



Culture of risk

The notion of a routinely planned mass gathering should be done away with

A day apart, two pilgrimages in North India have endured chaos. Eight people died on the steep stairway to Haridwar's Mansa Devi shrine on July 27 after a rumour spread that a snapped power line was live. The next day, at Avasaneshwar temple in Barabanki, monkeys reportedly damaged an overhead cable, sparking panic that killed two persons. Both incidents were triggered by fears of electrocution. Such hazards at temples are not new: makeshift wiring draped over stalls and overloaded transformers are common sights at melas. However, neither shrine had an automatic power cutoff or a public-address system capable of debunking misinformation. The Haridwar probe will almost certainly reiterate older recommendations such as underground cabling and real-time voltage monitoring. However, the threat is incidental. Except for two major stampedes in recent memory (in Bengaluru and Hyderabad), all such tragedies have occurred at religious mass gatherings or in the course of attending them. They occur despite multiple guidelines and court orders due to authorities' collective desensitisation to risk. On paper, Uttarakhand has a crowd-management manual for the Char Dham and the NDMA's guidelines say that every event must calculate carrying capacity, stagger entry, maintain redundant escape routes, and hold drills. Yet, at Mansa Devi, the stairway that doubles as entry and exit was used without scheduling, and the only alternative route had much lower carrying capacity.

In Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh, the response centred on compensation rather than structural reform. The NDMA norms need to be legally binding, with severe consequences for persons, enterprises or businesses that fail to protect lives. At present, States choose provisions from the norms and temple trusts often treat them as optional because pilgrim facilities fall under charitable exemptions in many building codes. Routine 'darshan' does not require safety certification even when daily footfall exceeds that of a sports stadium. States also bank on ad hoc volunteers and under-trained guards to manage surges. However, annual drills mandated under the Disaster Management Act are rarely held for regular worship, while funds earmarked for permanent infrastructure are often diverted to festivals. The time has come to eradicate the notion of a simply planned or cheap mass gathering event, religious or otherwise. When footfall exceeds a preset threshold, a single incident-command structure must come into effect. Authorities must deploy overhead LiDAR and AI cameras to calculate crowd density, with real-time alerts to help divert or throttle traffic. Finally, States must ensure that venues publicise capacity charts at entrances, conduct and livestream quarterly drills to normalise a safety culture, and certify volunteers in basic life support and crowd psychology.

Lessons from past

The Chola legacy includes good governance, not just grand temples

The visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Tamil Nadu had a subtle political message. In his address at the valediction of the annual Aadi Thiruvathirai festival at Gangai-konda Cholapuram to mark the birth anniversary of Rajendra Chola I, he focused on the legacy of the Chola emperor and his father Rajaraja Chola I to underline that contemporary India would be as enterprising as ancient India under the imperial Cholas, in expanding trade, and in guarding India's sovereignty. The festival was also organised to commemorate 1,000 years of the maritime expedition of Rajendra Chola to south-east Asia as well as the construction of the iconic temple, a World Heritage Site. The grandeur of the Chola dynasty is fascinating to recall, but there are other mundane facets of the Chola rule which are of modern relevance – its water management, tax and land revenue collection, and democratic processes.

In creating infrastructure, especially, the Cholas hold many lessons. In recent months, there have been fatal accidents involving civil structures. The resilience of the Brihadisvara temples, which have stood tall for over 1,000 years, could provide learnings. Studies show that the southern peninsula was the epicentre of several earthquakes in the last 200-odd years. Archaeologists are of the view that the superstructure of the temples holds the key to modern building techniques when it comes to seismic resilience. A close study of the temples for structural stability can have immense value in the contemporary context. Apart from focusing on the heritage and culture of the Cholas, India could try and replicate their success in administration. Management of water resources, especially, could be an important learning. The Cauvery delta, where Gangai-konda Cholapuram is located, may experience floods, with a large volume of water draining into the sea without being harnessed for periods of scarcity. More than 30 years have passed since the adoption of the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution, but a large number of local bodies, even in the major cities, are functioning without elected representatives. The celebration is an opportunity for an analysis of the functioning of grassroots-level democratic bodies. Mr. Modi announced that the Centre would install the statues of Rajaraja Chola and Rajendra Chola to remind the country of its historical consciousness. But the exercise would have greater purpose if it reminds the country of the administrative acumen of the Cholas, and nudges those in governance to address many of the chronic flaws and problems.

The medical boundaries for AYUSH practitioners

The recent controversy on X between a hepatologist and an Indian chess Grand Master, on whether practitioners of traditional medicine can claim to be doctors, has sparked much commentary on the role and the status of practitioners of traditional Indian medicine systems such as Ayurveda and Unani, in India.

Committees, governments, perspectives
The burning issue here is not merely whether practitioners of Ayurveda can refer to themselves as doctors, but rather the scope of medical activities permitted under Indian law. This is an issue which has consequences for public health. A starting point for this discussion is the interpretation of the framing of the debate over the last 80 years, beginning 1946, when the Health Survey and Development Committee, better known as Bhore Committee, batted in favour of modern scientific medicine based on evidence. The committee had pointed out that other countries were in the process of phasing out their traditional medicine systems and recommended that states take a call on the extent to which traditional medicine played a role in their public health systems.

The Bhore committee's lack of enthusiasm for the traditional medicinal system did not go unnoticed by practitioners of traditional Indian medicine who mounted a vocal protest. They managed to convince the Government of India to set up the Committee on Indigenous Systems of Medicine, which submitted its report in 1948. This committee unabashedly wrapped up its conclusions in communal language, framing the issue in terms of Hindu nationalism by linking Ayurveda to the Vedas and its decline to 'foreign domination'.

While the Nehru government took no action to formally recognise these practitioners of traditional medicine, the Indira Gandhi government in 1970 enacted a legislation called The Indian Medicine Central Council Act recognising and regulating the practitioners of Ayurveda, Siddha and Unani. This law was replaced in 2020 with a new law called The National Commission for Indian System of Medicine Act.

The syllabus for aspiring practitioners of Ayurveda is an absolute mish-mash of concepts that span everything from doshas, prakriti, atmas (which includes learning the difference between paramatma and jivatma) with a sprinkling of modern medical concepts such as cell physiology and anatomy. These are irreconcilable concepts – the theory of tridosha attributes all ills to an imbalance of doshas, while modern medicine locates the concepts of some diseases such as infections in 'germ theory', among others. There is no middle ground between both systems of



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The core issue is whether they can refer to themselves as doctors and the scope of their medical activities, as this is a subject with consequences for public health in India

medicine which is why concepts such as integrative medicine make no sense.

Point of friction

Nevertheless, the legal recognition of this new class of practitioners led to questions on the exact boundaries between the practice of traditional and modern medicine. The major point of friction has been the prescription of modern medicines by the practitioners of traditional medicine. Ayurvedic practitioners, in particular, while claiming the superiority of their art over modern medicine, have consistently demanded the right to prescribe modern medicines developed by evidence-based modern science.

Pertinently, this dispute revolved around the interpretation of Rule 2(ee) of the Drugs and Cosmetics Rules, 1945 which defined the class of "registered medical practitioners" who can prescribe modern medicine. This definition is complicated since it is not limited to doctors with a MBBS degree. It delegates a certain amount of power to State governments to pass orders declaring medical practitioners on their State medical registers as persons "practising the modern scientific system of medicine for the purposes of..." the Drugs and Cosmetics Act, 1940.

Many State governments have used this power under Rule 2(ee) to allow registered practitioners of Ayurveda and Unani to prescribe modern medicine such as antibiotics. The constitutionality of these orders was challenged before the courts and the first round of litigation concluded in 1998 with the judgment of the Supreme Court of India in *Dr. Mukhtiar Chand & Ors vs The State of Punjab & Ors*. The Court concluded that "the right to prescribe drugs of a system of medicine would be synonymous with the right to practise that system of medicine. In that sense, the right to prescribe allopathic drug cannot be wholly divorced from the claim to practice allopathic medicine". Simply put, Ayurvedic practitioners had no right to prescribe modern medicine.

That judgment never stopped the lobbying by Ayurvedic and Unani practitioners with State governments for the promulgation of orders under Rule 2(ee) allowing them to prescribe modern medicine. Several State governments have continued passing these orders in defiance of the Court's judgment. This inevitably leads to litigation before the High Courts, usually by the Indian Medical Association, which often wins these cases.

Unsuspecting patients too have often sued practitioners of Ayurveda before consumer courts on the grounds that they were deceived into believing that they were being treated by a doctor with a MBBS degree who can prescribe modern medicine.

While much of the litigation has revolved

around the right to dispense modern medicine, there is also the issue regarding the medical procedures that can be conducted legally by practitioners of Ayurveda and Unani. For example, can a registered Ayurvedic practitioner "intubate" a patient? This is an important question to ask since it is an open secret that many hospitals purporting to practise modern medicine are hiring Ayurvedic practitioners with Bachelor of Ayurvedic Medicine and Surgery (BAMS) degree at lower pay in place of graduates with a MBBS degree.

Further, a notification by the Indian government in 2020 has allowed Ayurvedic practitioners (post graduates) to perform 58 minor surgeries, including the removal of the gall bladder, appendix and benign tumours. The constitutionality of this notification is pending before the courts.

If the notification is upheld, the question that arises is whether these Ayurvedic practitioners can now use anaesthetic agents and antibiotics required to conduct surgeries. The stakes are high for public health in India since the likely strategy of Ayurvedic practitioners will be to argue that these surgeries were known in traditional Indian medicine. In these times of heady Hindutva, it will be difficult to find a judge who will ignore these claims.

The political factor

The larger political backdrop to this entire debate regarding Ayurvedic practitioners is "Hindu pride", which has fuelled claims of fantastical achievements by ancient Indian civilisation, be it the *pushpaka vimana* or the claims of the Kauravas being test tube babies. When a policy issue such as Ayurveda is cynically draped in the language of "Hindu pride", it is not just the Bharatiya Janata Party but also the Indian National Congress which feels compelled to support an obviously dangerous approach to public health. The last election manifesto of the Indian National Congress, in 2024, promised that the party would "support" all systems of medicines instead of a promise to support only rational, evidence-based medicine.

This blind faith in traditional medicine is going to cost every citizen in the future since the government is actively considering the inclusion of AYUSH (Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy) treatments under the Ayushman Bharat insurance scheme funded by tax-payers. This is in addition to approximately ₹20,000 crore of tax-payer money spent on research councils functioning under the Ministry of AYUSH with a mandate to research AYUSH. They have very little to show for in terms of scientific breakthroughs. Twitter outrage notwithstanding, the joke at the end of the day is on the tax-payer.

Build on this joint statement to try and save Gaza

A recent joint statement by about 30 western states, which includes the United Kingdom, France and Italy, has called for an end to the war in Gaza. It condemns Israel's 'drip feeding of aid and the inhumane killing of civilians, including children, seeking to meet their most basic needs of water and food'. It says that the Israeli government is denying 'essential humanitarian assistance to the civilian population', which it finds 'unacceptable'. And it calls Israel plans to sequester and eventually force Palestinian citizens out of Gaza 'completely unacceptable'.

This is the strongest western criticism yet of Israeli conduct across Palestine, and it has coincided with Israel's offensive on Deir al-Balah, the city which has acted as a refuge for thousands of displaced people. It has the infrastructure, logistical bases and personnel to keep people alive, and its destruction will be catastrophic.

It appears unlikely that this western condemnation will deter Israel. With a few exceptions, western governments have been calling upon their ally, Israel, to stop or moderate its behaviour while also ensuring that Tel Aviv has not suffered serious diplomatic, economic or military costs for acting with impunity across Palestine. Further, neither Germany nor the United States, Israel's most steadfast backers and its largest arms suppliers, have signed that statement. This is a signal that there has been no change in their policies and may be another reason why Israel is unlikely to stop.

But there is still time for the world to act and prevent the Palestinians from being destroyed.

The facts

Israel committing genocide? The International Court of Justice (ICJ) may take years to determine this. Several jurists, legal and other scholars



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There is still time for the world to show that humanity is one and universal

argue that what is unfolding in Gaza is in fact a genocide. However, rather than guiding us to facts, this question has become politicised and an end in itself. And the facts are sickening.

Gaza had a population of about 2.3 million people when the war began in October 2023. About 60,000 people are confirmed dead, perhaps half of them women and children, and 90% of the population has been displaced multiple times. The United Nations says that Gaza's remaining population has been squeezed into about 46 square kilometres of land where systems of food, health and hygiene have collapsed. That is about 43,478 people per square kilometre, living in conditions that one would not wish upon any form of life.

Tel Aviv's game plan

But these numbers do not capture what is widely suspected to be a systematic destruction of human life and habitat in Gaza through a micromanaged plan of starvation. Israel has curbed aid inflow when the war began. Earlier this year, it imposed a total blockade of 11 weeks and followed it up with a new aid delivery system that, according to the western nations' statement, 'deprives Gazans of human dignity'. Israeli forces have killed about a thousand desperate people seeking limited amounts of food under degrading conditions. And the UN says a third of the population has been living without eating.

Exhaustion is endemic. Starvation is widespread. And famine looms. Is this not a genocide?

Israel does not allow foreign journalists to report freely from Gaza. And it discredits the non-Israeli accounts coming out of Gaza. This has allowed it to dispute any assessment of its likely endgame in the territory.

That Israel is carrying out ethnic cleansing is clear. Israeli leaders have publicly stated their

plan to control most of Gaza, force the Palestinians into a 'humanitarian city', and let them out only if they choose to leave for another country. Two former Israeli Prime Ministers, Ehud Olmert and Yair Lapid, have called this 'city' a 'concentration camp'. Conditions for a future generation of Palestinians in Gaza are being destroyed. And as Jean Drèze recently noted in this daily, once famine sets in, people will turn against each other, which will put an end to all solidarity and chances of reconstituting. It would then be used as evidence of Palestinian barbarism and sub-humanity – and thus further proof that the Palestinians are not a people.

Stop the hedging

The UN says that the 'last lifelines to keep people alive are collapsing', but the world can still step in. The world has a chance to halt the catastrophe. Governments can review the scale of their diplomatic, economic and military ties with Israel. International peacekeepers can be sent to Gaza. Russia, China and India could join their 'Global South' partners in exerting additional pressure on Israel to stop. The Gulf countries and Türkiye should stop hedging. The western nations' statement has '... urge[d] the international community to unite in a common effort' to end the war. Non-western governments can test western sincerity by offering to evolve a common approach.

There are some of us who know what is going on in Gaza is an act that will end the idea that 'humanity is one and universal'. Therefore, we must do what we can. Governments and corporations have more influence, but individuals can act on their conscience too. The time to act is now. Otherwise, we will be hanging our heads in shame and regret.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Honouring Chola legacy

India should formally honour the Chola legacy for launching successful naval expeditions beyond India shores and establishing the Tamil influence across Southeast Asia. Getting the Indian Navy to celebrate 'Rajendra Chola' day would be a fitting tribute to these unmatched maritime achievements. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's references to Chola military and democratic legacy rightly spotlights their

enduring contributions. Their practice of *Kudavolai Murai* – selecting local representatives by lot – was a democratic model that was centuries ahead of its time. The Chola overseas campaigns were not just conquests but also acts of cultural diplomacy and naval vision. Honouring the Cholas would not be symbolic alone. It would reclaim India's proud naval heritage and inspire a forward-looking maritime

spirit rooted in our own history.
Avinashpattan Myilsami,
Chimbatore

It appears that the Cholas have done the impossible by bringing Davidian feudalism and the current fiery nationalism to the table. The sudden interest in history, from both the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and the Bharatiya Janata Party, seems less about the Cholas themselves and more about

scoring political points. One side speaks of Tamil pride; the other of ancient Indian glory. Meanwhile, the Chologangam tank, locally referred to as Ponneri, which was built by the Cholas and an engineering marvel, lies broken. Perhaps a way of scoring points would be to repair it.
Nagarajamani M.V.,
Hyderabad

It is a matter of pride that Tamil Nadu is now home to a number of World Heritage

sites. One can think of Gingee Fort along with the great Chola temples and the Mahabalipuram monuments. The only drawback at these sites is the lack of proper infrastructure. Connectivity is an issue. Pollution control too is another problem.
A.S. Thirumalai,
Chennai

Crowd management

Stampedes have become a frequent occurrence, leading to a tragic loss of

lives (Front page, July 28). There needs to be comprehensive crowd control and management measures in place at all places of public gathering. There needs to be a posse of well-trained volunteers (with a specific dress code) to guide people and ensure their orderly movement.
Kosaraju Chandramouli,
Hyderabad

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CACHE

How the fair use clause is being applied to generative AI

The summary judgments in the Anthropic and Meta cases recognise the highly transformative character of GenAI, thereby favouring a finding of fair use with respect to using copyrighted materials for training purposes

Arul George Scaria

Access to diverse kinds of materials is vital for building and fine-tuning Large Language Models (LLMs). These materials could include those that are available in the public domain (for example, works where the copyright has expired or works wherein copyright was relinquished by the authors) as well as those under copyright protection. Apart from gathering data through sources such as Common Crawl, AI firms often scan copies of books and other materials, and convert them into machine readable text from which data can be extracted for training purposes.

Whether the use of copyrighted materials for training purposes, without permission from the copyright holders, constitutes copyright infringement is a challenging legal question. Many litigations are happening across the globe around this issue.

One of the key factors that could determine the outcome in these litigations is how the courts view whether the concerned activities fall within the scope of any of the exceptions to infringement under the relevant copyright laws. For litigations in the U.S., this means one of the primary determinants in the outcomes would be the application of the 'fair use' doctrine under U.S. copyright law. Two trial courts in the U.S. have recently delivered summary judgments on fair use, and they may be considered as the beginning of the adjudications on this complex issue.

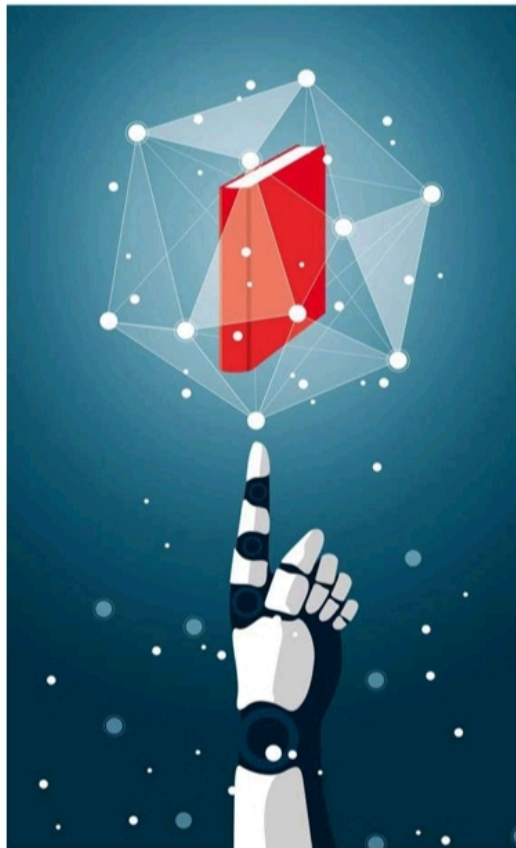
Factors considered

The U.S. courts generally take into consideration four factors while assessing whether a use constitutes as 'fair use'. They are – (i) purpose and character of the use, and the enquiry in this regard includes the extent to which the use can be considered 'transformative'; (ii) nature of concerned copyrighted materials (there is a higher likelihood of the fair use clause being applicable when it is used for works that are factual in character as compared to works of fiction or fantasy); (iii) amount of the portion taken, and this includes both qualitative and quantitative analyses; and (iv) the effect of the use on the potential market of the plaintiff's works or value of the plaintiff's works. The questions of transformative use and the impact on the potential market/value of the plaintiffs works have historically played critical roles in determining the final outcomes in a fair use litigation.

The Anthropic case

Anthropic trained the LLMs underlying Claude, one of their popular GenAI agents, using books and other texts from a library compiled by them. The library consisted of works obtained from different sources, including books purchased and converted to digital form as well as books acquired from potentially illegal sources. The copyright infringement action was initiated by the plaintiffs as their works were used for training without any authorisation from them.

Based on the application of the four above factors to the specific facts of the case, specifically the highly



GETTY IMAGES

transformative nature of the use of copyrighted materials, the court, in *Andrea Bartz et al. versus Anthropic PBC*, granted summary judgment in favour of Anthropic on the question of whether the training of the AI was fair use. The court was of the view that the print-to-digital format conversion of the books purchased by them constituted fair use. However, it denied the request of Anthropic that downloading and storing of the copies sourced from illegal sources must be treated as fair use. It remains to be seen how the infringement analysis and remedies would be handed down by the court with regard to those activities.

The Meta judgment

In *Richard Kadrey et al. versus Meta Platforms, Inc.*, 13 authors had sued Meta for downloading books from illegal sources and using them for training Llama, the LLM of Meta. Based on the specific facts and the specific averments made by the parties with regard to the four fair use factors, the court granted a

summary judgment in favour of Meta.

The court was of the view that the use of the works for training purposes was highly transformative in character and in such instances the plaintiffs will have to bring in substantial evidence with regard to the fourth factor (whether such use has affected the plaintiff's works market value) to avoid a summary judgment against them. But as the plaintiffs in the instant case couldn't produce any meaningful evidence, the summary judgment was in favour of Meta with regard to the copying and use of the plaintiffs' books as training data. However, the court will be continuing the proceedings against Meta with respect to the argument of the plaintiffs that Meta also unlawfully distributed their works during the torrenting process.

Comparative analysis

One of the common dimensions of both the summary judgments is the recognition of the highly transformative character of the use of copyrighted works

in training LLMs. This substantially influenced fair use analysis in both cases. There is an alignment on the third factor also, as both courts considered the extent of materials used reasonable in the broader context of training.

But on the fourth factor, one can see substantial differences. Judge Chahabria, who authored the Meta summary judgment, rejected the argument of the plaintiffs that Meta harmed the potential licensing market of the plaintiffs, primarily on the ground that it is not a market that the plaintiff is legally entitled to monopolise. However, he also observed that in many cases, AI training on copyrighted materials may become illegal due to "market dilution". According to him, the rapid generation of countless works that compete with the originals, even if those works aren't themselves infringing, can result in market dilution through indirect substitution. But the inability of the plaintiffs in the case to produce sufficient empirical evidence in this regard illustrates the difficulty in proving this kind of harm.

On the other hand, Judge Alsup, who authored the judgment in the Anthropic case, categorically rejected the market dilution argument and observed that the "[a]uthors' complaint is no different than it would be if they complained that training schoolchildren to write well would result in an explosion of competing works. This is not the kind of competitive or creative displacement that concerns the Copyright Act. The Act seeks to advance original works of authorship, not to protect authors against competition."

It is also worth highlighting here that the Judge in the Anthropic case considered downloading or building a permanent library of infringing works as a different use that warrants separate analysis and a different outcome. But the Meta summary judgement didn't take that approach and focused just on the ultimate purpose, that is, the training of models.

Other AI cases

Earlier this year, in *Thomson Reuters versus Ross Intelligence*, the court had reached the conclusion that the fair use exception was not applicable. However, this was not a GenAI case. The AI in question merely retrieved and shared judicial opinions based on queries from users. As this was not considered a transformative use by the court, and as the AI in question competed directly with the works of the plaintiff, the court concluded that the use of those materials without permission was not fair use.

Broader implications

Both the summary judgments in the Anthropic and Meta cases recognise the highly transformative character of use of materials in the GenAI training context, thereby favouring a finding of fair use with respect to the use of copyrighted materials for training purposes. But both judgments also reflect many of the anxieties of copyright holders. Whether the sourcing of materials from potentially illegal sources can negate the claims of fair use is an issue where scholarly opinion is divided and more discussions are warranted.

It is also evident that the kind of evidence copyright holders will bring in to illustrate the negative impact on their market will play a prominent role in determining the final outcome in many cases. This also implies that copyright infringement related issues are far from settled in the AI training area, and depending on the specific facts and evidences in each of these cases, the outcomes can be very different.

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FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know Your English

K. Subrahmanian
S. Upendran

"How do you pronounce p.r.o.c.r.a.s.t.i.n.a.t.e?"

"The o in the first syllable pro is like the a in China. The a in the second syllable cra is pronounced like the a in words like mat, cat and bat. The i in the third syllable sti is like the i in pit, bit and fit. And..."

"...the final nate rhymes with mate, fate and date. I suppose."

"Exactly! And the stress is on the second syllable cra. It's proCRAsinate. Do you know what it means?"

"Doesn't it mean to keep postponing doing things?"

"That's right. You keep putting off doing things. My father hates it when I procrastinate."

"So does mine. But I keep procrastinating all the time."

"Especially when it comes to doing your homework."

"That's true. I hate doing my homework. But if I am to do well in life, I should stop procrastinating."

"Absolutely right. Your motto should be: I shall not procrastinate anymore."

"Which reminds me. Is there a difference between any more and anymore?"

"Yes, there is. When used as one word, it means any longer or no longer. For example, I can say, 'Mohan doesn't smoke anymore.'"

"Meaning that Mohan has stopped smoking?"

"That's right. Mohan no longer smokes."

"So, I can say, 'I don't want to live in this city anymore?'"

"You certainly can. But tell me, why don't you want to live here anymore?"

"Oh, that was just an example."

"Well, in that case, here's another example. The dentist told Asha not to eat chocolates anymore."

"He wants her to give up eating chocolates. Poor Asha."

"Well, it's better than having rotten teeth."

"That's true. Now tell me, what does any more mean?"

"It is usually used with quantity. For example, if I say, 'I don't have any more pencils', it means..."

"...I have no more pencils."

"That's right."

"Last night, my mother told me not to eat any more halwa."

"It's not good to eat too much sweet."

"But tell me, what exactly is the difference between 'I don't want to eat ice cream anymore' and 'I don't want to eat any more ice cream'?"

"When you say you don't want to eat ice cream anymore, it means that you want to give up eating ice cream. You want to stop eating ice cream permanently."

"Good grief. I'd never want to do that."

"If, on the other hand, you say, 'I don't want to eat any more ice cream', it means that you have eaten enough ice cream for today and you do not want any additional ice cream now."

"So, it's not on a permanent basis?"

"No, it isn't. You may eat some ice cream tomorrow."

Published in *The Hindu* on June 3, 1997.

THE DAILY QUIZ

Renowned Dutch painter Vincent Van Gogh died on this day in 1890. Here is the first part of a quiz on the troubled artist

Vignesh P. Venkitesh

QUESTION 1

Van Gogh famously cut off his own ear. While there are different versions of what prompted this, several historians say an argument with a fellow painter led to the incident. Name the painter.

QUESTION 2

Japanese auteur Akira Kurosawa paid homage to Van Gogh with a segment in his anthology. Name the segment and the anthology.

QUESTION 3

Name the hand-painted animated feature that came out in 2017 as a homage to the artist.

QUESTION 4

Where was Van Gogh staying while he painted 'Starry Nights', one of his most famous works?

QUESTION 5

Name the only painting by Van Gogh that was sold while he was alive.



Visual question:

What did Van Gogh intend to convey with this painting, the 'Bedroom in Arles', which was inspired from the room he lived in after he moved to South France to set up an artists' colony?

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. The last rider to win four titles. Ans: Great Britain's Chris Froome

2. Riders from this non-European country claimed Stage win prior to the last Stage on July 27. Ans: Australia

3. This unfortunate distinction is common to Stage winners Phillipps (Stage 1), Mathieu van der Poel (Stage 2), and Remco Evenepoel (Stage 5). Ans: They withdrew from the event before the race's conclusion

4. Pogacar won this jersey for topping the mountains classification. Ans: Polka Dot

5. Stage 19 was cut from 130km to 95km, with two planned categorised climbs dropped, because of this specific reason. Ans: Herd of diseased cattle

6. This was common to Stages 4, 7, 12, and 13 before the ceremonial finish with Stage 21. Ans: They were the Stages won by the champion Slovenian

Visual: Name this champion. Ans: Jonas Vingegaard

Early Bird: Pranab Biswas

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

Word of the day

Flout:

treat with contemptuous disregard; laugh at with contempt and derision

Synonyms: scoff, barrack, gibe, jeer

Usage: He always flouts the rules.

Pronunciation: newsth.live/flaʊtpro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /flaʊt/

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

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Unclaimed deposits with banks at the end of June 2025

67,003 crore. As of June 30, 2025, public sector banks were saddled with unclaimed deposits of ₹58,330.26 crore while the private sector had ₹8,673.72 crore, as per the Reserve Bank of India. **PH**

Number of helicopter accidents in the past five years in India

12 The government said these accidents killed 30 people in the last five years. Seven of them took place in Uttarakhand, four in Maharashtra and one in Chhattisgarh. The DGCA has initiated additional surveillance and safety audits of helicopter operations for the Chardham Yatra. **PH**

Amount of food to be airdropped by Spain into Gaza

12 In tonnes, Spain said it would airdrop 12 tonnes of food into Gaza as the threat of famine stalks the Palestinian territory after 21 months of war. The operation is a rare example of a European nation joining West Asian countries in sending aid by air. The delivery would take place from Jordan. **APF**

Projected increase in Italy's above-65 population in 2050

34.6 In per cent, Italy's working age population is set to shrink by more than a fifth over the next 25 years, national statistics agency Istat said. In the same period, the percentage of residents over the age of 65 is projected to rise at least by 10%. **APF**

Number of digital payment transactions in the last six years

65,000 crore. The Indian digital payment landscape witnessed over 65,000 crore transactions amounting to more than ₹12,000 lakh crore in the past six financial years. **PH**

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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What is Maharashtra's new security Bill?

What does the Maharashtra Special Public Security Bill entail? How does it propose to counter 'urban Naxals'? Which other States have similar laws? Which party opposed the Bill in the State's Legislative Assembly? What are the main objections being raised against the Bill by civil rights activists?

EXPLAINER

Vinaya Deshpande Pandit

The story so far:

The Maharashtra Legislature passed the Maharashtra Special Public Security Bill or a 'Bill to provide for effective prevention of certain unlawful activities of Left Wing Extremist organisations or similar organisations', during the recent monsoon session of the Maharashtra Assembly. The Bill has been termed as 'oppressive, ambiguous and open to misuse' by opposition leaders.

What is the Bill?

The Maharashtra Special Public Security Bill was brought in to counter 'urban Naxalism', as per the government of Maharashtra. The Bill states that, "the menace of Naxalism is not only limited to remote areas of the Naxal affected States but its presence is increasing in the urban areas also through the Naxal frontal organisations. The spread of active frontal organisations of the Naxal groups gives constant and effective support in terms of logistics and safe refuge to their armed cadres. The seized literature of Naxals shows 'safe houses' and 'urban dens' of the Maoist network in the cities of the State of Maharashtra." The Maharashtra government claims that the State has become a safe haven for 'urban Naxal' organisations. It has said that over 60 such organisations exist in Maharashtra, and that current laws are ineffective against them. However, civil rights activists say that the State government has not yet made public the list of these organisations, despite repeated requests. They have alleged that the Bill has been brought about to control left-wing organisations and civil rights activists who had rallied against the BJP in the 2024 Parliamentary elections.

What about other States?

Maharashtra is the fifth State after



New law: MLAs of the Maha Vikas Aghadi submit a memorandum to Maharashtra Governor C. P. Radhakrishnan to review the Maharashtra Special Public Security Bill on July 18. **ANI**

Chhattisgarh, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and Odisha to enact a Public Security Act "for more effective prevention of unlawful activities of such organisations." The government has claimed that the other States have banned 48 frontal organisations under similar laws. But civil rights activists contend that the Public Security Acts in other States were brought in before the promulgation of more stringent pieces of legislation like the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. They said that the Maharashtra government itself has claimed to have curbed left-wing armed extremists to only two districts of the State, with the help of currently existing laws, thus questioning the need for such a stringent Act at this time.

When was the Bill introduced?

The Bill was first introduced by the earlier

Mahayuti government at the fag end of the monsoon session of Maharashtra Assembly in 2024. The State elections were held thereafter, and the BJP came back to power along with its allies with a thumping majority. The new government revived the Bill and introduced it during the winter session of the Maharashtra Assembly on December 20, 2024. A day later, a joint committee of members from both the Houses was formed to scrutinise the Bill. The committee received over 12,500 suggestions and objections but made only three amendments to the draft Bill. The activists have called the three changes 'minor'. After being cleared by the joint committee, the Bill was tabled in the Legislative Assembly on July 10. Only the Communist Party of India (Marxist) opposed the Bill. Other opposition parties raised objections, but did not oppose the

Bill, which was passed by a majority by a voice vote. Two delegations have since met the Governor requesting him to not sign the Bill and send it back to the Legislature instead.

What are the objections to the Bill?

The opposition has said that the Bill empowers the government to declare organisations 'illegal' without due process; allows suppression of facts in 'public interest'; allows the government to extend ban on an organisation without any limit on the duration; has the potential to criminalise regular opposition under an ambiguous definition of 'illegal activity'; excludes lower courts from jurisdiction, effectively closing off easy judicial remedies; provides full protection to State officials acting in 'good faith'; and creates grounds for ideologically motivated action against opposition groups, activists and movements. The government has said that democratic and peaceful protests as well as journalists will not come under the Bill's ambit, but the ambiguity in the Bill has given rise to fear that it might be used against farmers' organisations, students' groups, and civil rights groups under the label of 'threat to public order'.

For example, Section 2(f) of the Bill criminalises speech (spoken or written), signs, gestures or visual representations which 'tend to interfere' with public order or 'cause concern'. The opposition has said that such a provision allows authorities to criminalise expression, assembly, criticism, ridicule and association merely by indicating that they pose a potential threat. There is no requirement of actual violence, immediate harm or intent.

What next?

The Bill will become a law once the Governor gives his assent to it. It has been passed by both the Houses and has been sent to him. Meanwhile, civil rights activists and political parties have said they will continue to protest against the Bill and will approach the court against it.

THE GIST

The Bill was first introduced by the earlier Mahayuti government at the fag end of the monsoon session of the Maharashtra Assembly in 2024.

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Why were Tablighi Jamaat members given a clean chit?

How was the media used to spread misinformation about the *jod* organised by Tablighi Jamaat members?

Ziya Us Salam

The story so far:

The Delhi High Court last week acquitted all 70 Tablighi Jamaat members accused of housing foreign participants of a congregation during the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 in violation of lockdown protocol. The court ruling came in the *Mohammed Anwar versus State of NCT of Delhi* case.

What happened in March 2020?

The Tablighi Jamaat members, who came in for heavy criticism in media and political circles for attending a *jod* (religious congregation) in Nizamuddin Markaz (Jamaat's headquarters in New Delhi), were given a clean chit by Justice Neena Bansal Krishna who noted that the said *jod* was planned before COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO). Incidentally,

the *jod* which began on March 12, 2020 concluded on March 15, a day before the Delhi government capped all religious gatherings above the size of 50 and imposed the Delhi Epidemic Diseases, COVID Regulations-2020. Earlier, on March 13, 2020, the Union Health Ministry had stated that the coronavirus was not a national health emergency as there were only 81 cases in India at that time. It all changed after the imposition of the lockdown on March 24 at midnight. While most Indian participants had dispersed by then, foreign nationals were still at the Jamaat headquarters, awaiting resumption of international flights to their respective destinations. The congregation included participants from Indonesia, Malaysia, Kuwait, Ghana and Sri Lanka. However, soon after the imposition of the nationwide lockdown, the Delhi Police had filed FIRs against hundreds of Indian and foreign participants of the Tablighi Jamaat congregation for allegedly

violating the lockdown and orders prohibiting the assembly of people. The men were booked under provisions of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), the Epidemic Diseases Act, the Disaster Management Act and the Foreigners Act. These FIRs accused Indian nationals of either hosting foreigners in mosques or accommodating them at their homes. They were challenged before the High Court which dismissed them last week, a little over five years after the incident.

What did the court state?

"There is nothing on record to show that they had congregated after the promulgation of the Notification under Section 144 Criminal Penal Code. These petitioners were already present in the Markaz. After the imposition of the lockdown, there was no way possible for them to have dispersed; rather their stepping out of the houses would have been a violation of the complete

lockdown and also of the potential of spreading of communicable disease of COVID-19," the court stated.

The court also noted that the imposition of Section 144 banning large gatherings was not announced through a gazette notification nor was it properly published. Hence, the Tablighi Jamaat preachers were possibly unaware of such a notification. "There is no averment to show that any information was actually conveyed to the petitioners," the court stated. It also observed there was no whisper in the charge sheets that the accused were COVID-positive or had defied the government order by stepping out during the pandemic.

Incidentally, eight foreign participants had been acquitted back in August 2020 by the south-east districts court in Saket, New Delhi. Later in December, 36 more foreign participants were acquitted.

What was the media's role?

A large section of the media had then accused the Tablighi Jamaat volunteers of being the principal reason for the spread of the disease in the country. Terms like Corona Jihad, Islamic Insurrection and Corona Terrorism were loosely bandied about and many fake videos were shared accusing the Tablighi members of spitting on food to spread the disease. The Delhi government, in its daily medical dispatches, used to have a separate column for Tablighi Jamaat COVID cases.

THE GIST

The *jod* which began on March 12, 2020 concluded on March 15, a day before the Delhi government capped all religious gatherings above the size of 50 and imposed the Delhi Epidemic Diseases, COVID Regulations-2020.

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Why antitrust regulations are pertinent

While arguing for the Sherman Act, Senator John Sherman said in 1890, "If we will not endure a king as a political power, we should not endure a king over the production, transportation, and sale of any of the necessities of life." The law would eventually mark the beginning of antitrust regulation in the United States, while also laying the groundwork for similar statutes preserving market competition worldwide, including in India.

Sherman's idea of what constitutes a "necessity of life" has evolved since then. Technology is reshaping societies and markets — it now shapes the production, transportation, and sale of most goods and services, leading to the rise of what we now term the global 'digital economy'. India is a significant player, with its domestic digital economy contributing 11.74% to its GDP (2022-23). This success has partially been driven by technology start-ups, which rose from just 2,000 in 2014 to over 31,000 in 2023. The government recognises their potential and leans on them to build a \$35 trillion 'Viksit Bharat' by 2047.

Yet Sherman's concern about a few players dominating economies still applies. In Digital India, the kings are located in foreign waters, dictating selective terms to home-grown start-ups building the country's digital future. As a result, the ability of Indian start-ups to scale is often stunted. While these global firms connect societies, they also wield immense monopolistic power. A recent case by a leading Indian online gaming company against Google, filed with the Competition Commission of India (CCI), highlights the risks posed by such dominance.

On start-ups and monopolies
Discriminatory practices by gatekeepers in the digital economy harm India's economy, business environment, and consumers.
Google, for example, dominates



Alwyn Didiar Singh

Former Secretary to the Government of India and former Secretary General, FICCI

distribution and discovery of digital services. With Android holding about 95% of the of the mobile operating system market share in India, it is nearly impossible for consumers to discover new online businesses without the latter hawking their services on Google's superior search engine, app store, or online advertising ecosystem. This dominance has led to discriminatory outcomes for Indian start-ups. For example, high commissions levied by Google on transactions taking place within its payments ecosystem have dampened the revenues of start-ups using these services. These issues have led domestic antitrust regulators to crack down on the tech giant, preventing Google from restricting app developers from using third-party payment systems or from communicating with their users to promote their apps.

The gaming start-up's OCL filing is an addition to this long list of concerns with Google's anticompetitive behaviour in India. In its complaint, the gaming industry leader alleged that Google abused its dominant position via a discriminatory Real Money Gaming (RMG) Pilot Program operated through the Play Store, and restrictive advertising policies. Google's Pilot Program, launched in September 2022, selectively permitted two specific formats of RMG on the Play Store — Daily Fantasy Sports (DFS) and rummy — limiting market access for other formats of RMG, such as the casual games offered by the gaming company. While Google discontinued similar pilots in Mexico and Brazil in June 2024, its Indian iteration continues to date, offering DFS and rummy operators relatively unfettered access. For example, the complaint notes that a DFS operator with 90% of the market share acquired 150 million users over 16 years, but upon joining the Pilot, it added another 55 million users in just one year. Google similarly amended its advertising

policies following the launch of the Pilot, limiting gaming advertisements to DFS and rummy operators, which earlier allowed advertisements by all games of skill. Before these amendments, the online gaming leader claimed that 68.21% of its app downloads were derived from Google's ad program. Now, they have stopped — a deep cut for an Indian start-up with proven global credibility and scale. CCI, the forward-looking and progressive digital regulator, has begun an investigation into these concerns.

Costs to India
Such market distortions carry serious economic consequences, compromising India's ability to reach its digital economy ambitions. Most importantly, lack of competition leads to "reductions in quality and consumer choice[s]", and excessive reliance on a few powerful players. Net-net, everyone loses, except the gatekeepers.

India cannot afford such a loss in innovation — and nor can its people, who will ultimately benefit from competitive growth, driven by ambitious start-ups. Sherman's homeland offers some insight into what the future holds for markets where the antitrust issue is not addressed head-on. Antitrust scholars suggest that rising monopolisation across American industries has increased the cost of doing business for growing businesses, leading to a dramatic decrease in Initial Public Offerings. The economic consequences of such lopsided markets are too severe for India to bear.

Ultimately, global tech giants play a critical role in powering these new-age businesses. What the future requires is recognition from Indian adjudicators that avenues for distribution and monetisation must be democratised, without gatekeeping, for domestic start-ups to thrive. The gaming industry leader's case carries on Sherman's legacy — it is one step towards a fairer field for everyone.

Discriminatory practices by gatekeepers in the digital economy harm India's economy, business environment, and consumers

Politics of polarisation

A fear that gained currency during the Assam agitation is being stoked now too

STATE OF PLAY

Rahul Karmakar
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Following India's independence, Assam has consistently experienced religious, linguistic, ethnic, and sub-regional differences, which have led to violence at times. Debates that have occupied the social space include the *Ujoni* (Upper Assam) temperament versus the *Namoni* (Lower Assam) disposition and the *khilonja* (indigenous) versus the *bohiringa* (outsiders). However, none of them has been as polarising as the one between the indigenous and the *Miya*, a pejorative term for Muslims with roots in Bangladesh.

This divide is rooted in the fear that Bangladeshi nationals will take over Assam. This fear gained currency during the Assam agitation (1979-85), which led to the signing of the Assam Accord of 1985. The accord prescribed the detection, deletion (from electoral rolls), and deportation of foreigners who entered Assam on or after March 25, 1971, constitutional, legislative, and administrative safeguards for the Assamese people; and restricting the acquisition of immovable property by foreigners, which invariably meant Bangladeshi people. The Bharatiya Janata Party and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh supported the movement.

The Bangladeshi issue became an election staple from the controversial 1983 election, in which the Bengali-speaking Muslims, who are dominant voters in at least 35 of Assam's 126 Assembly seats, participated despite a boycott call by the pro-agitation groups. The issue dominated the 1985 election, won by the



Assom Gana Parishad (AGP), which mostly comprised leaders of the agitation. It also birthed the United Minorities Front, whose rise stoked the perceived — demographic threat, before its space was taken up by the All India United Democratic Front.

The Bangladeshi or 'illegal immigrants' issue was in the sub-text of the promise to protect 'jaati (race), maati (land), bheeti (hearth)' that helped the BJP form its first government in Assam in 2016. The party's minor allies were the AGP and the Bodoland People's Front, which ruled over a tribal council with a history of conflicts between the dominant tribe and the migrant Muslims. The BJP-led government showed it meant business by carrying out the first eviction drive in three fringe villages of Kaziranga National Park in September 2016, almost a year after the Gauhati High Court ordered the reclamation of encroached land. Two people were killed during the eviction of mostly migrant Muslims.

A similar exercise to evict families from forest land, grazing land, and government revenue land was carried out in at least 12 places across the State before the BJP retained power in 2021 and Himanta Biswa Sarma became the Chief Minister. Despite strong sentiments against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, the party came to power relying on vikas (development) to

turn the tide in its favour. A former Congress leader, Mr. Sarma has been maintaining that the BJP does not need the votes of Muslims to win elections, while taking care to distinguish the Bengali Muslims from the *khilonja* Assamese Muslims. The eviction drive became more aggressive under him. In September 2021, an eviction drive in Gorkhuti in Darrang district claimed two lives. It was paused after a few more operations. The drive was restarted in June this year across several districts of western and north-eastern Assam.

Citing official documents, Mr. Sarma has said that 1.29 lakh bighas have been cleared of squatters so far, and about 29 lakh bighas of land are still under encroachment in the State. He made it more than apparent that his government is against by calling encroachment of land a 'liability to finish the State'. He linked it to an impending demographic shift, which he said would make the Assamese people a minority by 2041.

The Chief Minister's detractors say the eviction is being carried out to clear land for corporate houses, including the Adani Group, which is eyeing a thermal power project in western Assam. This, they say, is why people have been moved out of at least 49,000 bighas where indigenous communities resided. While the eviction of other communities has been low-key, those against Muslims have had more traction because, as MLA Akhil Gogoi said, evicting minorities paves the way for the politics of polarisation so that the Hindu votes back the BJP, especially in Ujoni, where the party is facing challenges. The State elections are less than a year away.

Justice on hold: India's courts are clogged

Civil cases in district courts face the longest delays, exposing a stark mismatch between caseload and capacity

DATA POINT

Kartik Singh

Timely justice is a cornerstone of public trust in the legal system, as captured by the classic maxim 'justice delayed, is justice denied'. Prolonged delays often deter people from approaching courts. Last year, President Droupadi Murmu termed this hesitation the 'black coat syndrome'.

Although this has been a perpetual issue in India, the scale is now striking. Over 86,700 cases are pending in the Supreme Court (SC), over 63.3 lakh cases in High Courts (HCs), and 4.6 crore cases in district and subordinate courts. Added up, the total number of pending cases in India amounts to more than 5 crore (Chart 1).

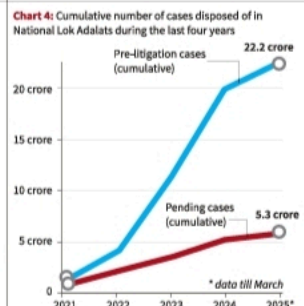
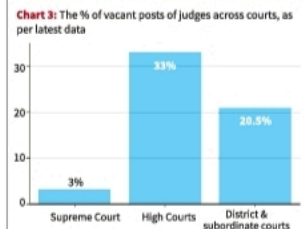
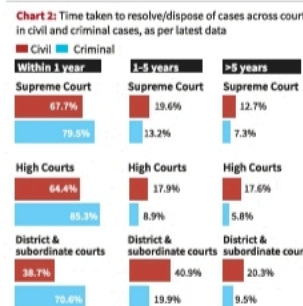
While the principal actors in the judicial process — judges, lawyers, litigants and witnesses — generally act in good faith and with rational intent, their functioning is often hindered by structural bottlenecks, procedural delays, and systemic constraints. These constraints in case resolution arise from several interlinked factors, including inadequate infrastructure and court staff, complex case facts, the nature of evidence, and degree of cooperation from key stakeholders. Delays are exacerbated by the lack of mandated timelines for different case types frequent adjournments, and weak mechanisms to monitor, track, and bunch cases for hearing. A major contributor is the absence of effective case management and scheduling, with no clear timelines for filings, witness examinations, or hearings.

An analysis of the justice delivery timeline in Indian courts reveals stark disparities across court levels and case types (Chart 2). Criminal cases, generally considered as offences against the State, are resolved faster than civil ones, such as property, family or con-

tractual disputes at every tier. HCs lead by disposing of 85.3% criminal cases within a year, followed by the SC at 79.5%, and district courts at 70.6%. The real concerns lie in civil litigation at the district level, which handles the bulk of India's pending cases, where only 38.7% civil cases are resolved within a year, and nearly 20% stretch beyond five years. This means that courts serving the most litigants are the least equipped to ensure timely justice.

Although the judiciary and the government consistently introduce various reforms, a major systemic cause of judicial delay is the persistent gap between the sanctioned and actual strength of judges across courts (Chart 3). India's judiciary functions at just 79% of its capacity. Out of 26,927 sanctioned posts, 5,665 are vacant, resulting in overwhelming workloads. District and subordinate courts, which handle the bulk of litigation, have a sanctioned strength of only 25,771 judges, averaging 18 judges per 10 lakh population. India operates with just 15 judges per 10 lakh population. Even at full sanctioned strength across all courts, it would reach only 19 judges per 10 lakh population — far below the 1987 Law Commission's recommendation of 50.

Alongside broader legal and procedural reforms, alternative dispute resolution offers a promising way forward to ease the burden on traditional courts and deliver quicker, more affordable, and citizen-friendly justice. Mechanisms such as mediation, arbitration, and Lok Adalats provide flexible alternatives for resolving disputes outside the traditional courtroom. The success of National Lok Adalats, which are organised simultaneously in all taluks, district courts, and HCs on a pre-fixed date (Chart 4), demonstrates this potential: Between 2021 and March 2025, they resolved over 27.5 crore cases, including 22.2 crore pre-litigation and 5.3 crore pending court cases.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO JULY 29, 1975

Cargo booking by Railways to Sri Lanka likely

Triruchi, July 28: Cargo booking by the Indian and Sri Lanka railways through Rameswaram and Talaimannar is likely to be resumed shortly. Preliminary discussions in this connection between officials of the Sri Lanka Railways and the Southern Railway were held here today.

Mr. V.T. Navaratne, General Manager, Mr. G.P.S. Weera Suriya, Operating Superintendent, and Mr. C. Nadarajan, Chief Commercial Superintendent of the Sri Lanka Railways, Mr. B. Natarajan, Chief Commercial Superintendent representing the General Manager of the Southern Railway and his colleagues participated in the discussions. The Emigration and Immigration Officers, Customs officials, Mr. Narayanaswamy of the Shipping Corporation of India, Mr. M.N. Balasubramanian, Divisional Superintendent, Southern Railway, Madurai Division also took part in the discussions.

Following the cyclone in 1965 which blew off the Danushkodi pier, goods booking between the Indian and Sri Lanka Railways was suspended. While the booking of passenger traffic at Talaimannar and Rameswaram continued the Railways have not been booking cargo bound for Sri Lanka which are being routed through ships.

At the conclusion of the discussions, Mr. Navaratne said that before 1965 Sri Lanka used to receive over 73,000 tonnes cargo every year by Railway booking. With just three hours for the steamer to cross the sea — a distance of 27 miles — there was very good booking from the southern districts of Tamil Nadu to Sri Lanka. The General Manager said, the pattern of cargo has now been completely changed and the Sri Lanka Railways was anxious to provide quick service for the movement of engineering and industrial goods from India to Sri Lanka through Railway booking.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JULY 29, 1925

Dangerous drugs Bill

London, July 28: The House of Lords today passed the second reading of the Dangerous Drugs Bill, the main object of which is to ratify the decision of the International Opium Conference at Geneva, namely, that coca leaves and India hemp should be added to the list of dangerous drugs, the importation of which is prohibited by the Act of 1920.

India has the highest number of slum clusters in flood-prone areas

According to a new study, around 445 million people in the Global South live in areas that have already been exposed to floods; countries like India and Brazil also have a disproportionately high number of floodplain settlements, because the people who choose to live there lack viable options

Sandhya Ramesh

Flooding events are a major hazard worldwide. According to a 2024 Moody's report, more than 2.3 billion people are exposed to flooding every year. In India, more than 600 million people are at risk of coastal or inland flooding. However, there is a lack of comprehensive data on vulnerable communities' flood exposure risk, especially in the Global South.

A new study has attempted to bridge exactly this gap by analysing satellite images of informal settlements or slum dwellings in 129 low- and middle-income countries and comparing them with maps of 343 well-documented large-scale floods.

The study found that India has the world's largest number of slum dwellers living in vulnerable settlements in floodplains – over 158 million, more than the population of Russia – with most of them concentrated in the naturally flood-prone delta of the Ganga river.

The largest concentrations and largest numbers of such people are in South Asian countries; northern India leads in absolute numbers, followed by Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. Other notable 'hotspots' include Rwanda and its neighborhood, northern Morocco, and the coastal regions of Rio de Janeiro.

Overall, in the Global South, 33% of informal settlements, making up around 445 million people living in 908,077 households within 67,568 clusters, lie in areas that have already been exposed to floods. Countries like India and Brazil also have a disproportionately high number of floodplain settlements despite also having suffered many large floods.

The study, published in *Nature Cities* in July, highlights the lack of risk management strategies that prioritise vulnerable communities, including those that have already experienced floods, beyond population-level approaches.

Risk and settlement

The researchers classified human settlements as rural, suburban, and urban, and found that Latin America and the Caribbean had high rates of urbanisation (80%), and thus more than 60% of settlements were in urban areas. In contrast, Sub-Saharan Africa had the lowest rates of urbanisation and nearly 63% of informal settlements were rural. In Sierra Leone and Liberia, informal settlements hosted most of the population.

In India, at the time of the study, 40% of slum dwellers resided in urban and suburban areas.

People settle in, or are forced to settle in, floodplains due to a combination of factors including access to jobs, social vulnerability, and financial constraints. In India and Bangladesh, the low lying Gangetic delta and the large national population contribute to the numbers.

The study also highlighted inequities in access to resources and thus local responses to flooding. These vulnerable residents also suffer the loss of jobs and access to services among the indirect consequences of floods.

Exposed populations' vulnerability was found to depend on socioeconomic factors like education level and institutional factors like flood insurance.



Aerial shot of a large slum in Bandra, a suburb in Mumbai. Both slum-dwellers and non-slum residents live in floodplains around the world, but for different reasons. GETTY IMAGES

The authors of the study wrote that both slum-dwellers and non-slum residents live in floodplains around the world, but for different reasons. In wealthier regions like Europe, subsidised flood insurance premiums in high risk areas promotes the desirability of floodplain areas like beachfronts and water views.

Infrastructure like levies also exist to protect people and houses. However, in the Global South, flood zones offer cheaper land and housing, pushing low income households into more vulnerable areas.

Data reveal that patterns of informal settlements also have a distinct bias towards settling in floodplains, with slum dwellers being 32% more likely to settle in a floodplain than outside due to lower costs, as evidenced in cities like Mumbai and Jakarta. In fact, the higher the risk of flood, the higher the chance of people settling there.

"In cities like Bengaluru, there definitely is a very strong correlation between informal settlements and their vulnerability to flood," Aysha Jennath, climate mobility researcher and post-doctoral fellow at the Indian Institute for Human Settlements, Bengaluru, said.

"Flood-prone localities are not preferred by large builders for gated communities or IT parks, so those areas are available for migrant workers and informal settlements as they are cheaper." Informal settlements in such urban



In cities like Bengaluru, there definitely is a very strong correlation between informal settlements and their vulnerability to floods

AYSHA JENNATH
CLIMATE MOBILITY RESEARCHER AND
POST-DOCTORAL FELLOW AT THE INDIAN INSTITUTE
FOR HUMAN SETTLEMENTS

areas are typically tin-sheet, tent or tarp housing, with rent paid to owners through land contractors.

SDG deadline looms

The researchers specified the need to act on flood vulnerability risk for poorer populations as the 2030 deadline for the United Nations' Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) nears. The goals number 17, including eliminating poverty and hunger, availing clean water and sanitation, and taking climate action. They apply to all the UN's member countries and focus on vulnerable communities.

The study also articulated the importance of taking a human-centric approach (instead of location-focused) to improve inadequate infrastructure.

Data show large concentrations of settlements in smaller areas, indicating gaps in housing, infrastructure, and basic services. Often, even gated communities

gentry flood-prone areas, pushing vulnerable communities to areas of higher risk exacerbated by failing infrastructure and lack of drainage, Jennath said.

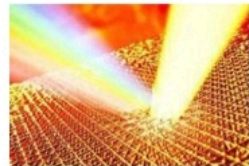
"Real estate plays a huge role in how these informal settlements come up."

Finally, the researchers also discussed the need for the government to collaborate with communities instead of banking only on traditional disaster preparedness. Skill improvement in areas like sanitation, waste management, and installing drainage systems could enhance the resilience to not just floods but also other risks like infectious disease, while providing jobs.

"These data-driven insights highlight the disproportionate flood exposure faced by slum dwellers in the Global South and underscore the need for just and equitable flood adaptation management," they wrote.

The findings are also a proof-of-concept for using machine learning, which can process large quantities of data, to analyse satellite imagery and extract nuanced insights, like socioeconomic data embedded in population densities. As a follow-up, the authors have said they plan to study time-series processes such as slum expansion, climate change, and human migration to effectively predict future flood risk.

(Sandhya Ramesh is a freelance science journalist. sandhyrsmh@gmail.com)



If a material is heated rapidly enough, it may not experience an entropy catastrophe. GREG STEWART/SLAC NATIONAL ACCELERATOR LABORATORY

Gold superheated far beyond its melting point can stay solid

Vasudevan Mukunth

When gold is heated really quickly, it remains solid at temperatures far above its melting point, a new study in *Nature* has found.

When an object is solid at or beyond its melting point, it's said to be superheated. Most materials can be superheated only in a short range after that point before melting. Scientists used to think this range was fixed because of the entropy catastrophe.

Previously, scientists thought that if you heated a crystal to about three-times its melting temperature, it wouldn't be able to stay a solid any more: it'd have to melt because its atoms would have become too disordered. In 1988, Hans-Jörg Fecht from Germany and William Johnson from the US reported that when a solid was superheated to around three-times its melting point, it would eventually possess more entropy than its liquid form beyond a particular temperature, which is impossible. This temperature was called T_{EC} , where EC stood for "entropy catastrophe."

This outcome is "catastrophic" because of the second law of thermodynamics. For two phases at the same temperature and pressure, the phase with higher entropy is (loosely speaking) the more disordered one. According to the law, the entropy of an isolated system can't spontaneously decrease – yet that is what the entropy of a solid being higher than that of a liquid implies.

The "catastrophe" is a warning that extrapolating to those problematic temperatures in the Fecht-Johnson experiment didn't enjoy thermodynamic legitimacy.

The new study with gold explores what happens when the metal is heated very quickly.

Understanding the limit of how much heat a solid can imbibe without changing its phase is important for engineers to design materials that work in extreme

Gold superheated to 14-times its melting point remained solid for a few trillionths of a second. X-ray patterns revealed the atoms were still in the ordered pattern typical of solid crystals

environments, such as on planets with brutal atmospheres.

The researchers, from Germany, Italy, the UK, and the US, used powerful laser pulses to heat gold films about 50 nm thick. The pulses heated the gold rapidly, without giving it time to expand, disintegrate, or liquefy.

Then, a device produced and emitted streaks of X-ray radiation that struck the gold atoms and scattered off only a few picoseconds after they'd been heated. By measuring the changes in energies of those X-rays and the directions in which they emerged from the nanofilms, the team could deduce the films' temperature.

The team found that gold superheated to 14-times its melting point remained solid for a few trillionths of a second, a significantly long time in the microscopic realm. The X-ray patterns revealed the atoms were still arranged in the ordered pattern typical of solid crystals.

According to the researchers, the rapid heating could overtake the effects that came with heating more slowly. This isn't a gimmick but a signal that if a material is heated rapidly enough, there may not actually be an "entropy catastrophe." The ultrashort laser pulses made sure the gold atoms didn't have time to "relax" before the X-ray instrument came on, revealing the nanofilm to have been solid even at a temperature where melting was expected to be unavoidable.

For feedback and suggestions for 'Science', please write to science@thehindu.co.in with the subject 'Daily page'

THE SCIENCE QUIZ

Lands kept apart, or together, by a sliver

Vasudevan Mukunth

QUESTION 1

Name the waterway that separates Europe from Asia and which has been central to trade and warfare for centuries. Once called the Hellespont, it connects the Sea of Marmara with the Aegean. Xerxes' army famously crossed it on a pontoon bridge in 480 BC, followed by Alexander the Great in 334 BC.

QUESTION 2

This 77-kilometre-long structure connects the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans via a narrow Central American land bridge, saving ships nearly 13,000 km of travel. Its construction reshaped global shipping routes and required a

major effort to conquer both tropical disease and terrain. Name it.

QUESTION 3

This strait is only 3.8 km wide at its narrowest point. It separates a British overseas territory from the Spanish mainland, connects the Atlantic Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea, and is home to a famous rock with mythic associations. Name the strait.

QUESTION 4

This narrow strait links the Crimean Peninsula to the Russian mainland and has been of strategic military interest since ancient times. It is also the site of a modern bridge that's often been in the news vis-à-vis Russia's war against Ukraine. Name the strait.

QUESTION 5

Often mistaken for a human-made

structure, this natural feature is a slender land connection between two large landmasses, separating the Pacific Ocean from the Arctic ocean. During the Ice Age, it helped humans cross from the upper edges of Asia into North America. Name it.

Answers to July 22 quiz:

1. Mammals related to primates that glide between trees – **Ans: Flying lemurs**
 2. South American rodents that spend a lot of time eating – **Ans: Guinea pigs**
 3. Marsupial that often went by "Tasmanian tiger" – **Ans: Thylacine**
 4. Common name for *Phrynosoma* lizards – **Ans: Horny toads**
 5. Sea urchin named for its skeletons washed ashore – **Ans: Sand dollar**
- Visual: **Whale shark**
First contact: K.N. Viswanathan | Tamal Biswas | Saifuddin Mridha | Anmol Agrawal | Faisal Khan



Visual: Clockwise from top left, these are the cities of Auckland, Manila, Seattle, and Madison. What do they have in common in line with this quiz's theme? ELPINT007, WELF NESTOR NACOR, COLLEGE LIBRARY

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



Corporations shouldn't expect banking licences

The RBI governor has done well to reiterate the central bank's long-held policy of keeping corporate houses out of banking. It is best to avoid conflicts of interest in this vital sector

In a world where change is said to be the only constant, it's good to know that some things do not change. The Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) long-held policy of keeping corporates out of banking, for instance.

"There is no proposal to allow corporates, either directly or through non-banking finance companies, to obtain banking licences," said RBI Governor Sanjay Malhotra last week. He cited an "inherent conflict of interest with a group actually dealing with the money of depositors." So there we have it—spelt out in clear terms by none other than the chief of India's bank licensing authority. Hopefully, this enunciation of RBI's position will deliver respite from a notable reality ever since the sector was opened to new entrants: incessant lobbying by corporate houses eager to open banks.

In 2020, it may be recalled, RBI had released the report of an internal working group tasked with reviewing the extant ownership guidelines for private banks and their corporate structure. The group's advice was that large corporate or industrial houses may be allowed to act as bank promoters only after necessary amendments were made to the Banking Regulation Act of 1949 to prevent connected lending in particular and the exposure of such banks to other group entities, financial or non-financial, in general; plus, the sector's supervisory mechanism had to be strengthened first. Neither has happened. Although RBI has been tightening supervision, it is nowhere near fool-proof. We have also not seen any movement on another key recommendation of that report: that a 'non-operative financial holding company' structure be preferred for all new licences issued for universal banks. Wisely, RBI has maintained the *status quo* on corporate entry.

The argument that India's banking sector is small relative to its GDP in comparison with other countries in its peer group and we must therefore let corporations start banks is not persuasive. Other sources of finance such as equity, corporate bonds and loans from non-bank financial companies have emerged in a big way in recent years. Moreover, India is not the only country that bars corporations from banking. In the US, for example, commercial enterprises are not allowed to own banks—in line with the principle of keeping banking and commerce apart. The same rationale applies here too. While safeguards exist, such as a stipulated cap on the stake of promoters as a percentage of the bank's paid-up equity capital eligible for voting (26% currently), the reality is that rules designed to prevent concentration of control can be circumvented. We can never be too careful when it comes to ensuring the safety of public savings and securing people's trust in the banking system, which serves as the bedrock of a modern economy. And that requires two conditions to be fulfilled: One, ownership should be wide and diversified; and two, there must be no scope for conflicts of interest. Sure, we could do with more and larger banks. But, as the working group report noted back in 2020, capital has not been a constraint for private banks. With the Indian economy averaging an annual growth rate of 7.2% in the past three years, that position has only changed for the better. Public sector banks are better placed too. State Bank of India's recent qualified institutional placement aimed to raise ₹25,000 crore but attracted bids of ₹1.12 trillion, 64% of it from foreign investors. This suggests that our banking sector is doing quite well, thank you, without the entry of corporate houses.

Resolve the paradox of jobless graduates amid a skills scarcity

Ensuring that India's youth are productively employed is a challenge that calls for radical reforms



AJIT RANADE
is senior fellow with Pune International Centre

India's gross enrolment ratio (GER) in higher education is at 28.3%, up by five percentage points in the past 10 years. This represents the proportion of those between the ages of 18 and 23 enrolled for college or higher-level courses. The National Education Policy aims to increase this ratio to 50% in the next decade. That would imply a faster rate of increasing college and university attendance than has been achieved in the past decade. At present, roughly 11 million young people are graduating annually with a degree or diploma of some kind. The problem of getting more youth enrolled is not merely constrained by the lack of seats in colleges. For instance, in the recent July frenzy for admissions to junior colleges across the state of Maharashtra, it was revealed that there were 300 colleges, fully funded by the state, that received zero applicants. These colleges receive grants for staff and faculty salaries but have no students. There is suspicion that this state of affairs has been going on for quite some time. It was shocking enough for the Bombay High Court to take *suo moto* cognizance and initiate legal proceedings.

The lack of applicants to certain colleges is an example of the youth 'voting with their feet'. There is no perceived benefit either from the courses on offer or the quality of teaching. Contrast this with the huge demand for coaching

classes. It is an industry worth an estimated \$10 billion, with millions enrolled in coaching centres from Kota to Kanpur and Patna to Pune. College graduates enrol in these to prepare for fiercely competitive examinations, such as those for the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC), banking and railways. We thus have colleges where seats go unfilled while there is a stampede for admission to other colleges or unregulated coaching centres. Ironically, the government itself encourages preparation for competitive exams by funding the creation of free digital resources for such preparation. Or through subsidised programmes offered as cheaper substitutes to unaffordable private coaching centres. The government's efforts are adding to the mindless mania of the youth pursuing already-scarce government jobs and point to a lack of imagination on what can be done to address the situation.

The goal of increasing the GER to 50% is meant to enhance the quality of India's human capital and prepare the youth for the jobs of tomorrow. India is in the midst of a demographic revolution that is also throwing up a paradox. The youth, or those between the ages of 15 and 29 years, make up 27% of the total population, thus representing a vast potential workforce. Yet, this is the very segment facing an acute crisis of high unemployment, low employability and widespread under-utilization. Large numbers of young Indians remain jobless or underemployed, or are engaged for years in unproductive exam preparation. The last of these is reflected in a low youth labour force participation rate. According to Periodic Labour Force Survey data for May, only 42.1% of the youth were employed or looking for work. There is also a stark gender divide, with the participation ratio being 61.6% for males and only 22.4% for females. Note, however, that female enrolment in colleges is now nearly at par with men, and women often outperform men academically.

According to the *India Employment Report 2024*, the youth make up 83% of the total unemployed. Two-thirds of them have a secondary or higher education. The unemployment rate among those with a college degree is close to 30%, nearly nine times the rate among illiterate youth. The high joblessness rate of educated youth is in addition to those who are exam aspirants, spending precious years of their youth preparing for competitive exams, where getting selected for their dream job is simply like winning a lottery. Very few bag it.

This group is identified by the acronym 'Nect': for 'not in employment, education or any training'. The coexistence of high unemployment among educated job seekers and an acute shortage of skilled candidates expressed by industry is a severe indictment of the country's higher education system. Less than 5% of our youth receive formal vocational training. Most college graduates lack digital literacy, communication skills and job readiness.

At the same time, our largest private sector recruiters, IT services firms, have announced hiring freezes, weighed as they are by reduced global demand and a shift towards automation (especially Generative AI). A computer science graduate is likely to be paid better as a healthcare worker for geriatric care, for which there is huge demand. Demand-supply mismatches between the skills sought and offered are growing. Gig work and platform-based jobs may be expanding, but they too require digital skills that many graduates lack.

We need a radical shift in education-to-employment pathways. This calls for an overhaul of higher education and its curriculum, more industry-academia partnerships that blend earning and learning potential and more apprenticeships.

We must also promote entrepreneurship rather than job seeking. Importantly, our labour markets need efficiency. Digital exchanges and career platforms could help.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

A man willing to work, and unable to find work, is perhaps the saddest sight that fortune's inequality exhibits under this sun.

THOMAS CARLYLE

THEIR VIEW

Sebi's Jane Street order: The canary our market needed

SOMNATH MUKHERJEE



is chief investment officer of ASK Private Wealth.

Arbitrage or market manipulation? Jane Street believes it is an uber-efficient arbitrageur. It spotted pricing anomalies between index options and the index's stock constituents, and used sophisticated trading models to profit from the arbitrage. The Securities and Exchange Board of India's (Sebi) order has some interesting findings. On 17 January 2024, the expiry day for Bank Nifty derivatives, the index opened 2% lower due to weak earnings of some of its constituents. However, options on the Bank Nifty traded at a level where the implied price was higher, resulting in an anomalous price spread. JS did what textbooks tell us: buy stocks that make up the Bank Nifty while selling options on this index. The trade worked as textbooks say it would: the spread narrowed within six minutes. But here's the twist: the total value of Bank Nifty stocks purchased was ₹572 crore while the total notional value of the options sold was ₹8,751 crore, which is more than 15 times. This oddity continued. By mid-day, JS

had bought Bank Nifty stocks and futures worth over ₹5,000 crore and sold options worth over ₹30,000 crore. Arbitrage is about hedging, but one doesn't hedge a bet on India winning the Border-Gavaskar Trophy by placing 15 bets on India not winning it. So JS started selling its stock/futures positions. But liquidity in these segments is so low that its trades tanked prices, resulting in losses for JS in its long index positions. But its large short options position (5-6 times in notional exposure to its cash/futures positions) got settled at market close at a massive profit. In short, JS appeared to move prices in the illiquid leg of the market (cash/futures) so that it could profit from its large position in the liquid leg (options).

Arbitrage or manipulation? Either way, Sebi's order has acted as the proverbial canary in the coal mine to reveal potentially poisonous fumes in our capital markets.

Flume 1—Lopsided market structure: India's equity market is the second largest among emerging economies by market capitalization and volumes both. However, volumes are skewed—over 90% are in derivatives (futures and options or F&O), with options accounting for the bulk. The cash segment is shallow. Daily volumes in the shares of HDFC Bank, the largest Bank Nifty constituent,

for instance, are only about ₹2,000 crore. To put this in context, the total equity assets under management of India's mutual funds (MFs) are over ₹30 trillion, with ₹50-60,000 crore worth of flows every month. This skew causes distortions.

Flume 2—Skewed tax structure: A small ₹5,000 crore trade could move prices because there is no countervailing Indian entity that's able to provide liquidity by playing the other side of JS's 'arbitrage' trades. The reason is simple—taxes. In India, the securities transaction tax (STT) on derivatives is a fraction of what it is on stocks, incentivizing investors to move to F&O from the cash segment. Further, foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) enjoy a large tax advantage over Indians. FPIs' F&O trades qualify for capital-gains tax (and are taxed at 20% if short-term and 12.5% if long-term), but for Indian entities, the same gains are deemed to be income (taxed at 25% for corporates and 30% for individuals/trusts).

Flume 3—Regulation stifles Indian institu-

tions: For many years, FPIs provided the dominant share of liquidity in Indian stock markets. Over the last decade, Indian institutions, especially MFs, have risen in stature and now account for a larger share of India's market capitalization and volumes than FPIs. This provides a diversified pool of liquidity in the cash segment. But in the F&O segment, a regulatory overhang prevents the creation of such counterweight liquidity. Why?

First, domestic institutional investors are mostly not allowed to use leverage, but FPIs are. **Second,** short-selling, which lets market participants act on bearish views, exists mostly in the realm of theory; its process is such that participation and

liquidity are low. **Third,** a prudential aversion to leverage has left F&O trading as its only source. Bank lending to capital markets is heavily circumscribed and non-banking financial companies have limited capacity to lend. This reduces domestic market liquidity and pushes

participants towards the F&O segment.

Fourth, while there are all sorts of limits in equity markets, index options face none. This means participants can build positions in index options many times the stock position limits on the underlying stocks.

Fifth, a very high proportion of market liquidity is concentrated in short-term options contracts. India is unique as a large market with zero liquidity in derivatives of more than three months tenor.

Solutions are within grasp: India's financial markets are world class. So are its regulators (think of Sebi and the Reserve Bank of India). Diversified liquidity is the lifeblood of any well-functioning market. Small tweaks in tax laws, alongside a rethink on the flexibility afforded to Indian institutions (especially MFs) would be a great first start. The appointment of market-makers for longer-dated derivatives is another idea that is well-tested in India; in the 1990s, RBI licensed a slew of primary dealers as market-makers for government bonds with great results. India's capital markets are valuable. Sebi has done its bit as the canary by highlighting emergent risks. It is time now to make space for fresh ideas so that the mine continues to prosper for India.

These are the author's personal views.



THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

India's Income Tax law revision: Well begun is still only half done

The draft tabled simplifies its language but we also need changes that go beyond form to address key aspects of substance



KETAN DALAL
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There has been significant press coverage of India's Income Tax Bill, 2025, which was introduced in Parliament on 21 July. As readers would recall, a committee was set up in October 2024 for the simplification of the Income Tax Act; the panel's mandate was ring-fenced to simplification of language, reduction of litigation and the compliance burden, and the removal of redundant or obsolete provisions. In that sense, the committee was restrained by its limited mandate.

A Lok Sabha Select Committee was set up to look at the draft Income Tax Bill framed by the Simplification Committee, which has submitted its report with 285 recommendations, a majority of which seem to find favour with the government; the net result is that the bill framed by the simplification panel will likely be passed into law with some changes. However, there are some key aspects that need to be discussed.

The Income Tax Act of 1961 has been amended dozens of times, and with some 4,000 amendments, its language had turned complex; in this context, the simplification panel has made a good attempt to offer clarity. For example, several tables and explanations have been added and the number of sections has been brought down from 819 to 516. However, there are concerns over several aspects; for example, there is a tendency to delegate rule-making to the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT)—like in the case of fee assessments—whereby, compared to existing provisions, the CBDT would gain greater scope to make legislative-type changes without parliamentary oversight. This is worrisome.

There are apparent errors and omissions in the existing law that should have been corrected. For example, in the context of the 'deemed gift' provision in s 60(2)(b), the definition of 'relative' for tax exemption does not expressly include reciprocity, or whether the relationship is mutually applicable for gifting; this aspect should have been explicitly clarified (even under the existing law, the CBDT should have issued such a circular). It impacts gifting between taxpayers and nephews, for example, if the tax exemption for relatives applies only one-way. Also, the tax neutrality provision for a 'demerger' does not include 'fast track demerger', because that concept came later. Representations were received by the Select Committee and both these aspects were pointed out to the ministry, but were apparently brushed aside; surprisingly, the common-sense point that relationships should be reciprocal (or two-way) was met with a response from the ministry that this is 'in the nature of a major policy change'.

Although the Committee's mandate was limited, the larger concern is that once the bill is enacted, the government would be reluctant to make sub-



stantive changes. Here are some we badly need. **Individual taxation:** The limit of annual income beyond which the maximum tax rate kicks in is only ₹5 lakh, which seems too low and needs to be addressed. Also, medical expenses have gone through the roof in the last few years, as have education costs; both these are critical, and even relatively well-off Indians are struggling to meet these costs. The bill should allow a higher deduction for medical and medical expenses and provide for a meaningful deduction for education (the latter could help address the skill gaps we face). Real estate costs have also shot up, while the deduction of interest on housing loans is too low at ₹2 lakh per year. This badly needs an upward revision.

Corporate taxation: India's corporate tax rate is very reasonable at 25%; however, some aspects that need to be addressed relate to mergers and acquisitions (M&As), including group restructuring. Some specific aspects that could be looked at even at this stage have been long-standing demands. The definition of a 'demerger' for tax neutrality is highly restrictive and needs rationalization. The commercial reality of M&A transactions involves earn-outs and deferred amounts, and the Act does not have contemporary provisions on the year of taxability, which causes uncertainty and litigation. Losses of merging companies are allowed to be carried forward only in restricted circumstances, primarily if the merging company is in manufacturing; this is a relic from a bygone era, since several service companies also have losses and the mergers of such companies could save them from extinction and prevent job losses.

India's problem of non-performing assets has reduced but is still substantial. In the context of takeovers that emerge from the official bankruptcy process, the provision in Section 28 that makes write-backs of haircuts taken by lenders taxable is a major dampener from the perspective of an acquirer that seeks to reduce its risk of acquiring an insolvent company to resurrect.

The last two aspects have again been pointed out to the ministry, which appears not to see merit in these changes.

Administrative dimensions: There have been simplifications in Tax Collected at Source (TCS) and Tax Deducted at Source (TDS), but the larger issue is that the deductor of tax is doing the government's job; from an Ease of Doing Business perspective, TDS provisions need to be shrunk, as opposed to language being simplified. Also, given the need to reduce tax litigation, a robust advance ruling mechanism needs to be put in place, so that tax disputes can be addressed upfront; all advance ruling mechanisms till now have failed, either because of faulty architecture or elongated time frames (or both), making the term 'advance' seem meaningless.

Given the Simplification Committee's mandate, it has done well to simplify the law's language, but unfortunately, that's about form rather than substance; the issues outlined above still need to be addressed in the context of India's avowed intent to ease business. At least some structural changes are needed. A redraft of our tax law is useful and attractive, no doubt, but would be disappointing if it falls short of dealing with fundamental issues.

AI 'slop' suits YouTube's aims but what about the rest of us?

AI-generated video clips could crowd out human-made content



PARMY OLSON
is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering technology.

The prevailing wisdom is that AI-generated content, or 'slop' as it's colloquially known, should make our skin crawl. AI models tend to generate uncanny faces, mangled hands and fantastical scenarios. For example, a YouTube Short video shows a baby that finds itself being shimmied up a baggage loader onto a jumbo jet, before donning an aviation headset and flying the plane. It has racked up more than 103 million views.

So too have other AI-generated videos which are starting to dominate the platform in much the same way they have proliferated across Facebook, Pinterest and Instagram. Several of YouTube's most popular channels now feature AI-generated content heavily.

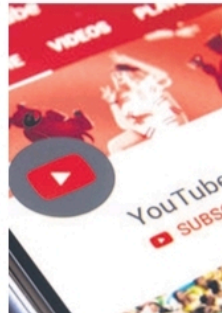
I'd originally thought this would be a problem for YouTube as it grappled with what looked like a new form of spam, but the general lack of complaint from advertisers, coupled with the gangbusters growth of AI content and appreciative comments from viewers, changed my view. It seems people are happy to gorge on slop, and that's not a problem for Alphabet's most valuable asset after Google Search. Quite the opposite.

Earlier this month, YouTube—which could surpass The Walt Disney Company this year as the world's largest media company by revenue—updated its policies to strike a balance, allowing AI-generated videos to flourish on its platform without treating them as spam.

The new rules cut ad revenue from low-effort, repetitive content. Their creators might exploit AI tools like Eleven Labs to create a synthetic voice that reads out a script, scraped from Reddit, over a slide-show of stock images. Some of these videos get hundreds of thousands of views.

The video platform's overall approach, however, is that AI-generated content is fine so long as it's original, provides value to viewers and includes some human input. For now, it seems to be measuring that on a case-by-case basis, which is as good an approach as any with new tech. YouTube is also no stranger to fighting spam. Indeed, the policy update seems to have put advertisers at ease, even as 92% of creators on the site use generative AI tools, according to the company. Advertisers have a tacit understanding that more AI on YouTube means more content, and more revenue.

It helps that the industry has years of experience trying to monitor icky content—from racism to conspiracy theories—shown next to their brands online. They



What's a boon for YouTube could be the bane of content creators. **ISTOCKPHOTO**

have learnt that it's a years-long game of whack-a-mole.

YouTube clearly wants AI content to thrive. Sister company Google has said that later this summer, it will bring its video-generation tool Veo3 to YouTube Shorts, making it even easier to create lifelike AI videos of Storm Trooper vloggers or biblical characters as influencers. The company says AI will 'unlock creativity' for its content creators.

But unlocking new forms of profit is more straightforward for Alphabet than it is for creators. Take Ahmet Yigit, an Istanbul-based creator who was behind the viral pilot-baby video. Though his channel has racked up hundreds of millions of views, he's only received an estimated \$2,600 for his most viral post, with the bulk of his audience coming from countries like India, where ad rates are low.

Yigit says he spends hours on a single scene and juggles a dozen tools, suggesting that even this new generation of AI creators could end up working harder for less, while Alphabet reaps ad revenue from their output. As long as the content machine runs, it doesn't matter whether AI videos are quick and easy or gruelling to make—only that they drive views and ads.

That's why YouTube is leaning harder into welcoming slop than policing it. While the company does require creators to say if their videos contain AI, the resulting disclaimer is listed in a small-text description that viewers must click through to read, making it tough to spot. That does little to address the growing confusion around what's real and what's synthetic as more YouTube users race to capitalize on AI content.

The risk is that as slop floods our feeds and juices YouTube's recommendation algorithms, it'll drown out more thoughtful, human-made work. The earliest big YouTube hits were slices of life like the infamous clip *Charlie Bit My Finger*. What happens when the next wave of viral hits have no bearing on reality, instead offering bizarre dreamlike sequences of babies dressed as Storm Troopers, or Donald Trump beating up bullies in an alleyway?

Perhaps they will both reflect and deepen our sense of disconnection from real life. AI might turn out to be a boon for YouTube, but it offers an alternative future for the rest of us. **©BLOOMBERG**

MY VIEW | A VISIBLE HAND

NISAR is a remarkable example of space collaboration

NARAYAN RAMACHANDRAN



is chairman, InKube Labs. Read Narayan's Mint columns at www.livemint.com/visiblehand

Earlier this month, Wing Commander Shubhanshu Shukla returned to earth after spending 18 days in space. He is only the second Indian to have been to space, and piloted the Space X Dragon with its Axiom-4 crew to the International Space Station (ISS) and back. While this mission was commercially arranged, the activities and experiments that Shukla conducted will aid India in its Gaganyaan human spaceflight programme in the coming years.

Gaganyaan 1 and 2 are expected to place uncrewed crafts in low-earth orbit that will be launched in late 2025 and 2026, respectively. Gaganyaan 3 is expected to launch a crewed craft later in 2026 or early 2027. Shukla himself was trained both at the Yuri Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Centre in Moscow and subsequently at the Johnson Space Center in Houston.

Another remarkable area of collaboration between the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) and National Aeronautics and Space Administration (Nasa) will come to

fruition with the launch at the end of July of a jointly-developed satellite called NISAR. The acronym stands for Nasa-ISro Satellite Aperture Radar. The mission is organized to collect an unprecedented amount of information about our planet's environment. It will scan nearly all of Earth's land and ice surfaces twice every 12 days. This will let us track the expansion and contraction of ice sheets, sea ice and glaciers, plus the deformation of its crust due to natural hazards as well as natural and man-made changes to terrestrial ecosystems. These measurements will be carried out by two radar systems—an L-band system and an S-band system. This dual-band system is the first of its kind in the world. The L-band system was built in the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) at Nasa and the S-band system at the Space Applications Centre (SAC), Ahmedabad. JPL will additionally provide a high-rate telecom subsystem for scientific data, a solid-state recorder and a payload data subsystem. ISro will provide the satellite bus, a solid-state recorder and a payload data system, in addition to launch services and a launch vehicle.

The NISAR satellite, which weighs nearly 2400kg, has been moved to Sriharikota in preparation for its launch at the end of this month. It will lift off on ISro's GSLV-F16 rocket and then be placed in a 743km sun-synchronous orbit.

There are many exciting space missions around the world this year and the next. These span lunar spaceflight, asteroid and planetary missions, climate and earth science missions and orbital innovation (of which NISAR is an example). Nasa, JAXA, ESA, ISro and CNSA lead almost all these programmes. Today, 55 countries have signed the Artemis Accords—a set of principles guiding peaceful and transparent space exploration, especially of the Moon and Mars. At a time when countries are at loggerheads on earth, civilian space collaboration continues apace.

If you look deeper, you will find threads of countries going it alone. The most obvious example is the CNSA, particularly Tiangong, China's space station launched in 2021. While China's stated goal is to make it a collaborative international project, it is currently operated by China alone. Tiangong is technically the third

space station, since it follows the Mir Space Station that the Soviet Union (and later Russia) had stationed in low-earth orbit from 1986 to 2001, and the ISS, which was launched nearly 25 years ago and is still operational. Surprisingly, Russia is part of the ISS and has committed to remaining so at least until 2028. China, though, has never been part of the ISS.

Geopolitics on Earth is beginning to shape some country collaborations in space. The International Lunar Research Station (ILRS) announced by Roscosmos and CNSA in 2021 is led by Russia and China but includes several other countries like Azerbaijan, Belarus, Pakistan and South Africa. The ILRS has announced plans to power a permanent station on the Moon with a nuclear plant to be operational beginning in 2031. After the Soviet Union's space programme, this is the first space mission that seems like an alternative to Western efforts. Brazil, South Korea and India operate space programmes that are not just independent,

but also open to wide global collaboration. India's civilian space effort has distinguished itself with its frugal missions, ability to master complex engineering feats like landing near the Moon's south pole, and its outreach to the public. Missions that explore the far reaches of our solar system and beyond are better left to countries that have very large space budgets. Nasa has several telescope-based missions for interstellar space and craft-based missions for Jupiter, Saturn and beyond. India has a fast-growing private space sector, but its best returns on space investment are likely to come from parts of space that are close to earth, like near-earth orbits and the Moon. This priority is reflected in ISro's next few missions, be it the planned launch of large and small payloads, uncrewed and crewed missions to low-earth orbit, or its directional tilt towards an Indian Space Station by 2035. Renewed interest in this sector has brought about a new momentum and opened up exciting possibilities for Indian discoveries in space.

Set for lift-off, this Nasa-ISro satellite aligns well with India's strategic focus on near-earth opportunities

P.S. 'We are just an advanced breed of monkeys on a minor planet of a very average star. But we can understand the Universe. That makes us something very special,' said cosmologist Stephen Hawking.

but also open to wide global collaboration. India's civilian space effort has distinguished itself with its frugal missions, ability to master complex engineering feats like landing near the Moon's south pole, and its outreach to the public. Missions that explore the far reaches of our solar system and beyond are better left to countries that have very large space budgets. Nasa has several telescope-based missions for interstellar space and craft-based missions for Jupiter, Saturn and beyond. India has a fast-growing private space sector, but its best returns on space investment are likely to come from parts of space that are close to earth, like near-earth orbits and the Moon. This priority is reflected in ISro's next few missions, be it the planned launch of large and small payloads, uncrewed and crewed missions to low-earth orbit, or its directional tilt towards an Indian Space Station by 2035. Renewed interest in this sector has brought about a new momentum and opened up exciting possibilities for Indian discoveries in space.

Opinion

TUESDAY, JULY 29, 2025



END RESULT
Union defence minister Rajnath Singh
In any exam, the result matters. We should see whether a student is getting good marks in an exam and not focus on whether his pencil was broken or pen was lost

Inflection point for IT

TCS layoffs show being large is no longer enough in an AI-dominated world; it's all about efficiency, innovation

TATA CONSULTANCY SERVICES' (TCS) decision to lay off 2% or about 12,000 of its global workforce is a clear signal of where the domestic information technology (IT) industry now stands. It's the first open admission by a major player that the traditional model that drove decades of growth is no longer working. While TCS may be the first to act, it's unlikely to be the last. Other companies will certainly follow as the moment of reckoning for domestic IT firms has arrived. The most striking part of this development is that the cuts are concentrated not at the entry level, which has long been seen as most at risk from artificial intelligence (AI), but at the middle and senior levels. TCS has said the layoffs are not because of AI, but due to a skill mismatch. Still, it's clear that AI and automation are playing a major role in reshaping how companies think about roles, structures, and future workforce needs.

For years, the domestic IT sector relied on a model that was focused on scale. Firms hired large numbers of engineers, charged clients based on how many people were assigned to a project, and delivered basic software services and digital transformation work. This was efficient and profitable when clients mainly wanted cost savings. But now, expectations have changed. Clients want faster results, flexible pricing based on outcomes, and innovation, not just execution. At the same time, global wage differences have narrowed, and automation makes it possible to deliver the same work with fewer people. What that means is that the foundation of the old model is being challenged. The pyramid structure, with its layers of managers and large delivery teams, is harder to sustain. TCS's restructuring, including new rules on bench time, utilisation, and performance, reflects a shift towards a more product-focused, agile set-up. Mid- and senior-level employees who once thrived in legacy project models are now under pressure to adapt to new ways of working, and not all of them are able to make that shift.

This isn't happening in isolation. Across the world, tech companies are cutting jobs and re-organising their teams. Microsoft, Meta, Google, Salesforce, and Intel have all made major workforce changes. Some have directly pointed to AI as a factor; others have talked about cost pressures, the end of overhiring, or changing business needs. But the overall trend is clear that companies are preparing for a future where automation plays a central role, and where being large is no longer enough, but being efficient and innovative matters more. In that context, TCS's move fits into a wider pattern.

What's worth noting is that this is happening even before AI reaches its next stage. So far, we are still in the early phases. More advanced, agentic AI systems are yet to be deployed at scale. When they do arrive, the impact could be deeper and more widespread. TCS's decision may look sudden, but it has been coming for a while. The pressures have been building, with changing client needs, slowing global demand, tighter budgets, and rising expectations from investors. The old approach of hiring big and delivering on scale will not be enough. Firms must now build platforms, create intellectual property, invest in talent with newer skills, and take on a more strategic role for their clients—something in which they have been found wanting. If TCS has taken the first step, its peers can't be far behind.

Angel investors in India will become rare species

ANGEL INVESTING IN India has just crossed a modest milestone of \$1 billion in commitments, and already the nascent asset class is facing extinction. Blame it on an overdose of regulatory attention.

Until recently, affluent individuals who placed small bets on long shots were targeted with a bizzare "angel tax," which viewed start-ups fundraising as taxable income. Now that the government has finally scrapped the draconian levy, the Securities and Exchange Board of India has sown fresh seeds of disquiet for people who want to try early-stage allocations via collective investment plans: It wants them to get accredited.

Commitments into angel funds have swelled by 44% over the past year, and investments have surged by a third. These are reasonable growth rates, but Sebi seems to believe it can give a further boost to the "ease of doing business." Although that's a welcome sentiment, some caution is warranted. As a risk-taking culture spreads beyond established business families, new sources of finance must emerge. If angel funds exit because their investors don't want to seek accreditation, many promising entrepreneurs may have to drop out before their first meeting with venture capital or private equity.

The regulator means well. It wants to unshackle angel investors from the Companies Act, which limits participation in private placement of securities to 200 subscribers. Any more will require public offerings. But this is unfair to regulated funds, where professional managers are required to have skin in the game. Plus, the risks are explained in a memorandum, and explicit investor consent is needed for each bet. But how does the regulator sidestep a law made by parliament?

It has come up with a plan. From next year, individuals who invest in angel funds will be treated as Qualified Institutional Buyers. Since the law exempts QIBs from the 200-person rule, managers will no longer have to limit participation. This "would allow angel funds to show opportunities to a wider pool of eligible investors, while staying in conformity with the Companies Act," Sebi said last month.

There's a catch, however. Since individuals aren't really institutions, Sebi wants them to become accredited investors like in the US to qualify for exemption. They will have a year to adjust to the new regime. Trouble is that while 13% of Americans meet the thresholds for buying private securities, so far only 650 Indians have successfully applied for accreditation.

Do only 0.0005% of Indians earn more than ₹20 million (\$230,000) annually, or have a net worth in excess of \$860,000? Not really. Counting just the top taxpayers, at least 60,000 people should easily meet those minimum standards. But to get accredited, people have to provide proof to third parties. In a country where authorities send tax bills to roadside vegetable vendors by tracing QR-code-based payments, it's in nobody's interest to furnish documentation showing how rich they are.

Even if the goal is to drive accreditation, why single out start-up investors? They are already set apart from the nine out of 10 retail traders betting on equities options and being taken to the cleaners by big whales like Jane Street. The public-market casino is where the regulator needs to police participation. Angel investors only self-certify a minimum net worth to their fund manager. The thresholds are low, as is the compliance burden. Not everyone is invited to dabble in unlisted securities has the risk appetite for it. But as long as they are giving informed consent, they can be safely left alone. It's the insurance and banking regulators that have to put a stop to much more widespread deceptive selling in their industries.

The \$1.2 billion that angels have committed so far may not produce superstar enterprises. That's fine, as long as a growing pot of money helps nurture some gritty entrepreneurs. Millennial and Gen Z billionaires among India's traditional family-owned firms are bored with business. They don't fancy their chances against either large tycoons or smart start-up founders. But the latter need finance.

Sebi's other ideas are laudable. Relaxing the floor and cap on investments, doing away with concentration limits on exposure, and allowing funds to keep backing start-ups as they mature will improve returns. But forcing investors to get accredited by third parties? That's sure to backfire, unless Sebi itself obtains their permission to query the tax returns database. A simple yes or no answer to the eligibility question, based on information they have shared with tax authorities, could help increase the number of 650 accredited investors manifold.



ANDY MUKHERJEE
Bloomberg

INDIA-UK TRADE DEAL

IT PUTS FOCUS BACK ON TRADE DISCOURSE ISSUES FOR THE FUTURE RATHER THAN ARCHIVAL ONES LIKE TARIFFS

An Ivy League FTA

AT A TIME when global trade discussions are dominated by tariffs, the India-UK Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) is a notable exception.

Tariffs are certainly a part of the CETA. But it is much more than tariffs. The deal exemplifies what modern trade agreements between the world's major economies should look like, in terms of issues and coverage. The agreement helps in getting both the developed and developing worlds to focus on non-tariff issues that matter most in modern trade. And it also marks India's entry in big-ticket 21st-century modern FTAs.

President Trump's fondness for tariffs, demonstrated by his calling them the most "beautiful word in the dictionary," has significantly impacted the global trade discourse by distracting the trajectory of trade liberalisation. From the time the most-favoured nation (MFN) principle of allowing reciprocal access became the key rule in global trade, tariffs began getting phased out. While World Trade Organization (WTO) members, like India, retained the flexibility of raising tariffs under specific circumstances, global trade has mostly on MFN rates. Bilateral and regional FTAs brought down tariffs even further. The steady decline in tariffs through FTAs made them far less important subjects in trade policy than they were in the 1980s.

The trade liberalisation discourse, till the middle of the last decade, was largely focused on non-tariff market access issues, including those that became heavily significant over time, such as investment, competition policy, services, labour and environment, and digital trade. The Trump tariff tirade has pushed back this discourse by at least a couple of decades by reviving the spotlight back on tariffs. As a result, new-generation trade

issues, which are far more important for future global trade given the structural changes and evolving priorities for the world economy, are being discussed less with countries scrambling to dig up tariffs and schedules that had sunk into oblivion due to the evaporation of tariffs.

It is in this respect that the UK-India CETA succeeds in pulling back the attention in global trade discourse on issues for the future, rather than archival ones like meaningless tariffs.

There are many reasons for the UK-India CETA to be looked at closely.

First, it is a FTA between the world's fourth (India) and sixth (UK) largest economies. The combined economic size of the FTA is \$8 trillion valued in current market GDP. The combined market includes around 2 billion people. Second, it is one of the most prominent FTAs exhibiting the complementing synergies between the Global South and North—as seen through it being India's first FTA with a major G7 member that is a mature industrialised Western economy like the UK. Third, in terms of the current strategic and geo-economic vision of the global order and the trade landscape, it marks a trade deal between two of the world's most prominent "middle powers".

India and the UK are middle powers,

in terms of their shares in global trade, which the director-general of WTO, in an enlightening speech in December 2024, had categorised as countries with shares between 1 and 4% in global trade. Following this categorisation, the Indian and British economies have combined shares of 4.5% in global goods trade and 11.4% in global commercial services trade respectively; these shares enlarge to 6% and 14% if global trade

shares are measured after excluding the Intra-European Union trade.

There are many significant market access commitments that the FTA brings for both countries. These include, for India, easy market access for a bunch of labour-intensive exports like leather products, textile, processed foods, footwear, toys, and organic chemicals. For the UK, similar access is provided for medical devices, alcoholic beverages, electrical machinery, aircraft parts, and various food products. The UK has brought social security contribution exemptions for temporary Indian workers on par with those from most other countries. Both countries have offered strong access to professionals in each other's domestic service markets.

India has been remarkably bold in its offers in the FTA. Some key examples in

It makes India well-prepared for engaging with modern trade pacts typically hailed as 21st-century, like the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership



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Views are personal

Govt role in building Bharat



GIRISH KOUSGI
MD and CEO, PNB Housing Finance

INDIA'S ECONOMY DEMONSTRATED remarkable stability amid global disruptions, supported by strong domestic consumption, increased government spending—particularly in infrastructure—and accommodative monetary policy. The country's real estate sector is expected to reach \$1 trillion in market size by 2030, up from \$200 billion in 2021. By 2025, it will contribute 13% to the country's GDP.

India is witnessing a steady shift in population from rural to urban areas in search of better employment opportunities. The housing shortage is primarily in the low-income group, especially in semi-urban or rural regions. Approximately 95% of the deficit. The foremost reason is the dearth of affordable capital for quality homes. Households earning less than ₹49 lakh annually remain underserved by formal credit channels with many being new credit and residing in semi-urban or rural regions.

Nevertheless, affordable housing has seen a significant surge in demand, particularly in tier-II to IV cities. This growth is driven by easier access to low-cost loans, along with improved availability of housing and growing self-construction activities.

To regulate realty across all states and safeguard consumer interests, the Centre introduced the Real Estate Regulation and Development Act (RERA) in 2016. RERA requires developers to comply with predetermined timelines in delivering projects while ensuring

escrow accounts to ensure funds are not diverted for other purposes. By mandating detailed disclosures by developers, RERA has enhanced transparent communication for home buyers and curtailed project delays.

Besides policy reforms, rationalisation of tax rates in the Union Budget has benefited homebuyers since it leaves them with more disposable income. The tax relief is expected to augment demand for housing, benefiting middle-class buyers, investors, and landlords due to the lower tax liabilities and reduced compliance issues. Homeowners also gain from a revision in rules allowing two self-occupied properties to be treated as tax-free versus only one previously. This will give a fillip to home ownership, facilitating the purchase of a second home in tier-II cities and beyond.

The Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) further supports home ownership via interest subsidy on home loans. Under PMAY-Urban 2.0, a ₹10-lakh crore investment will be made to meet the housing needs of 10 million urban poor and middle-class families. Recently, the scheme has gained momentum with the Centre approving the construction of 2.35 lakh houses across nine states. Of these, over 1.25 lakh homes have been sanctioned for

To sustain momentum in India's real estate sector, policy must focus on scalability, digital enablement, and stronger public-private partnerships

women alone. Moreover, the PMAY-U deadline has been extended to December 31, allowing more time to complete the sanctioned houses. From the lender's perspective, the interest subsidy scheme implies that borrowers will maintain their home loan accounts for a minimum of five years in order to fully access the benefits under PMAY, thereby fostering long-term customer retention and sustained engagement.

Commercial real estate transactions can be democratised by fractional property ownership, allowing multiple people to co-own a property jointly while sharing the costs and benefits. Essentially, each person receives equity in a specific property, along with access to its amenities and a share in the rental income, or its appreciation. Indian citizens as well as non-resident Indians (NRIs) can invest in such properties, but NRIs must adhere to Foreign Exchange Management Act rules and only use NRI-designated bank accounts for these transactions.

One key reform of the past decade that needs mention is the goods and services tax (GST). The GST rate is 1% for affordable homes and 5% for other categories. To increase mortgage penetration in the country and ensure that housing is within the reach of all sections of society, it is imperative that

GST slabs for residential properties are further lowered. Rationalised, lower rates will also benefit developers since they will provide an impetus for additional sales.

Since land constitutes 30-60% of the total price of a housing unit, a proposed 1% land bank policy would be a welcome move to address the chronic shortage of land for affordable housing in urban India. This policy aims to reserve a dedicated portion of government-owned or underutilised land in every state, exclusively for developing affordable housing projects. Built on a model similar to the special economic zone zoning framework, this initiative would ensure a steady supply of urban land for social housing.

India's housing sector stands at a crossroads—energised by forward-looking policies, inclusive reforms, and a deeper understanding of the home ownership as a national development driver. The synergy between government initiatives, demographic shifts, and increased access to formal finance is steadily reshaping the contours of India's real estate.

To ensure this momentum is sustained, policy must focus on scalability, digital enablement, and stronger public-private partnerships. Only then can India bridge the urban housing deficit, fulfil rising aspirations, and transform real estate into a pillar of inclusive growth as we move towards the goal of Viksit Bharat by 2047.

capex boom but likely support consumption, especially in sensitive sectors like housing and auto, and ease borrowing costs for micro, small, and medium enterprises, and debt servicing burden on corporates and the government. That said, as major central banks tend to soften rates, the RBI must look for monetary harmony in the face of less welcome capital inflows.

—R Narayanan, Navi Mumbai

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Digital discrepancy

Apropos of "Bridging the digital chasm" (FE, July 28), the rapid growth of digital infrastructure and access has increased digital penetration. But this has not been matched by a similar rise in digital literacy. Many users, especially in rural or marginalised communities, lack the skills to use digital tools effectively or safely. Their interaction with technology remains limited, passive, or even risky. This

imbalance has created a digital ecosystem where connectivity is mistaken for empowerment. True empowerment requires more than just devices and data. It demands the ability to critically engage with digital content, navigate online services confidently, and make informed decisions. Without targeted efforts in digital education and capacity-building, the promise of digital inclusion is only partly fulfilled.

—Narayanan Kizhundanayur, Thrissur

RBI rate cuts

The earlier policy rate cuts by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) is yet to ignite the private sector. The Centre has done the heavy-lifting with public capex to prop up growth, but private investment remains tepid, and industrial credit off take is modest. The issue is not all about the cost of capital but demand uncertainty, structural pain points, and a palpable debt aversion. Another rate cut now may not spur a

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THE IDEAS PAGE

A compass, not a verdict

ICJ's advisory opinion invests global climate obligations with more than moral weight. India must navigate litigation risks, enforcement gaps, and fossil fuel dilemmas; align duty with dignity



SYED AKBARUDDIN

FOR ONCE, A ruling of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) at The Hague is making waves in Hyderabad. In a rare instance of policy resonance, the advisory opinion on climate change delivered by the 15-judge panel of the ICJ on July 23 has sparked conversation far beyond decision-makers in India. The ICJ's unanimous declaration of climate change as an existential threat is being discussed not only in think tanks in Delhi and boardrooms in Mumbai, but also among environmentally conscious students in Patancheru, Telangana, where I teach public policy.

The case was initiated by Vanuatu, a Pacific island nation with a population of just 3,00,000. In March 2023, it led a coalition of small island states to secure consensual approval from the United Nations General Assembly to ask the ICJ two questions: What are states legally required to do to address climate change, and what are the consequences if they do not fulfil these duties?

Over 130 countries joined as co-sponsors. India did not join, but it did not oppose it either. This cautious posture reflects India's complex position in global climate diplomacy.

India's hesitation did not stem from disinterest. Rather, it reflected clear-eyed realism. As a developing nation still working to ensure universal access to electricity, healthcare, and employment, India undertakes a difficult balancing act. Unlike industrialised countries, India has not benefited from centuries of fossil fuel-powered growth. Although its total emissions are rising, per capita emissions remain among the lowest globally. Many households still rely on biomass for cooking and face irregular power supply.

Despite these constraints, India has taken ambitious climate actions. By 2030, it aims for half its electricity to come from renewables. Emissions intensity has declined, afforestation has expanded, and electric buses now run in several Indian cities, including Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, and Hyderabad. India leads the International Solar Alliance and the Mission Life campaign promoting sustainable consumption. During its G20 presidency, it ensured that climate finance remained in the global spotlight.

These are not peripheral gestures. They are structural shifts. By any fair measure, India has done more with less. By contrast, Canada emits seven times more per capita and continues to expand its oil sands production. Australia, a major coal exporter, sets modest domestic targets while profiting from global emissions. Considering historical responsibility, economic capacity, and present-day ambition, India's efforts stand out.

Yet, the sweeping ICJ opinion, though not legally binding, will have consequences for India. It draws not only on climate treaties but also on the United Nations Charter, customary international law, the law of the sea, and human rights law. The Court affirms that states have obligations to prevent environ-



C.R. Sasikumar

mental harm, reduce emissions, adapt to climate impacts, and cooperate internationally. These duties are no longer moral appeals. They carry legal weight.

The Court also ruled that climate change violates rights to life, health, and housing. States must act based on the best available science, adopt ambitious national plans, and may be legally compelled to strengthen them. Failure to act could invite claims for climate damage. Subsidies for polluting fuels are now within legal scrutiny. The opinion does not just outline obligations, it opens the door to legal consequences.

For communities that have long suffered without recourse, this is a potential game changer. It affirms the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities. India has long argued that those who contributed most to climate change must do more to address it. The ICJ has now given that argument legal grounding. It will bolster developing countries in global negotiations.

Yet, the new legal terrain raises at least three public policy challenges for India. First is legal preparedness. Indian courts already interpret the right to a healthy environment as part of the right to life. The ICJ ruling may spur a wave of litigation demanding stronger climate action or even compensation. The Indian state could also face lawsuits from within or from affected neighbouring island states. Anticipating such claims will be vital for legal and policy stability. Otherwise, a torrent of litigation could emerge without clear legal standards.

Second is enforcement. India's environ-

mental laws are strong on paper but patchy in practice. Pollution control agencies remain underfunded and compliance varies widely across different states and sectors. The ICJ has reinforced the importance of due diligence. Strengthening regulatory capacity must now become a national priority.

Third is the issue of fossil fuel subsidies. These remain crucial for economically vulnerable households, especially for cooking gas and kerosene. But they also delay the shift to cleaner alternatives. The ICJ opinion, including the separate declaration appended by Judge Dalveer Bhandari of India, makes clear that subsidies have legal as well as fiscal implications. India must rethink how it provides support to the poor without locking them into polluting fuels. That will demand both financial resources and policy innovation.

The diplomatic challenge lies in aligning climate ambition with fairness. India must continue taking climate action while defending the context of its development needs. Climate justice must not become a new form of injustice.

The milestone ICJ opinion is not just a verdict from afar, but a compass. It signals the end of voluntary climate ambition and invites all countries to chart a harder, but fairer course. For India, the challenge now is to align duty with dignity and ambition with justice.

The writer is former permanent representative of India to the United Nations, and dean, Kautilya School of Public Policy, Hyderabad

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Macron is right: Only a two-state solution, in which a Palestinian state is established, will enable a normal life for the two nations living between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River."

—HAARETZ, ISRAEL

Swordplay in the dark

A Vice President's exit that could have been about bigger things. An Opposition whose best hope is that government's cracks have started showing



VANDITA MISHRA

WHY DID VICE President Jagdeep Dhankhar resign suddenly, at the end of the first working day of the Monsoon Session of Parliament? The question is riveting. But unfortunately, as we look for answers, Jai-faire Dhankhar allows us a very limited range of wondering.

As Vice President and Rajya Sabha chairman, and as Governor of West Bengal before that, Dhankhar spoke the lines scripted by the Narendra Modi government, almost as if they had written them out for him. In West Bengal, he took on the elected Chief Minister, Mamata Banerjee, every day, firming up a template for the disabling politics practised by other BJP-appointed governors in Opposition-ruled states. At the Centre, he confronted the Opposition and the judiciary loudly and persistently, and weaponised the Rajya Sabha rule book to stifle debate. There seemed to be little or no daylight between the positions of Dhankhar and the Modi government to till now.

So now that a crack is showing, wide enough for Dhankhar to have made his unceremonious exit, or for him to have been eased out abruptly — no one seems to be taking the legal reasons he cited for his resignation seriously — in a so far unbroken facade, there is an opening.

All the fevered speculation in the last week about why the former V-P quit his job, however, boils down to this: Perhaps, hidden in plain sight, Dhankhar had overplayed the hand he had been dealt by the Modi government, and a regime that maintains tight control over its ministers and MPs and also over constitutional authorities, could not let it be.

The story of the V-P's exit could have been more interesting than this. Arguably, it could still be.

It could have been that Dhankhar has done something that has not been done so far to a third-term government with a messianic self-image, which gives no quarter to the dissenter and lays all its opponents low, a government that loses no opportunity to assert its absolute power absolutely. It could have been that Dhankhar has spoken truth — or even better, the Constitution — to power, from within. And that, having successfully subdued the Opposition, and its own ministers and MPs, the government has now come up against a pushback from the less bendable constitutional authority.

That's a tantalising possibility, still. But there is a problem, and it is this: Nothing in Dhankhar's public record till now, in the state or at the Centre, supports this theory. A modicum of publicness and transparency — completely missing from this episode so far — would also have been intrinsic to a power-drunk government being shown

the red lines by a constitutional authority.

What we are left with, then, is a drama, less real and more imagined, of mincing moves on the chessboard of power and politics that ostensibly led to the V-P's exit. This shape-shifting drama is set against the backdrop of the newly reconvened Parliament, where large issues and fundamental concerns have lined up — from unanswered questions about Operation Sindoor to fears of disenfranchisement of large numbers of voters touched off by the Election Commission's ongoing Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls in Bihar.

As the Monsoon Session enters its second week, on one side is the shadow-play over Dhankhar's exit, and on the other side an Opposition clutching at opportunities for small point-scoring even as it struggles to get a grip on the larger story.

Leaders of the Opposition have proposed to host a farewell dinner for Dhankhar, ostensibly to embarrass the government, twist the knife in. But on the SIR in Bihar, the Congress-led Opposition's legitimate criticisms of the Election Commission's impractical timelines in a poll-bound state are in danger of being clouded by its internal disunity. And by Rahul Gandhi's loose and lurching pot shots at the EC.

In Gujarat, on Saturday, Gandhi reportedly said the EC was like a "cheating cricket umpire" and that Congress defeats in the 2017 and 2022 assembly polls in the state also had to do with manipulated results — this is blame-laying in retrospect. Gandhi never said so earlier. To be sure, there is room for overblown rhetoric when a leader speaks to his party — Gandhi was addressing the newly appointed presidents of the Congress's district and city units. But by lashing out at the EC so widely in an attempt to let Congress off the hook, he also risks undermining the substantive case his party and others in the Opposition are making on the haphazard conduct of the SIR in Bihar by the EC.

In Gujarat, Congress has failed to stanch the flow of Congressmen to the BJP camp, to an extent that voters distrust the party's ability to hold its own in the state, quite literally. As in many other states, it has failed to challenge BJP dominance through new ideas, or through a new set of leaders. Its messaging has been inconsistent, lacking follow-up on the ground. It has not been able to live down the shortcomings and mistakes of its own governments in the past. Not one of those issues can be fixed by turning the focus to voter lists.

The ongoing SIR in Bihar is a different story, where the EC is fumbling visibly. But by setting up the fight with a constitutional authority so indiscriminately, Congress makes it harder for itself to ask the more pointed questions to the EC.

Both the V-P exit drama about shadowy things, and the loose balls Congress is throwing at the EC, are part of the same story. For an Opposition still flailing to seize the initiative, the best hope is that, in its third term, the government's cracks have started showing.

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ASHWANI KUMAR

A just equilibrium

Presidential Reference to SC can help redraw boundaries between institutions

THE UPCOMING HEARING in the Supreme Court of the Presidential Reference arising from the Court's judgment in *The State of Tamil Nadu vs The Governor of Tamil Nadu* (2025) is of seminal constitutional significance. This is because of the perceived encroachment of the states' defined sovereign functions and the troubling non-observance of conventional discipline in the exercise of high constitutional power. The Court's advisory opinion, though not binding, will have significant persuasive value for the exercise of sovereign power by the states and the central government in the future.

In its adjudicatory decision, the Court has indicted the Tamil Nadu Governor for withholding assent for an unreasonably long time to bills passed by the Legislative Assembly. It held that his conduct was unconstitutional and it was permissible for the Court to read into the silences of the Constitution an implicit obligation on the Governor's part to exercise constitutional discretion reasonably and impartially. Relying on government circulars, the Court held that decisions by the Governor and the President concerning assent to bills are required to be taken within three months of the date of receipt of the government's recommendation for assent.

The judgment is unexceptionable for its constitutional logic as far as the Governor's conduct is concerned. However, the extension of the Court's reasoning to the exercise of presidential prerogatives and its

suggestion to the President to seek the Court's advisory opinion "when deciding on bills reserved by the Governor" is fraught and open to interrogation for judicial overreach. This is because the President's prerogatives were not directly in question before the Court and because the President's sovereign power operates in a different realm and on a different plane in our constitutional scheme. As the repository of the highest sovereign power, the President is entitled to the fullest presumption of regularity in the performance of constitutional duties, unaffected by the assumed possibility of an irregular exercise of power. Inspired by national imperatives generally not amenable to judicially manageable standards, the nature of the President's functions place the head of state in a unique position that does not warrant equivalence with the Governor, who holds office at the pleasure of the President as her representative in the state. It is not surprising, therefore, that in a clear disapproval of the Court's judgment, the President has sought the Court's advisory opinion on the key constitutional issues that emanate from its decision.

The core question raised in the Reference concerns the "constitutional boundaries of executive and judicial authority", which are fundamental to the republic's constitutional arrangement. Pertinently, because the Court's advisory opinion cannot displace a

binding judicial precedent, the Reference is seen as an opening for a review of the judgment or justification for a possible legislative initiative to insulate the President from the restraints imposed by the Court, should the advisory opinion be at variance with the ratio and reasoning in the Tamil Nadu case in so far as it relates to the President.

The Reference also seeks the Court's view on several specific and substantial questions of public importance. These include whether "the judiciary can modify or override constitutional powers exercised by the President or Governor through Article 142", which confers upon the Supreme Court judicial power of the widest amplitude. Despite its internal coherence and unexceptionable logic in relation to the conduct of the Governor, the Court's decision can be questioned for its directions (cloaked as a suggestion) to the President to seek its advice under Article 143 on legal issues impinging on the legality of his required presidential assent. This has been requiring, not unreasonably, as an unwarranted judicial intervention in the exercise of sovereign discretion, not necessitated by the scope of the legal challenges that was limited to the conduct of the Governor of Tamil Nadu. This part of the judgment can also be faulted in view of the established processes of decision-making by the President, including those pertaining to legal counsel.

Judicial intervention in policy choices of the government/Parliament and in the exer-

cise of sovereign power, unless palpably malafide, has raised questions about the balance of constitutional power. The necessity of restraint in the exercise of judicial power has been reiterated by the Court in the Tamil Nadu case itself, holding that "[i]n the exercise of self-imposed restraint... courts do not venture into areas of governance in which the Constitution gives a prerogative solely to the executive." Chief Justice B.R. Gavai, in his recent address at the Oxford Union, is reported to have endorsed a balanced exercise of judicial power.

Judges, made wise by experience, disciplined by law and elevated by knowledge, are expected to weigh and balance competing values, a function central to their role. The nation trusts the sagacity of the highest court to configure a just constitutional equilibrium of power so that the country's democratic order is not held hostage to the unfettered impulses of any single branch of the Indian state. As the nation's conscience-keeper, the Court is expected to vindicate this trust by the consistency and moral integrity of its judgments and by guarding against the "justification of politics and politicisation of the judiciary". We know that it is in the wisdom of the wise that enduring answers to some of the vexed questions of our time will be found.

The writer is senior advocate, Supreme Court and former Union Minister for Law and Justice. Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

CLIMATE ACTION

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "A welcome nudge" (IE, July 28). Recently, the ICJ delivered a landmark advisory opinion holding nations accountable for their greenhouse gas emissions, recognising the urgent and existential threat being faced by the world. While the ICJ opinion is not binding, it could influence nations to push for stronger climate action. A polluted environment, owing to changes in the physical, chemical, and biological conditions, directly affects mental and physical health, making survival difficult. Article 12 of the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and Article 6(1) of the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights provide the right to enjoy the highest attainable standards of physical and mental health.

Vaibhav Goyal, Chandigarh

UK FTA TEMPLATE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "Carry it forward" (IE, July 28). India made concerted efforts to negotiate a trade deal with the UK and arrived at a Free Trade Agreement. This agreement will boost trade practices beneficial to both countries. A similar process may be adopted to encourage good economic relations with other nations. This will help promote our economic growth, enhance employment opportunities and strengthen international ties. At present, there is a significant trade imbalance with many countries, which needs

review and corrective measures. Emphasis should be laid on increasing exports by maintaining proper balance.

Sushash Vaid, New Delhi

DIVERSIFY TRADE TIES

THIS REFERS TO the article, "Be uncertainty-ready" (IE, July 2025). The use of tariffs by the Trump administration and its numerous warnings to India and other BRICS nations should be a wake-up call for Indian foreign policy. The tariffs might still be uncertain but what is certain is that a trade deal won't be as easy as the FTA India just signed with the UK. India must have flexible diplomatic relations with small or developing nations as well in order to have access to their markets. Even though it may not substitute the forces received from major developed countries, it will at least absorb the damage caused by high tariffs.

Dalsh Solanki, New Delhi

RURAL TALENT

THIS REFERS TO the article, "The creativity curriculum" (IE, July 28). It rightly highlights the need to nurture creativity for Viksit Bharat, 2047. But if we are truly aiming for transformation, we must go beyond CREST. State boards and government schools must be integrated into this creative vision. In the fading classrooms of rural India lies raw talent, silenced by outdated pedagogy and a lack of resources.

Zainab Ishaq, Patna

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, TUESDAY, JULY 29, 2025

13.5 EXPLAINED

Five years of NEP: Taking stock of the transition

A few reforms proposed in school and higher education have made their way into classrooms. Others are stuck in Centre-state tussles & institutional delays

ABHINAV HARIGOVIND
NEW DELHI, JULY 28

IT IS five years since the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 – the country's third such policy since Independence – was cleared by the Union Cabinet. The NEP promised a sweeping reset of both school and higher education. Some of that vision has made its way into classrooms. But a lot remains on paper, slowed by state-Centre frictions, or held up by institutional delays.

What has worked

School curriculum is changing, slowly: The 10+2 system has been replaced with a new structure – foundational (pre-primary to class 2), preparatory (classes 3-5), middle (6-8), and secondary (9-12). In 2023, the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCSE) laid out the learning outcomes and competencies for each stage.

NCERT has produced new textbooks for classes 1-8 based on this framework. Social science, for example, is now taught as a single book covering history, geography, political science, and economics, replacing separate

textbooks for each subject. New books for classes 9-12 are expected next.

First steps of early childhood learning: The NEP aims to make pre-primary learning universal by 2030. NCERT's Jaadui Pitara learning lists are already in use, and the Women and Child Development Ministry has issued a national ECCE curriculum. Delhi, Karnataka, and Kerala will soon enforce the minimum age of six for class 1 entry. 2023-24 data show a fall in class 1 enrolments to 1.87 crore from the 2.16 crore of previous year, likely due to this age cutoff. About 73% of those enrolled had attended some form of preschool. The big hurdles are better training for Anganwadi workers, and improving infrastructure and teaching quality in early education centres.

National focus for foundational skills: NIPUN Bharat, launched in 2021, seeks to ensure every child can read and do basic math by the end of class 3. A recent government survey found average scores were 64% for language and 60% for math – a start, but well short of universal proficiency.

Credited flexibility starts to take shape: The NEP suggested the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC). This, and a National

Credit Framework (NCF) have been developed. UGC rules published in 2021 allowed students to earn and store credits digitally, even across institutions, making it possible to move between courses or exit and re-enter. The system allows students to earn a certificate after one year, a diploma after two, or complete a four-year multidisciplinary degree. The NCF brings similar flexibility to school students, where learning hours (including skill-based ones) translate into credits. CBSE invited schools to be part of an NCF pilot last year.

Common test for college entry: The Common University Entrance Test (CUET), introduced in 2022, is now a key route to undergraduate admissions. NEP 2020 had suggested that multiple college entrance exams should be replaced with a single national test.

Indian campuses abroad and vice versa: IIT Madras, IIT Delhi, and IIM Ahmedabad have set up international campuses in Zanzibar, Abu Dhabi, and Dubai respectively. University of Southampton recently opened in India, after two other foreign universities at GIFT City, Gujarat. Another 12

foreign universities are in the process of being approved under UGC regulations, plus two more at GIFT City. Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan said earlier this month.

What's in progress

Changes in board exams: The NEP envisages less high-stakes board exams. Starting 2026, CBSE plans to allow class 10 students to sit for board exams twice a year. Karnataka has experimented with this; other boards are waiting to see how it plays out. The NEP idea of offering all subjects at two levels (standard and higher) is limited to class 10 math, which CBSE introduced in 2019-20.

Holistic report cards, so far on paper: PARAKH, a unit under NCERT, has developed progress cards that go beyond marks, and include peer and self-assessment. But some school boards are yet to make the shift.

Slow progress for four-year UG degrees: Central universities are rolling out NEP's idea of four-year undergraduate degrees with multiple exit options, and Kerala has followed. But in many places, colleges don't yet have the faculty or infrastructure.

Mother tongue in classrooms: NEP encourages the use of mother tongue as the medium of instruction till at least class 5. CBSE has asked schools to begin this from pre-primary to class 2, with classes 3-5 retaining the option of staying or switching. NCERT is working on textbooks in more Indian languages.

What's stuck and why

Three-language formula remains a sticking point: NEP proposes three languages in school, at least two of them Indian. But Tamil Nadu, which follows a Tamil-English model, sees this as an attempt to impose Hindi.

Teacher education overhaul hasn't happened: The National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education, due in 2021, is yet to be released. The four-year integrated BEd course has been announced under the Integrated Teacher Education Programme (ITEP), but colleges offering existing programmes like Bachelor of Elementary Education (BEED) are pushing back.

UGC's proposed successor delayed: A 2018 draft bill proposed scrapping the UGC Act and replacing it with an umbrella Higher Education Commission of India (HECI). NEP formalised the idea – HECI would handle reg-

ulation, funding, accreditation, and academic standards across higher education, excluding medical and legal. But the Education Ministry is still in the process of drafting the Bill.

No breakfast in schools yet: NEP recommends breakfast along with midday meals. But in 2021, the Finance Ministry rejected the Education Ministry's proposal to add breakfast for pre-primary and elementary classes.

Policy divide between Centre and states: Some states have pushed back against key NEP provisions. Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and West Bengal have refused to sign MoUs with the Centre to set up PM-SHRI schools, citing clauses that require full adoption of NEP.

Tamil Nadu opposes both the three-language formula and four-year UG structure. Kerala and Tamil Nadu argue that since education is on the Concurrent List, the Centre cannot mandate these changes unilaterally.

The Centre has withheld Samagra Shiksha funds from these states, saying the money is tied to NEP-linked reforms. Tamil Nadu has challenged the freeze in the Supreme Court.

Karnataka, which introduced and scrapped the four-year UG model, is working on its own state education policy, an election promise made by the Congress in 2023.

EXPLAINED GLOBAL

WHAT ARE THE KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THE U.S.-EU TRADE DEAL?

US PRESIDENT Donald Trump and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen have announced a sweeping trade deal that imposes 15% tariffs on most European goods, warding off Trump's threat of a 30% rate if no deal had been reached by August 1.

The tariffs, or import taxes, paid when Americans buy European products could raise prices for US consumers and dent profits for European companies and their partners who bring goods into the country.

Unresolved details

The trade deal announcement leaves many crucial details to be filled in. The headline figure is a 15% tariff rate on about 70% of European goods brought into the US, including cars, computer chips and pharmaceuticals. It's lower than the 20% that Trump initially proposed, and lower than his threats of 30% and then 30%.

The remaining 30% is still open to further decisions and negotiations. Von der Leyen said the two sides agreed on zero tariffs for a range of "strategic" goods such as aircraft and aircraft parts. Specifics were lacking.

EU companies would purchase what Trump said was \$750 billion worth of natural gas, oil and nuclear fuel over three years to replace Russian energy supplies that Europe is seeking to exit in any case.

Steel tariff remains

Trump said the 50% US tariff on imported steel would remain. Von der Leyen said the two sides agreed to further negotiations to fight a global steel glut, reduce tariffs and establish import quotas – that is, set amounts that can be imported, often at a lower rate or tariff-free.

Trump said pharmaceuticals, a major import from the EU to the US, weren't in-



Donald Trump with Ursula von der Leyen in Scotland on Sunday. Reuters

cluded in the deal. Von der Leyen said the pharmaceuticals issue is "on a separate sheet of paper".

'Best we could do'

The 15% rate reduces Trump's threat of a 30% tariff. But it effectively raises the tariff on EU goods from 12% last year to 17% and would reduce the 27-nation's gross domestic product by 0.5%, said Jack Allen-Reynolds, deputy chief eurozone economist at Capital Economics.

Von der Leyen said the 15% rate was "the best we could do" and credited the deal with maintaining access to the US market.

Car prices

Asked if EU carmakers could still profitably sell cars at 15%, von der Leyen said the rate was much lower than the current 25%. That has been the rate under Trump's 25% tariff on cars from all countries, plus the prevailing US car tariff of 2.5%.

The impact is likely to be substantial on some companies, given that automaker Volkswagen said it suffered a \$1.5 billion hit to profits in the first half of the year from the higher tariffs.

ASSOCIATED PRESS

ANAGHA JAYAKUMAR & ARJUN SENGUPTA
NEW DELHI, JULY 28

AFTER DAYS of deadly fighting, Cambodia and Thailand on Monday agreed to an "immediate and unconditional ceasefire". The ceasefire was negotiated by Prime Ministers Hun Manet of Cambodia and Phumtham Wechayachai of Thailand at a meeting hosted by Malaysian PM Anwar Ibrahim in Kuala Lumpur.

The centuries-old border dispute between the Southeast Asian neighbours. What is the history of this dispute, and what happens now?

Tensions come to a boil

Tensions between Cambodia and Thailand had been simmering since May, when they skirmished at a contested area of the border, leading to the death of a Cambodian soldier. Nationalist rhetoric in both countries and a series of tit-for-tat actions followed. Cambodia banned the import of Thai fruits and broadcast of Thai films and soap operas; Thailand closed all land crossings.

Last Wednesday, Thailand withdrew its ambassador from Cambodia and expelled the Cambodian envoy after a Thai soldier lost a leg in a land mine blast. Thailand claimed the mine was laid by Cambodian troops in Thai territory. Cambodia responded by downgrading diplomatic relations and recalling all Cambodian staff from its embassy in Bangkok. Clashes broke out at half a dozen places along the border between the Thai provinces of Surin and Sisaket, and Cambodian provinces of Oddar Meanchey and Preah Vihear.

On Thursday, Thailand launched air strikes on Cambodian military sites, and Cambodia responded with rocket and artillery fire. Exchanges of artillery and machine gun fire followed, in which at least 35 people were killed and more than 2.6 lakh civilians were displaced on both sides of the border, Reuters reported.

Making of a conflict

The 817-km land border between Cambodia and Thailand was drawn in 1907 by France, then the colonial power in Cambodia. Like many other borders drawn by colonial administrators, this too has long been disputed.



(From left) Hun Manet, Anwar Ibrahim, Phumtham Wechayachai after truce. Reuters

The two predominantly Theravada-Buddhist neighbours are more alike than any other country in the region, sharing ethnic and linguistic ties, social norms, culinary traditions, and cultural activities. But both claim to be the "original" owners of their heritage. This is what drives the animosity between them.

The competing claims of cultural ownership are rooted in contesting readings of history, which, scholars say, are purposely propped up by governing elites of the two countries to strengthen their domestic positions. "Countries fabricate history to celebrate their past, using nationalism as a political tool in the manipulation of public opinion... It is evident that contemporary Thai-Cambodian relations have become a casualty of the remade past," wrote Charvatt Kasetsri, Pou Sotthirak and Pavin Chavaleepaisarn in *Preah Vihear: A Guide to the Thai-Cambodian Conflict and Its Solutions* (2013).

Every skirmish in the border thus has the potential to devolve into a much larger conflict. This has happened now, and earlier.

Case of Preah Vihear

At the centre of the border dispute is the Preah Vihear temple, which is called Phra Viharn in Thai. "The temple has meaning – both as a cultural symbol and a religious place of worship – to people on both sides of the border," John D. Ciocriaci, a professor

of international politics at Indiana University, wrote in his 2009 paper "Thailand and Cambodia: The Battle for Preah Vihear". The temple was built in the 11th and 12th centuries during the golden age of the Khmer Empire, who at the time ruled much of South Asia, including Siam (Thailand). But beginning in the 15th century, as the Khmer Empire declined, Siam gradually chipped away at Cambodian territory. In 1867, Cambodia officially handed the area around Preah Vihear to Siam.

But by this time, France had entered the picture. After colonising Cambodia and Laos, it reduced the Siamese kingdom to a weak position in the neighbourhood. Siam and France signed a treaty in 1904 that said the northern frontier of Cambodia would run along the watershed line of the Dangrek Mountains. While this principle would put most of the Preah Vihear complex in Siam, the official map drawn by the French in 1907 put the temple in Cambodia. Siam's objections were muted then – but in 1941, after entering into an alliance with Japan, it seized Preah Vihear, only to return it to France at the end of World War II.

After Cambodia's independence, Thai troops once again occupied Preah Vihear in 1954. Cambodia moved the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which in 1962 upheld its claim over Preah Vihear. But this did not put the issue to bed.

Tensions flared up in 2008 after



Cambodia sought to list the Preah Vihear temple as a UNESCO World Heritage site. The Thai opposition used the issue to attack the government, accusing it of "forfeiting Thai dignity and sovereignty". Ciocriaci wrote, "Cambodian leaders too used the issue to rally nationalist sentiment in the country."

Over the next several years, Cambodian and Thai troops frequently skirmished at the border. In 2013, the ICJ affirmed Cambodia's position vis-à-vis Preah Vihear, creating a demilitarised zone around the temple, although this was never implemented. Thailand has since rejected the ICJ's jurisdiction.

What happens now

Preah Vihear temple is the most famous of many disputed sites at the Cambodia-Thailand border which hold cultural significance for both countries. Another such temple, called Prasad Ta Moan Thom by the Cambodians and Prasad Ta Muen Thom by the Thai, witnessed fighting during the recent hostilities.

The ceasefire does not fundamentally address issues of cultural inheritance and ownership. It will take a lot more to bring down temperatures in both countries, and for them to permanently iron out the border issue.

For the time being, however, analysts expect an uneasy peace to hold. This is primarily because of pressure from outside, notably China and the United States, both of whom oversaw the negotiations in Kuala Lumpur. In fact, the talks were held after US President Donald Trump set the two countries agreeing to a ceasefire as a precondition to their respective trade talks with Washington.

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Power of rebasing: How Nigeria's GDP jumped from No. 58 to No. 55 in a day

SIDDHARTH UPASANI
NEW DELHI, JULY 28

ON JULY 20, the West African country of Nigeria was the 58th largest economy in the world. The very next day, it jumped to No. 55, having added more than \$50 billion, or roughly 30 per cent, to its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for 2024. On its way up, Nigeria overtook Ukraine, Qatar, and Hungary.

On July 21, Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) published the results of its GDP rebasing exercise, in which the base year of the indicator was changed to 2019 from 2010, among other changes.

The result? Nigeria's GDP in 2024 is now estimated at \$243 billion in nominal terms, rising from \$187 billion forecast by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Change in methodology

A new base year – which essentially means measurement of GDP, or the final

value of goods and services in any particular year, with respect to the prices prevailing in that year – does not automatically lead to a larger economy.

However, Nigeria's base-year revision exercise included other, more meaningful changes in the manner in which the country calculates GDP. Among them was increasing the scope of the methodology to include previously undercounted sectors such as digital services, pension fund operations, and e-commerce activities among others. Technological development, structural changes, and changes in production and consumption patterns meant that "the methods and data used in estimating GDP must change with the times to reflect current economic realities", the NBS said.

A previous rebasing

The exercise, the NBS said, was "by far the most comprehensive rebasing" it had ever carried out. However, this is not the first time that Nigeria has seen such a huge

increase in its GDP due to a revision in the base year.

More than a decade ago, a change in the base year from 1990 to 2010 had helped propel the country to the position of Africa's largest economy, thanks to an even larger increase of 89 per cent in its GDP – to \$510 billion in 2014.

But wait – \$510 billion? Does that mean the Nigerian economy has shrunk by half in the last 10 years to \$243 billion now? Well, sort of. At least in US dollar terms.

Significant concerns

While this month's rebasing has brought Nigeria \$50 billion closer to its goal of becoming a \$1 trillion economy by 2030, actually hitting that target is well nigh impossible following the sharp devaluations of its currency naira in 2023 and 2024. As a result, on an annual average basis, the official naira/US dollar exchange rate weakened by

130 per cent from 645 naira/US dollar in 2023 to 1,479 naira/US dollar in 2024, according to the IMF. (For comparison, 17.5 naira make 1 Indian rupee.)

"Even using the new series, currency devaluations in 2023 and 2024 mean that Nigeria's economy has not recovered its previous position as Africa's largest economy," a note by research firm BMI, a part of the Fitch Group, said on July 23.

The GDP rebasing exercise has spotlighted changes in the Nigerian economy that point to significant concerns.

One, the share of agriculture in the country's GDP has increased to almost 26 per cent in 2019 from 22 per cent estimated earlier, while that of industry has declined to 21 per cent from 27.65 per cent.

Two, the contribution of the informal sector to GDP has increased to 42.5 per cent from 41.4 per cent.

And while a larger GDP has helped reduce the debt-to-GDP ratio to 38 per cent from 51

per cent, it does little change the outlook for Nigeria, whose GDP grew 3.13 per cent year-on-year in the first quarter of 2025, data released on July 21 showed.

A day later, the Monetary Policy Committee of the Central Bank of Nigeria left the Monetary Policy Rate unchanged at 27.5 per cent. Headline retail inflation, which declined for the third straight month in June, remains above 20 per cent.

"Long-running issues that have plagued sectors like agriculture from insecurity to climate risk remain. And President [Bola Tinubu's] ambitious 6 per cent per annum [growth] target will require significant improvements in human capital levels as well as [a] reforms to help lift the persistently low investment rate. And while the rebasing exercise may have helped to lower the debt-to-GDP ratio, the government's revenue-generating capacity and capacity to repay its debt hasn't changed. Fiscal discipline and tax reforms are still needed to keep public finance risks in check," David Omojomo, Africa

Economist at the global insights and analyses firm Capital Economics said on July 22.

The Indian experience

India is no stranger to GDP revisions; in fact, the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) is currently in the process of updating the GDP base year to 2022-23 from 2011-12. The rebased GDP numbers will be released in February 2026.

The last time India's key macroeconomic indicator underwent a major revision was in 2015. At the time, questions were raised about the accuracy of the numbers even by the Reserve Bank of India after the GDP growth rate for 2013-14 was revised upwards to 6.9 per cent from 4.7 per cent.

Then Governor Raghuram Rajan had said the central bank found it "hard to see the economy as rolling in 2014-15".

At the time, questions were raised about the accuracy of the numbers even by the Reserve Bank of India after the GDP growth rate for 2013-14 was revised upwards to 6.9 per cent from 4.7 per cent.

Signs of the future

India must prepare to deal with AI adoption

The announcement by Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), India's largest information-technology (IT) services company, on Sunday that it would lay off about 2 per cent of its global workforce from middle and senior levels is a clear sign of how corporations, particularly in IT, are responding to shifts in the business environment. The decision will result in the technology behemoth laying off more than 12,000 people from its workforce of more than 600,000. The company, in its statement, said it was in the process of becoming a future-ready organisation. This will include investing in areas of new technology and deploying artificial intelligence (AI) at scale, both for its clients and itself, among other things. Although this may also partly be a result of a challenging business environment, the move is being interpreted by analysts as a structural shift driven by AI.

To be sure, several large technology companies, such as Microsoft, IBM, and Intel, have announced plans to cut their workforce to varying extents, and the trend is unmistakable. The fast-changing technology landscape, with the growth and adoption of AI, is making not only tech firms but businesses across the spectrum adapt. In this context, the TCS management must be commended that it is preparing for the future and is willing to take hard decisions to remain relevant in this fast-changing environment. Only organisations willing to adapt to the changing technological and business environment will be in a position to add value, create employment, and contribute to growth over the long run. It is also worth noting that, besides technological changes, the global business environment is not conducive. The uncertainty emanating from the policies adopted by the United States is particularly affecting investment across the globe.

Nevertheless, AI is changing businesses in profound ways and also posing policy challenges for a country like India, which needs to create employment at scale. For instance, a top executive of one of the big tech companies told this newspaper recently that the person's firm was approaching a point where a single model would replace several cognitive tasks that only humans could do. Once such models are adopted by businesses, they will begin replacing humans on a much bigger scale. In terms of outcome, the adoption of AI or automation in general will further tilt the balance in favour of capital over labour. Although this has been happening in various sectors over time, the scale might increase rapidly in the near to medium term. Thus, the big question is how policy should respond in a country like India. Unfortunately, there are no easy answers. Policy cannot stop firms from adopting technology because it will be critical for them to remain competitive. However, it will lead to lower demand for human labour.

There will certainly be a need for talent to manage and handle AI programs. India could perhaps benefit by reorienting its large tech workforce in these areas. Training in top engineering institutes might also need to be adapted. Adoption of technology could also result in different kinds of work being shifted to India. Admittedly, all these are just possibilities, and nothing can be said for sure. What is needed at this stage is a wider policy debate on how India can capitalise on its demography in an environment of trade fractionalism and increasing possibilities of rapid labour replacement by technology.

Back in the sun

Patient diplomacy pays off in Maldives

With a red carpet, a 21-gun salute, a guard of honour, and the nation's highest award for the Indian Prime Minister, the Maldives and India signalled a critical reset of relations, which had touched the nadir in 2023. Then, newly elected Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu demanded the withdrawal of 90 Indian military personnel, stationed there for medical evacuation and maritime surveillance, on the grounds that the decades-long presence infringed on Maldivian sovereignty. An agreement with China for "non-lethal" weapons supply followed a month later. But the tensions between New Delhi and Male date back 11 years, when the Maldivian government cancelled an airport-construction project by Bengaluru-based GMR group, then its biggest foreign investment project at \$511 million, allegedly at Beijing's behest. Since then, the island-nation enthusiastically signed on to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with projects for an airport upgrade, a major bridge and low-cost housing. Aware of the growing China factor in this island chain, strategically placed along major Indian Ocean shipping lanes, India chose patient, constructive diplomacy over confrontation to rebuild relations.

Even as Mr Muizzu signalled closer ties with China, choosing Beijing first for an overseas visit in January last year and signing a flurry of agreements, India retained ties with Male. Early last year, India replaced military personnel with technical staff from state-owned Hindustan Aeronautics. India also continued to fund critical infrastructure, including major inter-island connectivity projects. New Delhi extended support by rolling over a \$50 million Treasury bill, plus a \$400 million emergency financial package and \$360 million currency-swap agreement to help the Maldivian economy, which was reeling from a debt crisis. Much of this debt is the legacy of Chinese loans incurred for ill-planned and expensive BRI projects, with its debt rising to over 120 per cent of its gross domestic product. For instance, recovering the steep cost of a signature "friendship bridge" linking the airport island to the main island required such high tolls that locals preferred cheaper alternative routes. With delays in land acquisition and construction schedules, the Maldives' low-cost housing project eventually moved to high-cost for locals to afford.

The problem of poor project planning and execution has been compounded by the slowdown in the island-nation's tourism revenues, which are still to recover from the pandemic shock. Matters were made worse by gratuitously insulting remarks about India and its Prime Minister by three Maldivian ministers, which precipitated a boycott of the Maldives by the Indian tourism industry. For years, Indian nationals were the largest cohort visiting the Maldives. Recognising this, the Maldivian government suspended the offending ministers. But with Indian tourist arrivals dropping more than 30 per cent in calendar 2024, the sharp drop in tourist dollars prompted the Maldivian government to appeal to Indian tourists to return, including hosting high-profile networking events. But the numbers are yet to ramp up to pre-2024 levels.

As the recent reset with Sri Lanka has demonstrated, mature responses to geopolitical pressures can be as effective as the exercise of hard power. To be sure, India has also benefited from the salutary lessons that both countries have learnt from their closer association with China. But these successes do not alter the fact of China's dominance. Staying the diplomatic course, therefore, is critical for India's interests in the Indian Ocean Region.

India needs more Apples

The government must replicate the Apple template to bring the world's top 50 brands into the country

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



While the jury is still out on many of the production-linked incentive schemes (PLI) introduced by the Indian government, one undeniable success has been the scheme targeting smartphone production. Used largely by Apple, and to a lesser extent by Samsung, this scheme has helped India export over \$24 billion worth of smartphones in FY25, up from virtually zero in FY18. Today, India is the world's third-largest smartphone exporter, after China and Vietnam. Apple now assembles about 20 per cent of all iPhones in India, and this percentage is set to keep rising. While local value addition is limited — still in the low double digit, it will increase over time as the component ecosystem slowly comes online.

The success in attracting Apple has been critical. It is now well-documented that Apple, through its training, focus on quality and scale was critical in helping China build a world-class manufacturing ecosystem. Hopefully, it can do the same for India.

Apple is key in being a leading multinational company (MNC) that is closely tracked. If Apple can eventually source 50-75 million phones from India (worth \$50 billion) with its focus on quality and finish, what excuse can any MNC offer its board for why they cannot source from India? Can labour, logistics or regulations really be that impossible in India? If Apple can source this quantum of world-class product from the country? The demonstration effect is huge.

The PLI for smartphones was extremely sophisticated in design, a win-win for all parties. The government must have consulted Apple/Samsung and taken inputs when designing the scheme. There must have been a plan to reach out and engage the companies. Given the global competition to become a sourcing hub for Apple and our lack of capabilities in the field, we must have been able to address their apprehensions and assure them of a policy feedback loop. Given how quickly Apple has been able to scale, someone in the government took the initiative to ensure all obstacles

to ramping production were jointly cleared. They deserve credit and gratitude for enabling India to become a world-scale player in smartphones and for helping create over 700,000 jobs (direct and indirect). We can now build on this to develop into a broader electronics manufacturing hub.

We must take the Apple template and broaden it. We must target top MNCs across key sectors where India has a competitive advantage, engage them, and understand their concerns. Design PLI-type schemes to get them to commit to sourcing more from India. The United States today sources about \$450 billion from China, about 50 per cent of this comes from just 50 brands and contract suppliers. These are the companies to go after.

We can break this down into two buckets. The first is brands like Nike, a world leader in its industry (revenue of \$50 billion). Nike does not manufacture much in-house, but sources very little from India. We need to understand why India is not on their sourcing map despite the country having strengths in apparel and footwear. Getting Nike to commit will force their global suppliers to come to India and be seen as a proof of concept for other athletes players. A policy framework can be designed to compensate for initial cost differentials, just as the smartphone PLI did.

The reality is that all companies need to de-risk their supply chains. Business as usual is not possible. Companies need an alternative geopolitically stable location. Other examples in this bucket could be Dell for hardware, Mattel for toys and Victoria's Secret in innerwear — all industry leaders with limited India sourcing. This is the Apple model.

Another model would be target MNCs with a large manufacturing footprint in China. Foreign-invested enterprises employ about 40 million workers there and account for nearly \$1 trillion of China's total exports of \$3.6 trillion. Most of these companies do not want to expand further in China.

AKASH PRAKASH



The tired and tiered middle class

Around 2007, the late economist Subir Gokarn wrote a landmark article in this paper titled, *Middle Class Origins*. Almost 20 years later, the postulates of that article are even more relevant — that the origins of the middle class, or the process by which they came to be middle class, mattered and must be factored into our understanding of the middle class and our assumptions of their behaviour and attitudes. That it would be incorrect to assume that India's future middle class will have the same characteristics as the (then) present middle class in terms of homogeneity and behaviour patterns in spending and saving (and, to extend his argument, world views on nation, politics, and societal duties).

The "contemporary" middle class, at the time, was the product of public-sector employment — government jobs, both at higher and lower echelons, offering permanent employment, health care and pension, low-interest loans (regular increments too, one may add) that gave security and predictability that shaped the behaviour and attitudes of the middle class. Since 1990, this source of employment has been decreasing, as data shows, and similar kinds of formal large private sector employment are not compensating. The most hit, Gokarn observed, are the lower echelon employees in public-sector enterprises, where numbers are actual.

The future middle class, he postulated, will not be homogeneous, since there is no longer a single strong "into or created of it, but many sources of channels through which it emerges. While the numbers of what we call the middle class today are swelling, the majority do not have the same historical attributes of stability and predictability of income, security of jobs, or basic hygiene factors of life taken care of. Hence, growth in numbers based on an

income-level-defined middle class will not automatically deliver sustained economic performance, since the factors connecting the two are different.

As this column has often pointed out, we need to do a reality check on our count of the "middle class" based on income alone, and include the dimensions of income stability and predictability that come from having skills, a line of work and an occupation type offering resilience in volatile times, and at least 30 per cent surplus income after expenses to take care of today and investment in one's own future security and in the next generation's social mobility. If we wish to hold on to the number and stay with the "purchasing power at the moment" definition of the middle class, then we need to think of the segments that make up this non-homogeneous admixture to understand how it will behave — be it as consumers, electors, taxpayers or citizens.

There is one segment that still has the vestiges of the old middle class — current government employees and those employed in old jobs in large private sector companies. Based on occupation data, this already small segment has a declining share of the growing future middle class. The majority will be in quasi-formal or quasi-informal small private company employment, small entrepreneurs with limited business scalability and ability to withstand environmental cycles, and self-employed gig workers with varying levels of skills and low levels of stability.

Our study Drivers of Destiny among the young lower middle-income India, many of them first-generation college-goers, provides some pointers to the nature of the future middle class (previous columns here and elsewhere have described the findings of the study in detail).



RAMA BIJAPURKAR

They need an alternative low-cost location.

Despite our large domestic market, technical manpower, growing working-age population, and well-developed capital markets, India has found it difficult to attract these companies. It may be that we are not competitive enough given our infrastructure constraints, or there are regulatory hurdles, or just the perception of being a tough place to do business.

We need focussed effort on the part of the government to target these 50 companies. It is astonishing to me that none of us know who engaged with Apple and get them over the line? It should be a case study in government. The time has come to form a high-level task force to target leading companies and get them to commit to India in a more substantial manner.

The task force's job will be to connect target companies with the highest levels of government, resolve cross-ministerial issues, and coordinate between the Centre and states. It should also understand policy gaps and recommend solutions.

This body must report to the highest levels of government, with clear target companies and timelines. It should include representatives from all key ministries and help design the necessary incentives and reforms to attract global firms. Its progress must be reviewed periodically, ideally by the Prime Minister himself, given the urgency of the issue.

Apple's India sourcing success did not happen by chance. I am sure there were large hurdles that were jointly overcome. India now needs to repeat this playbook with at least 50 more companies, creating policy frameworks that address the specific concerns of each targeted industry leader. Once they commit, their suppliers will follow, and smaller industry peers won't want to be left behind. Other countries, whether Singapore, Malaysia, or Vietnam, have done exactly this, actively travelling the world to attract investments. The focus must be on manufacturing as we are already well-established as a destination for services.

Global supply chains are being forced to reorient as companies need to de-risk China, at 32 per cent of global manufacturing, has peaked. The world is uncomfortable with China gaining further share. Over the next 25 years, China will also see a net reduction of 235 million in its working-age population. The West is becoming uncompetitive across industries, and artificial intelligence cannot solve all people and cost concerns. As China moves up the value chain and challenges Western incumbents, there is a strong case for partnership between India and global companies. India has opportunities in both precision manufacturing and mass assembly.

This is our chance to get into global value chains. We may also be given a relative advantage by the Trump tariffs. This requires engagement at the highest levels of government and in a focussed manner. We have missed many buses in the last 50 years, we should not miss this one.

The author is with Amansa Capital

When India discovered itself



AMRITESH MUKHERJEE

Time moves differently in certain moments of history. In early 19th-century Britain, the future seemed to stretch endlessly before British India. As the empire celebrated victory over fascism abroad, it continued to imprison freedom fighters at home. Bloodied but victorious, it seemed as permanent as the monsoons. Complete independence — *purna swara* — remained exactly what it had always been: Tomorrow's promise, next year's possibility, next decade's dream.

What happened in the next few months, then, that Indian freedom would become a tangible, historic reality? How did the British, so eager to maintain India's dominion status, end their colonial rule in a hurry? That is fun-

damentally the story Ashis Ray's *The Trial That Shook Britain* ventures to answer. History, that most contested of disciplines, suffers from our human need for clear narratives. The writing of history is itself a political act, and nowhere is this more evident than in the contested narratives of decolonisation. Indian independence has been claimed by pacifists, revolutionaries, secularists, communalists, socialists and capitalists, each group highlighting their preferred version of events. Mr Ray refuses this false choice, understanding that the end of the empire was neither purely moral triumph nor purely revolutionary victory, but a confluence of intended and unintended consequences, of careful planning and historical accidents working in ways that none of the participants fully understood.

To understand Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose and his Indian National Army (INA), Mr Ray first traces the long lineage of armed resistance in British India, from the 1857 revolt all the way to the Ghadar Movement. While these movements saw success in spurts, Mr Ray writes that

"given the dangers involved and the consequent reprisals, the masses largely shied away from participation. There was also no outreach to either the countryside or Indian prisoners of war and Japanese military support, represented the logical extreme of armed resistance, an attempt to fight the empire with its own weapons. Bose, whose 'heart ruled over him,' whose 'sanguineous got the better of him,' and in whom 'a fiery patriotism prevailed over pragmatism,' attacked

British territories with Japanese support but achieved only limited success. By the time of his death, most of his forces had surrendered, with the remainder following suit shortly after. What the British failed to understand was that their own judicial theatre would complete what Bose's military campaigns could not. The British choice of INA officers, who had defected from the British Indian Army, Shah Nawaz Khan, Prem Sahgal and Gurbaksh Dhillon, as the first three to be court-martialled — that, too, as co-accused in the same trial — was unwittingly a Himalayan blunder. A Muslim, a Hindu and a Sikh, respectively, represented the three prominent Indian communities. Consequently, a spark became an inferno." Mr Ray writes.

Faced with a shifting political climate and upcoming elections, Nehru's leadership chose to rehabilitate the reputation of Bose — the same man they had helped drive into exile, the same militant whose methods they had publicly repudiated — by embracing and amplifying the story of

INA. The end of wartime censorship meant that the INA story, suppressed for years, entered public consciousness with accumulated force, spreading like wildfire. The blend of historical truth with mythmaking created a story, a ferocious concoction that would shake the Empire's very roots.

The cruel mathematics of political martyrdom meant that "Bose had accidentally and posthumously achieved what he failed to accomplish in his lifetime." The man who couldn't unite India through military victory and died in obscurity with his army scattered suddenly became the most powerful symbol of Indian unity. As Mr Ray writes, "The British Raj had killed many a defiant to its authority from Gandhian mass movements over a quarter of a century with wily circumspection. Rarely, if ever, was it outflanked as by the public outpouring over the trial."

What followed was a spontaneous mass uprising. Moreover, thousands of naval ratings revolted, chiefly in

Bombay, and spread throughout India's military infrastructure. Mr Ray's research through archives, memoirs, and courtroom proceedings reconstructs everything that happened in the courtroom and everything that happened outside, the waves of resistance that spread far beyond any single location or community.

The trials had created a "revolutionary situation," a moment when the normal rules of political engagement no longer applied, when previously unthinkable actions seemed not just possible but necessary. "Knowledge of the INA campaign, the provocative INA court martial and the defection in a section of the armed forces had converted a previously mellow public mood to one of militancy."

The INA trials, therefore, accomplished what decades of political organising could not: They made continued British rule practically impossible rather than merely morally objectionable. This was what India, still shackled in 1945, still dreaming of *purna swara*, would — at the stroke of the midnight hour — rise to discover itself once more.

The reviewer is a journalist, writer, and editor. Instagram/X: aroomofwords

The EDITORIAL PAGE

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

MALÉ OUTREACH

PM Modi's visit to the Maldives marks a significant turnaround in bilateral relations after a period of strain

WHEN PRESIDENT MOHAMED Muizzu, riding the "India Out" campaign, rose to power in the Maldives in September 2023, he signalled a clear intent to politically distance Malé from New Delhi. His January 2024 visit to China and his call for India to withdraw troops from the Maldives complicated ties with India. In this context, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit to the island nation to attend its Independence Day celebrations, during which several economic agreements were signed and projects inaugurated, marks a significant turnaround in bilateral relations after a period of strain.

The Maldives is a key pillar of India's "Neighbourhood First" policy. Beyond deep-rooted cultural ties and a history of friendly relations — India was among the first to establish diplomatic ties following that country's independence in 1965 — it sits atop critical sea lanes in the Indian Ocean, through which a major share of global trade and India's energy imports pass. It is an integral part of India's maritime security architecture. India provides economic support and assistance to the Maldives in infrastructure and health-care. Tourism, which accounts for nearly a third of the Maldivian economy, saw Indians as the largest group of visitors for several consecutive years up to 2023. This trend was disrupted in 2024, after derogatory remarks by three Maldivian junior ministers (suspended subsequently) triggered a diplomatic row and led to a sharp decline in Indian tourist arrivals. In a bid to reverse this, President Muizzu, speaking to reporters over the weekend, acknowledged that "India is one of the major countries that helps the Maldives with tourism. With PM Modi's visit, it is going to increase a lot."

Apart from meeting senior government officials, PM Modi also held separate interactions with the main Opposition party and leaders from across the political spectrum in the Maldives. These engagements reflect New Delhi's effort to insulate bilateral relations from the ebb and flow of politics between and within both countries. On the China question, it would be unrealistic to expect Malé to avoid doing business with Beijing. As the world's second-largest economy, China presents significant opportunities for the Maldives, and the latter is entitled to make its own choices. Talks on loan restructuring with China, however, initiated during President Muizzu's state visit in January 2024, have seen little progress so far. As a key neighbour and regional power, India can counterbalance Beijing's influence by making better offers — especially given that Maldives' external debt burden has worsened as a result of China's lending practices. New Delhi, therefore, should keep using its leverage to further its interests and maintain close relations, while keeping a watchful eye on Malé's political environment.

A BEAUTIFUL DRAW

At the end of five days in Manchester, it felt like a win — for India and Test cricket

SPORTS FANS NOT immersed in the ways of Test cricket would be intrigued at how a contest can end without a clear winner and loser, and how there can be celebration of a stalemate. In Test cricket, too, the draw has become pretty rare of late, and often happens only when a considerable amount of time is lost due to weather. That's why India's feat of batting 143 overs in Manchester was all the more special. It is a rare performance in this era of T20 cricket, where strike rates are everything and most batsmen have forgotten the art of defending.

A hard-fought draw, which witnesses two teams fighting it out for the full five days before finishing with shared honours, is still one of the sublime joys of the longest format of the game, as could be seen at Old Trafford over five days. Shubman Gill, K.L. Rahul, Washington Sundar and Ravindra Jadeja batted with skill, patience and composure to deny England a win. If India manages to level the series 2-2 at the Oval next week, the doggedness shown in the fourth Test will be a big reason. Test cricket is the severest examination of the mental, physical and emotional attributes of a player. Almost anything can happen over a period of five days. There's hope, even if a team is 0/2 facing a deficit of 311 with more than five sessions left in the game.

A five-match Test series leaves players with no place to hide. All their strengths and weaknesses are exposed as the same set of players have a go at each other week after week. It allows someone like Gill to start the tour like a run-machine, lose his bearings for a while in the middle, and still have the time to regain his mojo before it's too late. It forces Ben Stokes to push his battered body through the pain barrier in regular long and incisive spells, after doing his bit with the bat and on the field, leading his team by example. It's understandable when tempers fray, as was seen at Lord's and in the final stages at Old Trafford. After having frustrated England for such a long time and tiring them out, Jadeja and Washington wanted personal milestones for celebration. That it ended up getting under the opposition's skin was a bonus. Stokes's reaction was childish. When his initial offer of a draw was refused, he and his team would have done well to grit their teeth and carry on, rather than make an issue of it. At the end of five days, however, the draw in Manchester felt like a win — for India and Test cricket.

BE A POOKIE

How IIT-Ropar's convocation became a masterclass in connection — a reminder that joy belongs on campus

APOOKIE, BY any other name, is someone who gets it. What it means to be young and vulnerable; to crave joy in unexpected places; or to question why solemnity must always march in step with ceremony. At IIT-Ropar's recent convocation, director Rajeev Ahuja, professor of Computational Materials Science, showed he hasn't forgotten the feeling of wavering between hope and anxiety, standing on the cusp of change. The 60-year-old didn't just hand out degrees. He doled out dabs, fist bumps, and Korean finger hearts. Formal, it wasn't. But memorable? Absolutely.

The videos of the ceremony on social media, clocking over 30 million views, have earned Ahuja the affectionate moniker of "pookie professor". His moves may not have had the Gen Zchutzpah — boomer shoulders can only shimmy so much — but what mattered was the spirit. In a space often weighed down by formality and hierarchy, Ahuja brought presence, play, and a rare emotional intelligence. He didn't just preside over a convocation, he participated in it. Ahuja met students where they were, and in doing so, made the stage feel a little less daunting and a lot more empathetic.

The moment may have been light, but its resonance is far from trivial. Higher education in India is often weighed down by stress, burnout and a sense of alienation. In the endless juggling of exams, deadlines, institutional pressures and existential dread, a small gesture of warmth — a shared laugh, a playful photograph — can feel like a moment of levity; an affirmation that learning isn't just about instructions, it is also about connections. Ahuja's gesture symbolised a rare kind of academic leadership that institutions could do more with: One that is committed to creating spaces where students can thrive as more than the sum total of their grades; one that values joy over ceremony. Because long after the degrees are framed and the marks forgotten, what stays with students is someone who made them feel seen and heard. Someone like a pookie, on their side.



ASHOK K KANTHA

ON JULY 19, Chinese Premier Li Qiang travelled to Nyingchi in Tibet to launch the construction of a 1.2 trillion yuan (\$167.8 billion) mega hydropower project on the Yarlung Tsangpo River. This massive project is being constructed without prior consultation with lower riparian India, though its likely location in Medog County is barely 30 km from the place the river enters India and becomes the Siang, the main channel of the Brahmaputra River system. The project has serious ominous implications for India, but the Government of India has not commented publicly on its construction.

While the project details have not been made public by China, except its cost and that it will involve five cascade hydropower plants, Chinese media reports suggest that it will generate nearly 300 billion kilowatt-hours (kWh) of electricity annually, more than thrice the designed capacity (88.2 billion kWh) of the Three Gorges Dam in China, currently the largest in the world. It would involve drilling four to six 20-km tunnels and diversion of half of the river's flow.

India ought to be deeply concerned about the downstream impact, which will manifest in many ways. First, a project of this magnitude will inevitably interfere with the flow of waters in the Brahmaputra. The contribution of glacier melt, snow melt and precipitation in Tibet to the waters in the Siang could range from 25 per cent to 35 per cent. There will be significant impact downstream of any diversion or ponding of water in Tibet, particularly in the lean season. The construction of five massive hydropower plants in cascade is likely to involve reservoir-like structures, even though it is claimed to be a run-of-the-river project. Altering natural river flows will harm aquatic ecosystems, fisheries, sedimentation, and biodiversity hotspots.

Second, even more worrying is the risk of flooding. While reservoirs can regulate floods, unannounced or sudden releases of water during heavy rainfall, or in a natural disaster like an earthquake, to protect the structure, can exacerbate downstream flooding, causing immense damage to life and property.

Third, this massive project involving tunnelling through fragile and young mountains is being undertaken in an area classified as Seismic Zone V (very high risk), which has seen major deep and shallow earthquakes in the past. Medog County lies within the

Delhi must talk tough with Beijing over China's construction of a dam on Brahmaputra

The present strategy of quiet diplomacy with China is not working. Strangely, none of our readouts on recent high-level conversations with China have even mentioned the Medog project. Looking ahead, there must be strong signalling of our deep concerns about this project to China, both through diplomatic channels and in public comments. If the roles were reversed, there is absolutely no possibility of China being similarly circumspect. It is also worthwhile recalling how forceful Pakistan has been in dealings with India as a lower riparian, even though we had given generous terms under the Indus Waters Treaty.

Eastern Himalayan Syntaxis, a highly seismic region influenced by the Himalayan Frontal Thrust and local faults like the Medog Fault. Challenges such as reservoir-induced seismicity, tunnelling, geological miscalculations, and previous Chinese lapses in construction quality (for instance, in the Neelum-Jhelum project in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir) leave zero margin for engineering error — post-construction, there will be an ever-present danger of disasters.

Fourth, China has leveraged its advantage as predominantly upper riparian vis-à-vis its neighbours and has mostly withheld meaningful cooperation with downstream countries. For instance, China's development of a cascade of 12 smaller hydropower projects on the Mekong (called Lancang in China) has led to irregular fluctuations, drying out of areas, and depletion of fish catches and fertile sedimentation in the Lower Mekong Basin, affecting Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. This pattern of behaviour presages foreseen and unforeseen consequences of the proposed dam for India and Bangladesh.

Fifth, China's track record of cooperation under three MoUs with India over the past two decades has been unsatisfactory. China has suspended the supply of wet-season hydrographic data for the Brahmaputra and the Sutlej from time to time. It has not agreed to provide lean-season data. Let alone discuss broader cooperation like the sharing of waters of trans-border rivers, not one collaborative project has been undertaken under the umbrella MOU for cooperation signed in 2013.

Finally, neither China nor India is a signatory to the UN Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses (1997). However, two key principles of the Convention, "equitable and reasonable utilisation" of shared waters and the "obligation not to cause significant harm" to downstream states, are a part of customary international law. India has been a responsible co-riparian state, including with Pakistan, even after the Indus Waters Treaty was put in abeyance after the Pahalgarh terrorist outrage. The same cannot be said of China.

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strong signalling of our deep concerns about this project to China, both through diplomatic channels and in public comments. If the roles were reversed, there is absolutely no possibility of China being similarly circumspect. It is also worthwhile recalling how forceful Pakistan has been in dealings with India as a lower riparian, even though we had given generous terms under the Indus Waters Treaty.

The scope of the dialogue with China must be expanded beyond the issue of hydrographic data. As an affected party, we have every right to insist on full visibility on the technical specifications of the project, its environmental impact studies and how China proposes to tackle the seismic challenge. We must push for transparent and broader trans-boundary cooperation, similar to China's engagements with Kazakhstan on rivers like the Ili and Irtysh, to protect our existing and proposed user rights and other interests as a co-riparian. Indeed, we should seek suspension of work on the project until the relevant issues have been addressed. There should be a clear message that China undertaking a massive project like this without taking on board our legitimate concerns will have consequences for bilateral relations.

We must undertake a series of activities on our own. Considering the danger of floods and reduction in lean-season flows, India has no alternative but to create storage structures to moderate the risks in the immediate downstream. India should reassess the quantum of water contributed by major tributaries and local hydrological systems using its remote sensing techniques, geospatial modelling tools and legacy hydrological data to reduce dependency on upstream data from China. We have the means and expertise to monitor the project and make the findings of those studies public. Finally, it is important to build a sustained narrative about China's unilateral actions in the upstream and escalate the issue bilaterally as also in our broader messaging on India-China relations. Our NGOs should raise this matter in relevant international platforms.

We must appreciate that India's circumspect could be seen by China as a sign of weakness. This wouldn't help in pursuing our larger agenda of rebuilding bilateral relations with our northern neighbour.

The writer is former ambassador to China



SUHAS BORKER

SUMIT CHAKRAVARTY, EMINENT journalist and editor of *Mainstream Weekly*, passed away in Kolkata on July 26. He was 79. Chakravarty is survived by his wife, Gargi, historian and CPI leader, and his son, Sagnik, editor with Prasar Bharati's DD India. Chakravarty had been ailing for some time. He had moved to Kolkata in September 2023 to be with family and close associates.

As a young man, Sumit had the unenviable task of living up to his parents' legacy. His mother, Renu Chakravarty, was elected twice to the Lok Sabha and emerged as a "striking" parliamentary and trade union leader. She was the niece of B.C. Roy, first Chief Minister of West Bengal, who inspired her to take up political work. Both parents shared the Odia connection and had joined the British Communist Party as students. His father, Nikhil Chakravarty, founded *Mainstream* in 1962. Over the years, it became a platform for critical discourse in the country. He was the "father figure" for the press freedom movement; whether it was the Emergency (1975-77) or the Defamation Bill (1989), he always led from the front. He declined the Padma Bhushan in 1990, saying "Journalists should not be identified with the establishment".

Sumit's legacy brought high expectations, and public scrutiny. He was *Patriot's* Moscow correspondent and worked with *The Daily* be-

GENTLE CRUSADER

Sumit Chakravarty practised journalism with courage, conviction and generosity

In 2004, I experienced Sumit's incredible integrity as an editor. He published an article I had written about a top-notch politico's about-turn from his professed views. Notwithstanding the bitterness it caused in his relationship with the politico, Sumit remained resolute in my defence even when he came under vehement personal attack.

fore joining *Mainstream*. He came out with flying colours by combining journalism and activism. His journalism fostered informed debate and gave space to diverse viewpoints, while his activism was driven by values of democracy, secularism, scientific temper and Gandhian *ahimsa*. From Singur to Bhopal to Korea — statements, appeals, reports and documents were featured in *Mainstream*.

Sumit was a one-man army. We had launched the Working Group on Alternative Strategies (WGRAS) — a voluntary civil society initiative — in March 1992 to work on policy alternatives for an equitable development paradigm. Sumit was a founder member of its core group, and I was its convener. But we were soon overtaken by events. With the destruction of the Babri Masjid, our full attention turned to communal harmony. Senior journalist Dileep Padgaonkar had appealed for the Prime Minister to lead a citizens' march on Rajpath on January 26, 1993, for communal harmony, similar to the one held on January 26, 1963, after the Chinese aggression. We waited, but nothing was happening. So, on the night of January 25, 1993, WGRAS issued an appeal, calling for a citizens' march. It was successfully completed from Vijay Chowk to Amar Jawan Jyoti at India Gate, and we sent out a very positive signal across the country.

In 2004, I experienced Sumit's incredible integrity as an editor. He published an article I had written about a top-notch politico's about-turn from his professed views. Notwithstanding the bitterness it caused in his relationship with the politico, Sumit remained resolute in my defence even when he came under vehement personal attack.

In 2008, a documentary film project of mine was facing rough weather. One day we met at the India International Centre and he said he wanted to talk to me. We walked to Lodhi Garden and sat on a bench. Sumit took out his chequebook and wrote out a cheque of Rs 2 lakh for me. I protested, but he would not listen. "I know the problem you are facing; give it back when you can," he said. That was the man, helpful to a fault, and one who would internalise the problems of his close associates as his own.

Sumit donated the print issues of *Mainstream* from 1962 to 2020 to the Archives of Contemporary India at Ashoka University. His spirited journalism-activism, in which he invested his genius, simple, sensitive, grounded and noble lifeblood, has now moved into the digital space and is published every week.

The writer is editor, *Citizens First Television*, and *commentator*, *Working Group on Alternative Strategies*, New Delhi

JULY 29, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

PUNJAB ELECTIONS

THE PUNJAB GOVERNOR, Arjun Singh, said elections in the state were in the offing. When asked whether the atmosphere was ripe for elections, after the widely hailed accord for Punjab, he said that the word "atmosphere" was vague. The elections would depend on the "totality of circumstances" in the state.

AISSF TALKS

ALMOST ALL MEMBERS of the All-India Sikh Students Federation who are not facing charges of violence or waging a war against the government may be released soon. The

government is considering their cases. Following the agreement between Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Akali Dal chief Harchand Singh Longowal, the release of all such persons will help the Akali leadership in pacifying the youth and also in implementing the accord. Former CM Parkash Singh Badal and SGPC chief G.S. Tohra had objected to the accord on multiple grounds.

LOOTING IN KAMPALA

THE NEW MILITARY rulers of Uganda on Sunday suspended the constitution, dissolved Parliament, closed the borders and warned civilians to remain indoors as looting intensi-

fied in the capital. There was no estimate of the monetary loss. Several shops of Asians have also been affected.

J&K CM SUMMONED

A change of government in Jammu and Kashmir appears to be in the offing. The Chief Minister, G.M. Shah has been summoned to Delhi along with his wife, Khalida Shah, president of the NC(K). According to circles close to the ruling party, the Chief Minister has been summoned by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to apprise him about the views of Congress (I) MLAs who have been openly demanding withdrawal of support to Shah's government.

THE ASIAN AGE

29 JULY 2025

Subhani

Politics, history: Much ado about PM Tamil Nadu visit

The vignette of Prime Minister Narendra Modi waiting through the colonnaded precincts of the historic abode of Lord Brihadeswarar at Gangaikonda Cholapuram in shimmering silk, holding a pot of holy water close to his chest, was picture perfect. It presented a devotee in traditional attire seeking divine blessings with religious fervour. But how much would that image help Modi gain what he has long been seeking in Tamil Nadu: a political recognition that would help his party, the BJP, be in an alliance that will romp home in the next elections.

Flying into the State straight from picturesque Maldives, the Prime Minister paid tributes to ancient Tamil king Rajendra Chola, who had built the town as well as the temple, besides a sprawling lake, 1,000 years ago, apart from making foreign conquests. Paying encomiums to the ancient monarch for his administrative acumen and military might, Modi said the legacy of the Chola dynasty drew the roadmap for modern India to emerge as a developed nation.

But will that shower of praise for a Tamil dynasty of yore evoke people's sentiments that will convert into ballots in the modern day context, particularly when the present ruler of the State, Chief Minister M.K. Stalin, had fired a missile reiterating that the visiting PM was holding back funds meant for Tamil Nadu under the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan? Besides raising a storm of demands, Even if that is dismissed as a grumble of a disgruntled leader in the opposite side of the BJP's political spectrum, Modi did nothing to pacify a curiosity in the State, who has been demanding an answer.

The AIADMK's top honcho Edappadi K. Palaniswami has been seeking a clear answer, particularly since he has already embarked on a State-wide campaign tour for the elections that are close to a year away, on the beggling question over the nature of the alliance his party has struck with the BJP. Amidst the mockery of the rivals, who predict an overrun of the AIADMK by the mighty BJP after it helps the national party win some seats in the Assembly polls, Palaniswami would have liked to get that clarification from the PM that he may not have got.

Since Palaniswami has been claiming that it is the AIADMK that would lead the coalition, in which the BJP is a part, and that he would be the Chief Minister if the alliance wins, provoking another round of analysing from the opposite camp, he has been waiting for Amit Shah, the Union home minister who originally scripted the alliance singlehandedly without any interruption from the AIADMK, to come down to Chennai and make things clear for the people.

With Shah unable to make the much-awaited trip, Palaniswami would have liked Modi to spell out the terms of the alliance dispelling fears of the BJP overrunning the AIADMK. But not only did things not turn out in favour of Palaniswami, they also did not favour the BJP. To believe that a PM's sudden open devotion for a deity in an old temple in the State would turn the voters to the BJP is nothing but absurd, particularly when the State is known for religiosity and also rationalism, both travelling hand in hand without any conflict.

Learn to control crowds better

It is only a coincidence that back to back incidents of stampedes claimed as many as 10 lives and injured dozens of people on Sunday and Monday; they are waiting to happen at any and every place where people congregate in India, thanks to the lethargy and total lack of people control measures by the authorities concerned.

The stampede that claimed eight lives at the Mansa Devi temple in Haridwar on Sunday was caused by a rush of pilgrims along a stair route leading to the temple while the one that ended two lives at Avshaaneshwar Mahadev temple in Barabanki on Monday was triggered by the panic after a live power line breaking.

Such incidents happen in India every year with alarming regularity. It was not very long ago that stampedes claimed several lives in Bengaluru while people were celebrating an IPL victory at the Delhi railway station or at Tirupathi temple.

It is not that the government authorities and the event/festival organisers were caught unawares by events leading to a tragedy instead. The Mahakumbh this year has proved that a congregation of crores of people can be conducted with no loss of life. There indeed was an instance of a tent catching fire. Normally, it could have resulted not only in the spread of fire but also of a killer panic. But the preparedness was foolproof and there was no report of loss of life.

It may also be remembered that a blast at a religious meeting in Kalamassery in Kerala last year claimed eight lives but all of them were the direct victims of the blast; not one was due to stampede caused by panic running. Reports had said there was a drill on every day of the congregation on how to behave in case of an emergency and how to avoid a stampede.

Respect for human lives and proper preparedness can indeed save lives. It is time that the government and law-enforcement agencies rise to the challenge.

Rajendra Mishra

Editor

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THE ASIAN AGE

R. Suresh

Managing Director

Aakar Patel

What's behind BJP shift over divorce & inheritance laws, and other policies?

The joint family and indissoluble marriage have been the basis of Hindu society. Laws that alter this basis will ultimately lead to the disintegration of society. The Jan Sangh will, therefore, repeal the Hindu Marriage and Hindu Succession Acts.

This is from the party's manifesto of 1957. The Jan Sangh's opposition to divorce and its championing of joint families was accompanied also by an attack against the rights of women. It has drafted legislation in the early 1950s. Dr B.R. Ambedkar had proposed modest changes to Hindu personal law, especially on the question of inheritance for women. He identified the two dominant forms of traditional inheritance law and modified one of them to make inheritance fairer for women. In its 1951 manifesto, the Jan Sangh opposed this proposal in the Hindu Code Bill, saying social reform should not come from above but from society. In 1957, the one that is quoted above, it said such changes were not acceptable unless rooted in ancient culture. "Ridiculous individualism" would ensue as a result, it feared.

One part of its opposition to divorce was the idea of eternal marriage. However, the material element was not letting divorced women and widowed daughters-in-law inherit property. This position changed over time, but there is no explanation why the party changed its manifesto positions. As divorce became less rare in Indian

society and as urban, upper caste, middle-class families (the BJP's base) became more nuclear, the pledged loyalty to joint families eroded.

As we have seen in the earlier column, looking at a similar abandoning by the Jan Sangh/BJP of its socialist policies on the economy, this is not necessarily a problem. All parties have the right to alter and shift their stand, but when a position is laid out, then its retreat and cancellation and taking up of a stand it had previously opposed should be laid out and explained. This the RSS-linked political force has chosen not to do.

An uneasiness with how to handle caste is also reflected in its manifestos. The party said it would create a "feeling of equality and oneness in Hindu society by liquidating untouchability and casteism". But it did not speak of how. The Jan Sangh did not add to the Congress policy of reservations for Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes, for example by pushing for it in the private sector or expanding it. The support to Dalits comes from such ideas as "arranging for extra training classes, refresher courses and in-service training for their benefit". Culturally, the party stood firmly against alcohol and sought nationwide prohibition. And it wanted English to be replaced in all spheres by local languages, and especially Hindi. This is something home minister Amit Shah spoke about recently. After an uproar, the BJP forced

media outlets to delete his video, likely because it offended their middle-class base.

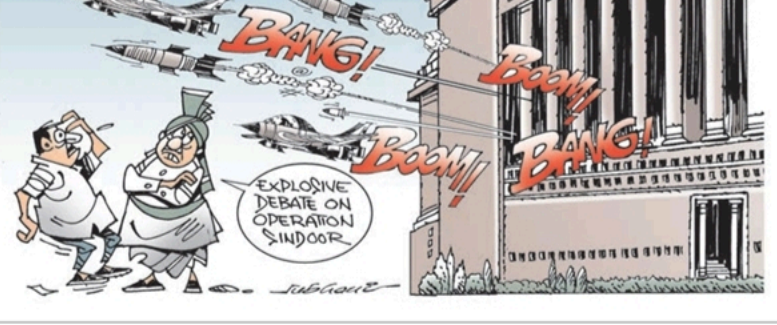
Another place the Jan Sangh showed itself to be a party of the urban middle class was in agriculture. The first point on agriculture of its first manifesto calls for a "country-wide campaign to educate and enthuse the cultivator about the necessity of harder work for more production". Today it would take a brave BJP minister to accuse India's farmers of not working hard enough, and the surrender on the farm bill shows that the party continues to be removed from the way the Indian farmer thinks.

On foreign affairs, a subject on which the BJP has won many gold medals recently, the Jan Sangh did not have any particular strategic view of the world and India's place in it, besides saying that India should be friends with all who were friendly and tough on those who were not. It wanted India to be given a place in the UN Security Council, but there was no reference to why or what India's role would be, or how its influence and options could be increased if this seat were miraculously given. It offered no path for getting to the Security Council. There appears to be no continuity in the way the Jan Sangh thought about such things. The 1957 manifesto opened with a grim warning of a threat emanating from a Pakistan-Portugal alliance. The 1962 manifesto made no reference to this, but opened with an admonition against

Jawaharlal Nehru for losing the war to China. The 1972 manifesto made no reference to the war in Bangladesh, which had been created out of Pakistan only weeks earlier. Its idea of defence policy came through such demands as compulsory military training for all boys and girls, removal of licences for possessing muzzle-loading guns (an 18th century weapon), expansion of the National Cadet Corps and the manufacture of nuclear weapons. It is a series of things strung together without any thread.

The reader may ask what is the point of raising these things in 2025, and that is a valid question. Perhaps the answer is that the BJP is the largest and most dominant political force in our country. What it says it stands for and what it ultimately does is important. Its own constitution says that the party "shall bear true faith and allegiance... to the principles of socialism and secularism and this came years before other parties were compelled to do so by law. Today it is under some pressure, even if the very genteel one exerted by this columnist, to explain itself and its endless shifts to its voters and to the citizens of this country.

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



Is 'double engine' politics of discrimination normal?



Shikha Mukerjee

The politics of discrimination is a binary and that has been so normalised that no one seems shocked or even bothered that every time a state comes up for election, the BJP's campaign machine led by its helmsman and star propagandist Narendra Modi unravels a narrative to captivate his audiences by promising the "double engine sarkar" as the panacea for all ills. The BJP's campaign machine led by its helmsman and star propagandist Narendra Modi unravels a narrative to captivate his audiences by promising the "double engine sarkar" as the panacea for all ills. The BJP's campaign machine led by its helmsman and star propagandist Narendra Modi unravels a narrative to captivate his audiences by promising the "double engine sarkar" as the panacea for all ills.

The vision of the nation unravels by Mr Modi's superior skills as a campaigner, charismatic leader and mass icon is simple: the nation ought to be "one nation-one party". If parts of the nation are delinquent enough to choose other parties, then the fault-line separates the good from the bad is the concept of the "double engine sarkar".

There are problems with this concept. Mr Modi's campaigns are blatant in propositioning voters on the basis of promising discrimination. His guarantee is conditional; if voters help the BJP win, then there will be rewards. The "double engine sarkar" that is a BJP government in the state and the National Democratic Alliance government at the Centre will work in coordination to rev up the delivery of services, infrastructure, investment, Central funding and Central schemes to power up "development" in the state.

If this promise of goodies and windfalls were limited to the campaign, which is always fierce and intensely competitive, then it would be perfectly in order; all political parties have the freedom to sell

The "double engine sarkar" voter seduction exercise will be presumably unleashed for maximum effect in the next few months.

themselves to voters in election time in creative and blatantly biased ways, bordering on unethical. What is not in order is for Mr Modi's BJP to normalise discrimination by showing off the rapid change in backward states once voters opted for the "double engine sarkar" model and warn voters in states that are not run by the BJP that they will continue to lag behind, if there is no change of government.

Discrimination as a policy instrument is creating inequality where it cannot be seen to exist. That trashes the promises in the Preamble of the Constitution of equality, fraternity and justice, and distorts the value of liberty by arm-twisting the freedom to choose of voters. Mr Modi's campaign centre in Bihar and West Bengal reveal the nature of the discrimination and threat that it contains if voters don't do what he tells them to. Earlier in July, the Prime Minister unveiled a Rs 7,200-crore development package for one district, Jammu, which has a significant tribal population. The PM did not distribute cash for votes, but he did imply that there would be more money if the BJP won.

Every time Mr Modi campaigns, he talks of how Uttar Pradesh's development speed has zoomed after the BJP was voted to power, how Assam has moved away from turbulence and is racing ahead with infrastructure development, how backward Tripura is fast catching up and Chhattisgarh after its change of heart is going forward with leaps and bounds. The "double engine sarkar" will transform the fortunes of states that lag behind is his promise to West Bengal if it votes the BJP to power in 2026 when the Assembly elections are due. The grouse of the Member of Parliament in Bihar's Banka, JD(U) leader Giridhari Yadav, contradicts Mr Modi's claim. The MP was scathing he said after 11 years of the BJP-led NDA in power, Bihar has continued to lag behind. His yardstick for measuring neglect was his grievance that not one new train has been launched on the Delhi-Patna and Patna-Mumbai routes in the time that Mr Modi has been Prime Minister, even though Bihar's population has grown and more people travel on those routes.

One disgruntled MP from a party that is in alliance with the BJP in Bihar is not necessarily a representative sample of how the "double engine sarkar" model works. The best performing state in terms of a combination of state GDP, the maximum number of factories and the collection is probably Tamil Nadu. An Opposition-ruled bastion that the BJP has not breached in 11 years. The other best performing states by a mix of measures are Maharashtra, that has swung between the Opposition and the BJP over the last 11 years, Gujarat, that is a BJP-ruled state, and Karnataka, that is more or less a Congress bastion now. Andhra Pradesh and Telangana have done well and the BJP is not the dominant party in either state. Uttar Pradesh has surged forward, but is not as yet near catching up with Tamil Nadu.

If regime change made all the difference as the "double engine sarkar" model suggests, then it is remarkable how voters and political parties have been stubbornly resistant to the BJP's attractions. It suggests that voters and political parties have other considerations when the BJP offers to team up. State Assembly elections are due in Assam, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Kerala in 2026. The "double engine sarkar" voter seduction exercise will be presumably unleashed for maximum effect in the next few months.

LETTERS

HALT GAZA'S TRAUMA

In Gaza, the crisis has reached a heartbreaking low: journalists, once the voice of the voiceless, are selling their cameras and press gear to feed their families. The very people who exposed injustice to the world are now starving in silence. Yet amidst this darkness, a faint light emerges that global media networks, human rights groups and ordinary citizens are calling for urgent aid, evacuation routes and protection for these frontline truth-tellers. But the deafening silence of major world powers and human rights bodies raises painful questions about our shared humanity? Do we really need a mass graveyard of journalists to awaken the world's conscience?

As'ad Kabir Nagari
Mumbai

GREEDY TRUMP

US PRESIDENT Donald Trump's yearning for the Nobel Peace Prize is no secret. He frames himself as a peacemaker, often unprompted. Yet, his record speaks more of ambition than achievement. In Ukraine, he hints at ending the war "in 24 hours" but neither Kyiv nor Moscow trusts him. In Gaza, his stance is even less persuasive, with little beyond hollow statements, while giving Israel carte blanche. His supposed credit for the India-Pakistan détente lacks conviction, repeated more out of habit than belief. Frustrated, Mr Trump turns to Africa and Southeast Asia for conflict de-escalation, but even these claims lack depth. His Peace Prize pursuit seems driven less by diplomacy than by the desire for legacy.

R. Narayanan
Navi Mumbai

HATERS PUNISHED?

WITH the reset in ties between India and the Maldives, what happens to all the ambitious plans of converting Lakshadweep into a tourist spot to rival the Maldives? Our patriotism tends to be short-lived. There was earlier a call for a ban on buying Chinese goods, and later to boycott the Maldives for its insulting attitude towards India. One can only feel sorry for those who may have invested time, money and energy into projects anticipating an influx of domestic tourists. Let this also be a warning to all not to be fooled by the sudden bursts of patriotism. We should think over matters more carefully and dispassionately.

Anthony Henriquez
Mumbai

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

[OUR TAKE]

SIR challenge for the poll panel

ECI should brace for questions on decline in voting population, deletions in Bihar electoral roll

The second phase of the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of the Bihar electoral roll will begin on August 1 once the Election Commission of India (ECI) publishes the draft document. The number of enumeration forms received for SIR suggests a fall of 6.5 million from the number of registered voters in Bihar as on June 24, the day before ECI launched the exercise, and also lower than the number of registered voters before the 2024 general election and even the 2020 assembly election. This number may fall further as the forms are scrutinised and the incomplete ones rejected. Except during the electoral roll revision in 2005, Bihar has never seen a decline in the voting population: The decline is intriguing considering the state's high fertility rate. ECI has attributed the decline to the deletion of the names of deceased persons, those with duplicate registration and migration, but this doesn't ring true. The poll body has promised that due process will be followed in the case of deletions from the roll; it must follow through for the sake of the credibility of SIR.

The SIR controversy is playing out across three planes — political, legal and institutional. It has rolled the political atmosphere with the Opposition accusing the poll body of weaponising the electoral roll; the Rashtriya Janata Dal has threatened a poll boycott if its concerns are not addressed. Civil society bodies and politicians have challenged SIR in the Supreme Court, especially its choice of 11 documents to prove eligibility for inclusion in the roll and the refusal to include the Aadhaar card, existing voter identification card, and ration card among them. The challenge also involves the constitutional question of whether ECI's mandate extends to insisting that a prospective voter prove his/her citizenship. And ECI, which has a stellar record in conducting elections, has come under scrutiny for potential overreach, and the Opposition has raised questions about its conduct.

In this backdrop, ECI's actions in the coming days will be keenly watched. The right to vote is a cherished right, especially for the poor and oppressed who consider it as the only weapon to demand accountability from the rulers; denial of this right, even if on technical grounds, is likely to be viewed with grief and anger. ECI must tread carefully and stay true to its mandate, which is conducting free and fair elections.

Turn Gaza pause for aid into a ceasefire

Israel's tactical pause in fighting in three areas of Gaza — to allow minimal humanitarian aid to reach starving Palestinians — may temporarily help in averting mass starvation deaths in the war zone. Israel's military onslaught is aimed at destroying Hamas and rescuing the last of the hostages in the latter's custody, but it hasn't spared tens of thousands of ordinary Gazans. The bulk of the territory's health care facilities and other utilities now lie in ruins. Tel Aviv's refusal to let humanitarian aid through — until the tactical pause — has added a massive human and deprivation crisis to the mix.

Up until now, Israel cited the operations of the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation — backed by the US and Israel — to gloss over the hunger crisis, which, some western experts believe, now approaches textbook famine conditions. Sniper attacks on aid queues killing over 800 persons and reports of over a hundred deaths — many of them young children with emaciated bodies and bellies distended from malnutrition — have shocked the global community. Despite this, Israel blocked aid even as the World Food Programme claimed 90,000 women and children needed urgent treatment for malnutrition, and the World Health Organisation warned that nearly one in five children under the age of five in Gaza City now suffers from acute malnutrition — tripling from just a month ago.

The pause in the war has come after strong condemnation from Israel's many friends in the West — last Monday, the UK and 27 other nations issued a statement, censuring Israel's actions. The UN and aid organisations estimate the aid Israel has allowed to reach Gazans is just a trickle and won't avert a famine. Close to 60,000 Palestinians have died in the 22-month war, which at times threatened to engulf the whole of West Asia. Multiple attempts at peace have failed owing to the intransigence of Tel Aviv or Hamas, or both. It is time the international community asks Tel Aviv to turn the tactical pauses into a permanent ceasefire.

How NEP facilitated a UK-India partnership

The framework on education, which turns five today, has identified internationalisation of education and invited the world to invest in India

In July 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi set out a new vision for education in India, the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP). This visionary framework for the very first time identified internationalisation of education as a national priority and invited the world to collaborate and co-create with India's thriving higher education ecosystem. Provisions for foreign university campuses, joint and dual degrees, credit transfers, and an increased focus on research and innovation aim to propel India towards becoming one of the world's leading knowledge economies.

Almost exactly five years on, India is celebrating five years of the National Education Policy in action and India and the UK have prioritised education in our refreshed and forward-looking Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Last week in the UK, Prime Ministers Keir Starmer and Modi set out a vision for 2035 that will build on our already strong education and skills partnership, nurturing the next generation of global talent, creating opportunities for cross cultural

learning and accelerating our cooperation and ambition through an annual strategic education dialogue. And the future of education partnership is already clear to see, with the opportunity to access the UK's world-class education growing right here in India.

In July, the University of Southampton became the first foreign university to open a comprehensive branch campus in India under the University Grants Commission regulations. We were delighted to attend the opening ceremony in Gurugram along with dignitaries from the Government of India and the University of Southampton. But it was among students that the excitement was most palpable — one told us that she was delighted to have the chance to attend a UK university without having to travel thousands of miles from her family.

It is students like her that this partnership benefits most.

This is an important milestone in the UK-India relationship, which has been made possible by the NEP, the UGC regulations and the UK and India's shared commitment to internationalisation, inclusion and innovation. And with four other UK universities set to follow Southampton's lead and open campuses in India next year, and two more set to launch soon

in GIFT City, this excitement is continuing to grow.

With some of the UK's best universities bringing their brands to India, thousands of bright Indian students will have new opportunities to gain the global skills that India's fast-growing economy needs. These students will be the pillars of India's knowledge economy and integral to the achievement of the vision of Viksit Bharat.

But these university openings are just one strand in the golden thread of people-to-people connections linking the UK and India.

For decades, British and Indian students have travelled to each other's countries, enriching our living bridge and playing their important part in our vibrant research, education and skills partnership. In the UK, we are proud to celebrate our 1.9 million strong Indian diaspora. Their contributions to the arts, language, culture, food, sports and everything else have been felt in towns and cities across the UK.

We are at an inflection point in transnational education. Together, both countries are shaping a future-ready, equitable and innovative model of transnational education that prioritises access, quality, and cross-cultural exchange. UK campuses in India are only one part of the story. More India-UK joint and dual degrees, cen-



Lindy Cameron



Alison Barrett



Regulations, when thoughtfully crafted and consistently implemented, can be powerful enablers of international learning.

DPR PHO

ties of excellence with industry, and science and research hubs are joining the thriving Indian higher education ecosystem. All this creates greater opportunities for young people, including for British students to spend time studying in India.

The bespoke Young Professionals Scheme (YPS), a visa scheme which allows young Indian and British graduates to live, study, travel and work in the other country for up to two years, is also an enabler of that.

The timing of our commitment to deepen our educational partnership could not be more important. In a world of geopolitical, geo-economic and technological shifts, and greater demand for higher education, it is crucial that our education systems evolve to drive innovation and build a skilled and forward-looking talent pool, ready to address global challenges and contribute to a safe and sustainable future for all.

That is why the UK and India's intellectual partnership will build on the strong foundations of the first five years of progress we have seen under the NEP. We will be responsive to emerging opportunities, adapt to the

rapid advancement of technology, and strengthen our collaboration.

And we hope to see universities continuing to partner to align their curricula, processes, and support systems to meet students' international aspirations. As the NEP shows, regulations, when thoughtfully crafted and consistently implemented, can be powerful enablers of international learning.

India and the UK are collaborating to build institutions that can form a generation of globally minded, socially conscious leaders equipped to tackle complex transnational challenges. Education is the foundation on which economies grow, and where innovations that create the opportunities of the future are shaped. The UK and India will continue to nurture the next generation of talent through our global education and skills partnership — and we are excited to see what the next five years of the NEP will bring.

Lindy Cameron is British high commissioner to India and Alison Barrett is country director, British Council India. The views expressed are personal.

In Bihar SIR case, Supreme Court has to walk a tightrope

The Supreme Court is hearing several petitions against the Election Commission of India (ECI)'s decision to conduct a special intensive revision (SIR) of the electoral rolls in Bihar even in the first phase of the exercise was completed last week. SIR targets updating the rolls before the upcoming Assembly elections in the state. After the first phase, ECI revealed that 72.4 million enumeration forms have been collected, which is 6.5 million less than the number of registered voters in the state as on June 24, when SIR began.

While ECI has the power to conduct revision of electoral rolls under Section 21 of the Representation of the People Act 1950, two striking issues aggrieved the petitioners. First, the revision process required all voters who had been enrolled after 2003 to re-enroll and demonstrate their eligibility, and second, they were allowed only one month to do so. Despite serious claims of mass disenfranchisement due to the opaque procedure, the swift manner of enumeration, and a short time limit to re-enroll, the Court refused to stay the exercise. It merely asked ECI to "consider" three other documents, namely the Aadhaar card, the ration card, and the voter ID card, to tackle the possibility of disenfranchisement.

Several judgments have highlighted the importance of the right to vote and how it goes to the heart of democracy in India. However, the right to vote continues to remain a statutory right. Its existence is tied to a specific legislation — alarming, one that can be interfered with or subjected to conditions. Section 62 of Representation of the People Act 1951 states that the right to vote is to be provided only to those people whose names are present in the electoral rolls of a constituency. Thus, the process of preparation and revision of electoral rolls is an important step in identifying eligible voters.

In *Baidyanath Panjari v. Sitaram Mahto* (1969), the Supreme Court disallowed any revisions to the rolls in Bihar since the deadline had expired. The 1960 Rules prevent any amendment, transposition, inclusion, or deletion of voters after the last date. Such precedents and rules do not inspire the expectation of an outcome in favour of the petitioners in the current case, given the apex court's refusal to stay the exercise, though there is still some time to the deadline. Also, there are risks of a potential dismissal of the SIR case for two reasons: First, the Supreme Court has limited grounds to review such cases, and second, the Supreme Court is always sceptical about delaying elections in such cases.

The 1950 Act provides for an internal review mechanism for complaints or grievan-

ces — any person can file objections to the electoral officers, raise complaints, and ask for further directions from ECI. There exists a repeated emphasis on following this process before approaching the courts. In *Uttar Pradesh, in the case of Anugrah Narain Singh v. State of UP* (1996), the Supreme Court refused to intervene in irregularities regarding the preparation and correction of electoral rolls and deferred to the internal process. In the same vein, it is highly probable that the Court, while evaluating the legality of Bihar's revision process, may simply redirect the complainants to these statutory processes.

The nature and efficiency of this mechanism have never been questioned. Whether ECI can be independent in assessing complaints made against its officers remains to be seen. That apart, the process may not be transparent or citizen-centric. Past cases have highlighted deep-rooted issues with these internal redressal mechanisms. Several people have complained that their objections went unheard due to the officers being unresponsive and overlooking their concerns. Further, this process has been quite exclusive to certain groups of vulnerable citizens, such as slum dwellers.

Such processes severely affect those at the margins. Would an uneducated be able to understand the voter disqualification notices? Would the daily-wage worker be able to forego one day's worth of work to appear before the electoral officer? In *Lal Bahadur Shastri v. Electoral Registration Officer* (1995), poor, uneducated residents of Paharganj had questioned the inaccessibility of such redressal processes and highlighted the unfair and unreasonable procedures they had to go through. In the end, only the Court was able to uphold their rights through due process.

Thus, it is strongly in the interests of justice that the Supreme Court substantively adjudicates in the current Bihar SIR case. This could ensure any instance of possible disenfranchisement in Bihar does not go unsupervised, unchecked, or uncontrolled. The second reason that the courts should intervene is the fear of delaying the elections. In *Lakshmi Chandra Sen v. AKM Hassan* (1985), the Supreme Court was apprehensive about ordering a revision of electoral rolls. It was worried about the unwarranted judicial control over elections or, worse, an indefinite postponement. The unsaid principle goes: The more imminent the election, the greater the reluctance to judicially interfere.

The only exception made is if there exist irregularities in the process, which have the potential to vitiate the entire election. Then, a special tribunal may be set up to address the same. Hence, in the Bihar case, first, there exists the possibility of the Supreme Court summarily refusing to intervene, citing interference with the assembly elections. Second, even if the Court thought that the revision of rolls was irregular, there exists the possibility of it neither unjuncting election process nor preventing disenfranchisement.

In most matters, the Supreme Court has always assumed the role of the sentinel on the quai vive (on the alert) for any harm — however small — to Indian democracy. It is even more important that the Court should take up this mantle and protect the liberal basis of democracy — the people's right to vote — now.

Anshul Dalmia is with Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy. The views expressed are personal.



Anshul Dalmia

RAJNATH SINGH | MINISTER OF DEFENCE

We had several options but we chose one that would inflict maximum damage on the terrorists and their hideouts, while causing no harm to Pakistani civilians

On Operation Sindoor decisions



In Nisar collaboration, space exploration paths converge

The Nasa-Iro Synthetic Aperture Radar (Nisar) mission will lift off on Wednesday. At first glance, it's the world's most expensive Earth observation satellite at a \$1.5-billion mission, 2,800 kg observatory, carrying two different radar frequencies (L-band and S-band), capable of detecting centimetre-level surface changes globally every 12 days. A technical marvel. And notably, its data will be freely available and open to the public.

But Nisar is more than a satellite. It represents the quiet convergence of two space philosophies — one born from the urge to explore the planets, and the other grounded in the belief that space should serve people back home. Nisar is the first mission of its kind: a dual-band Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR) satellite that can measure Earth's changing ecosystems, dynamic surfac-

es, and ice masses. It will provide insights on biomass, natural hazards, sea level rise, and groundwater, and will support a host of other applications. But, the mission didn't start that way. It began as a proposal, DesDynI, a Nasa-only mission aimed at studying hazards and global environmental change — technically ambitious, but logistically challenging. That is, until Iro joined in. A rare kind of collaboration followed. Both Iro and Nasa contributed critical components rooted in their respective space programmes. Nasa brought its L-band radar and the deployable mesh reflector, Iro built the S-band radar, added the satellite bus, and will launch it aboard a GSLV. They created something neither could have done alone — not at this scale, not with this coverage, and certainly not with this economics.

This partnership of dual-band SAR was only possible because of the long and distinct paths that led Nasa's Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) and Iro's Space Applications Centre (SAC) to this moment. Nasa-JPL had explosive beginnings, literally. In the 1930s, Caltech graduate students known as the "Suicide Squad" began testing rocket engines in the Arroyo Seco canyon near Pasadena. Their makeshift experiments occasionally caused explosions that shook the campus. But, they also laid the foundation for what would become one of the world's foremost planetary science institutions.

Nasa-JPL went on to lead landmark missions — from Magellan's radar mapping of Venus to the Cassini-Huygens mission that revealed Saturn and its moons in stunning detail, and the Shuttle Radar Topography Mission (SRTM), which redefined how we map Earth from space. Its ethos, *Dare Mighty Things*, reflected its relentless pursuit of interplanetary exploration.

Iro's SAC, based in Ahmedabad, grew from a different vision. SAC-Iro was built on the belief that space should serve society. In 1975, SAC led the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE), broadcasting educational TV to more than 2,400 Indian villages via a Nasa satellite, a global first in using space for mass communication. Its Earth observation journey, too, began humbly — with a challenge close to home: coconut root-wilt disease in Kerala. Traditional detection was slow, prompting PR Pisharoty, the Indian physicist and meteorologist considered to be the father of remote sensing in India, to successfully use aerial infrared photography. This sowed the seeds for the Indian Remote Sensing (IRS) programme.

That spirit of innovation ended in 1980s to the wake-up call of the Kargil War. SAC-Iro played a key role in shaping India's all-weather imaging capability, culminating in IRSAT-1, the country's first indigenously developed radar imaging satellite. Since then, it has contributed to landmark missions like Chandrayaan and Mangalyaan, all the while staying true to its founding principle.

In 2014, following Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the US, the Nisar partnership was formalised when Nasa administrator Charles Bolden and then Iro chairperson K. Radhakrishnan signed documents in Toronto to launch a joint Earth-observing satellite mission. It was a symbolic and strategic handshake between two spacefaring nations.

Nasa is providing the mission's L-band synthetic aperture radar, a high-rate communication subsystem for science data, GPS receivers, a solid-state recorder and payload data subsystem. Iro is providing the spacecraft bus, the S-band radar, the launch vehicle and associated launch services.

Nisar proves that international space partnerships can be complementary. Its model — shared costs, aligned objectives, and different expertise coming together — is a blueprint for future collaborations.

Two roads diverged in the space age, and today they converge at Nisar. It's a powerful reminder that progress doesn't always come from working in isolation. Breakthroughs happen when diverse approaches, ecosystems, and capabilities come together with a shared purpose. Nisar signals that the future of space lies in collaboration, not competition.

Gaurav Seth is CEO and co-founder, PierStar, an Indian space tech startup, and Steffi Joseph works with PierStar. The views expressed are personal.



Gaurav Seth



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