require more than nudging if they are to pay greater attention to children's home language. As a privileged segment of the CBSE family, KV's have been silently copying the practices of English-medium private ("public") schools. Many years have passed since the day I noticed that Grade I children in a KV in Delhi could not name all the days of the week in Hindi. It was nobody's wish to make children monolingual English speakers so early in life; KV's were merely following a social trend. Being evasive about the omnipresence of English-medium education is probably a policy compulsion, but it amounts to a preference for snoozing in a make-believe world.

If the child's own language is to find some appreciative space at school, countless euphemisms will have to be sacrificed. Some of these serve as a political shorthand; others are related to frozen pedagogies. Experienced teachers know that language is not merely literacy, however foundational it may be. Sounds, rhymes and words contain

intimate, imagined meanings for small children. Sensible teaching lets these meanings develop new forms; misconceived schooling throttles them, imposing dictionary meanings through tests and competition. In our system, the child's language is the first casualty. Prematurely acquired capacities to recite and spell run parallel to rote numeracy. These practices run counter to the basic principles of child-centred teaching. If the CBSE wants to improve language learning at early stages, it will have to look beyond publicised priorities. An examination board, its focus is naturally on tests and outcomes. Currently, this focus has intensified. New technologies have exacerbated this tendency. Language learning during childhood is an aspect of intellectual growth that demands a generous teacher and diversity of resources. Music, drama and other means of aesthetic expression also enhance children's linguistic strength. A multilingual classroom is best suited to achieving these aims.

The education system is accustomed to treating language like a subject. It is taught with the purpose of ensuring success in tests. In recent years, this systemic tendency has worsened. Distrust of the teacher has led to a general, undeclared policy of denial of autonomy. In KV's, teachers must abide by a nationwide convergence of weekly completion schedules. This practice compels every teacher to complete each segment of the syllabus or textbook at the same pace as others. Practices in private schools are not very different from this norm. There is little room in such a system to permit teachers to pursue curricular goals at their own pace. The transformation of such a system cannot be achieved with a circular and a brief re-orientation.

The writer is former NCERT director and the author of *The Child's Language and the Teacher and Padma, zara sochna*

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The Big Beautiful Bill would tangle Obamacare in red tape. Under the legislation now before Congress, millions of people would lose their health insurance."

— THE WASHINGTON POST

A lose-lose policy in West Asia

By pursuing closer ties with Israel, distancing itself from Palestine, India is set to gain nothing, while losing moral leadership



MANOJ KUMAR JHA

THERE IS PERHAPS no image more heart-breaking than that of Palestinian children longing for the beloved Parle G biscuits that have nourished generations of Indian children. In the rubble-strewn streets of Gaza, these most affordable Indian biscuits have become precious commodities, their exorbitant costs placing them beyond the reach of parents struggling to provide even basic sustenance for their children. This painful reality serves as a stark reminder of our shared humanity and our duty to protect children everywhere. If one has to decide between guns and children, one must always choose children. No matter whose guns, no matter whose children.

Yet India's abstention on June 12 from a UN ceasefire resolution in the context of the Israel-Hamas conflict, titled Protection of Civilians and Upholding Legal and Humanitarian Obligations, marks a betrayal of our historical solidarity with the Palestinian cause. As I have written before, the relationship between India and Palestine was built on shared experiences of colonial subjugation and anti-imperial struggle. Mahatma Gandhi's words from 1938 remain as relevant today as they were then: "Palestine belongs to the Arabs in the same sense that England belongs to the English or France to the French. It is wrong and inhuman to impose the Jews on the Arabs." Jawahar Nehru was equally clear when he declared, "Palestine is essentially an Arab country and must remain so." For decades after Independence, India stood firmly with Palestine, recognising the Palestinian state right and consistently supporting their right to self-determination at international forums.

This solidarity reflected India's broader leadership of the Global South in the post-independence era, where we confidently and strongly championed the causes of decolonisation, self-determination, and justice for oppressed peoples worldwide. Our foreign policy was anchored in moral principles that transcended narrow strategic calculations, earning us respect and leadership among newly independent nations. India's stance on Palestine was emblematic of this principled approach as we consistently chose to stand with the dispossessed against powerful oppressors, regardless of their military or economic might.

Contemporary India's foreign policy has become increasingly opportunistic rather than principled, marking a dramatic shift from our foundational ethos. This transactional approach, evident in our abstentions on the two recent Palestine-related resolutions, reflects what I have analysed in an earlier article: "Dear people of Palestine" (IE, June 17, 2021) as the actions of a government which believes "that an electoral majority is a licence to trample over anything, including history". While pursuing perceived strategic advantages through closer ties with Israel, India has neither secured the opportunities it seeks nor maintained its moral leadership. The irony is quite stark. This unprincipled stance has left us diplomatically isolated on crucial global issues, contradicting the very "vassudhaiva kutumbakam" phi-

losophy we claim to uphold.

Strong moral leadership itself constitutes a powerful diplomatic tool that India has historically wielded with great effect. Nations accumulate moral capital by standing on the right side of history. This capital is the crux of soft power and international influence. Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent resistance and India's anti-colonial struggle inspired liberation movements worldwide, giving India a moral authority that extended far beyond our economic or military capabilities. By abandoning this moral foundation, we have weakened our own diplomatic heft, trading long-term influence for immediate and cynical gains that may or may not materialise.

It fundamentally does not serve India's interests to align with Israel, which in its current shape and form under the incumbent leadership can only be described as a morally corrupt and warmongering state. While Israel may appear powerful, it remains essentially an American client state, dependent on US military aid and diplomatic protection. India's growing alignment with Israel risks reducing us to an ally of a client state, a position that contradicts our aspirations for strategic autonomy. Moreover, global public opinion is overwhelmingly arrayed against the Zionist project and its ongoing occupation. Despite the media spin by political elites, the occupation of Palestine and what has been variously termed "apartheid" and "incremental genocide" deeply resonates with the moral conscience of citizens worldwide, making India's stance increasingly untenable.

The international law implications of India's stance are equally troubling. By abstaining from resolutions condemning clear violations of international humanitarian law, India effectively becomes complicit in what reputed international human rights organisations have characterised as systematic oppression. This position undermines India's own claims to champion international law and multilateralism.

India's alignment with Israel also jeopardises our relationship with Iran, a crucial ally in the region. Iran's steadfast support for Palestine represents a core element of its regional strategy. As India deepens its ties with Israel while abandoning Palestinian solidarity, we risk alienating Iran and other nations that view the Palestinian cause as a litmus test for moral consistency in international relations. This diplomatic calculus seems particularly shortsighted given Iran's strategic importance for India's energy security and regional connectivity.

The recent Madineh flotta effort and the global people's march to Gaza demonstrate the stark contrast between the bravery of ordinary citizens challenging the status quo when their governments fail them. These grassroots initiatives remind us that moral leadership often emerges from below when those in power abdicate their responsibilities. As I have written to our Palestinian friends, "Let me assure you that the civilisational ethos of India is far more powerful than any regime which believes that they can erase and rewrite memory and history."

When Palestinian children dream of simple Parle G biscuits, we are reminded that our choices have consequences that extend far beyond diplomatic halls. We owe help and support to every child who has ever reached for a biscuit and found only empty shelves, who has ever looked to India with hope and found only silence.

The writer is Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha), Rashtriya Janata Dal



RAM RAJYA

BY RAM MADHAV

Wake up to new world order

It is time Delhi went beyond old-world romanticism, Cold War calculations



RAM MADHAV

EURASIA IS IN turmoil. Three major conflicts — Russia-Ukraine, Israel's Gaza operations and the Israel-Iran-US conflict — are reshaping the geopolitics of the region. Wars driven just cause physical destruction, they profoundly impact international relations.

Beyond Eurasia, US President Donald Trump is causing serious drift and disorder in the Western world. The US and Western Europe, powerhouses of the last century, appear to be decisively moving into a slow afternoon. At the same time, the world is witnessing the unmissable rise of China as a dominant economic and technological superpower. These developments, coupled with a few other important ones, will lead to the emergence of a new global order.

Therein lies a major challenge for India. It developed institutions and initiatives based on the premises of the old world. But the emerging order calls for a new way of thinking about its geopolitical priorities. During the ill-fated Cultural Revolution years in China, Chairman Mao Zedong used to call for the abolition of the "Four Olds" — old ideology, old culture, old habits and old customs. This might be a wrong analogy, but India, too, needs to come out of the mindset of the last century.

India has built a strong partnership with Europe over the past few decades. In recent years, the Narendra Modi government has successfully enhanced engagement with middle Eastern powers like Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Out of those engagements emerged the ambitious India-Middle East-Europe

Economic Corridor (IMEC) initiative. IMEC is a promising initiative connecting South Asia with the GCC region and Europe. Signed in September 2023 on the sidelines of the G20 summit in New Delhi, IMEC became the flavour of the season for many strategic pundits and fodder for think tanks. However, given the changed geopolitical scenario in Eurasia, India needs to recalibrate IMEC carefully. Although a beneficial project, it faces daunting challenges, the cauldron in Eurasia being the major one. With stability eluding the region, IMEC's future, too, remains ambiguous. At a more fundamental level, the positioning of IMEC itself has flawed. Most commentaries seek to pit it against China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Confusing the geo-economic with the geo-strategic is one of the old-school traits that many in India fail to overcome. It must be remembered that almost all the member countries of the GCC are partners in the BRI while at least 17 out of 27 EU member countries have closer trade ties with China. Only Italy decided to quit the BRI recently while the rest continue to enjoy China largesse.

There is IMEC-related romanticism too, with some scholars overemphasising the millennia-old history when India traded with Europe through ports in the Gulf. It is a fact that India traded in spices and textiles with Europe in return for gold in the good old days — so much so that scholars in Rome used to bitterly complain to their emperor that India was draining all the gold from their kingdom.

But today's reality is different. Oman, whose ports were an important part of the route in ancient times, is not even part of IMEC. Then there is the logistics nightmare. In the IMEC scheme, goods from India will reach Middle Eastern ports like Jebel Ali (Dubai) by sea lines. From there, they will be transported through the land route to Haifa in Israel. Beyond Haifa, it will again be a journey through the sea lines to European ports like Marseille in France and Trieste in Italy.

Some argue that it bypasses the Suez Canal and thus helps save time and money for the exporters. This is contestable. Seventy-five ships pass through the Suez Canal every day in normal times. Each carries a minimum load of 1,00,000 tonnes. If the Suez needs to be bypassed, it requires massive rail infrastructure through the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and Israel. One has to look at the numbers just to understand the magnitude of the challenge. A single reasonably long freight train can carry 5,500 tonnes of goods. That means for every ship diverting to the Middle East, we need a minimum of 18.5 trains to carry that load to Israel. One can easily calculate the number of trains required and the time this would consume if even a fraction of the ships decide to junk Suez and take this route. Moreover, countries on the land route like Jordan and Egypt are still not part of IMEC.

Undoubtedly, beyond these nightmarish challenges lies the opportunity of the \$18 trillion economy of the EU that India can explore. But it must also be kept in mind that the EU's

GDP growth is sluggish at around 1 per cent, and China is already a big presence in the EU market with a more than 55 per cent share in the manufactured goods sector and a significantly growing share in other key sectors. That leaves less scope for India to penetrate.

India has a history of such projects. Long before venturing into the IMEC initiative, in 2000, the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government announced the North-South corridor project with much fanfare. It was duly signed by India, Russia and Iran in 2003. Two decades later, while the project remained on paper for India, China quickly entered and built formidable ties with the two countries.

Similarly, we talked about a Look East policy in the 1990s, seeking to build strong ties with the roaring Asian Tigers. It became the Act East policy under PM Modi. Yet our engagement with a region that became a free trade partner in 2010, and a comprehensive strategic partner in 2022, remained below par. While India's trade with ASEAN remains at \$120 billion, China's trade is touching \$1 trillion and growing rapidly.

Besides IMEC, Eastern and Central Europe, Russia and ASEAN are important regions for India's geopolitical objectives. It is time India reconfigured its global engagements, going beyond old-world romanticism and Cold War calculations, and followed a multidirectional approach with specific end goals.

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

EMERGENCY POLITICS

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Emergency's warning' (IE, June 27). The ruling BJP is leaving no stone unturned to slander Congress for the 1975 Emergency. Much of the Emergency-era happenings have already been forgotten by the public. Why is the BJP bent upon digging the grave further, if not for political reasons? If now propriety itself is the sole repository of our constitutional ideals, even though many of its acts since 2014 indicate just the opposite. How is unleashing section laws like the UAPA and central agencies like the ED and CBI to imprison dissenters on bogus charges any different?

Kamal Laddha, Bengaluru

CLIMATE RED ALERT

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Asia on the boil' (IE, June 27). The points raised through this editorial are most pertinent. What is the use of progress and development if the cost is an imbalance against nature, the very source of our existence? The WMO's studies should be looked into with sincerity if we wish to see our future generations flourish.

Sanjeev Ratna, Greater Noida

LEVERAGING SPACE

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'A space beyond Earth' (IE, June 27). Today, every Indian will be delighted to see Group Captain Shubhanshu Shukla scripting history 41 years after astronaut Rakesh Sharma's spaceflight by embarking on a space odyssey to the International Space Station. By adding a new glorious chapter to India's space history, Captain Shukla's experiences will be a key component in India's ambitious upcoming Gaganyaan mission.

Valbhav Goyal, Chandigarh

INDIA AT SCO

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'Pakistan terror attack kept out, Rajnath doesn't sign SCO draft' (IE, June 27). Operation Sindoor, launched in retaliation to the Pakistan terror attack, left no room for doubt about India's firm stand on terrorism. It's obvious that China, a founder-member of the SCO and Pakistan's all-weather friend, piloted this machination by omitting Pakistan from the draft communiqué. Its unwillingness to call a spade a spade has vindicated India.

S.S. Paul, Noida

Opinion

SATURDAY, JUNE 28, 2025

A giant leap

Axiom-4 more than just sending a human to space; it's about building a foundation for the future of humanity

THERE ARE SEVERAL reasons to celebrate the successful launch of the Axiom-4 (Ax-4) mission. First, it marks the beginning of India's human spaceflight. Though the mission was undertaken on a commercial flight operated by Houston-based private company Axiom Space, it is a collaboration between Nasa, Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), European Space Agency (Esa), and SpaceX. Group Captain Shubhan-shu Shukla, who's piloting the mission, has become only the second Indian to travel to space. And when the spacecraft docked at the International Space Station (ISS) on Thursday, he became the first ever Indian to visit Nasa's orbiting laboratory. Shukla's trip comes 41 years after cosmonaut Rakesh Sharma became the first Indian to fly to space aboard a Russian Soyuz in 1994. But Sharma's achievement was largely symbolic and of inspirational value as India did not at the time have the infrastructure and the capability to make productive use of his learnings. In comparison, Shukla's trip will have huge practical implications.

The experience Shukla will gain during his 14-day mission will help India's space efforts immensely. Axiom-4 has scheduled several experiments, the results of which would help ISRO execute its own manned spaceflight, Gaganyaan, two years later. ISRO's next big project, after Gaganyaan, is to build its own space station. That is a massive infrastructural endeavour. Shukla would be in a position to offer critical inputs here as well. There are at least seven experiments, relating to impacts on human health and growth of crops in microgravity environments, which ISRO has designed for the mission. One of the experiments relates to the study of the growth rate, cellular responses, and biochemical activity of cyanobacteria — a group of bacteria that are known to produce energy through photosynthesis just like plants. There is growing interest in studying this microorganism as it may offer the key to deep space exploration and long-term presence of humans on the moon or other planets: a self-sustaining system for oxygen production without need for resupply from earth.

Another experiment would look at the impacts of spaceflight on germination and growth of sprouts in space. There is another to study the impact on crop seeds as well. Then there is an experiment that will focus on the growth, metabolism, and genetic activity of microalgae, which are being studied for their potential as a sustained oxygen generation system as well as a food source in space. The zero-gravity conditions in space offer a unique setting for studies that are extremely difficult to do on Earth.

For example, one of ISRO's experiments relates to the study of muscle behaviour. Muscle degradation can be because of natural causes; it can also be affected by a person's weight. On Earth, it is very difficult to decouple these two causes because of gravity. Space's zero-gravity environment gets rid of the weight factor and allows the study of changes in muscles purely due to natural reasons, which can lead to breakthroughs in the understanding of human health. In the last few years, ISRO has carried out a number of important missions that have placed India in a very small group of countries with cutting-edge space capabilities. Thus, Axiom-4 is a giant leap forward. It's not just about sending an astronaut to space; it's about building a foundation for future space exploration and technological innovation. The mission's scientific objectives have the potential to benefit humanity.

India's banks will lend. Will tycoons borrow?

THERE'S PLENTY of talk about how India's 600-million-strong workforce gives it a unique edge in the US-China space over trade and technology. But to be the world's next factory, the most populous nation will need a strong domestic investment impulse. The data don't show any evidence of that. Nor does the authorities' response inspire confidence. When it comes to large, long-gestation projects, a handful of tycoons will do the heavy lifting, and it will take more than cheaper borrowing costs to sway their decisions.

Sanjay Malhotra, the new Reserve Bank of India governor, has thrown the kitchen sink at what is basically a problem of comatose animal spirits. Within six months of his appointment, he slashed the benchmark interest rate by 1 percentage point to 5.5% and flooded the banking system with liquidity. He also eased financing norms for small individual borrowers that rely on microcredit, or loans against gold jewellery. All this will have an indirect effect at best. The real-estate industry may gain as lower mortgage costs entice homebuyers. However, a broader investment-led credit cycle continues to elude. Which is why the RBI has now mandated that banks set aside 1-2.5% of their loans to unfinished projects to offset any losses. The requirement drops to 0.4-1% when assets start generating cash.

But how will funds flow into projects that create new assets, when the bottleneck is not in supply of credit but demand? In October, S&P Global Ratings had predicted an \$800-billion tsunami of investment by Indian conglomerates over 10 years, about 40% in new areas like green hydrogen, clean energy, etc. Throw in the infrastructure needed to sustain these industries, and it would automatically mean a lot of new projects, and demand for bank financing tied to future cash flows.

But for that, the tycoons need to be confident. Among local billionaires, Gautam Adani may still be on track to bring on capital expenditure, despite a US Justice Department indictment for alleged involvement in a bribery-for-contract plot. His group would need \$15-20 billion annually over the next five years, he announced at a shareholders' meeting this week.

Rival conglomerates, however, are distracted. Mukesh Ambani has to steady his empire first — and spin off retail and digital services in public markets to unlock value in Reliance Industries Ltd. The Tata Group has to sort out the mess at Air India, the struggling airline at the center of the country's worst passenger jet crash in nearly three decades. Billionaire Sajjan Jindal is embroiled in knotty legal proceedings. The Supreme Court has annulled his JSW Steel Ltd's purchase of a bankrupt company — four years after he paid creditors \$2.7 billion to acquire the unit's new 1.3% of its steel revenue.

So much for the four pillars of the national team. The appetite for credit is subdued even among smaller companies. They are still scarred by the bad-loan crisis that erupted a decade ago.

The post-pandemic surge in the revenue of engineering and construction firms — a proxy for new asset creation — has ebbed. This fiscal year's government target for new roads is the smallest since 2018, according to India Ratings. Slow-moving irrigation and drinking-water projects are locking up working capital, while margins are getting squeezed in construction of factories and buildings. Contractors are, therefore, cautious about borrowing.

Then there are heightened global uncertainties. Like their peers elsewhere, business executives are waiting for July 9, when the Trump administration's pause on reciprocal tariffs will end. If Washington and New Delhi are able to pull off a trade deal ahead of the deadline, Indian exports may avoid a 26% tax in their biggest market. That is when bankers in Mumbai could finally start getting calls for higher working-capital funding limits and new term loans.

Until then, private credit will rule. Global asset managers, sovereign wealth funds, insurers and banks are actively chasing Indian business owners who are looking either to refinance existing loans, pay for acquisitions, or preserve control. What the economy needs, however, is credit that helps create new assets. There's little sign yet of such a virtuous cycle getting started.



ANDY MUKHERJEE

Bloomberg



MSMEs & INDIA'S GROWTH STORY

President Droupadi Murmu

A robust MSME ecosystem is not only important but also essential for the country's sustainable economic development. They generate more employment opportunities at a relatively low cost of capital. Most importantly, these enterprises generate employment in rural and backward areas

● PRESCRIPTION FOR GROWTH

A WELL-STRUCTURED PPP FRAMEWORK IS KEY TO ENSURING HEALTHCARE REVOLUTION REACHES ALL CORNERS

Tie-up key for Swasth Bharat

AS INDIA CHARTS its course to become a developed nation, healthcare will have to emerge as a fundamental cornerstone of progress. The Covid-19 pandemic was a stark reminder of our fragile healthcare infrastructure, highlighting the need for a robust, responsive system. While the public sector has been the traditional custodian of national health, a quiet revolution driven by private enterprise is reshaping India's healthcare capabilities.

We must fully value the role of the private sector in healthcare at this stage and build around it. Not doing so will mean misdiagnosing the ailment and prescribing wrong cures for building a 'Swasth Bharat, Vilesh Bharat' (healthy, developed India).

India's public healthcare spending, languishing at 2% of GDP, falls significantly short of the global average and trails behind fellow developing nations, creating a chasm between demand and supply. This chronic underinvestment in public healthcare has left a void that the private sector has been bridging. Private providers account for a staggering 70% of all healthcare services, 80% of outpatient care, and nearly 60% of inpatient care. These aren't just statistics; they represent millions of lives touched and families secured.

Private capital boosted healthcare

The post-pandemic landscape, marked by heightened health awareness, rising incomes, and wider insurance penetration, has only amplified the demand for quality care. The market is responding with vigour, with the hospital sector projected to grow at a robust 10-11% annually over the next three-five years. The engine for this expansion is primarily private capital. Forecasts from agencies like CRISIL and ICRA, which anticipate over ₹44,000 crore in investments to add nearly 35,000 beds in the coming years, signal a nation-building exercise financed by private capital, and driven by local entrepreneurial spirit.

BARNIK CHITRAN MAITRA
Private equity investor and founding managing partner of Chrysalis Equity Ventures

The dynamism in the sector has attracted capital where it's needed. Healthcare investments from private equity and venture capital hit a record \$5.5 billion in 2023. Foreign direct investment (FDI) in hospitals has surged to half of all healthcare FDI in FY24, more than doubling its share from three years prior. This capital is not just building brick-and-mortar hospitals; it is financing innovation, technology, and new economic models pushing boundaries of what is possible in Indian healthcare.

Private enterprise is adding skilled workforce, by hiring and training millions every year. The value proposition of the private sector is as much about better medical outcomes as it is about better infrastructure and quality of professionals employed.

This value proposition has placed India on the global map as a premier destination for medical tourism. By leveraging a pool of world-class, Indian-trained medical professionals, state-of-the-art technology, and internationally accredited facilities at competitive prices, it has built an industry that is a significant source of foreign exchange and national soft power. By attracting patients from the UK, Canada, West Asia, and Africa, India is showcasing the best of its medical talent and ingenuity to the world.

Problems beyond the top tier

This wave of investment is not evenly distributed. While metropolitan hubs attract significant capital, expand-



ing healthcare infrastructure into tier-II and -III cities and beyond is a formidable challenge. The financial viability of new hospitals in these regions is constrained by lower average revenue per patient, difficulty in attracting and retaining specialist medical talent, and inconsistent patient volumes for advanced procedures. For investors, the risk profile is simply higher and often financially unviable.

To unlock the potential of these underserved regions, the sector needs innovative models where the government derisks private investment. This can take the form of providing land at concessional rates, offering viability gap funding to bridge initial profitability shortfalls, or guaranteeing a certain volume of patients through government schemes. In return, the private sector brings operational efficiency, clinical excellence, and quality control.

A well-structured public-private partnership framework is key to ensuring the healthcare revolution reaches all corners of India.

Of course, the path of public-private (PPP) collaboration is not without friction. Take the government's visionary Pradhan Mantri Arogya Yojana (PM-JAY). While the scheme is a revolutionary step towards universal health coverage, its implementation has created operational hurdles for private providers. PM-JAY reimbursement rates are often lower than actual costs, rendering the treatment of patients finan-

cially unviable for many hospitals, with payment delays compounding the problem. In an effort to address the issues, a green channel was started to clear 50% of the payments. It has not yet fully solved the problem as the enrolment numbers have reduced significantly, from 31.6 million in 2024 to about 1.1 million in 2025 (till April). For PM-JAY to achieve its true potential, it must evolve into a true partnership with viable rates and swift, predictable payment cycles.

The path forward is not a binary choice between public and private healthcare but a strategic partnership between both that acknowledges the strengths and addresses the challenges of either. The challenge of delivering quality healthcare to 1.4 billion people is too vast for any single entity. The government's role is manifold — a prudent regulator, an enabler, a viability gap funding provider. It is also a strategic purchaser of services, ensuring quality standards and equitable access for the most vulnerable. The private sector's role is to be the engine of growth, innovation, and service delivery, expanding capacity and pushing the frontiers of medicine.

With long-term structural forces like increasing urbanisation, a rising middle class, and the growing burden of lifestyle diseases propelling demand, the private sector's fiscal, access to capital, and relentless focus on quality make it uniquely positioned to meet this challenge. The burgeoning growth of private healthcare is not just an investment opportunity; it is a national imperative. By fostering a collaborative ecosystem — one that builds effective PPPs for regional expansion (particularly in semi-urban and rural areas) and refines programmes like PM-JAY to be truly synergistic — India can unleash the full potential of its private healthcare providers. Only then can it build a system that is not only prepared for the next crisis but can deliver world-class care to every Indian, realising the vision of a healthy and developed India well before 2047.

Balancing act on small savings schemes

SIDDHARTHA SANYAL
Chief economist and head of research, Bandhan Bank

SAVINGS ARE CRUCIAL for growth and development as they help mobilise capital into productive sectors of the economy. In India, household savings play a key role in overall savings as the former accounts for about 1.8% of GDP and about 60% of gross savings. Bank deposits, with a share of over 40%, are by far the largest constituent of household financial savings. The other modes of household financial savings typically encompass currency, shares and debentures, small savings, life insurance, and provident and pension funds.

Trends in interest rates on these alternative savings instruments present a mixed bag. Bank deposit rates have softened in recent months, partly reflecting the reduction in the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) policy repo rate by 100 basis points (bps) between February and June. The central bank also announced a series of measures to provide ample liquidity in the banking system, ensuring better transmission. The weighted average term deposit rate on fresh deposits declined by about 27 bps between January and April. Going ahead, transmission to deposit rates is likely to continue with surplus liquidity.

On the other hand, for the employees' provident fund (EPF), the government retained the same interest rate of 8.25% for 2024-25 from the previous year. In 2022-23, the Employees' Provident Fund Organisation kept interest rate at 8.15%. Provident and pension funds have about 20% share in household financial savings as the government nudges towards formalisation of the economy.

For small savings (commonly referred to as postal deposits) — which now enjoy about 9% share in household financial savings against just 0.7% in 2013-14 — interest rates remained unchanged for a while. The total outstanding balance of small savings was about ₹18.7 lakh crore in March 2024, which has risen at an impressive compound annual growth rate of about 16% since March 2019.

The reach of small savings is widespread with about 1.65 lakh post offices offering such products (along with government securities) and select private banks acting as the government's agent (them). Despite the rise in the

attractiveness of new-age high-yielding financial savings products in recent years, traditional avenues of household savings such as bank deposits and small savings continue to demonstrate strength and relevance. This reflects a wide reach and an easy-to-understand product offering, promoting a practice

of healthy and sustained savings including for people at the bottom of the pyramid — especially during periods of high global uncertainty and volatile financial markets.

The government decides interest rates of different small savings schemes on a quarterly basis. Interest rates for different small savings schemes have been unchanged for the past six quarters. Rates on various small savings schemes are generally benchmarked against yields on government securities of similar tenors. Over the last year, yields on different tenors of government securities have come off significantly. With the beginning of the rate cut cycle by the RBI from Feb-

The govt has to juggle between adjusting interest rates in line with moderation in yields on govt securities in secondary markets and mobilising funds for fiscal deficit

ruary, yields on government papers have softened faster. This is more prominent in the shorter tenor of the yield curve due to higher liquidity in the banking system in recent months and may create some space for policymakers to review and reduce rates on some of the small savings products in the near future.

Proceeds from small savings also play an important role in financing the fiscal deficit of the government — net small savings today funds about 22% of fiscal deficit as against just about 13% in 2016-17. According to the FY26 Budget estimate, net small savings are expected to have a moderation of 20% to ₹3.4 lakh crore during the current year. A steep reduction in postal deposit rates may affect fund mobilisation in this account, which might, in turn, lead to higher market borrowings to an extent. Hence, it will be interesting to see how the government strikes a balance between adjusting small savings rates in line with moderation in yields on government securities in secondary markets and mobilising funds to finance the fiscal deficit without resorting to higher market borrowing.

Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

NATO's spending surge

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) decision to raise defence and security spending to 5% of GDP by 2035 represents more than a budgetary increase — it signals a bold strategic recalibration for an age of great power competition, hybrid warfare, and systemic volatility. By channeling 5.5% into core defence capabilities and 1.5% into broader security architecture, the alliance aims

to modernise its deterrent posture, enhance civil-military resilience, and assert technological dominance in emerging domains. It is also a step towards fairer burden-sharing, although ironically it deepens European dependence on US defence systems. While the strategy aspires to forge a more cohesive, agile, and innovation-driven NATO, internal economic strains could test unity. Ultimately, the 5% threshold isn't just a military benchmark, but also a

statement of intent: To rebuild NATO's edge while cementing the transatlantic bond. —Amarjeet Kumar, Hazaribagh

Safety is paramount

Apropos of "Closing the safety door" (FE, June 27), as a people, we refuse to take safety precautions seriously. Going by the number of people who lose their lives in accidents every year, this is a grave concern that warrants attention. The Directorate General of

Civil Aviation's special audit has found many shortcomings and lapses in the way airlines operate. Regulators appear to be unwilling to take any tough action against these violators of safety. This must stop as safety of passengers is paramount. We must learn to respect established safety practices to compete in the global aviation space. —Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra

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WORDLY WISE
LEARNING IS NEVER DONE WITHOUT
ERROR AND DEFEAT.
— VLADIMIR LENIN

The IndianEXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

FOR NOW, A REPRIEVE

Lowering of tensions in Middle East, de-escalation of Trump's tariff war bring relief for global economy. It may be temporary

THIS WEEK HAS ended on a note of economic optimism, with the Senses closing at 84,059, its highest level since October 1. The rupee has recovered to 85.5 to the US dollar, after having slid to below 86.9 on June 19. Brent crude prices, too, have softened to about \$67 a barrel, after soaring to \$79-plus at the start of the week. And the southwest monsoon has revived, with all-India average rainfall during June 1-27 being 10.3 per cent higher than the historical norm for this period. That's a turnaround from the situation till June 15, when cumulative rainfall was 31 per cent below normal and 30 out of the country's 36 meteorological subdivisions had registered deficits in excess of 15 per cent. That deficiency is now largely confined to Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Marathwada-Vidarbha, Chhattisgarh, Bihar and the Northeast region.

To be sure, these optimistic cues are less about genuinely positive expectations of the future than relief over the worst apparently being put behind. The ceasefire between Iran and Israel since October 24 was preceded, only a day before, by the former launching missiles at a US air base in Qatar and threatening to block the Strait of Hormuz — through which a fifth of the world's oil and a third of its liquefied natural gas flow. Those tensions have ebbed, for now. So have the uncertainties from the tariff war that US President Donald Trump unleashed in early April; they have seen some de-escalation with his administration claiming to have signed a trade deal with China. There has been a pause on the implementation of Trump's so-called reciprocal tariffs on other countries, including India, as well. But that three-month deadline ended on July 9. Simply put, there is only a temporary reprieve from the trade policy and geopolitical strains that may come back to haunt the global economy.

India must keep the focus on the medium term. That would mean ensuring macro-economic stability (the best defence against short-term global financial market and commodity price volatility, linked to geopolitical events) and ease-of-doing-business reforms to leverage its strengths (favourable demographics, a large consumer base and a potential alternative for investors looking at a China-plus-one strategy of diversifying their manufacturing and supply chains). The Indian economy has so far demonstrated relative resilience, recording the highest growth among the world's major countries amid elevated global uncertainty. But India has to do well relative to not just the world, but to the aspirations of its young population and workforce — both current and those entering over the next couple of decades. Navigating short-run geopolitical uncertainty may be easier than meeting challenges and seizing opportunities beyond the immediate term.

TRIPPING ON REFORM

DU's new tie-breaker for undergraduate admissions could bring back anxieties that CUET was designed to eliminate

WHEN DELHI UNIVERSITY (DU) adopted the Common University Entrance Test (CUET) for undergraduate admissions in 2022, it was seen as a long overdue step toward standardisation of a sprawling ecosystem. An improvement over the Central Universities Common Entrance Test introduced in 2010 for a handful of central universities, CUET promised to level the playing field by replacing the uneven Class XII cut-off system with a single, uniform test. It was an opportunity to move beyond the disparities of state boards, streamline admissions, and focus solely on merit. Though premised on fairness, some of the changes to the admission process this year — especially the addition of Class X scores as the penultimate tie-breaker, supplanting alphabetical order of candidates — tread a delicate line. In a country where access to higher education remains intensely competitive and deeply consequential, this risk reintroducing anxieties that CUET was designed to eliminate.

With 71,624 seats across 79 undergraduate programmes in 69 colleges up for applications this academic year, the new tie-breaker has been designed to offer, as DU's dean of admissions has put it, a "more rational and merit-based approach" to break CUET deadlocks. Class X performance is a reliable indicator of consistency, arguably less vulnerable to coaching-driven score inflation. It also reduces the arbitrariness of alphabetical tie-breakers, which, though neutral, fail to reward academic effort. However, it risks undermining CUET's foundational principle, rooted in the spirit of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which advocates for equity and inclusivity in higher education. In de-coupling undergraduate admission from board variability, CUET sought to ensure that scores alone did not dictate a student's future. Reintroducing board scores from Class X opens up old vulnerabilities. State board curricula and grading systems continue to vary widely in difficulty and leniency. As a result, students from better-resourced boards or urban backgrounds may gain an unintended advantage. Moreover, NEP 2020 encourages holistic assessments over rigid reliance on any single score. Shifting the focus to grades — especially one from years prior — might be counterproductive for students who have matured academically in the years since or had faced personal setbacks at that stage.

Instead of tying the admission process with three separate academic records — CUET, Class XII, and Class X — a possible alternative could have been the option of more gradual tie-breakers within CUET itself; its scores could have been extended to more decimal places or to domain-specific section scores. As India reimagines its higher education architecture, policymakers must be careful that efforts to fix procedural gaps do not reignite old apprehensions or come at the cost of inclusivity.

A QUESTION OF GRACE

Prada may have used Kolhapuri chappals in its latest collection. It must not shy away from giving credit where it is due

LONG BEFORE it gave its name to one of the most iconic patterns in fashion, Paisley was just another Scottish town. Its star rose in the 19th century, when it became so well-known for its imitation Kashmiri shawls that the shawls' traditional "buta" pattern was soon named "paisley". This era of the pattern's origin, removing it from the specific cultural context in which it was first created — the "buta" is said to be inspired by the shape of either a pineapple or mango — makes it an early instance of cultural appropriation. But is this also what is happening with the footwear — strongly resembling Kolhapuri chappals — that the Italian fashion house Prada featured as part of its Spring-Summer 2026 collection this week?

In its show notes, Prada described the footwear as "leather sandals", with no reference to an Indian connection. This has infuriated many in India's fashion community as well as traditional makers of Kolhapuri chappals. The history of fashion, of course, is one of crosscurrents and confluences, with textiles, motifs and styles passing from region to region, and wardrobe staples in one place inspiring luxury creations in another. But fashion labels in the West have a history of appropriating and flattening different cultures — often tipping over into controversy, such as when Gucci sent out models wearing Sikh-style turbans in 2016. This understandably leads to wariness among designers and craftspeople in the Global South.

Change, however, is already underway, with labels like Dior and Louisoutin starting to look for collaborators, not just ideas, in other cultures — the former worked with Mumbai's Chanakya School of Craft for its pre-fall 2023 line, while the latter teamed up with designer Sabhyasachi Mukherjee for a capsule collection in 2017. With Prada yet to make the details of its latest collection public, it still has the chance to give credit where it's due. Grace, after all, is one of those things that never go out of style.



KANTI BAJPAI

THE AMERICAN STRIKES against Iran's nuclear facilities at Fordow, Natanz, and Isfahan have brought to the fore three major issues: The success of the strikes, the future of Iran's highly enriched uranium (HEU), and the nature of US-Israel-Iran dealings going forward.

It is too early to know the extent of the damage inflicted on the Iranian facilities. Of greatest interest is Fordow. Twelve GBU-57 bombs were used against the main ventilation shafts in an attempt to destroy the centrifuges and control centre, which are 80 metres underground. The GBU-57s are effective to a depth of 60 metres. It is unlikely, therefore, that the bombs penetrated through to the centrifuge hall and control room.

The question, though, is: Did the hits severely damage the main underground facilities connected through the convoluted shafts of the bombs? If the main ventilation shafts collapsed, what happened to the personnel within the facility? If power supplies were interrupted, were the centrifuges damaged and is anything operating? Is the Iranian admission of severe damage a ruse?

If Fordow has effectively been sealed and control over the centrifuges is lost, a direct hit on the centrifuge hall may not matter. The centrifuges will, over time, simply become inoperable. In this sense, the US President may be at least partly right: Fordow may have been obliterated functionally.

The second question is: What has become of the HEU, which by all accounts is enriched to 60 per cent (and can be quickly enriched further to make a bomb)? Reports suggest there were about 160 kg of it at Fordow and perhaps 400 kg in total. The stockpiles were apparently moved before the strikes (though the Trump administration

The conditions are ripe for Washington to negotiate a successor to JCPOA

The US wants to avoid another 'forever war', not least due to domestic opposition. In addition, its supplies of defensive missiles and other war materials are under stress from provisioning Ukraine and Israel. Israel's famous air defences are strained, perhaps to breaking point, and it will be increasingly vulnerable to retaliatory missile attacks. Iran's options, too, are limited. Tehran must worry that both Israel and the US will resume attacks, and not just on nuclear facilities, and that internal dissent will boil over.

tion now contests this). If the stockpiles were removed, they would be dispersed to several sites to increase survivability. Nonetheless, given Israeli and US intelligence capabilities, the location of the HEU may soon be known. If Israel can find and kill top Iranian nuclear scientists and generals, it should eventually be able to find the HEU.

Once the HEU is located, what can the US and Israel do? They could choose to do nothing, on the calculation that Iran will have difficulty in enriching the HEU for the bomb. Most analysts, however, conclude that Iran can sufficiently enrich the HEU at a secret facility (assuming one exists), within months. So, doing nothing is probably not an option.

Once the locations of the HEU are known, the US and Iran could resume their attack. The problem is that any direct strikes on the HEU would be tantamount to unleashing "dirty bombs", in which radioactive materials are vented without a nuclear chain reaction. The global outcry would be significant were this to occur, and both the US and Israel may be wary of the blowback. Plus, Israel must worry that its own nuclear reactors could be targeted someday to produce a similar result. It may not, therefore, want to legitimate such an action.

If a direct attack on the HEU is dangerous, Washington and Tel Aviv must instead gain control of the stockpile. Tehran would have to be persuaded to reveal the locations of the HEU, and full-scale safeguarding would follow. This, in turn, means that the IAEA inspectors must have access to Iranian nuclear facilities, as was envisaged by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement between the US and Iran during President Barack Obama's time. In addition,

the various 24/7 surveillance mechanisms under the accord would have to be installed and operated.

For a new deal to be struck on Iran's nuclear activities, the United States will need to negotiate a successor to the JCPOA. In his comments on the strikes on Iran, US President Donald Trump drew a parallel to the Hiroshima and Nagasaki attacks during World War II, seeming to suggest that Iran is similarly prostrate. In fact, the parallel is far from accurate. Iran is not an occupied country.

Both sides face limits. The US wants to avoid another "forever war", not least due to domestic opposition. In addition, its supplies of defensive missiles and other war materials are under stress from provisioning Ukraine and Israel. Israel's famous air defences are strained, perhaps to breaking point, and it will be increasingly vulnerable to retaliatory missile attacks. Iran's options, too, are limited. Tehran must worry that both Israel and the US will resume attacks, and not just on nuclear facilities, and that internal dissent will boil over.

The conditions are ripe, therefore, for a new nuclear deal. That said, the ceasefire must hold, and Iran must have an authority figure that can deliver a deal. Neither is certain. In addition, the US may have to sweeten the deal economically by lifting sanctions. This will depend on Trump over-coming domestic and Israeli opposition. In short, there is a road ahead, but it is a rocky one.

The writer is Wilmar Professor of Asian Studies and vice dean, Research and Development, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore

AND STILL WE RISE

It is time to listen not just to governments, but to Iran's suffering people



SHOKOOFEH AZAR

IRAN MAY BE one of the few countries in the world to have experienced two revolutions and two wars in just half a century. My generation still remembers the 1979 revolution — a revolution that, with the tacit support of Western powers and the backing of domestic leftist groups, led to the fall of the Pahlavi monarchy and the rise of a theocratic regime. The children of that era became the teenagers of the futile eight-year war with Iraq, and today, in middle age, we find ourselves on the verge of another revolution. But this time, its nature and mechanism are fundamentally different.

Contrary to popular belief, Iranians' struggle against the Islamic regime is not merely a 46-year-long story; it is rooted in 1,400 years of cultural resistance against imposed Arab-Islamic rule. Iran is among the few civilisations that, despite military and cultural occupation, never fully relinquished its language or identity. Iranian intellectuals, poets, and philosophers have striven to keep alive the humanistic and philosophical foundations of our pre-Islamic culture — from Zoroastrianism and Mithraism to Persian mysticism — against the dominance of rigid Islamic dogma. The clash between these two worldviews has claimed thousands of lives.

The 1979 revolution, despite appearances, was not purely a popular uprising. Historical evidence shows that Western countries — including the UK, Germany, France and the United States — encouraged the Shah to leave in his final days. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union, through figures like Ayatollah Beheshti, played a role in weakening the Pahlavi monarchy. For both East and West, the Islamic Revolution was a geopolitical opportunity: The USSR sought to weaken the anti-communist Shah, while the West

Let me be blunt: We are no longer the people of half a century ago who waited for the verdict of the East or the West. We are a nation with deep cultural and historical roots, a people educated, aware, and exhausted by Western, Eastern, and religious authoritarianism alike. But we have also learned that to defeat one of the most brutal regimes of modern times, global support is essential — just as you needed international allies to defeat (Adolf) Hitler. For many of us, Israel and the US are no longer enemies, but temporary allies in our national liberation.

wished to curb the power of a monarch who had become increasingly uncontrollable through the rise of OPEC and the strengthening of Iran's national economy.

Over the past four decades, what the Islamic Republic has inflicted upon the Iranian people is nothing short of cultural, social, and human devastation. The systematic oppression has included the rape of female dissidents, the elimination of intellectuals, the humiliation of religious and ethnic minorities, the deliberate destruction of natural and historical resources, and the promotion of Arabic language and culture through education and media. Sharia-based laws have created an environment where domestic violence and femicide have become everyday occurrences. According to the Iran Human Rights Organisation, in 2023, the number of executions in Iran surpassed those in China — a country with 20 times its population.

And yet, in the midst of this darkness, a profound hope has emerged. Contrary to the regime's intentions, the people of Iran have not returned to religion — they are moving beyond it. More than half of the new generation is openly or secretly atheist or non-religious. This generation clings fiercely to its Iranian identity and the Persian language, and with each execution or act of violence, it distances itself further from state-imposed Islam. The regime has been effective in repression but has utterly failed to win hearts.

In recent days, Israeli military intervention against the Islamic Republic's military infrastructure has sparked not just fear but hope among many Iranians. For a people who have lived under the yoke of tyranny for generations, seeing the institutions and individuals of oppression destroyed evokes a sense of justice — one that Western powers

may not understand, but for us, it feels like a moment of liberation.

Let me be blunt: We are no longer the people of half a century ago who waited for the verdict of the East or the West. We are a nation with deep cultural and historical roots, a people educated, aware, and exhausted by Western, Eastern, and religious authoritarianism alike. But we have also learned that to defeat one of the most brutal regimes of modern times, global support is essential — just as international allies were needed to defeat (Adolf) Hitler. For many of us, Israel and the US are no longer enemies, but temporary allies in our national liberation.

I am astonished to see that many Western intellectuals now describe Hamas as the world's only anti-colonial force while condemning Israeli's strikes against Iran's regime. Let me end with a message to them: If you despise these countries so much, why don't you take up arms and fight them yourselves — from your own soil? Why must we in the Middle East pay the price for your slogans? Does the suffering of people like us figure at all in your daily political calculations? Perhaps it is time to listen not just to governments and religious bullies, but to the voices of Iran's suffering people.

We are on the brink of another revolution — of a return to the roots. After 46 years of theocratic oppression, Iranians are rising — not for religion, nor for ideology, but for identity and freedom. And if you will not stand with us in this revolution — then at least, do not stand in our way.

Azar is the author of the International Booker Prize-shortlisted *The Enlightenment of the Greengrass Tree* and *The Gokarna Tree* in the Middle of Our Kitchen



JUNE 28, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

PLANE CRASH PROBE

INVESTIGATORS SAID THAT faint, intermittent signals have been detected near where an Air India jumbo jet crashed, but it is not certain if they are being emitted by the missing flight recorders. A spokesman at the British Royal Navy's command centre at Northwood, north west of London, confirmed this. If the flight recorders can be recovered from the mile-deep seabed, they could provide information on the cause of the crash.

HUNT FOR LAL SINGH

AS CANADIAN AUTHORITIES continued their

hunt for two Sikhs for questioning in connection with the crash of an Air India jumbo jet and a Canadian Pacific Airline baggage explosion at Tokyo airport, a Vancouver Sikh lawyer said Lal Singh (one of the two suspects) had been seen in Vancouver as recently as three weeks ago. In an interview, Ujjwal Bosanj, a spokesman for Sikh moderates in Vancouver, said it was accepted within the Sikh community that Lal Singh, and perhaps Amrind Singh, were hiding in the city.

NEW MENU ON TRAINS

THE MOS FOR Railways, Madhav Rao Scindia, formally announced the introduction of "an

absolutely new concept of serving wholesome and hygienic food to railway passengers". A variety of vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes, in consultation with the India Tourism Development Corporation (ITDC), are to be served in hygienic aluminium foil wrappers.

MONSOON HAVOC

WITH THE TEN more landslide deaths reported in Kerala's high ranges, the death toll in Kerala's monsoon havoc this week has mounted to 45, reports received in Trivandrum said. Nine persons belonging to two families were crushed to death when huge boulders came down on their house.