



Self-inflicted injury

Trump's tariffs will not spare the United States from economic damage

Economic estimates from United States President Donald Trump's first term suggest that the sweeping tariffs his administration imposed on nearly \$400 billion worth of goods hurt the American economy. They also resulted in a net loss in real (inflation-adjusted) Gross Domestic Product (GDP), a decline in annual household income, and job losses in the manufacturing sector. A 2019 discussion paper by the Federal Reserve Board, 'Disentangling the Effects of the 2018-2019 Tariffs on a Globally Connected U.S. Manufacturing Sector', found that industries most exposed to tariff increases saw relative reductions in employment. The negative effects of rising input costs and retaliatory tariffs outweighed the benefits of import protection, leading to a net decline in manufacturing jobs, an estimated 0.6% loss, or about 75,000 fewer jobs than would have existed without the tariffs. Similarly, a 2019 report from the Congressional Budget Office (CBO), 'An Update to the Budget and Economic Outlook: 2019 to 2029', projected that trade barriers would reduce U.S. economic output. By 2020, the CBO estimated a 0.3% decline in real GDP and a \$580 reduction in average real household income (in 2019 dollars).

The 25% tariff on iron and steel imports by Mr. Trump, in his second term, mirrors a similar policy from March 2018. In his first term, Canada, Mexico and the European Union were initially exempted until June 2018, after which retaliatory tariffs followed until a truce was reached in May 2019 through a revised North American trade agreement. Economists have pointed to these tariffs, which continued to a large extent under the Biden administration, being one of the factors that contributed to high inflation in recent years. In 2023, China dominated global steel production with 1,019 million metric tons per annum (mmtpa), accounting for 54% of global output, followed by India (140.8 mmtpa, 7%) and the U.S. (81.4 mmtpa, 4%). Despite its domestic production, the U.S. relies heavily on imports from Canada, Mexico, and Brazil. Steel is a critical material across industries, including automotive, construction, appliances, and oil and gas. While the American steel industry has welcomed the new tariffs, imports are unlikely to decrease immediately, as a global surplus, driven by China, keeps prices competitive. Even a slight increase in steel prices could ripple across the economy, raising costs for consumers struggling with affordability. If history is any indication, Mr. Trump's tariffs may be the start of another round of self-inflicted economic damage for an already strained U.S. economy, albeit still the world's largest.

Perilous path

Bangladesh is displaying an intolerant streak against minorities

After the government of Sheikh Hasina was brought down by a student-led uprising on August 5, 2024, Bangladesh's new rulers, a military-backed interim government led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus, promised a new beginning. Six months later, the country of 170 million is far from having a stable political order, let alone a new dawn. The lawlessness across the country was on full display on February 5 when a mob demolished the residence of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the first President, in Dhanmondi, the trigger being reports of Ms. Hasina, who is in exile in India, planning to broadcast a speech on February 5. Protesters circulated their plan online to destroy the Bangabandhu Memorial Museum. Using excavators and bulldozers, they unleashed the attack on the building, in the presence of security personnel, where the father of the nation was assassinated in 1975. The residences of Ms. Hasina and other Awami League leaders were also vandalised. The interim government promised stern action, and Mr. Yunus called for calm. But three days later, a security crackdown targeted Awami League members and saw over 1,000 arrests in a single day.

The attack is not an isolated incident. Mr. Yunus and student protesters have accused Ms. Hasina of running an authoritarian regime. Mr. Yunus has also promised to build a *naya* Bangladesh with reformed institutions, transparency and accountability. But six months after Ms. Hasina's ouster, the interim government has made little progress in its reform agenda and has yet to announce a schedule for general elections. There have been repeated complaints about mob violence against Hindu and Christian minorities as well as Ahmadiyya Muslims and ethnic minorities of Chittagong Hill Tracts. More than 100 people have been killed since August 5, and at least 11,000 people arrested. Among those arrested are 140 journalists, who face murder charges over their reporting of the events that led to Ms. Hasina's ouster. The government has also scrapped more than 150 press accreditations, which are required for official events and briefings. The Chhatra League, the Awami League's student wing, has been banned. A Human Rights Watch report released in January, has warned that those who opposed the Awami League "are now mirroring its intolerance for criticism". The Yunus administration and the student leaders are still blaming Ms. Hasina for the lawlessness and violence. This amounts to an absolute abandonment of accountability. Bangladesh cannot progress into a better system if the violence and lawlessness continue. As the ruler, Mr. Yunus has the primary responsibility to ensure that law and order prevails. He should also expedite the reform process and announce elections so that Bangladesh can have an elected, legitimate government at the earliest.

COP29, at Baku, Azerbaijan, aptly referred to as the 'Climate Finance COP,' has played a crucial role in operationalising core elements of Article 6 of the Paris Agreement (PA). The adoption of Article 6 at Baku represents a renewed focus on the market mechanism which could help countries that are often constrained by limited resources and face difficulties in achieving an economy-wide transition to a carbon-neutral economy.

Article 6 has the potential to meet climate ambitions through cooperative approaches. Its key component, Article 6.2, facilitates the transfer of Internationally Transferred Mitigation Outcomes (ITMOs) between host and partner country to help countries meet their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), by offering flexibility for tailored agreements. The process not only supports emissions reductions in the host country (developing country) but also fosters technology exchange, promotes capacity building, and facilitates financial resources from the partner country (developed country), helping in the transition to a low-carbon economy and reaching the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Article 6.2 and India's climate policies

India, which is considered to be the third largest emitter of greenhouse gases (GHG), though in absolute terms only, and a rapidly growing economy, is well-positioned to draw benefits from Article 6.2. The country has had a challenge in balancing its developmental goals with its climate commitments due to a lack of adequate finance and also a lack of support from developed countries. India's NDCs, *inter alia*, include ambitious targets, such as reducing emissions intensity by 45% by 2030. However, the financial and technical constraints are considerable, as just before COP29, India reiterated its call for the developed nations to mobilise at least \$1 trillion annually in climate finance for developing countries to meet the challenges of global warming.

It is an opportune time for India as it moves to its own domestic emissions trading scheme (ETS), launched as a Carbon Credit Trading Scheme (CCTS) in 2023, with the aim of integrating market mechanisms into national policy. While not directly linked to Article 6.2, the CCTS proposes to strengthen India's institutions by providing a framework for transparent carbon credit tracking and verification. India's prior experience with the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), voluntary carbon market (VCM), Energy Saving Certificates (ESCs), and Renewable Energy Certificates (RECs), has laid the groundwork for effective engagement with



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India can position itself as a leader in the global transition to a low carbon pathway, through transparent processes and equitable partnerships

international carbon markets under Article 6.2, unlocking opportunities for emission reduction projects and climate finance.

India has identified 14 key activities for international collaboration under Article 6.2, which include Renewable Energy (RE), energy storage, and Carbon Capture, Utilization, and Storage programme. These technologies, such as green hydrogen and sustainable aviation fuel, require advanced expertise, research and significant investment, which India seeks through partnerships with leading nations such as South Korea, the European Union, and Japan.

Engaging in ITMO transactions under Article 6.2 gives India the opportunity to meet its SDGs by transferring surplus emissions reductions certificates to partner countries through different unique project implementations. There are also co-benefits such as reducing health problems and enhancing income through green jobs. On other hand, by encouraging South-South cooperation India can also generate ITMOs while facilitating investments in key sectors, in which India has extensive experience such as RE and sustainable infrastructure.

Opportunities for the country

Article 6.2 offers India an opportunity to unlock large-scale climate finance through South-South cooperation. Countries under pressure to meet stringent NDCs can purchase ITMOs from India, generating financial resources for climate-resilient projects and green technology development. For example, India's renewable energy sector attracted over \$10 billion in foreign direct investment in 2022. Further, ITMO transactions could scale up these efforts for other developing countries. The New Collective Quantified Goal (NCQG) also encourages such South-South cooperation as developing countries have been extending climate finance to other developing countries on a voluntary basis; however, their contributions are often unreported. Hence, Article 6.2 may foster such partnerships beyond the traditional North-South dynamic, enabling India to lead South-South cooperation, through the transfer of technology, and building capacity in developing countries (Africa) to help them meet their NDCs.

While India signs memorandums of understanding with developed countries to facilitate ITMO transfers, there is also a strong case for India to focus on building partnerships with African nations (India as partner country and Africa as host country). Africa, with its vast renewable energy potential and urgent climate vulnerabilities, is ideal for South-South cooperation. Many African nations face severe impacts from climate change, particularly in agriculture and water resources. India's close

partnership with African governments, extending to trade, investment, and developmental projects, strengthens this case. Under the 10 principles for India-Africa engagement enunciated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, a key pillar is economic cooperation – emphasising sustained engagement, creating local capabilities, enhancing agricultural productivity, and addressing climate change. With its expertise in RE deployment, digital tools, and sustainable agriculture, India is well-positioned to help the region. This can also help India meet its NDCs while also accessing carbon market opportunities to fund sustainable development projects across the African continent.

The sharing of ITMOs between India and partner countries will depend on agreement specifics, reflecting India's role as the host country and the developed partner's contributions to technology and capacity building, which are also aligned with the Common but Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities (CBDR-RC). The share ratio may vary based on each party's contributions – India could claim a larger share if it extends significant financial or technical inputs. A similar approach is seen in the Joint Crediting Mechanism (JCM), where credit allocation is decided through mutual consultation based on contributions to GHG reductions. Japan typically offers technology, funding, and capacity building, while the host country implements the project. The JCM Joint Committee reviews and issues credits, ensuring transparency by publicly sharing allocation details.

The challenges

ITMO sharing offers opportunities for international cooperation. But, at the same time, it also presents challenges for India. Developed nations might rely on low-cost emission reductions from India, potentially avoiding significant domestic decarbonisation efforts and shifting costly mitigation burdens onto India. For India, ITMO transfers could involve opportunity costs, as these reductions might otherwise support its own climate targets or sustainability goals.

Additionally, inadequate transparency and governance in ITMO mechanisms may lead to inefficiencies and can accentuate inequities, affecting India's interests. Over-reliance on ITMO transfers by partner nations could also hinder India's broader priorities, such as capacity building, green technology deployment, and climate-aligned economic growth. To address these risks, India must ensure ITMO agreements include safeguards for equitable benefit-sharing, transparency, and alignment with national and global climate ambitions.

A legal 'remedy' that perpetuates survivor trauma

The Allahabad High Court, in *Atul Gautam vs State of Uttar Pradesh* (2025), recently granted bail to a man who has been accused of raping his inter-faith live-in partner on the 'promise of marriage'. The bail was granted on the condition of his marrying the survivor under the Special Marriage Act and arranging for a deposit of ₹5 lakh.

In another case, *Abhishek vs State of Uttar Pradesh and Ors.* (2024), the same High Court had granted bail to a rape accused on the condition that he marry the survivor and care for both her and their newborn child. This reasoning aligns with a precedent set in *Ramashankar vs State of Uttar Pradesh* (2022), wherein bail was granted on similar grounds.

On the court and state

These cases raise key issues: first, whether courts can impose bail conditions requiring a rape accused to marry the survivor and assume responsibility for her and the child. And, second, whether the state is neglecting its responsibility to provide welfare measures for survivors and children born out of such crimes.

In *Aparna Bhat vs State of Madhya Pradesh* (2021), the Supreme Court of India, while issuing guidelines for bail conditions, lay emphasis on the point that courts must ensure that the conditions of bail strictly prohibit any contact between the accused and the survivor to avoid secondary trauma. The bail conditions which mandate that the accused marry the survivor, violate this guideline.

The Court also directed that the bail conditions should not reinforce gender stereotypes and patriarchal notions on women and must strictly comply with the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973. While dealing with Section 437(3)(c) of the Code, the Court, in *Kunal Kumar Tiwari vs State of*



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The judiciary offering bail on the condition of marriage to the perpetrator of sexual violence is problematic

Bihar (2017), observed that the courts may impose bail conditions in the interest of justice. However, such conditions cannot be arbitrary or extend beyond the ends of the provision. However, the approach adopted by courts (*Atul Gautam*) appears to stem from regressive societal perceptions that equate a woman's dignity with her marital status.

Impact on survivor

Such reasoning perpetuates the problematic belief that marriage is a remedy for rape, restoring an alleged loss of purity or honour. This not only violates the autonomy of the survivor but also legitimises an unequal and coercive marital relationship. Such conditions create a perverse incentive for the accused to manipulate the survivor, furthering the possibility of abuse under the guise of reconciliation. The courts inadvertently reinforce a narrative where the survivor is forced into a dependent relationship with the accused, often without genuine consent. In such cases, marriage might result in abusive behaviour under legal protection. The prospect of marriage often becomes a strategic escape route for the accused, allowing bail, compromises, or even leniency during sentencing.

Courts that suggest or facilitate such marriages inadvertently risk legitimising the heinous act under the guise of matrimony. Such conditions undermine the integrity of the trial process and the survivor's quest for justice.

The responsibility of ensuring the welfare of survivors and their children lies squarely with the state. In *Re: Right to Privacy of Adolescents* (2024), the Court held that the state must provide essential support such as shelter, food, education, and counselling for victims. The lack of an adequate support system often leaves survivors

with no choice but to rely on their perpetrators. This reliance not only perpetuates cycles of exploitation but also violates their fundamental right to live with dignity under Article 21 of the Constitution. By failing to provide holistic support to victims, the state shifts its responsibility to the judiciary, leading to solutions that may conflict with constitutional principles. This creates a perverse mechanism where victims are coerced into dependence on the accused, with the courts further enabling the state's neglect.

A conflict of interest

Granting bail on the condition of marriage during the pendency of a trial is particularly problematic. While considering the question of granting bail, courts are not supposed to look into the merits of the case, as the accused's guilt is not to be determined at this stage. Bail hearings and conditions should not influence the trial. However, imposing marriage between the accused and the survivor as a bail condition has irreversible effects, altering their relationship and interpersonal dynamics. Such conditions may affect the trial's outcome and the survivor's ability to testify freely.

Moreover, if marriage is deemed as a measure for the survivor's welfare, it raises concerns about the court's impartiality in convicting and sentencing the accused, as this could conflict with the survivor's welfare if she becomes dependent on the accused. These practices demand a critical re-evaluation of the judiciary's approach to cases involving rape and other forms of sexual violence. Justice must not be diluted by societal norms or convenience; it must prioritise the rights, the dignity, and the autonomy of survivors, ensuring that legal remedies do not perpetuate their trauma or compromise the principles of fairness.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Trump and the world

Nations across the world appear to be transfixed by the idiosyncratic announcements flowing one after another from Trump 2.0. The 47th U.S. President's imperialistic proposal to own the Gaza Strip and relocate its population to other countries deserves an instant and outright response from the Arab world and countries such as India which have all along been advocating a two-state solution to the

Palestine crisis. It is time nations closed ranks to call Mr. Trump's bluff.
Manohar Alembath,
Kannur, Kerala

YouTuber's comment

It is appalling that someone who is in a position of influence would make immoral and offensive jokes, particularly against parents, who deserve utmost respect in society ("Case registered after row breaks out over YouTuber's comment", February 11). Public figures, especially

those with a large following, have a responsibility to set a positive example. This is not just an issue of bad humour but also reflects a dangerous trend where so-called influencers think they can get away with anything. Freedom of speech does not mean a licence to insult and degrade others.
K.J. Haroon Basha,
Vaniyambadi, Tamil Nadu

A venture worth exploring

I read the interview with renowned composer

Ilaiyaraaja, "I was not an Indian or Tamil film music composer when I wrote symphony Valiant: Ilaiyaraaja" (January 31), and wish to make my observation on the London Symphony being conducted by none other than our own "emperor of music". Almost 15 years ago, I had proposed to a few prestigious Sabhas in Chennai city on having a Carnatic symphony orchestra, with one of the Sangeeta Kalanidhis as artistic director, and

creating an epoch-making venture in the world of *Bhaaratateeya Sangeet*. The idea was that this ensemble (symphony orchestra) would have gone around the world propagating the greatness of Carnatic music. Unfortunately, none paid heed to my suggestion, offering the excuse of 'no funds' and also blaming it on the difficulties of asking musicians to be engaged in year-long hard work, practising or engaging themselves in mastering the symphony techniques.

The maestro is right in pointing out that this mammoth production can be achieved only with government support. But if he does undertake such a venture, corporate houses are sure to line up offering support. My request is that the Madras Music Academy or the Narada Gana Sabha should come forward to have such a venture.
V.P. Dhananjayan,
Chennai

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

Addressing the growing threat of forest fires

As wildfires swept throughout Los Angeles last month, destroying homes and causing casualties and displacements, the urgency of addressing and preventing forest fires took centre stage once again. Unfortunately, forest fires become a point of conversation only when some major incident causes irrevocable damage and captures media and public attention. The fires are a stark reminder that no place is immune from their impacts and that we need a clear pathway to prevent and manage them as their frequency increases.

In India, the situation is equally alarming. According to the Forest Survey of India, more than 36% of the country's forest cover is prone to fire. An analysis by the Council on Energy, Environment and Water states that there has been a 10-fold increase in forest fire incidences in the last two decades, whereas the total forest cover has increased by merely 1.12%.

Living on the fringes of the Corbett Tiger Reserve in Uttarakhand, I see the immense value of India's forests, not just as critical enablers of wildlife conservation and sources of biodiversity, but as lifelines for local communities that live around them. While Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh often capture headlines for forest fires, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, and Karnataka, among others, are also grappling with the frequency and intensity of forest fires.

Devastating consequences
According to various reports, nearly 90% of these fires are caused by human activities such as deliberate land clearing, slash-and-burn agriculture, and unattended campfires. These factors, coupled with climate change-driven factors such as rising temperatures and extended dry spells, intensify the risk of forest fires.

Forest fires have widespread consequences – natural, social, and economic – that are all



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interconnected. Besides the direct loss of trees, wildlife, and biodiversity, they contribute significantly to carbon emissions. A report by the World Resources Institute estimates that Indian forest fires emit approximately 69 million tonnes of CO2 annually. Forest fires result in the loss of timber and non-timber forest products, essential for forest-dependent communities, contributing to direct economic losses. A 2018 report by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change estimated that forest degradation (including forest fires) results in an annual economic loss of approximately ₹1.74 lakh crore. Forest fires also disrupt the water cycle, cause soil fertility degradation, and worsen human-wildlife conflict as animals seek refuge in human settlements.

India has put in place several policies and schemes to address forest fire management, such as the National Action Plan on Forest Fires and the Forest Fire Prevention and Management Scheme (FFPMS). The centrally sponsored FFPMS assists State governments in strengthening their forest fire prevention and management capabilities.

A more robust response
However, given the growing intensity of forest fires in India, much more remains to be done. First, Budget constraints have proven to be an obstacle. For example, the FFPMS's funding allotment has fluctuated over time. In 2019-2020, it received ₹46.40 crore, followed by ₹32.47 crore in 2020-2021, ₹34.26 crore in 2021-2022, and ₹28.25 crore in 2022-2023. The budget projection for 2023-2024 was ₹51 crore, which was revised to ₹40 crore. The planned allocation for 2024-2025 is ₹50 crore. This shows the need for more steady support.

On the technology front, the existing Forest Fire Alert System cannot distinguish between forest fires and other types of fires, delaying ground-level validation and response. India could use

advanced predictive modelling to help identify high-risk areas based on climatic and geographic data. This must be supplemented by using drones equipped with thermal imaging cameras to monitor fire-prone areas, assess damage, and guide firefighting efforts. States such as Tamil Nadu and Odisha have already piloted such initiatives, which could be scaled nationally. In addition, there is merit in also exploring how relevant and existing data from the Forest Survey of India, the India Meteorological Department, and the Indian Space Research Organisation can be integrated and analysed for better forest fire management.

Equipping more and more local communities to collect and share real-time data to report fires as soon as they are sighted through mobile applications, toll-free helplines, and SMS-based systems can strengthen early warning systems and ensure rapid, localised response. In Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh, self-help groups, primarily women, collect pine needles to blunt future fires. India can also draw from Nepal's Community Forest User Groups and Indonesia's Fire-Free Village Program to strengthen community forest fire management. Empowering communities with awareness, training, and resources and engaging youth as 'forest fire scouts' can foster stewardship, combining local knowledge with modern tools like fire risk mapping and controlled burns.

Forest fires are not just an environmental issue – they are societal and economic, affecting livelihoods, health, and the foundation of our ecosystems. Addressing this challenge requires the collaboration of policymakers, scientists, civil society groups, and communities. From creating supporting infrastructure through policy intervention, improved budgeting, technology adoption, and building a cadre of trained personnel to empowering communities – all measures must go hand-in-hand to turn the tide.

Struggling with poor cyber security

Karnataka's critical information infrastructure has come under attack again

STATE OF PLAY

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Kaveri 2.0, a web portal that was launched in 2023 to streamline property registrations in Karnataka, came under a distributed denial of service (DDoS) attack carried out through Artificial Intelligence (AI)-powered bots recently. A denial-of-service (DoS) attack occurs when legitimate users are unable to access information systems, devices, or other network resources due to the actions of a malicious cyber threat actor, while a DDoS attack occurs when multiple machines are operating together to attack one target. The DDoS attack crippled the portal, bringing property registrations across Karnataka almost to a halt for many days in January and February, possibly causing huge revenue losses to the State exchequer.

This is not the first time that the State's critical information infrastructure has come under attack. In 2017, the Karnataka State Data Centre fell victim to the WannaCry ransomware attack, which spreads by exploiting vulnerabilities in the Windows operating system. In 2019, the State's e-procurement portal was hacked leading to a theft of ₹11.5 crore. In 2022, the systems of the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences were attacked. However, as the DDoS attack shows, no lessons seem to have been learned from earlier attacks and the gaps identified in the State's response have still not been filled.

Most government portals, including Kaveri 2.0, are designed and run by the State's e-Governance Department

and hosted by the Karnataka State Data Centre.

The attack on Kaveri 2.0 began in December 2024 and brought the portal to a virtual halt in the last week of January and the first week of February. During this period, the e-Governance Department was on firefighting mode. On February 6, the Revenue Department claimed that the issues had been "fixed". Surprisingly, throughout this process, the State cyber crime police were not kept in the loop. The Inspector General of Registrations and Commissioner of Stamps lodged a complaint with the cyber crime police only on February 7.

Earlier too, the State's response to cyber attacks was marred by a lack of coordination between the e-Governance Department and the State police. So far, the e-Governance Department has identified a few IP addresses from which the attack originated. Involving the cyber crime police much earlier could have helped combat the problem in real time, police officials said. However, sources said that there was resistance within the departments to go to the police.

According to the Karnataka Cyber Security Policy, 2023, the State has a Cyber Security Committee, led by the Chief Secretary. This is filled with bureaucrats and not a single representative from the State police. Compare this to the na-

tional level, where the cyber security architecture – the Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre (I4C), which is affiliated to the Home Ministry and is the nodal point to curb cyber crimes, and the National Critical Information Infrastructure Protection Centre (NCIIPC), which protects the country's critical infrastructure – have evolved.

Many experts feel that a similar cyber security architecture with clearly defined standard operating procedures to deal with such attacks should be put in place in Karnataka as well. The State immediately needs a control room set-up involving both technical experts and the cyber crime police to handle crises so that it can respond to such attacks in a coordinated manner in real time.

In his last Budget, presented in February 2023, former Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai had proposed to set up a Cyber Security Operation Centre at a cost of ₹20 crore, on the lines of I4C and NCIIPC. However, when the Congress came to power in the State in May 2023, a revised Budget was presented and the proposal was dropped.

Bengaluru is known as the Silicon Valley of India. It is also an emerging cyber crime hotspot, according to a 2023 report titled 'A Deep Dive into Cybercrime Trends Impacting India', by the Future Crime Research Foundation, an IIT Kanpur incubated start-up. Karnataka has among the highest number of cyber crime cases in the country. Yet, the State does not have proper infrastructure. In contrast, Maharashtra and Odisha have robust cyber security infrastructure in place.

It is time for the Karnataka government to act to protect critical data.

Elector surge in Maharashtra and Delhi polls is par for the course

Data show that the net addition of 39.6 lakh electors in Maharashtra in about seven months is not unusually high

DATA POINT

Vignesh Radhakrishnan
Sambavi Parthasarathy

The surge in the number of electors during the recent Assembly elections in Maharashtra and Delhi is not unusually high, an analysis of Election Commission data shows.

The spurt in electors in Maharashtra became a subject of controversy after the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, Rahul Gandhi, raised the issue at a recent press conference. In Maharashtra, between the Lok Sabha polls held on April 19, 2024, and the Assembly elections held on November 20, 2024 – a period of 215 days – there was a net addition of 39.6 lakh electors. However, between the Assembly elections on October 21, 2019, and the Lok Sabha polls in April 2024 – a period of 1,642 days – there was a net addition of only 32.2 lakh electors. "Why did the Election Commission add more voters in Maharashtra in five months than it did in five years," Mr. Gandhi asked.

Table 1 shows the number of electors recorded across various Assembly and Lok Sabha elections in Maharashtra. Data show that the net addition of 39.6 lakh electors in 215 days is not unusually high. Between the Lok Sabha polls on April 20, 2004, and the Assembly elections on October 13, 2004 – a period of 176 days – there was a net addition of 29.5 lakh electors. A similar analysis of 2009, 2014, and 2019 shows net additions of 30 lakh, 27.2 lakh, and 11.6 lakh electors, respectively.

In fact, if the increases are expressed as electors added per day, the context becomes clearer. The net addition of 39.6 lakh electors in 215 days amounts to 18,434 net electors added per day. This figure is not a far cry from the 16,782 net electors added per day in the 176 days in 2004.

Table 2 shows similar informa-

tion for elections in Delhi. Between the Lok Sabha polls on May 25, 2024, and the Assembly elections on February 5, 2025 – a period of 256 days – there was a net addition of 3.9 lakh electors. However, between the Assembly elections on February 8, 2020, and the Lok Sabha polls in May 2024 – 1,568 days – there was a net addition of only 4.16 lakh electors.

As with Maharashtra, past data for Delhi also show that such surges in electors during brief periods are not unusual. In fact, the net additions have often been much higher. For instance, between the Lok Sabha polls on May 12, 2019, and the Assembly elections on February 8, 2020 – a period of 272 days – there was a net addition of 4.7 lakh electors. Between April 2014 and February 2015, there was a net addition of 6.02 lakh electors. And between December 2013 and April 2014, in just 127 days, there was an addition of 7.7 lakh net electors.

It is intriguing that a significant number of electors were added during the brief periods between two elections, while longer gaps did not result in substantially higher additions. But the elector surge during the recent State elections in Maharashtra and Delhi, over a short period, is not a new phenomenon; it is part of a long-standing trend in these States.

Tables 3 and 4 provide data for Jharkhand and Haryana. Departing from the trends observed in Maharashtra and Delhi, in these two States, shorter intervals between elections resulted in smaller net additions of electors, whereas longer intervals lead to significantly higher elector additions.

These contrasting patterns suggest that the effectiveness of Chief Electoral Officers assigned to these States, population demographics, and migration patterns might significantly influence voter additions. Political reasons such as welfare measures might help in higher voter registration but that requires a deeper study.

Not far away from the trend

The data for the tables were sourced from the Election Commission of India

Table 1: Number of electors recorded across various Assembly and Lok Sabha elections in Maharashtra

	Year	Electors	Poll date	Elector difference	Gap in days	Voters per day
LS	1999	5,68,53,196	Sept. 6, 1999			
LS	2004	6,30,12,208	Apr. 20, 2004	61,59,012	1,688	3,649
AE	2004	6,59,65,792	Oct. 13, 2004	29,53,584	176	16,782
LS	2009	7,29,54,058	Apr. 16, 2009	69,88,266	1,646	4,246
AE	2009	7,59,68,312	Oct. 13, 2009	30,14,254	180	16,746
LS	2014	8,07,98,823	Apr. 10, 2014	4,830,511	1,640	2,945
AE	2014	8,35,28,310	Oct. 15, 2014	27,29,487	188	14,519
LS	2019	8,86,76,946	Apr. 11, 2019	51,48,636	1,639	3,141
AE	2019	8,98,38,267	Oct. 21, 2019	11,61,321	193	6,017
LS	2024	9,30,61,760	Apr. 19, 2024	32,23,493	1,642	1,963
AE	2024	9,70,25,119	Nov. 20, 2024	39,63,359	215	18,434

Table 3: Number of electors recorded across various Assembly and Lok Sabha elections in Jharkhand

	Year	Electors	Poll date	Elector difference	Gap in days	Voters per day
LS	2004	1,68,12,339	Apr. 20, 2004			
AE	2005	1,77,66,202	Feb. 3, 2005	9,53,863	289	3,301
LS	2009	1,79,34,095	Apr. 20, 2009	1,67,893	1,537	109
AE	2009	1,80,45,638	Nov. 25, 2009	1,11,543	219	509
LS	2014	2,03,49,796	Apr. 10, 2014	23,04,158	1,597	1,443
AE	2014	2,08,52,808	Nov. 25, 2014	5,03,012	229	2,197
LS	2019	2,24,04,856	Apr. 29, 2019	15,52,048	1,616	960
AE	2019	2,30,58,035	Nov. 30, 2019	6,53,179	215	3,038
LS	2024	2,58,77,892	May 13, 2024	28,19,857	1,626	1,734
AE	2024	2,60,87,698	Nov. 13, 2024	2,09,806	184	1,140

AE: Assembly elections
LS: Lok Sabha elections
Vigneshr.@thehindu.co.in, Sambavi.p@thehindu.co.in

Table 2: Number of electors recorded across various Assembly and Lok Sabha elections in Delhi

	Year	Electors	Poll date	Elector difference	Gap in days	Voters per day
LS	1999	87,12,530	Sep. 5, 1999			
AE	2003	84,48,324	Dec. 1, 2003	-2,64,206	1,548	-171
LS	2004	87,63,475	May 10, 2004	3,15,151	161	1,957
AE	2008	1,07,26,573	Nov. 29, 2008	19,63,098	1,664	1,180
LS	2009	1,10,96,854	May 7, 2009	3,70,281	159	2,329
AE	2013	1,19,36,360	Dec. 4, 2013	8,39,506	1,672	502
LS	2014	1,27,11,164	Apr. 10, 2014	7,74,804	127	6,101
AE	2015	1,33,13,295	Feb. 7, 2015	6,02,131	303	1,987
LS	2019	1,43,27,649	May 12, 2019	10,14,354	1,555	652
AE	2020	1,47,97,990	Feb. 8, 2020	4,70,341	272	1,729
LS	2024	1,52,14,638	May 25, 2024	4,16,648	1,568	266
AE	2025	1,56,14,000	Feb. 5, 2025	3,99,362	256	1,560

Table 4: Number of electors recorded across various Assembly and Lok Sabha elections in Haryana

	Year	Electors	Poll date	Elector difference	Gap in days	Voters per day
LS	2004	1,23,20,557	May 10, 2004			
AE	2005	1,27,35,888	Feb. 3, 2005	4,15,331	269	1,544
LS	2009	1,20,87,710	May 7, 2009	-6,48,178	1,554	-417
AE	2009	1,31,17,142	Oct. 13, 2009	10,29,432	159	6,474
LS	2014	1,60,97,233	Apr. 10, 2014	29,80,091	1,640	1,817
AE	2014	1,63,03,742	Oct. 15, 2014	2,06,509	188	1,098
LS	2019	1,80,57,010	May 12, 2019	17,53,268	1,670	1,050
AE	2019	1,83,86,682	Oct. 21, 2019	3,29,672	162	2,035
LS	2024	2,01,87,911	May 25, 2024	18,01,229	1,678	1,073
AE	2024	2,04,63,841	Oct. 5, 2024	2,75,930	133	2,075

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The **Hindu.**

FIFTY YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 12, 1975

India not for wooing China

New Delhi, Feb. 11: The Government of India does not seem to be too keen on engaging itself in any ping pong diplomacy when the Chinese table tennis players come to Delhi next week for playing some exhibition matches under the vigilant eyes of the political commissars chaperoning them. There is still no clear indication from the Chinese side whether it is really interested in an early thaw in Sino-Indian relations, since the Indian assessments of the possible motivations behind the latest Chinese smiles are based more on intelligent guesswork than authentic information. In spite of repeated reminders, the Chinese delegation has not yet given the names of players and others accompanying them to Delhi. All that the Indian hosts, the Table Tennis Federation of India, have been told so far is that almost immediately after the conclusion of the world championship tournament in Calcutta on February 16, most of the Chinese players will be leaving for Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. The rest of them including some officials of the delegation will arrive in Delhi on February 18 after a day's rest. The arrangements for their stay and entertainment in Delhi are being made by the Table Tennis Federation in India which maintains its contacts with the Government only through the Ministry of Education. In other words, the External Affairs Ministry is keeping out of both the organisational and hospitality parts of the Chinese team's visit to Delhi. Hence unless the Chinese functionaries accompanying the players want to make courtesy calls on Indian officials dealing with Sino-Indian relations, the External Affairs Ministry does not propose to take any initiative for having any political exchanges with them.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 12, 1925

Slavery in Burma

London, Feb. 10: Commenting on Sir Harcourt Butler's journey to Naing Kwan, *The Daily Telegraph* says it may be that the sullenness with which Sir H. Butler's speech was received by the Nagas may have been mitigated by the Burmese Government's intention to grant advances enabling slaves to buy their freedom. The sum involved will not be very great, but in any case there can be no justification for the toleration of slavery in any country for which the British Government is in any degree responsible and an exception should not be made in this district.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Religious groups that have sued the Trump administration

27 More than two dozen Christian and Jewish groups representing millions of Americans filed a federal court lawsuit on Tuesday challenging a Trump administration move giving immigration agents more leeway to make arrests at houses of worship. AP

The growth in net direct tax collection till February 10

15 In per cent. Net direct tax collection grew 14.69% to over ₹17.78 lakh crore so far this fiscal, government data showed on Tuesday. As per the data released by the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT), mop up from net non-corporate taxes grew 21% year-on-year to about ₹9.48 lakh crore. PTI

The increase in IRCTC's PAT in the December quarter

13 In per cent. The IRCTC reported a 13% rise in consolidated profit after tax from continuing operations at ₹341.08 crore for the December 2024 quarter, on account of higher income. It had posted ₹299.99 crore profit after tax in the year-ago period. Total income increased to ₹1,281.20 crore. PTI

Lives claimed by man-elephant conflicts in Jharkhand

474 Man-elephant conflicts in Jharkhand have claimed 474 lives over a span of five years since the 2019-20 fiscal. A total of 87 lives were lost due to such incidents in 2023-24, lower than the figure of 2022-23 and 2021-22 when the deaths were 96 and 133 respectively. PTI

Number of chickens culled in Andhra Pradesh

4,500 Following the detection of Avian Influenza in Velpuru in West Godavari district and Kanuru Agharam in East Godavari district, officials in Andhra Pradesh have begun culling birds. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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How will freeze on USAID affect the world?

Why is the U.S. administration halting foreign assistance and scaling back personnel in the United States Agency for International Development? What will happen if the agency stops funding development projects in many countries? Which are the key sectors it is involved in? What will be the fallout in the Global South?

EXPLAINER

Ramya Kannan

The story so far:

On January 20, his first day in office for a second term, U.S. President Donald Trump put in place a 90-day freeze on foreign assistance. The executive order read, [There will be a] “90-day pause in United States foreign development assistance for assessment of programmatic efficiencies and consistency with United States foreign policy.” Consequently, personnel of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) were stopped from disbursing assistance across the world. By late last week, the website of USAID also wiped content, leaving just a message that all USAID personnel (about 10,000 globally) would be placed on administrative leave, with a few exceptions for mission-critical personnel. Shortly before the plans to scale back personnel were to take effect, a federal judge issued a temporary restraining order till February 14, but that does not extend to the freeze on funds disbursement.

What is the USAID?

The U.S. Agency for International Aid was set up as an independent agency, through an Act of Congress in 1961. It was an attempt to align all U.S. efforts to administer civilian foreign aid and development assistance. Its mission is “to promote and demonstrate democratic values abroad and advance a free, peaceful, and prosperous world” while advancing the U.S.’s security and prosperity. In pushing this agenda, it provides financial aid across various sectors in over 100 countries worldwide. Broadly, it works in the sectors of economic development, health, education, food security, humanitarian assistance, climate change, and democracy and governance.

It works in partnerships with governments, NGOs, businesses, and other international organisations, primarily providing grants, technical assistance, and funding for development projects that are in sync with its goals. Notable among its flagship schemes are the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), Feed the Future (addressing hunger and food security issues), Power Africa (expanding access to electricity across Africa) and Water for the World Act (improving water, sanitation, and hygiene services).

It receives funding allocated in the U.S. budget. In 2024, USAID received a total of \$44.20 billion, which is 0.4% of the U.S. federal budget for FY 2024 (as per the official website USAspending.gov). In the same year, the agency had distributed \$44.20 billion among its four sub-components. Media reports claim it contributed to nearly 42% of all humanitarian aid tracked by the United Nations in 2024.

What has Elon Musk said?

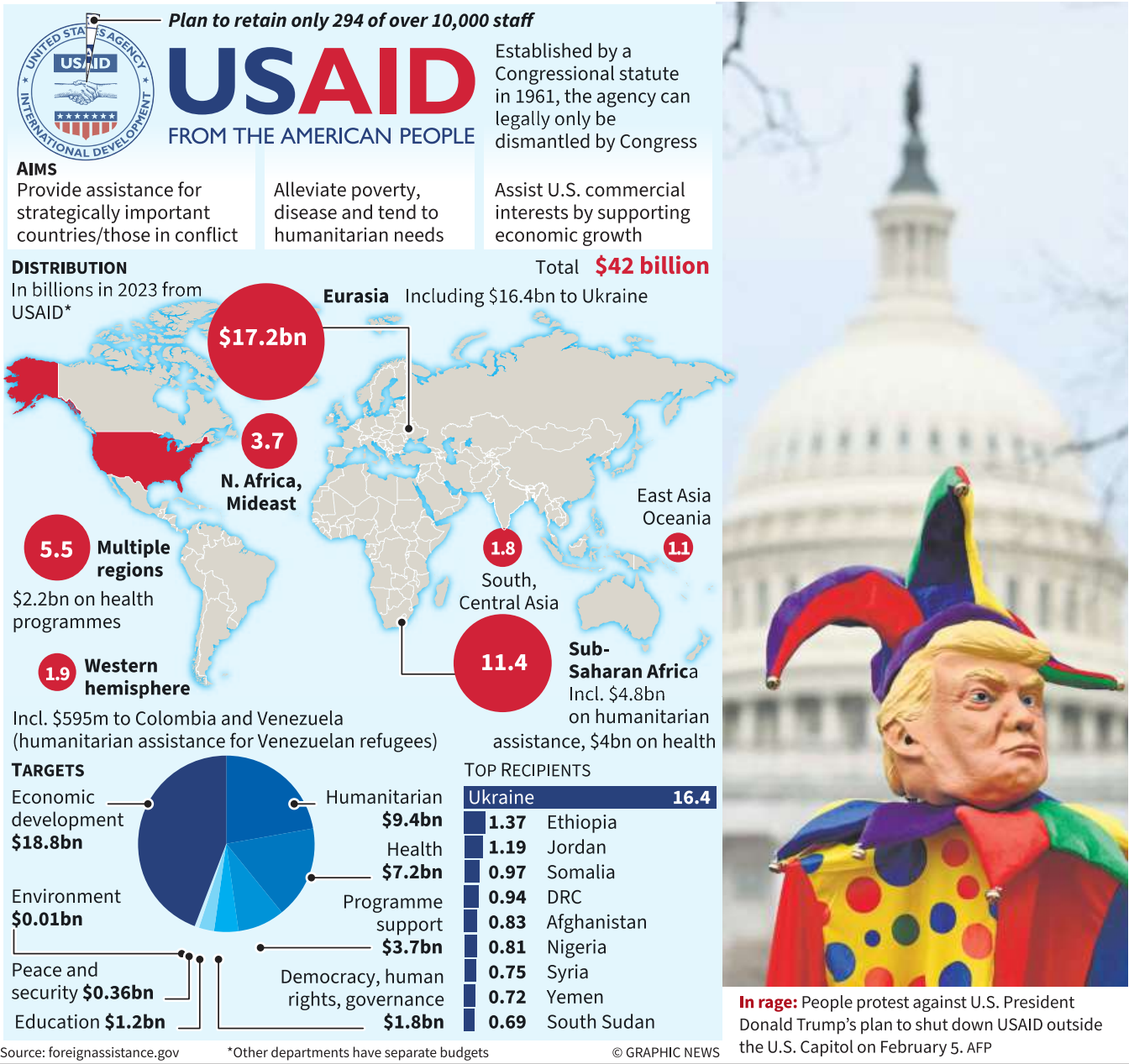
Elon Musk, head of the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), has threatened that the agency would be shut down, while Secretary of State Marco Rubio who is now the acting administrator of USAID, has talked about ‘restructuring’ it.

How will this impact countries?

According to the official U.S. foreign assistance website, the top countries the USAID engages with are Ukraine, Ethiopia, Jordan, Somalia, Congo

Dismantling aid from the U.S.

The withdrawal of USAID, arising out of a decision born of petulance, might severely impact the fortunes of many nations, as a number of projects will have to be dropped, in the light of aid being stopped through an executive decision by the Donald Trump administration



(Kinshasa), Afghanistan, Nigeria, Syria, Yemen and South Sudan.

The withdrawal of these funds, arising out of a decision born out of petulance, might severely impact the fortunes of these nations, as a number of projects will have to be dropped, in the light of aid being stopped. This will have an impact not only on the quality of life of beneficiaries of these schemes, but may even pose a danger to life in these nations. More than six million people could die from HIV and AIDS in the next four years if Mr. Trump’s administration pulls its global funding for programmes, the United Nations AIDS agency said on February 7.

Media reports stated that while a freeze was ordered on the \$13.3 million in aid for Haiti, the U.S. State Department issued a waiver, allowing \$40.7 million in foreign assistance for the nation’s police department. Also, the agency has said, in its note on the website, that exceptions would be made for “mission-critical functions, core leadership and specially designated programs”, but no details are available yet on what these may be or the grounds for exception.

Meanwhile, foreign agency reports speculate that only 294 employees of the total of 10,000 would remain, including 12 in the Africa bureau and eight in the Asia bureau, because these are areas that are critical to combating poverty, disease, and conflict.

While Mr. Rubio has told the media that “this is not about ending foreign aid,

but about structuring it in a way that furthers the national interests of the United States,” there are not too many takers for this defence. Mr. Trump has made no secret of the fact that he has always advanced his point of view of America, a stand his critics see as rendering the nation in isolation from the rest of the world. Even as a front-runner for the President’s seat, he said: “We’re rebuilding other countries while weakening our own. Ending the theft of American jobs will give us the resources we need to rebuild our military, which has to happen and regain our financial independence and strength.” His trusted aide Mr. Musk poured vitriol over USAID, calling it a ‘criminal organisation’ and ‘a viper’s nest of radical-left Marxists who hate America’.

Andrew Natsios, former USAID administrator, in an interview with *PBS News Hour*, said USAID was one of the great humanitarian powers in the world, to protect the U.S. and people in the developing world from hunger and disease. “The programmes they are attacking now are Biden-era programmes,” he said, hinting at political vengeance being the driving force behind the move. The withdrawal, he claimed, would be a “disaster for the U.S. and for the Global South”.

Will projects in India suffer?

In India, the quantum of funding has reduced over the years, with the government of India objecting to certain

aspects of the conditions for the agreement for grants. In the last decade, India is said to have received around \$1.5 billion from USAID – about 0.2 % to 0.4 % of USAID’s total global funding (as per the foreign assistance website).

The association between India and USAID began in 1951 when President Harry Truman signed the India Emergency Food Aid Act. Over the decades, USAID’s role has evolved from food aid to infrastructure development, capacity building, economic reforms, and more. In the early years, the agency weighed in strongly in the education sector, immunisation and health care. While health remains the main sector where USAID has been involved in India (including HIV/AIDS, TB, maternal and child health, and immunisation programmes) with a funding of \$79.3 million in 2024, it also has interests in economy, energy, water supply and sanitation, and environmental health.

In this sense, pundits in the development sector feel that the withdrawal of USAID may not affect India in a major way.

However, it remains to be seen how these existing projects, particularly in healthcare fare now, and whether Central or State governments will be able to pick up the tab to keep these projects, and beneficiaries going.

Meanwhile, USAID has directed all organisations implementing projects in India to suspend operations for the time being.

THE GIST

The U.S. Agency for International Aid was set up as an independent agency, through an Act of Congress in 1961. It was an attempt to align all U.S. efforts to administer civilian foreign aid and development assistance.

In India, the quantum of funding has reduced over the years, with the government of India objecting to certain aspects of the conditions for the agreement for grants.

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KEYWORD

The banality of evil: learning about Gaza from Nazi history

What a moral philosopher’s view of the life and career of Nazi officer Adolf Eichmann can tell us about our own beleaguered age, especially in the backdrop of the Israel-Palestine war

Prathmesh Kher

Neither perverted nor sadistic’, but ‘terrifyingly normal’ is how historian and philosopher Hannah Arendt had described Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi officer in charge of the mass deportation of millions of Jews to the extermination camps across Nazi-occupied Europe. Arendt had reported on the trial of Eichmann, and described it in her seminal work *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. The subtitle of the book has achieved independent notoriety, with the expression ‘banality of evil’ often being employed to describe the “innumerable men in the federal and state administrations and, generally, in public office whose careers had bloomed under the Hitler regime”.

Normal people, evil deeds
The expression was coined to describe the behaviour of the proverbial ‘cautious bureaucrat’ whose “deeds were monstrous” and yet the doer “quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous”. The description was apt not merely for Nazi-era bureaucrats but also for the many “good Germans” who stood by haplessly as millions were sent to death. Furthermore, the very decade that witnessed the barbarism of the Holocaust witnessed the profound dereliction of the British government in famine afflicted India or the purges in erstwhile USSR.

These were well-oiled states that allowed their individual members to acquiesce their personal responsibility to allow for the commission of crimes so vast and heinous that they beggar the imagination. What is further beleaguering is the realisation that many of the people who had to partake in these cruelties were perfectly civil and courteous in private life. By all accounts, Eichmann was a family man. His last words were reportedly: “I greet my wife, my family and my friends. I am ready. We’ll meet again soon, as is the fate of all men. I die believing in God.”

During his trial, half a dozen psychologists, who had examined Eichmann, had submitted that “his whole psychological outlook, his attitude toward his wife and children, mother and father, brothers, sisters, and friends,” was “not only normal but most desirable”. Another contemporaneous figure said that he was “a man with very positive ideas.” His last moments were not the wrangling of some deranged lunatic but rather a modest drink of dry wine. Not exactly the bloodlust of a psychopath. But the ‘banality of evil’ was not meant to be a mere insight into one man but rather a look into what drove hundreds and thousands of administrative officials to engage in what they knew would lead to the death of millions.

During his trial, Eichmann had referred back to Immanuel Kant’s idea of a categorical imperative in defence of his actions, and argued that that he had always done his “duty” without reference to other considerations. Arendt was shocked at the rather tenuous use of an enlightenment concept of ethics in defence of a horrifying genocide. In Arendt’s understanding Eichmann “was



In absolute ruin: Displaced Palestinians walk through a muddy road amid the destruction in Jabalia in the northern Gaza Strip on February 6, APF

not stupid”. It was “sheer thoughtlessness” not “identical with stupidity” that inclined him to become “one of the greatest criminals of that period”.

A stark contrast to Arendt’s observations, in the book *Eichmann Before Jerusalem*, the German historian Bettina Stangneth explores another side to the man besides the banal, apparently apolitical administrator, merely working as any other career bureaucrat.

Through a careful consideration of the audiotapes of Eichmann’s interviews by the Nazi collaborator and journalist William Sassen, Eichmann is revealed as a sworn ideologue strongly committed to National Socialist dogma. He expresses neither remorse nor guilt for his role in the Holocaust. This is no simple bureaucratic officer merely following distasteful orders but a radically extremist functionary living behind the mask of an unglamorous official.

These notions of otherwise good Germans who simply followed orders

takes a particularly stark appraisal in our own day and age.

Here and now
The incumbent U.S. President Donald Trump has advocated for the ownership of the Gazan enclave by the Americans, and has proposed its transformation into an “international city”. He has in the past made remarks about “cleaning out” Gaza and has suggested that Gazans “should not be going back to Gaza” since it has been “very unlucky for them”, where they have “lived like hell”.

He has proposed that Gaza could be made “a good, fresh, beautiful piece of land” as it is a “phenomenal location, on the sea, the best weather”, and has called it effectively a “Riviera” of West Asia that “could be so magnificent”. Trump said the U.S. would play the lead role in this real estate development that would make Gaza into “an international, unbelievable place”. But it would not have the Palestinians getting back to Gaza; most of them would be relocated in other

countries, while “representatives from all over the world would live there”. Under his plan, Trump said that Gazans “would have already been resettled in far safer and more beautiful communities, with new and modern homes, in the region”.

Trump’s words echo the “sheer thoughtlessness” that Arendt spoke of with regards to Eichmann. It is not some sadistic act with malice writ large but rather something done with the sheer bluster of someone hoping to make their mark on the pages of history.

There are many who also feel that Palestinians as a whole must pay for Hamas’ crimes. This too reverberates a pernicious idea of the ‘blood libel’ that was affixed onto the Jews as a whole by bigoted Christians – an idea which became the fount of the hate that allowed for the callous murder of millions of innocents during the Holocaust. The doctrine of collective guilt necessarily leads to collective punishment, and with it a denial of the autonomy that individuals have in the face of social control. Human history is littered with such mass violations of innocents lives, and in all cases a political machinery manned by bureaucrats and administrators becomes requisite to eliminate those fellow human lives.

Whence and wherefore
It must be noted that under international law, attempts to forcibly transfer a population from occupied territory are strictly prohibited. It must also be mentioned that 15 months of sustained fighting have left the Gaza Strip, largely uninhabitable, with nigh 50,000 people having been killed and nearly twice as many injured. It must be pointed out that it was the Democrats, who had allowed President Biden to provision Israel with massive arms sales, to continue its war with Hamas.

These observations are important to remind us that the many bureaucrats and officials working in these disparate nation states are faced with the prospect of “following orders”. They can as Eichmann did, choose to further their own careers while forcing out hapless victims out of their homes in order to make way for condominiums and casinos, with the best prospect of the victims’ return being in the form of factotums employed to serve the very people who forced them out in the first place. The bureaucrats and officers in charge of these programmes that are being put forth must judge for themselves how they wish to conduct in the face of these “orders” from high above.

These choices are not easy, particularly for those who still retain a conscience while being employed while still having to worry about their own survival.

While the idea that so many individuals who had participated in the Holocaust were merely “following orders” came under much criticism, many could not imagine what sort of resistance a meagre bureaucrat could offer against the state, particularly a dictatorial one.

Responding to the criticism in a speech titled ‘Personal responsibility under dictatorship’, Arendt argues that an “adult consents where a child obeys”. George Sabine once wrote that “even the most despotical government cannot hold a society together by sheer force”.

Arendt similarly recalls the Madisonian dictum that even the worst of tyrannies “rest on consent”. Arendt argues that in such a situation it is “better to suffer than to do wrong” even when doing wrong is the law.

By suffering through the rejection of a law that is evil, one might in Arendt’s words recover a “measure of self-confidence and even pride” and “regain what former times called the dignity or the honour” of “being human”.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian
S. Upendran

“What is the meaning of ‘personality’?”
“In India, it is used in the sense of physical features. A person who has good physical features is said to have a good personality. But it is not the real meaning of ‘personality’. ‘Personality’ means “the distinctive character or qualities of a person”. It doesn’t refer to the physical features of a person. It is also used to refer to a famous person. He is a TV personality. “He has a personality of his own” means “he has a distinctive character or lively qualities.”

“What is personality cult?”
“The excessive admiration of a famous person, especially a political leader is called personality cult. It is often used in a derogatory sense. There is something in the soil of India which promotes and nourishes personality cult. Incidentally, ‘personality’ without ‘i’ after ‘l’ is a legal term which means “one’s personal property or estate.” This is the opposite of realty or real estate which means “immovable property, consisting of land, building, etc.”

“What is the meaning of ‘captious’?”
“A person is captious when he raises objections about unimportant matters. This is a formal word.”

“What is ‘potamology’?”
“It is a branch of science that deals with rivers. It is from Greek ‘potamos’, river. The first and second ‘o’ in the word are pronounced like the ‘o’ in ‘hot’. The ‘a’ and the third ‘o’ are pronounced like the ‘a’ in ‘China’.”

“What is the difference between ‘colloquial’ and ‘formal language’?”

“Colloquial” language is language used in informal conversation. Informal means language of familiar, everyday affairs. Formal language is the kind of language you find used on formal occasions. Look at the following passages.

(a) We finally got to the game and went to our seats right away. Boy, it sure felt cold, and were we up high. I kicked myself all over for not wearing heavier clothing. Our seats were on the goal line, which isn’t very good. I made a big mistake not joining the Rooter Club. Those lucky bums were on about the 40-yard line.

(b) It was a very impressive spectacle somewhat reminiscent of stories about ancient Roman pageantry, but it was immediately obvious that such a massive formation of musicians could not be used in a serious musical endeavour, primarily due to the considerable distance between the musicians at opposite ends of the formation and the fact that sound travels at a fairly slow velocity, rendering it almost impossible for the sounds from all of the instruments to reach the ear of a listener simultaneously on any given beat.

We’ll discuss levels of language next week.”
Published in The Hindu on May 9, 1995.

THE DAILY QUIZ

Toponymy is the study of place names. A quiz on how some places got their names

Vasudevan Mukunth

QUESTION 1
Many people living in this city call it “Chatigaon”. The Portuguese called it the “Grand Harbour of Bengal”. Ibn Battuta called it “Sadrakwan”. Its current name is derived from that given by a 9th century Burmese invader, in whose language it meant “to make war is improper”. Name the city.

QUESTION 2
In 1989, one conflict in this (now erstwhile) country was over whether the two halves of its name should be hyphenated. Opponents to the idea said the hyphenation was reminiscent of Nazi Germany’s annexation of the territory denoted by the second half. Name the country.

QUESTION 3
This region has in the past been called

“Pathanistan”. The British called it the “North West Frontier Province”. Political efforts to rename the area ultimately led to a two-word name in 2020, one representing the local Pashtun people and the other the non-Pashtun. What’s the name?

QUESTION 4
In the Turkish language, this water body is called the “Gulf of Basra”. The Iranian Shia cleric Sadeq Khalkhali suggested the name “Muslim Gulf” but it lost favour after Iran invaded Iraq in 1980. Name it.

QUESTION 5
The name of this country is also the historic name of a region in Iran. Specifically, it was the name of a region south of the Aras river. When the Russian empire collapsed in 1918, the country was born on the river’s north, and assumed the name of the southern region. Name the country.



Visual question:
This British Overseas Territory in the south Atlantic Ocean is an archipelago. A part of its flag is shown above. Argentina calls the territory “Malvinas”, which the islanders reputedly dislike due to its association with a 1982 incident. Name the territory. PUBLIC DOMAIN

Questions and Answers to the previous day’s daily quiz: 1. This pop singer was brought in to perform at halftime in 1993. **Ans: Michael Jackson**
2. This artist was picked up by a helicopter from stage for her exit at the 1996 Super Bowl. **Ans: Dianna Rose; her outro song was ‘Take Me Higher’**
3. Name the hit TV show and the episode which was aired as a lead-out after the game in 1996. **Ans: Friends, ‘The One after the Superbowl’**
4. The halftime event during the first Super Bowl in 1967. **Ans: Marching bands of the University of Arizona and Grambling State University**
5. Name the artist who revealed her pregnancy to the world during her halftime performance. **Ans: Rihanna**
Visual: Name the singer and his song. **Ans: Prince; ‘Purple Rain’**
Early Birds: Viswanadha Rao Batchu| Siddhartha Viswanathan| Piyali Tuli| K.N. Viswanathan| Tamal Biswas

Word of the day

Wrangle:
an instance of intense argument (as in bargaining); an angry dispute; to quarrel noisily, angrily or disruptively

Synonyms: haggle, brawl

Usage: *The wrangle over ownership of the house dragged on for years.*

Pronunciation: newsth.live/wranglepro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /ˈwɹæŋɡl/

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

Uneven recovery

India Inc's Q3 numbers signal a patchy revival

With both GDP growth and India Inc's performance taking a hit in the first half of this fiscal, all eyes were on the second half of the year, for a rebound. The results of listed companies for the October to December quarter (Q3) of FY25 suggest that growth is indeed staging a recovery, albeit a patchy one. An analysis by this newspaper found that for 1,435 listed companies, aggregate net profits (excluding one-offs) for Q3 grew by 6.1 per cent year-on-year, after shrinking by 1.8 per cent in Q2 and growing just 2.3 per cent in Q1.

A strong show by companies selling high-end goods and services, a pickup in the core sector and a profit boost from falling energy costs aided the show. Profit growth was driven almost entirely by an expansion in operating profit margins, which stood at 25.8 per cent in Q3 compared to 22.9 per cent in Q2, thanks to lower energy costs. The overall demand environment however remained subdued with the companies reporting 7.2 per cent revenue growth in Q3, the same as the preceding quarter. As sales growth holds the key to durable profit expansion, hopes are now pinned on tax cuts announced in the Budget and the recent rate cut to bump up aggregate demand.

However, the performance of individual sectors reveals an uneven recovery. Consumption trends continue to diverge, with discretionary goods and services registering strong growth, while staples falter. In Q3, sales of FMCGs (5.8 per cent), automobiles (6.1 per cent), telecom services (5.6 per cent) remained muted. But scorching sales growth continued for real estate (23.3 per cent), jewellery (32.5 per cent), durables (37.5 per cent), hotels (21.2 per cent) and e-commerce (18.5 per cent). A heartening trend here was pick-up in sales from traditional retail trade (19.3 per cent sales growth). Core sectors such as cement, power generation and refineries managed a sharp improvement in profitability on the back of lower input and energy costs, but their topline growth remained anemic at sub-5 per cent. This is indicative of muted industrial activity.

Even as storm clouds gathered on the global front, export-oriented sectors managed a good show. Revenue growth for IT services (6.4 per cent), pharmaceuticals (11.9 per cent), textiles (8.3 per cent) were the same as, or slightly improved over the previous quarter's levels; but whether this survives the Trump onslaught remains to be seen. Financials delivered a steady show, with banks and NBFCs managing income growth of 11.7 per cent and 10.7 per cent this quarter. But their income growth fell by more than half from 26-29 per cent a year ago.

Income tax breaks may put more money in the hands of the spending class, boosting discretionary consumption. This will take time to get to the bottom of the pyramid. The 25-basis point rate cut may prompt fence-sitters to buy big-ticket items, though it may not alter existing EMIs (Equated Monthly Instalments). After a fiscal and monetary stimulus, policymakers can only wait for India Inc to kick-start a new capex and hiring cycle.

POCKET RAVIKANTH



ADITYA SINHA

In the early 2000s, Gujarat and Maharashtra were locked in an economic cold war, each claiming to be India's industrial powerhouse. The battle escalated when Maharashtra rolled out tax breaks for auto manufacturers, only for Gujarat to counter with better tax breaks, free land and other enticing benefits. This was competitive federalism at its finest.

Subnational competition for investment, talent, and economic growth is precisely how fiscal decentralization is supposed to work. However, in India, this competition often takes a Tughlakian turn — States undercut each other with reckless subsidies, bureaucratic hurdles remain firmly intact, and regulatory certainty is treated like an optional add-on.

The race to attract voters through freebies is another way competitive federalism is being distorted. Done right, competitive federalism drives efficiency and innovation. Done wrong, it becomes a reckless bidding war where States keep raising the stakes — only to realise they've mortgaged their future for short-term political gains.

FOUR BENEFITS

Empirical research highlights four key benefits of competitive federalism.

First, it enhances economic efficiency by allowing States to tailor policies to local needs, leading to higher growth, increased investment, and job creation (Oates, 1999; Zodrow & Mieszkowski, 1986).

Second, it fosters policy innovation as States experiment with governance models, regulatory reforms, and public service delivery to gain a competitive edge (Besley & Case, 1995).

Third, it strengthens fiscal discipline, as States must balance revenue generation with responsible spending to attract businesses and maintain investor confidence (Rodden, 2006). Fourth, it improves public service quality, as competition forces States to enhance infrastructure, education, and healthcare to retain skilled workers and businesses (Gennaioli et al., 2013).

At the same time, evidence also suggests that unchecked competition can lead to negative externalities, such as a race to the bottom in tax incentives, fiscal imprudence, and an over reliance on subsidies, ultimately eroding long-term financial stability (Wilson, 1999; Gennaioli et al., 2013).

Hence, there has to be mechanism in place wherein Union can nudge States not to splurge resources on freebies. This can only happen through Finance Commission, may be through a conditional grants framework.

INVESTMENT INDEX

Apart from the Finance Commission, the Union government has made efforts



REUTERS

Push for competitive and cooperative federalism

BUDGET FOCUS. Investment Friendliness Index of States and National Manufacturing Commission are key ideas but much depends on implementation

to promote competitive federalism further through a number of announcements in the Budget. The first obvious announcement was an Investment Friendliness Index of States (IFI), to be launched in 2025.

The index can function as an information mechanism that enhances transparency in State-level economic governance by establishing a quantifiable benchmark for investment attractiveness.

Drawing from institutional economics, such rankings create reputational incentives that induce subnational governments to undertake policy reforms. Theoretical models of yardstick competition (Besley & Case, 1995) suggest that when jurisdictions are publicly ranked, policymakers face electoral and economic pressures to improve performance relative to their peers. This creates a regulatory environment where States internalise the benefits of investment facilitation as a means of achieving long-term economic growth.

Furthermore, the index serves as a commitment device, signalling policy stability and predictability to investors, which is critical in reducing transaction costs associated with uncertain regulatory environments.

Public choice theory suggests that policy competition among States can counteract bureaucratic inertia by

Done right, competitive federalism drives efficiency and innovation.
Done wrong, it becomes a reckless bidding war between States

aligning State-level incentives with broader economic efficiency. The index, if designed effectively, can also introduce fiscal incentives by linking rankings to preferential access to financial resources. IFI can build on the success of DPIIT's Business Reform Action Plan (BRAP), which has evolved since its launch in 2014-15 to assess and drive regulatory reforms at the sub-national level. BRAP 2024 will further streamline India's business environment by integrating next-generation reforms, aligning with initiatives like reducing compliance burden, decriminalization, and the World Bank's B-READY program.

Another announcement, establishment of National Manufacturing Mission, will foster both competitive and cooperative federalism by aligning Central and State efforts to strengthen India's manufacturing ecosystem. This will provide a unified policy framework, execution roadmaps, and governance mechanisms. This initiative will encourage States to compete to improve the ease and cost of doing business, enhance infrastructure, and attract investments.

At the same time, it promotes cooperation by standardizing best practices, facilitating knowledge-sharing, and ensuring technology access across regions. The MSME focus incentivises States to tailor local support measures while adhering to national priorities, creating a balanced approach where States compete on efficiency but collaborate on systemic improvements, ultimately driving 'Make in India' forward.

Another area is the Budget's commitment to mandate ministries to develop PPP project pipelines for the

next three years. At the same time, the Union government is also encouraging States to carry out a similar exercise.

Simultaneously, India Infrastructure Project Development Fund's support institutionalizes cooperative federalism by providing financial and technical assistance, ensuring States with varying fiscal capacities can participate equitably. This approach aligns with market-preserving federalism, where subnational competition drives efficiency and innovation, while a structured national framework prevents coordination failures.

All these initiatives — IFI, the National Manufacturing Mission, PPP project pipelines — are steps in the right direction, but the focus must now shift to execution. India has no shortage of well-intentioned frameworks and policy announcements; the challenge lies in implementation. The success of competitive federalism hinges on how effectively these mechanisms translate into on-ground improvements rather than remaining theoretical constructs. The IFI must have rigorous, objective metrics to avoid becoming another bureaucratic ranking exercise.

The National Manufacturing Mission must ensure that incentives do not simply duplicate existing schemes but drive real policy shifts at the State level.

Similarly, PPP project pipelines must not become yet another box-ticking exercise but a meaningful way to bridge infrastructure gaps. The Finance Commission, too, must go beyond recommendations and establish clear accountability mechanisms to prevent States from prioritising populism over fiscal prudence.

The writer is a public policy professional

FDI and exports need a policy boost

Revamping BIT model and hiking FDI limit for insurance to 100% are vital Budget proposals

Amal Krishnan
Badri Narayanan Gopalakrishnan

The recently published Economic Survey flagged the challenges for India's external sector, particularly exports, amidst the change of power in the US and the shifting trade stances by other economies. The Survey suggested a long-term approach by positioning itself as a strategic partner in high-value sectors such as biotechnology, semiconductors, and space technologies, to name a few.

The Survey emphasises the need to adopt a short-term approach by diversifying the export basket to ensure that India remains resilient despite rising protectionism and trade costs. Foreign direct investments are critical in ensuring that a strategic shift to a high-value export basket takes place in the long run.

FDI INITIATIVES

The most significant Budget announcement on external trade and foreign investment is the decision to revamp the Bilateral Investment Treaty (BIT) model to make it more "investment friendly." The provisions in the current model BIT, especially those concerning the investor-state disputes, are a significant mood-dampener for

foreign investors. The lack of flexibility in the new model BIT introduced in 2016 has impeded investment treaty negotiations, particularly with the developed countries. The announcement assumes significance, given that India is negotiating investment treaties with the UK, Saudi Arabia, the EU, and Qatar.

Although the Survey projects India as a long-term investment destination, any further delay in implementing reforms will have serious implications on FDI flows. The global economic uncertainty and rising borrowing costs further add to the woes.

Another important Budget announcement pertains to raising the FDI limit in the insurance sector to 100 per cent. The annual premiums to GDP ratio was a meagre 3.7 per cent in FY24, in contrast to the global average of 7 per cent.

The higher investment limits will attract more foreign players. The caveat in the announcement is that the enhanced limits apply to companies that invest the entire premium within India.

The previous instances when FDI insurance limits were raised in 2015 and 2021 were successful in attracting fund flows to the tune of ₹54,000 crore.

The Budget lacks concrete policy announcements on reforms to attract FDI in the manufacturing sector.



BOOST. Manufacturing exports GETTY IMAGES

Considering that the PLI scheme has not delivered the desired results, the manufacturing sector desperately needed reforms to attract foreign investment.

EXPORTS PUSH

The Budget has recognised the need to encourage exports amidst the rising protectionist tendencies across the global economy. The Export Promotion Mission primarily aims to improve exports by providing easier access to credit for exporters, particularly SMEs, and reduce trade-related costs and compliances.

The new unified digital platform, the Bharat Trade Network, is laudable as it helps streamline export documentation and integrate major players such as

DGFT, GSTN, and banks to reduce bureaucratic delays. Although the new announcement recognises the delay in export processes and lack of access to credit, the allocation of ₹2,250 crore is paltry and inadequate.

The mission must be scaled up further in the upcoming financial year to ensure that a positive impact on exports is visible. Another important outcome of the Budget is the effort to address the inverted duty structure and rationalise the tariff structure to boost Indian manufacturing. Sectors, such as agro-textiles and geotextiles, have received sops. Policy announcements to ensure the availability of certain critical minerals will boost the EV industry.

Nevertheless, there is a long way to go in addressing the inverted duty structure and rationalization of tariffs. Sector-specific announcements like these are inadequate in addressing the structural issues plaguing our external trade sector.

Furthermore, India's real comparative strength lies in services exports. While focusing on promoting manufacturing exports, sustained policy efforts are required to strengthen our services export sector.

Krishnan is an Assistant Professor at Christ University, Bengaluru. Gopalakrishnan is Fellow, NITI Aayog. Views expressed are personal

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

Trump's tariff weapon

Apropos 'US tariffs may flood India with cheap Chinese steel', (February 11), US President Donald Trump's use of tariffs as a blunt weapon to extract concessions on everything from commerce to immigration and drug trafficking could redraw global trading norms. Trump sees tariffs as a way to raise revenue, remedy trade imbalances and pressure countries to act on US concerns. Trump's tactics could lead to a retraction of global supply chains.

The membership in the WTO serves no purpose, when one of the biggest countries in the world can threaten tariffs for national security reasons in such an aggressive way. The role of international trade institutions, international trade rules and trade agreements are under threat.

N Sadhasiva Reddy

Bengaluru

Mobilising funds

This refers to the article "Banks may have to change tack" (February 11).

Given the surging disposable income of the middle class, the financial sector needs to ensure that the guidelines and regulations are being strictly adhered to while mobilising the resources and deploying them. Even though the current and savings deposits are less costlier than the term deposits they are not deployable for long-term purposes. Given the growing need for long-term funds, banks have to look for mobilising term deposits at lower rates. Ensuring good governance while

creating the assets is vital to the growth of returns and credibility. RBI must tighten oversight.

VSK Pillai

Changanacherry (Kerala)

Farm first

Apropos 'Agriculture set to flourish' (February 11). Budgetary support to agriculture will augment structural transformation. No doubt that PMDDKY scheme proposed in the Budget will address the structural impediments regarding productivity,

irrigation through credit from formal sources. Creating a marketing platform for the select 100 districts with cold storage facility and MSP will ensure fair prices to farmers. Crop insurance with timely claim settlement at times of crop failure will ensure seamless agriculture operations. Digital tech must be scaled up through training schemes for farmers.

NR Nagarajan

Sivakasi

Boost to human rights

Rules for officers effecting an arrest strengthened

RK Raghavan

In a significant recent decision (*Vihaan Kumar vs The State of Haryana*) the Supreme Court of India ruled that the failure of a law enforcement official to give the grounds of arrest to a person detained by him is violative of the Constitution and, therefore, illegal. The Court specifically referred to Article 22(1) of the Constitution which reads: “No person who is arrested shall be detained in custody without being informed, as soon as may be, of the grounds for such arrest nor shall he be denied the right to consult, and to be defended by, a legal practitioner of his choice.”

The Court went on to add that under such circumstances the arrestee was entitled to be released on bail, even if there were any statutory restrictions on giving bail in a particular case.

The Court’s objective here was evidently to reduce the arbitrariness and caprice of investigating officials.

To eliminate any suppression of crucial material by the officer concerned with regard to the detention it has been laid down as a practice that Magistrates should question the offender produced before them whether he or she had been apprised of relevant facts. If any failure of the investigating officer to do so is detected the Magistrate should record this fact and bring it to the notice of supervisory officials for such disciplinary action as deemed fit.

SEVERAL OTHER RULES

The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (previously known as the Criminal Procedure Code enacted under the British) lays down several other rules for compliance by the officers effecting an arrest, all in the interest of protecting human rights. These include conveying information of an arrest to a friend or relative named by the arrestee, as also providing legal assistance to him or her through the nearest available advocate.

The most important legal requirement here is of course the production of the arrested person before the nearest Magistrate before the end of 24 hours from the time of arrest. It is widely known that many agencies dodge this rule by not bringing on record the fact of an arrest, sometimes for a dishonest purpose, and many a time for giving themselves enough time to ferret out more information related to an incident under probe.



ARREST. Welcome move to reduce arbitrariness

Rigorous training of officers in lower rungs of a law enforcement agency is the need of the hour

This is a definite violation of human rights that is highly condemnable. But then there is the questionable defence of this practice by some well meaning public officials that law enforcement officers are forced to resort to off-the-record detentions because many offenders are far too clever in suppressing their misdeeds and need to be interrogated at length.

Police stations in particular contribute to this unsatisfactory state of affairs. We now have nearly 17,000 police stations in the country.

In earlier times, supervisory officials used to be directed to visit police stations by surprise and physically check whether there were any suspects kept there off the record. This was a salutary practice. I hope it continues and acts as a deterrent to malpractices.

Rigorous training of officers in lower rungs of a law enforcement agency is the need of the hour. This should be both at the time of recruitment and later while in service. Unlike earlier times training now receives considerable attention in the police and other law enforcement organisations. Training resources are now enormous.

The efficacy of training however remains doubtful. It is moot whether the latest Supreme Court decision will ever be brought to the knowledge of officials at the cutting edge level. Nothing but daily indoctrination will ever work.

Fear of stringent disciplinary action for violation of law and the code of conduct comes only later.

The writer is a former CBI Director

Ways to shrink the IBC process

FASTER SETTLEMENT. Non-core activities of resolution professionals act as a drag. Asset realisation should be simplified



TR RAVICHANDRAN

According to official data, the average time taken for an insolvency resolution process at the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) was 716 days (654 days in 2022-23) with the percentage of realisable amount to admitted claims at 27 per cent (36 per cent in 2022-23) in 2023-24. This data clearly depicts the continuing existence of gap between the legislative intent and effectiveness of the law i.e., Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC), which was enacted with twin objectives of timeliness and asset maximisation.

Hence, it is imperative to make drastic changes in the administration of IBC to achieve the objectives. The resolution professional (RP), who plays a pivotal role in the administration of IBC, must be allowed to focus only on core activities.

Non-core activities include: processing of claims; handling litigations; filing of avoidance applications; and running the operations of the company. Let us analyse each non-core activities, mandated under Section 25 of IBC, which are presently carried out by RP.

First in line is processing of claims, received from financial and non-financial creditors of the corporate debtor (CD). This activity is to determine the liabilities of the CD, and the outcome is necessary only at the time of distribution of the amount realised either from the successful resolution applicant (SRA) or sale of the economic assets of the company. This activity can be carried out parallelly by another RP or other professional (OP). Meanwhile, if any amount is received either from SRA or from the buyers of individual assets of the CD, the same may be kept in a separate bank account till the eligible creditors are finalised. In short, distribution should be de-linked from the resolution.



TOUGH ASK. The resolution professional cannot be expected to run the operations of different industries successfully ISTOCK

Secondly, lot of time is spent by RP during resolution, or CIRP, on litigation matters. Most of the litigations are either initiated by the promoters to disrupt CIRP or by the claimants when their claims are rejected. If the promoters are kept away from participating in CIRP and if the litigations from the claimants are handled parallelly without affecting the core activities, resolution would be quicker.

AVOIDANCE TRANSACTIONS

Thirdly, RP is obliged to file applications under IBC, in respect of avoidance transactions (preferential, undervalued, extortionate and fraudulent transactions) found by him during CIRP before the adjudicating authority (AA). For instance, he is obliged to inform the NCLT in the event of asset stripping or

fraud suspected by him. The investigation into such transactions by a ‘transaction auditor’ appointed by the RP should not come in the way of the resolution process.

Fourthly, RP is mandated to run the operations of the company disregarding the viability of the operations, due to the misconception that the realisation would be higher if the operations are running. On the contrary, in most of the cases, running the company during CIRP has only resulted in huge cash loss and substantial erosion in the current assets of the company.

Key reasons for the value erosion include non-availability of credit for the supply of raw materials, default in receivables, lower morale of the employees, unrest amongst workers, etc., which are common for any CD undergoing CIRP.

Moreover, one cannot expect the RP to run the operations of different industries successfully. Hence, it is suggested that unless it is absolutely necessary, the operations of CD be halted temporarily to enable the RP focus on core activities. The buyers of a CIRP company anyhow check the working conditions of the machineries before submitting their offer; hence

Most of the litigations are either initiated by the promoters to disrupt CIRP or by the claimants when their claims are rejected

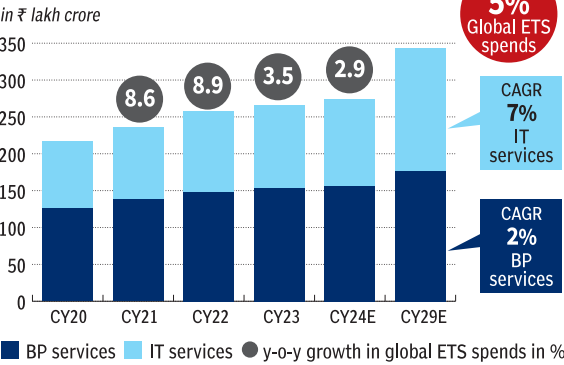
STATISTALK.

Compiled by Nishanth Gopalakrishnan | Graphic KS Gunasekar

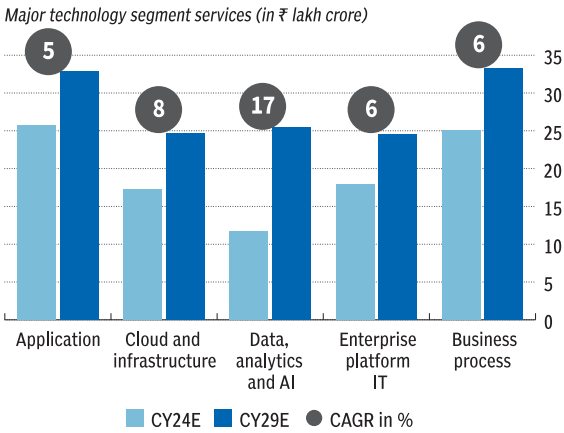
Key trends in how the world spends on tech services

Hexaware’s IPO documents reveal interesting trends in the global enterprise technology services (ETS) market. After a pandemic led digitisation boost, global ETS spends are set to see a compounded growth of 5 per cent leading to 2029. Of the major technology segments of service providers in the space, the data, analytics and AI segment is expected to grow the fastest. Financial services leads the list of user industries in AI adoption

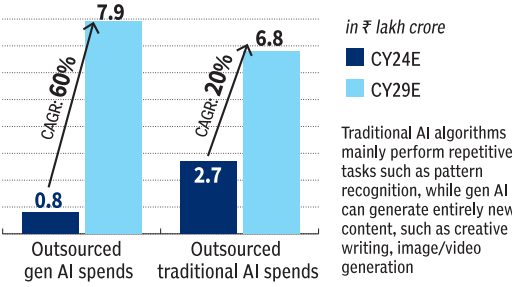
Growth in global ETS spends normalising



Data, analytics and AI spends to double in five years

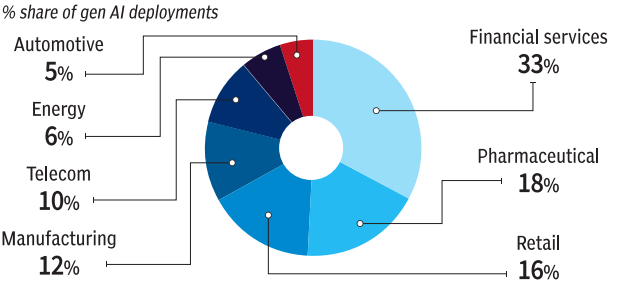


Gen AI spends expected to skyrocket



Source: RHP of Hexaware Technologies

Financial services leads in Gen AI adoption



thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

February 12, 2005

Tata Tea to transfer 17 estates

Tata Tea Ltd (TTL) has begun the process of withdrawal from the plantation business, with its board today approving the transfer of 17 tea estates in South India to a new company featuring employee ownership. TTL will be a minority shareholder in the new company with less than 20 per cent stake.

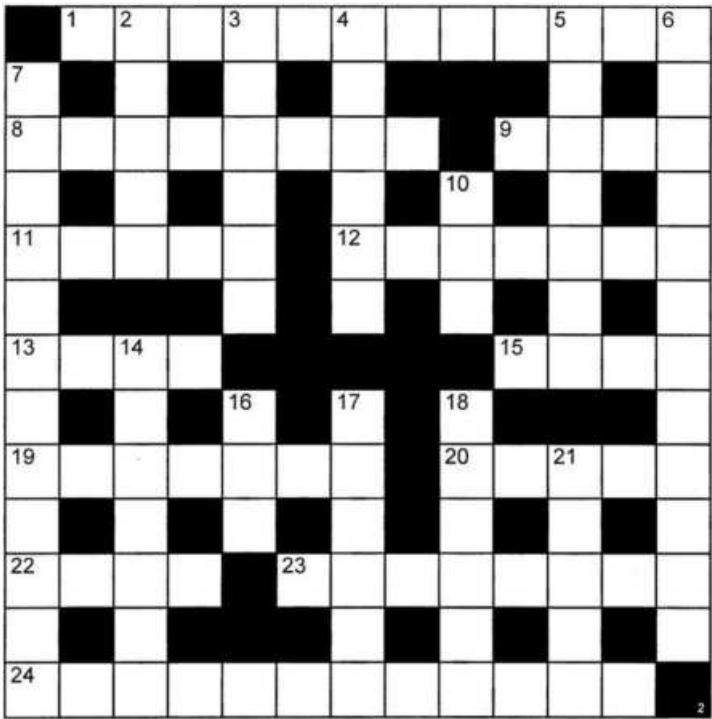
SKF India board to consider delisting

The stock of SKF India Ltd, part of the global bearings maker SKF Group, closed 13.58 per cent higher on the BSE on news that the company’s Swedish promoters would delist shares from Indian bourses. SKF India Ltd informed the stock exchanges that its board of directors will consider the buyback proposal received from Aktiebolaget SKF together with its subsidiaries.

Tribunal declines to stay ISP fees

In a blow to the Internet service providers (ISPs), the Telecom Dispute Settlement Appellate Tribunal (TDSAT) refused to grant any stay on the Government’s decision to impose entry fee and licence fee on ISPs for offering virtual private network services. The TDSAT has asked all the ISPs to comply with the Government order by March 3.

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2630



EASY

ACROSS

- Place things come together (7-5)
- Hardened in heart; difficult to influence (8)
- Mark of cut (4)
- Small anchor (5)
- Fiction writing (7)
- Police informer (4)
- Essence from lemon peel (4)
- One held for ransom (7)
- Classic poet; pigeon (5)
- Track (4)
- Consisting of verses (8)
- Pages bound for schoolwork (8,4)

DOWN

- Finished (5)
- Changed direction (6)
- Legal officer (6)
- Fragrant substance for burning (7)
- Went helplessly upside-down (6,6)
- Nursery item for riding (7-5)
- Flightless bird (3)
- Let-up (7)
- Tree grown from acorn (3)
- Controls (6)
- Heavenly child (6)
- Ostentatiously masculine (5)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- A get-together with Dot? (7-5)
- Stubborn old schoolfellow expected to hold deserter (8)
- There’s no end to a muffler to show where cut was made (4)
- Anchor used by ketch initially on the brink (5)
- Italian capitalist has only half-a-cent? That’s fiction! (7)
- He informs Noah first of the craft he must build (4)
- Enthusiasm for what may be extracted from lemon-peel (4)
- One held an entertaining person for a very long time (7)
- Greek poet offering permanent shelter to the right (5)
- Reville the bar that extends horizontally (4)
- Encountered the right one with California in verses (8)
- What scholar uses may be a manual for PE instructors (8,4)

DOWN

- Having need of change before 1st December, didn’t go on (5)
- Made something on lathe and went off in the dairy (6)
- Certifying officer changes the rota in the Big Apple (6)
- What may burn fragrantly and make one cross (7)
- Capsized helplessly as one rotated the soup-maker (6,6)
- Its rider has his ups and downs, but doesn’t get a nywhere (7-5)
- Half of them take a turn forbidden to grounded flier (3)
- Temporary cessation that is concerned with malice (7)
- Hearty supplier of material for ships in olden days (3)
- Controls always seen in links without means of writing (6)
- Sweet child shows there’s no start to pain one can massage (6)
- Pronouncedly masculine man endlessly choking without ruler (5)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2629

ACROSS 1. Clause 8. Raise 9. Abolish 11. Earliest 12. Flake 15. Loll 16. Sly 17. Rave 19. Scots 21. Henchman 24. Runaway 25. After 26. Stroke

DOWN 2. Label 3. Unlikely 4. Else 5. Frill 6. Like 7. Felt 10. Handlebar 12. File 13. Armchair 14. Beds 18. Charm 20. Track 21. Head 22. Note 23. Nuts

Trump’s trade order

India has an early opportunity to present its position

American President Donald Trump’s economic and political ideas are unsettling the world. Given the importance of the United States (US) in the global economy and political order, it is anybody’s guess how the world will look in four years. It is also likely that Mr Trump’s ideas will last longer than his term. Be that as it may, the world will have to deal with disruption in the foreseeable future. Individual countries will need to be prepared to negotiate and adjust to protect their interests. Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s trip to the US this week provides India an early opportunity to present its position to the new Trump administration. The meeting between the two leaders will, among other things, take place against the backdrop of Mr Trump’s imposition of a 25 per cent tariff on US steel and aluminium imports without exception. Before this, he had imposed a 10 per cent tariff on China and threatened to impose tariffs on Mexico and Canada.

In the context of trade, to be able to present India’s position, it is important to understand what the new US administration intends to achieve. As has been highlighted by some commentators, there are largely two objectives. First, as Mr Trump himself has often stated, is to have a balanced trade. The US current account deficit (CAD) in the third quarter of 2024 was 4.2 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP), up from 3.8 per cent in the previous quarter. The second objective is to raise revenue to finance the extension of tax cuts. The objectives and means are, of course, at odds with the broader economic consensus. The tariff burden will eventually fall on American households and there are macroeconomic reasons why the US runs a CAD. However, such reasons are unlikely to persuade Mr Trump.

The broad thinking of the establishment was recently illustrated by Robert E Lighthizer, US trade representative in the first Trump administration and the author of *No Trade Is Free: Changing Course, Taking On China, and Helping America’s Workers* (2023) — endorsed by Mr Trump — in an essay in *The New York Times*. The central argument is that the international trading system has failed the US and many other countries. He notes that China, which reported a trade surplus of about \$1 trillion in 2024, has demolished the systems. There are various ways that countries can rig the system to their advantage, including currency manipulation. Mr Lighthizer further argues democratic countries should come together to create a new trading system. Given the broad thinking and policy framework, India must forcefully make the following points to the US to avoid country-specific restrictions — Mr Trump has spoken about Indian tariffs several times during the campaign trail.

First, unlike many others, India is not manipulating domestic policies and, like the US, runs a CAD — it imports more than it exports. Second, India is reviewing its tariffs and, as a trade expert underscored in these pages, the actual tariff burden on three-fourths of US imports to India is less than 5 per cent. India, if needed, should be willing to review tariffs and sources of import. Third, India is a large market and talent base for top US technology companies, which means interdependence between the two is much deeper than what is perhaps reflected in trade numbers. Finally, economics and geopolitics are intertwined, at least in the context of China, and it is in the interests of both the US and India to continue cooperating.

Learning to grow

India needs to invest more in higher education

The NITI Aayog’s policy report entitled “Expanding Quality Higher Education through States and State Public Universities” tackles head-on the key problem that has contributed to the dismal state of academic standards in such institutions. Its broad recommendations are for a greater degree of fee autonomy, a draft research policy, a dedicated infrastructure-finance agency, tax exemptions, and encouraging corporate social responsibility for state public universities (SPUs). NITI Aayog Vice-Chairperson Suman Bery pointed out that in advanced countries public universities set the standard for excellence. This is certainly true of public higher-education institutions in the US, Germany, and China. In India, outside the Indian Institutes of Management and Indian Institutes of Technology, and some notable central universities and specialist institutions, the quality of public higher education leaves much to be desired. Given that 80 per cent of India’s higher education takes place in SPUs, it would be no exaggeration to say that there is a crisis of quality in this critical branch of the Indian education system.

The principal problem, as the report makes clear, is not just inadequate investment in higher education but also the poor quality of spending. High-literacy states such as Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana top per-youth spenders on higher education, but the divergence among states is wide. Remarkably, the study found that in terms of higher-education expenditure as a percentage of gross state domestic product, Bihar, Jammu & Kashmir, and Manipur ranked among the highest. Since these states are not reputed for the quality of their institutions of higher education, it is worth wondering how productively this money is being spent. The question that the NITI Aayog attempts to address is how states can achieve more bang for the buck spent on higher education. The 80-odd policy-detailed recommendations set out short-, medium-, and long-term goals, implementation strategies, the actors responsible for implementing the recommendations, and over 125 performance-success indicators. These recommendations have been compiled after stakeholder consultations held with state-government officers of higher- and technical-education departments from over 20 states and Union Territories, vice-chancellors and senior academicians of 50 SPUs, and chairpersons of several state higher-education councils.

The broad focus on stepping up research capabilities and “improving pedagogy” is unexceptionable. Creating centres of excellence aligned to a National Research Policy and building multi-disciplinary education and research universities to bridge gaps between research and education are also sound suggestions. The issue comes down to whether states have the monetary and institutional resources to make such ground-breaking changes that aim to transform universities from being mere teaching shops to turning meaningful research institutions. Though states’ expenditure on education has been falling as a percentage of GSDP over the past decade, the fact is that more than 85 per cent of public education spending is covered by the state governments. Overall public expenditure on education (Centre plus states) is also woefully short of the National Education Policy target of 6 per cent of GDP. Flexible fee structures may partially address this problem but could have the unintended consequence of excluding less affluent students. Given the demands on state finances, the Centre may need to take the lead. The demographic dividend and global competitiveness that India can hope to derive from its youth population are critically dependent on the quality of higher education it delivers.

Ambivalence on PSU policy

The Budget for 2025–26 bets on more dividend from PSUs with reduced equity contribution

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



Has the Union government’s approach to its public-sector undertakings (PSUs) changed? The Union Budget for 2025-26, presented early this month, provides a few pointers. But in order to assess how the approach to PSUs has changed or remained the same, it will be useful to set the latest Budget numbers in a historical context.

Let us start this exercise by first looking at 2019-20, the first year of the Narendra Modi government’s second term and before Covid struck the Indian economy. From a financial-performance perspective, this was not a good year for PSUs under the government.

Dividend from PSUs fell sharply by 19 per cent to ₹0.35 trillion. Not surprisingly, their capital outlay in 2019-20 rose by just about 2 per cent to ₹8.51 trillion. That was also because their ability to generate internal and extra-budgetary resources (IEBR) to finance their capital outlay was constrained because they rose by just 5 per cent to ₹6.4 trillion.

Even the government had become a little tight-fisted about the PSUs, proved by the fact that it slashed its contribution to the PSUs’ capital outlay, which consists of their IEBR and government support by way of equity and loans. The government’s budgetary support to the PSUs’ capital outlay fell by 7 per cent to ₹2.1 trillion. The share of such government equity and loans in the capital outlay of these PSUs fell to 25 per cent. On the other hand, the government’s plan for disinvesting its equity in PSUs also slowed in 2019-20, with disinvestment

receipts plunging by 47 per cent to ₹0.5 trillion.

The trend in the following five years ending 2024-25 was hardly encouraging. Capital outlay by the PSUs recorded a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of less than 2 per cent. The PSUs’ own resources, or IEBR, fell by about 10 per cent. Certainly, the pandemic must have played havoc with the finances of these PSUs. But engagement between the PSUs and their majority shareholder, the government, saw a significant change.



RAISINA HILL
A K BHATTACHARYA

In spite of their relative financial adversity, annual dividend transferred to the Centre in these five years increased at a CAGR of 9.5 per cent. The government also returned the compliment by raising its contribution to the PSUs’ capital outlay schemes by a CAGR of 21 per cent. Indeed, the share of the government’s budgetary support to PSUs’ capital outlay rose to 59 per cent in 2024-25 from 25 per cent five years earlier.

But the most significant change in the government-PSU equation was in disinvestment, which saw a fall of about 8 per cent over this period of five years. In other words, there was a marked slowdown in the pace of the government’s sale of equity in PSUs.

More importantly, the last five years were quite different from the previous five years. During that period, roughly coinciding with the Modi government’s first term, PSUs were providing more for their capital outlay (a CAGR of 23 per cent) and generating more IEBR (a CAGR of 26 per cent). The PSUs were paying less dividend, with a CAGR of just about 2 per cent. But the Centre was gar-

The blind state of media metrics

The Indian newspaper business is doing well. DB Corp, the publishers of *Danik Bhaskar* among other brands, posted an Ebitda (earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortisation) of ₹703 crore on revenues of ₹2,482 crore in the financial year ended March 2024. That is a 28 per cent gross margin in a business that, in most parts of the world, is in decline. Much like DB Corp, across the board, newspaper publishers have had a good couple of years, thanks to falling newsprint prices and rising ad revenues.

That seems strange. The last Indian Readership Survey was done in 2019. There has been no readership data for five years now. The data on circulation or copies sold has become irrelevant since publishers jump in and out of surveys, depending on which edition or market they want to pump up or hide. How then are advertisers using newspapers? What are they basing their expenditure on if there are no metrics?

This brings us to the point of this column.

What is true for newspapers is also true, in varying degrees, for television, digital, radio, and other media. Across the ₹2.3 trillion Indian media and entertainment business, advertisers, media buyers, and analysts are operating in a blind state.

Somewhere in 2022 the Broadcast Audience Research Council (Barc) stopped sharing any data with the media. Its subscribers — broadcasters, advertisers, and media agencies — continue to get data. There are some numbers available on its website, but if you wanted to do a trend analysis or cut across regions, languages, or genres, things got tougher. At ₹69,600 crore in revenues in 2023, television is the largest part of the media and entertainment business. It needs to be analysed. Most

of us get the numbers we want from friendly media agencies but that is not a sustainable way to analyse such a large business.

If you think digital is the cat’s whiskers, think again. For years Barc tried to put together a cross-media metric that would generate the blended viewership of, say, Star Plus on linear plus online, on Disney+Hotstar, YouTube, etc. But it did not work out because the parties involved simply couldn’t agree.

On pure-play digital, there is Comscore, Nielsen, App Annie, SimilarWeb, and others. But many of the major apps and sites do not allow third-party measurement. Try getting a list of the top 10 streaming brands that everyone agrees on and has no caveats; it is impossible. Advertisers simply accept the numbers Google (YouTube) and Meta (Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram) claim. Online, supposedly the most transparent medium, is a dark data hole.

Advertisers pay six times as much to reach every thousand people reading a newspaper as against what they pay to reach them online. On TV they would pay four times as much as digital, going by the January 2024 data from media agency Lodestar UM. Without decent third-party metrics, can digital match the ad rates that print or TV get even if it crosses them on reach or revenue? Note that even though print has no metrics currently, much of the spend is based on past figures and extrapolations thereof.

Newspaper publishers are sanguine about the lack of readership data. They reckon, rightly, that if Google or Meta is not asked to certify or audit their numbers, why should publishers. Besides, for many large newspapers such as *Malayala Manorama* or *Dainik Bhaskar* three-fourths of the advertising revenue comes from local retailers in



MEDIASCOPE
VANITA KOHLI-KHANDEKAR

A professor’s ways of seeing



BOOK REVIEW
CHINTAN GIRISH MODI

Attention paid by the artist saves objects (and arguably, people) from the world’s indifference. That is perhaps the point of noticing, of observing,” writes Amitava Kumar, a professor of English at Vassar College in upstate New York, in *The Green Book: An Observer’s Notebook*. The book was written while he was a Cullman Center Fellow at the New York Public Library during the academic year 2023-24.

It is a work of non-fiction that cannot

be classified neatly as a memoir, travelogue or journal because the author seems more interested in playing with ideas and forms than sticking to a genre or delivering what agents and publishers can define, package and market easily. Apart from text, the book also includes drawings, watercolour paintings, photographs and collages.

Dr Kumar draws the reader’s attention to gulmohar, sheesham, banyan, semul and tamarind trees. Besides words, he relies on colours, textures, light and shade to heighten the reader’s appreciation of little details that are easy to miss in an age where human powers of quiet and careful observation are dulled by endless scrolling.

His objective here is not to present trees “as a motif of romance or mere nostalgia” but to “face the crisis of the anthropocene where the dominance of

the human, his arrogance as much as his greed, has brought the planet to the brink of annihilation”. He also leaves us with a shocking piece of information. “I have read somewhere that 1,200 square kilometres of forest are cut down each year in India just to burn bodies,” he notes.

Dr Kumar’s approach to the ecological crisis appears to come from a place of love, which manifests as grief because he takes personal responsibility for the harm that human beings have caused. “Why does construction look so much like destruction?” he asks, while writing about hydroelectric power plants and landslides in ecologically sensitive mountainous terrain.

This grief is interlaced with other kinds of grief documented in the book: The grief that follows the death of the author’s parents who lived in

India, the grief that arises from acknowledging that the “pluralist ethos” of the nation is “in tatters”, and the grief of bearing witness to the dead bodies of children in Gaza killed by Israeli airstrikes and ground operations funded by the United States while much

of the international community chose complicity over solidarity and a call for accountability.

This book is a collection of jottings and musings that flow from the author’s mind in response not only to the buzz of life that he experiences and observes in New York, Varanasi, Patna, Rishikesh, Auli, Devprayag, Joshimath, Prayagraj and Delhi but also to what he reads on these journeys. This includes a wide range of writers such as Rabindranath Tagore, Nirmal Verma, Salman Rushdie,

Jhumpa Lahiri, Shiva Naipaul, Kobayashi Issa, Zadie Smith, G N Saibaba, James Baldwin, Oscar Wilde, Virginia Woolf, and George Orwell.

People who aspire to write their own book someday might want to take a cue from Dr Kumar’s writerly routine. He

shares, “I’m committed to writing every day. I’m also an advocate of walking every day. The mantra I offer my students is that each day they write 150 words and walk mindfully for at least ten minutes.” Going by this modest ask, setting up a

disciplined writing practice does not seem all that challenging.

While many dream of writing a book, it is hard to generate material. Dr Kumar recalls, for instance, that author V S Naipaul “suffered from the fear that he had run out of fictional material after

having written *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Similarly, Dr Kumar himself wondered who would publish this experimental book of his. This is a genuine concern in today’s publishing market where commissioning editors are often constrained by the demands of sales and marketing teams. They are reluctant to take risks, and settle for the formulaic. Fortunately, Dr Kumar did not give up. He was standing, after all, on the shoulders of writers like Henry David Thoreau, Annie Proulx, the Bronte sisters, Vladimir Nabokov, and Jack Kerouac whose “mixed genre creations” greeted him at the New York Public Library. In following their example, he has created a thing of great beauty that will give hope to those who are struggling with a writer’s block and to those who are open to a work of literature that may seem like a heap of fragments but is held together by its own inner logic.

The reviewer is a journalist, educator, and literary critic



INDIA bloc’s
identity crisis

Recent polls show that mere anti-BJPism is insufficient to attract voters

The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP)’s drubbing in the recently concluded Delhi assembly elections appears to have widened the cracks within the INDIA bloc. Within hours of the counting beginning last week, Jammu and Kashmir chief minister (CM) Omar Abdullah threw a barb, warning against infighting and expressing his frustration — particularly since the Congress, which failed to win a single seat for the third time in a row, played spoiler to the AAP in some key constituencies. The AAP then raced to save its administration in Punjab, with party chief Arvind Kejriwal scheduling a meeting with Punjab CM Bhagwant Mann, ministers, and party lawmakers in Delhi amid speculation of growing dissension. At the same time, West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee has blamed both the AAP and the Congress for the debacles in Haryana and Delhi respectively and made it clear that she will fight alone in elections in her state next year.

The INDIA bloc was never meant to be an ideologically seamless alliance. So, some push-and-pull in a coalition trying to take on the BJP’s electoral juggernaut is to be expected. If the Congress is unable to take on the BJP effectively — organisationally, strategically and electorally — it will find its position squeezed by other partners. Regional parties continue to see the Congress as a hindrance and an adversary and are sceptical of the party’s ability to put together a coherent campaign. Conversely, the Congress sees some regional partners as obstacles to its growth and blames them for its shrinking national footprint. Before elections, too much time is spent on speculating about seat details (in Maharashtra, this conundrum was not resolved even till polling day) and too little on building a common platform, holding joint rallies, coordinating strategies, and pooling together ground resources. Other than in Parliament, the INDIA bloc is barely visible as a coherent force, and even that coordination is missing on some key topics.

This points to a larger lacuna. The bloc exceeded expectations in the 2024 general elections but has failed since to create an ideological and electoral identity that goes beyond opposition to the BJP. With no word on what the bloc stands for, the BJP finds it easy to brand it a band of opportunists. Till this identity crisis is resolved, the bloc will likely continue to be an amorphous force — together in success, disbanded in failure.

Mob rule has marked
new regime in Dhaka

Much has changed in Dhaka six months after a popular uprising forced the Awami League government to resign and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to flee Bangladesh. The broad-spectrum alliance that mobilised the streets against the Awami League had sought radical political reforms to rebuild democracy in that country. The task of Muhammad Yunus, chief adviser of the caretaker administration, was to initiate the reforms and hold fresh elections. At least 13 reform commissions have been constituted, but an elected government seems a distant goal. Echoing Yunus, the country’s election commission told a delegation of the Khaleda Zia-led Bangladesh National Party (BNP) that it plans to hold the next general elections in December. The BNP prefers early polls.

Mob rule rather than any effective civil administration has distinguished the six months of Yunus at the helm. Awami League supporters and members of the Hindu minority have been at the receiving end of this chaotic turn of events. The Islamists have resurfaced to revive an old fault line about Bangladeshi identity: The recent legal challenges to Dhaka’s secular identity — the Constitution Reform Commission has proposed that “secularism” should be replaced with “pluralism” as a fundamental principle of the Bangladesh constitution — and the repeated mob attacks on symbols, memorials and the memory of Sheikh Mujib are aimed at reversing the 1971 Liberation War legacy that privileged a distinct secular-linguistic identity for Bangladesh over the Partition inheritance of Islamic nationhood.

As a friend of secular Bangladesh, New Delhi is right to worry about the turn in Dhaka. Its condemnation of the destruction of Mujib’s residence in Dhaka last week reflects the understanding that the enemies of secular Bangladesh are seeking an erasure of its founding legacy and friendship with India. With the Yunus regime in no position to firewall ties from its domestic politics and Sheikh Hasina making speeches while in exile in India, New Delhi and Dhaka are drifting apart. Reversing a deep friendship enabled by history and geography will not help Bangladesh realise its potential.

Ignore trade irritants,
focus on strategic ties

The Trump team is prioritising relations with India and recognises that India’s emergence as a global power has the potential to transform the Indo-Pacific region and the world

In the first Trump administration, Indian Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi visited the White House in June 2017, six months after Donald J Trump took power. This time around, Modi will visit the White House less than one month into President Trump’s second term. The question is whether Modi’s early venture into Trump’s world — which has been marked by an unusual level of chaos and disruption — will pay off for India.

Chances are that the Modi-Trump meeting will go smoothly. India’s foreign minister S Jaishankar already had a successful meeting with his counterpart, secretary of state Marco Rubio, on the latter’s first day on the job. Modi and Trump also spoke on the phone one week after inauguration day. The Trump administration’s early attention to India is notable, given all that is happening in the United States (US), including the shuttering of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), which has roiled the international development community.

Modi will be the fourth foreign leader to step into the middle of the American tumult. During the Israeli PM’s visit last week, President Trump surprised observers with an unexpected proposal for the US to take control of the Gaza Strip. Trump’s meeting with Japanese PM Shigeru Ishiba last Friday was less attention-grabbing, and notable for its friendliness and lack of confrontation. Modi hopes for similar treatment.

Trump’s priorities will be the deportations of illegal Indians and India’s notoriously high tariffs. Modi appears prepared to take the heat. Last week, India announced it was lowering import duties on high-end motorcycles, a move that will open the door for the US to export more Harley-Davidson bikes to the country. India may also offer to purchase more American oil and gas to narrow the US trade deficit.

India has also accepted over 100 Indian citizens deported from the US for entering the country illegally, although the Indian Opposition has complained about the treatment of the deportees, who were transported in shackles in an American military plane. India has pledged to take back additional deportees, so long as they have documentation proving their Indian citizenship.

India’s opening gambit on trade is unlikely to quench Trump’s desire to access the Indian market. Trump already is planning to slap 25% tariffs on steel and aluminium imports, putting at risk nearly one-fifth of Indian exports to the US. To avoid a trade

war, the two sides will need to announce fast-track trade negotiations.

The two sides failed to reach a trade agreement during Trump’s first term. Instead, Trump withdrew India’s Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) trade privileges in 2019 shortly before Modi won re-election. Still, overall strategic relations stayed largely on track, despite the friction over trade. The Trump trade team’s expectations of India will be higher this time around, however. There will be a greater risk that a failed trade negotiation could sour bilateral ties since Trump’s remarkable political comeback has bolstered his confidence and diminished his appetite for compromise.

Trump also will look for India to commit to buying American defence equipment. During Trump’s successful February 2020 visit to India, he closed defence deals worth \$3 billion. Now the two sides are negotiating India’s purchase and co-production of combat vehicles and jet engines.

The Trump team is clearly prioritising relations with India and recognises that India’s emergence as a global power has the potential to transform the Indo-Pacific region and the world. That is why Rubio’s first meeting as secretary of state was with the Quad foreign ministers from India, Japan, and Australia. Quad — revived in 2017 during Trump’s first term — is a critical block to meet new economic and security challenges, and the Trump administration’s decision to hold a Quad foreign minister’s meeting in its first week sends a



Lisa Curtis



There is a strong incentive for the US and India to cooperate on technology to diversify supply chains and help each other compete against China. BLOOMBERG

strong signal to China and others about its commitment to working with allies and partners to meet challenges in the Indo-Pacific. Trump has already hinted that he will attend a Quad leaders’ meeting in New Delhi this fall, marking the first time a US President would visit India during the first year in office.

Another topic of discussion could be technology cooperation. The signature Biden initiative with India was launching the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET) dialogue in 2023 which provided a framework to deepen technological cooperation between the US and India. When PM Modi visited the US in June 2023, the two sides announced the co-production of jet engine technology, a landmark agreement that was negotiated under iCET. The two sides later announced initiatives in biotechnology and semiconductors and discussed 6G technologies and collaboration in quantum technologies and Artificial Intelligence.

The Trump administration is likely to maintain a high-level dialogue with India on technology cooperation, though it may be branded

differently (a shame, given the catchiness of the iCET acronym). There is a strong incentive for the US and India to cooperate on technology to diversify supply chains and help one another compete effectively in the technology race with China.

Modi has likely calculated correctly in making the trek to Washington early in Trump’s second term. Trump is serious about wielding tariffs against friend and foe alike, and India won’t escape the net. Better for Modi to signal early efforts to reduce the US trade deficit and to remind Trump of the geopolitical underpinnings of the relationship. It will be critical for Washington and New Delhi to find a modus vivendi on trade so that friction over the issue does not hinder progress on strategic ties that are necessary to shape a peaceful and stable Indo-Pacific.

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Resolving farmers’ concerns,
bridging State-market divide

As farmer leader Surjit Singh Dallewala’s indefinite fast at the Khanauri border in Punjab continues, the Union government has agreed to hold talks with protesting farmers on February 14. This shift in approach has temporarily eased tensions, raising hopes for resolving the key demand to legalise minimum support prices (MSP).

The Centre must now adopt a conciliatory approach, particularly as it pushes the National Policy Framework on Agricultural Marketing, which farmer groups see as an effort to corporatise agriculture. The key challenge is for the government to lead while balancing farmers’ welfare and food security, and carefully bridging the government-market divide.

An amendment to each state’s APMC Act can ensure that farmers’ produce is never purchased below MSP, with penalties for violations. This should be an integral part of the central policy framework. If private traders fail to procure at MSP — especially after harvest, due to temporary supply-demand mismatches — the government should be prepared to procure up to 25% of total production, as permissible under the Price Support Scheme (PSS). This would demonstrate strong government intervention, stimulate market dynamics, and help stabilise prices above the MSP, all without placing a heavy burden on the government’s exchequer.

The focus should first be on the 21 food crops currently covered under the MSP regime, along with three key vegetables — potato, tomato, and onion. An initial Price Stabilisation Revolving Fund should be set up in each state, supported by the Centre, to ensure legally binding MSP through timely intervention. This fund, when established, would not exceed ₹5 lakh crore to support MSP, as recommended by the Swaminathan Commission, for the whole country. The actual burden on the government exchequer, if implemented carefully, would be limited to no more than ₹25,000 crore to cover the deficit between procured and

market prices.

This assessment draws from past experience, which highlights the likelihood and duration of farm commodity prices falling below the MSP. With a national budget of approximately ₹50 lakh crore, this represents a manageable financial commitment. Legal guarantees for MSP can be further strengthened by ensuring essential backwards and forward linkages, such as crop planning, building post-harvest infrastructure for efficient storage, transportation, and processing, and offering liberal pledge loans to manage post-harvest gluts in farm commodities.

Procurement should be strategically focused on supporting over 810 million people under the Public Distribution System (PDS), feeding around 120 million children daily through the midday meal scheme, and other programmes under the Food Security Act, 2013. These initiatives are designed to address the persistent issues of hunger and malnutrition — critical challenges that still require urgent attention. In short, the debate has shifted from why legal MSP is necessary to how it can be effectively implemented.

Several realistic initiatives have already been attempted to operationalise legal MSP within a statutory framework. The Maharashtra government and the Karnataka Agricultural Prices Commission have taken steps in this direction. In 2018, a private member’s bill was introduced in Parliament. A more recent initiative is the draft Andhra Pradesh Farmers’ Produce Support Price Act 2023, which allows marketing agents from private, corporate, and cooperative sectors to engage in barrier-free transactions of farm commodities — including livestock — both within and outside APMCs via a digital platform. This draft bill ensures that no transaction occurs below MSP or an equivalent price in the state, making it a noteworthy model. The key challenge now is reconciling the divide between the market and the government.

In agriculture, where producers have little control over the prices they receive, government intervention remains essential. This is more or less the norm in farm commodity markets worldwide. While MSP and timely procurement have long been pillars of India’s agricultural policy — ensuring income predictability for farmers — the ongoing agrarian crisis and rising farmer suicides demand a proactive government response. A strategy that balances the growth and efficiency aspects of the market with the government’s social justice objectives should help in furthering the dialogue.

The Supreme Court’s high-power committee, formed to negotiate with agitating farmers, can play a key role in this process. It would not only shift farmers from protest to productivity, getting them back in the field but also strengthen food security and contribute to the nation’s long-term prosperity.



TN Prakash Kammardi



In agriculture, where producers have little control over the prices they get, government intervention remains essential AFP

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{ OLAF SCHOLZ } GERMAN CHANCELLOR



If the US leaves us no other choice, then the European Union will react unitedly. Ultimately, trade wars always cost both sides prosperity



Why Delhi’s water sector
needs structural reforms

The situation could have been straight out of a black comedy. Political leader A accused a rival party of poisoning the city’s river upstream. Leader B, in a dramatic rebuttal, took a sip of the river water to prove otherwise. Leader A then claimed his opponent merely put the water in his mouth and spat it out. This spectacle isn’t a satire, as most of us would know by now.

Rather, it was the political drama surrounding Delhi’s water crisis in the lead-up to the assembly elections. Over the past few months, water became a dominant theme in Delhi’s poll discourse of maligning the rival. Apart from river water (Yamuna) pollution, the shortfalls in raw water supply, stranglehold of the water-tanker mafia, monsoon flooding leading to deaths, erratic billing, unreliable supply, financial mismanagement and corruption were part of the water-sector accusations and counters. These are, of course, real issues and need governance and managerial solutions. But, instead, they seem to have been reduced to mere political battlegrounds.

Interestingly, other utilities and services in Delhi — power, Metro, and piped gas — have not gotten embroiled in political controversy to the same extent. A key difference is leadership. Unlike the other utilities, the Delhi Jal Board is helmed by a political leader rather than a professional administrator. According to the DJB Act of 1998, the board’s chairperson is supposed to be the minister responsible for water and sanitation. Traditionally, this role has been filled by the chief minister, and more recently, by other senior political leaders. This direct political control has blurred the lines between governance and political interests, affecting the utility’s functioning. Political leadership for a water utility is not unique to Delhi, as this is also the case for the water utilities of Hyderabad and Chennai.

However, a couple of other factors have amplified the politicisation of Delhi’s water sector. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) made free water supply and bill waivers a central plank of its politics, turning water provision into a populist issue rather than a governance challenge. Over the last decade, the bitter contest between the AAP in the national capital and the Union government reached unprecedented levels. In this climate, any failure in water management quickly escalated into a political firestorm, given the political leadership of DJB. The fact that DJB has long struggled with inefficiencies, poor service delivery and financial losses, offers ample opportunities for such political conflagrations.

Any utility service requires large capital investments with long time horizons, as well as a strong focus on asset management, to ensure affordable, efficient, and sustainable delivery. Politics in the day-to-day running of these services can have severe consequences. Key decisions on capital expenditure, tariff setting, network loss reduction, manpower planning, and financial management can become vulnerable to political compulsions, rather than being guided by strategic planning considerations.

Compared to other utility sectors, water supply tends to be more vulnerable to politics, given its status as a basic necessity, as well as the complex interplay of economic, social, and environmental factors. In a rapidly urbanising country such as India, where climate uncertainties are on the rise, these complexities are becoming even more pronounced. Without a stable governance framework, water utilities become vulnerable to inefficiency and mismanagement.

To ensure sustainable and efficient water supply management, Delhi needs to emulate governance and service delivery models that have worked well in other utility sectors. There needs to be a clear role separation, wherein the political leadership sets the long-term sector policies and goals,

while the utility’s operations are left to professional managers as seen in the functioning of electricity, metro and piped gas services. The utility needs to be helmed by empowered professional managers with the requisite expertise, and adequate tenures to enable long-term decision-making. Other crucial elements would include: predictable and adequate financing for long-term planning and infrastructure development and an independent regulatory body to oversee the utility, and ensure transparency and accountability in its functioning.

Such a reform agenda may appear highly ambitious. However, a restructured governance framework for Delhi’s water sector is crucial for not just efficient and affordable service delivery, but also to ensure sustainable water resource management and develop resilience to the climate crisis. A consensus is needed to take forward structural reforms that prioritise these sector goals over electoral calculations. Only then can Delhi move beyond its current cycle of water crises and political grandstanding to ensure a secure and stable water future for its citizens.



Vandana Bhatnagar

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OUR VIEW



The Paris summit could help raise our AI game

This global gathering aims to have AI serve the common good. Should India and France join hands, it would benefit us both and help stop the US-China rivalry from stealing the race

Keeping up the momentum of the 2023 Bletchley Park and 2024 Seoul AI Safety talks, global leaders have gathered at this year's AI Action Summit in Paris to forge a consensus on the regulation and deployment of artificial intelligence (AI) for the common good. The agenda of this huddle focuses on public-service AI, the future of work, innovation and culture, trust in AI and global governance. India, co-chairing talks with France, aims to bolster its position in the global AI ecosystem and collaborate with EU nations on issues such as climate change and energy use. However, we face a major hurdle in recent US curbs on the export of advanced chips to India, which clouds our ambition to compete with today's AI leaders: the US, China and the UK. Can a handshake with France work to India's advantage?

Both countries have been developing national AI strategies since 2018. France has invested about €2.5 billion in setting up an AI ecosystem and is home to over 1,000 AI startups, including 16 unicorns (like Mistral AI). French efforts are backed by four interdisciplinary AI institutes that got public and private research to work together. Since 2019, the Jean Zay supercomputer has supported more than 1,200 academic and industrial projects. Tech majors such as OpenAI, Alphabet, DeepMind, IBM, Meta, SAP, Uber and TCS have set up or expanded AI labs in France. Its leadership has sought to mobilize private investments of €109 billion in AI over the years ahead—less than America's \$500 billion Stargate project, but a big signal. France also plans to dedicate a gigawatt of nuclear power to a mega AI facility. India, too, has taken strides. The government

has invested over \$1 billion in the IndiaAI Mission. We now have four chip projects underway, valued at over ₹1.5 trillion and aimed at reducing our reliance on imports for crucial hardware inputs. Plus, India has selected 10 firms to supply 18,693 GPUs for the creation of essential machine learning tools. Add to this a skilled and cost-effective talent pool of software developers and engineers, a reason why we host around 2,000 global capability centres that are engaged in advanced R&D for multinationals.

Yet, both India and France trail the US and China on AI. Stanford's Global AI Vibrancy Rankings 2023 placed India fourth and France sixth. The US has invested nearly \$250 billion in 4,643 companies since 2013, compared to China's \$95 billion in 1,337 startups, with India having put \$8 billion into 296. The US leads the arena, be it top-end research, model development or startup funding. Notably, China attracted \$67.2 billion in AI-related private investment in 2023—surpassing the US's \$7.8 billion—and has produced more machine learning models (61 versus 15), while leading in AI-related patents. Moreover, Chinese models like DeepSeek's R1 and Kimi k1.5 are making Silicon Valley sweat with their energy efficiency and open-source frameworks. India's planned semiconductor fabs will not churn out chips used at the cutting edge of AI competitiveness. But the IndiaAI Mission should mean more computing power, improved data quality for language models, sharper skill-sets, more startup funding and a wave of new apps, apart from a framework for AI governance. AI ties with France could catalyse both our efforts in a field too important to let the world's two geopolitical arch-rivals dominate. AI, ultimately, must enrich our lives, not imperil us.

MY VIEW | STAT-CRAFT

Middle class: A decisive force in the BJP's Delhi victory

RAJESH SHUKLA



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A sizeable middle class plays a crucial role in sustaining democracy. Consider the Delhi legislative assembly elections, where middle-class voters played a decisive role in shaping the outcome. The Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) victory marks a significant shift in Delhi's political landscape, dominated for over a decade by the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). According to PRICE's ICE 360 data, the middle class constitutes a substantial portion of Delhi's electorate, particularly in districts such as West Delhi (85%), South Delhi (74%), East Delhi (69%) and North West Delhi (62%). Its vote reflects a demand for governance reforms, economic stability and infrastructure improvements, overriding earlier trends favouring populist policies.

The BJP's success stemmed from its ability to connect with middle-class voters by focusing on economic growth, infrastructure and administrative efficiency. Unlike past elections, when measures such as free electricity and water subsidies dominated

voter concerns, this election saw demands for job creation, business-friendly policies and urban development, with an increased middle-class voter turnout contributing to the BJP's victory. Greater participation by professionals, entrepreneurs and salaried individuals indicated a growing awareness of the impact of governance on the economy. The recent budget, which included tax relief, home-loan subsidies and support for small businesses, further strengthened the BJP's appeal among voters in this demographic group.

While voter preferences in some districts, such as Central and North West Delhi, leaned toward policies addressing economic inequality, job creation and welfare, middle class influence extended beyond economic affairs to matters of governance. However, the responsibility of this class does not end with elections; they must also hold the ruling party accountable.

The middle class tends to serve as a watchdog of democracy, ensuring that elected representatives fulfil their promises. Unlike lower-income groups that may primarily focus on direct welfare benefits and the wealthy who often have direct individual access to policymakers, the middle class tends to act collectively through institutions,

media and public discourse. Delhi's political arena is no stranger to middle-class movements aimed at influencing governance.

The 2011 anti-corruption movement, which led to AAP's formation, was largely fuelled by middle-class frustrations. A vocal demand for transparency resulted in participation required direct engagement via political assemblies, today's middle class leverages social media, public debates and investigative journalism to influence governance. Platforms such as X, Facebook and WhatsApp have enabled people to amplify concerns, criticize governance failures and demand accountability. The BJP, having effectively used digital campaigns to win polls, must now be prepared to address issues raised on these platforms.

Public advocacy and legal challenges also remain powerful tools. In recent years, middle-class citizens have increasingly resorted to public interest litigations (PILs) to challenge government inaction on urban issues such as pollution, illegal construction and

south and east, expects tangible improvements. With Delhi being a commercial hub, middle-class voters will monitor BJP policies in support of small businesses, the job market and attracting investments. Much will be put to scrutiny.

Unlike in Aristotle's time, when civic participation required direct engagement via political assemblies, today's middle class leverages social media, public debates and investigative journalism to influence governance. Platforms such as X, Facebook and WhatsApp have enabled people to amplify concerns, criticize governance failures and demand accountability. The BJP, having effectively used digital campaigns to win polls, must now be prepared to address issues raised on these platforms.

Public advocacy and legal challenges also remain powerful tools. In recent years, middle-class citizens have increasingly resorted to public interest litigations (PILs) to challenge government inaction on urban issues such as pollution, illegal construction and

bureaucratic inefficiency. Citizen engagement for policy feedback will be crucial for governance accountability. We can expect growing pressure to institutionalize feedback mechanisms and ensure that civic complaints get prompt responses.

In other words, Delhi is set to test governance-focused politics over populism. The middle class may have helped shift Delhi's political trajectory towards a model that favours long-term growth over short-term benefits. But this demographic group will need to watch how this pans out.

For the BJP, sustaining middle-class support will require consistent performance and clear communication. This vote bloc is looking for visible improvements, rather than freebies and vote-bank politics based on identity. Any deviation from promises made during the election campaign could result in disillusionment and another shift in political allegiance in future elections.

The BJP's victory in Delhi underscores the decisive power of middle-class voters in steering political outcomes. Ultimately, this class serves as both kingmaker and accountability enforcer—ensuring that democracy remains not just about winning elections, but about meeting poll commitments and delivering results.

THEIR VIEW

America's trade partners should resist magnifying its irrationality

They mustn't respond in kind to Trump's tariffs. Such duties mostly hurt the countries levying them



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Dilemma. In this scenario, each actor benefits from their own unilateral move, but is made worse off when the other actor responds in kind. Trump's tariffs do not fit this characterization.

Contrary to what Trump claims, US tariffs are paid mostly by American consumers and firms that use imported inputs. Thus, the 'optimum tariff' argument, by which a country could gain by exercising monopoly power on world markets, does not seem to apply. Yes, selective trade protection could occasionally play a positive role as part of a broader agenda for development or greener growth. But across-the-board tariffs hurt the US economy, and more so than they do other economies. Trump's America is a prisoner entirely of its own making.

Likewise, retaliatory tariffs imposed by Canada and Mexico would mainly harm their own economies. As smaller players in world trade, they have even less ability to pass the costs of tariffs on to the US. The presence of supply chains in North American trade (as in auto manufacturing) magnifies the costs of disruption, but does not alter the fact that the costs of import tariffs are essentially domestic. In the language of game theory, retaliation through import tariffs is not a 'best response.'

Returning to the schoolyard bully analogy, imagine that you face an aggressor who is attacking you for no good reason. He seems crazy, hitting himself with each wild swing of his arm. What should you do? You could respond in kind and mimic what he is doing, but that would be equally mad, since you would be hurting yourself even more in the process. The best strategy, then, is to minimize the damage by staying as far from the bully as you can and waiting for him to punch himself out and crumple in a corner.

To be sure, Canada, Mexico, China and other countries that will bear the brunt of Trump's trade actions do not have the luxury of insulating them-

selves from the US. They will feel some pain for sure. But they should not make things worse for themselves by 'pulling a Trump' on their own economies. Some surgical retaliation against industries that support Trump politically may be unavoidable for domestic political reasons. But common sense and moderation should prevail, for the sake of their own countries and the global economy on which they depend.

Some worry that Trump might feel vindicated if others do not mount a strong response. But the surest way to put him in his place is to downplay his threats and treat him as weak. The most effective message America's trade partners can give Trump is: 'You are free to destroy your own economy; we do not plan to do the same. We will turn instead to other, more reliable trade partners, thank you very much.'

Moreover, America's trade partners—even the small ones—are not entirely powerless *vis-à-vis* the US. They have instruments other than trade policy at their disposal. They can, for example, impose profits taxes on domestic subsidiaries of specific American multinational corporations.

Gabriel Zucman of the Paris School of Economics has suggested that Canada and Mexico place a wealth tax on Elon Musk and make Tesla's access to the Canadian market conditional on paying it. This approach has the advantage of potentially generating direct fiscal benefits at home.

In the wake of Trump's actions, we should worry about the prospects of a calamitous race to the bottom. During the 1930s, a cycle of retaliation sent international trade into a tailspin and exacerbated the global depression. Avoiding such an outcome today is of utmost importance. The good news is that the worst of the trade damage can be contained and the costs will be borne mostly by the US, if others don't over-react. In other words, America's trade partners should keep calm and carry on.

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10 YEARS AGO

JUST A THOUGHT

BUZZ ALDRIN

GUEST VIEW

MINT CURATOR

New Delhi has much to navigate in this unpredictable Trump era

India must stay alert to the risks and opportunities that arise as the US leader pushes global trade patterns into turbulence



SHYAM SARAN
is a former foreign secretary

President Donald Trump promised a trade war and has fired the first shots. The US leader has chosen to use cannon balls rather than mere bullets, imposing a 25% tariff on goods imported from Mexico and Canada and 10% on imports from China (he had threatened 60% before assuming office). On 3 February, both Canada and Mexico were given a 30-day reprieve, with concessions extracted from them—the beefing up of border patrols to prevent ingress of fentanyl and illegal immigrants. While both Canada and Mexico had threatened retaliatory tariffs, they too have deferred action in the wake of Trump’s decision to temporarily suspend tariffs on them.

In the case of China, Trump has delayed the US crackdown on a loophole that relieved packages worth less than \$800 from attracting import taxes. To this effect, he has amended his earlier order that sought to suspend the ‘*de minimis*’ provision for low-value imports from China.

The Chinese have replied with an array of measures—from levying tariffs (on LNG, coal, crude oil, etc) to export controls on key metals (for instance, tungsten, which finds critical application in military equipment, electronics and solar panels) and anti-monopoly investigations (against Google and bio-tech firm Illumina).

US trade partners in Asia and Europe, meanwhile, have largely escaped the tariff war so far (if we factor in the recent levy on steel and aluminium), although Trump has repeated his threats to target them as well. Trump’s aggression has not exactly kept up with his rhetoric. Nevertheless, it has had enough heft to compel trade partners to look for avenues to diversify their trade away from the US. Inevitably, today’s highly integrated global supply chains, in which components may cross and re-cross borders several times, will experience disruptions. They will be restructured to reduce dependence on US links in the chain. This will proceed gradually and cautiously, given the large US presence in the global economy, its dominance of high-tech sectors and control over international currency and financial markets. But, over time, US assets are likely to wane in global significance.

Amid all this, China is likely to be the main beneficiary, occupying spaces left vacant by US protectionism.

How will the world adjust to Trump’s trade war? One should expect that the current trend towards regional and inter-regional trade arrangements excluding the US will intensify. In our own region, both the loosely-structured Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the more ambitious Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) will seek to re-assemble supply chains within these regional arrangements. Other regional trade arrangements such as the European Union (EU) and Mercosur (in



BLOOMBERG

Latin America) are likely to increase their focus on expanding intra-regional trade. In fact, there may be mutually beneficial links to be forged between regional pacts, as seen in the recently reached agreement between the EU and Mercosur.

The looming trade war started by the US will not reverse globalization. Rather, the latter will now proceed and even expand through regional arrangements.

The lesson for India is that it should quickly rejoin the RCEP and apply to join the CPTPP. The changed global economic situation demands such bold precautionary moves, since India has already been pushed to the margins of the Asian economy. Some policymakers in India may have hoped that the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) could become the vehicle for re-entering the regional economy on the coat-tails of the US. Trump, however, has already rejected the IPEF.

There seems to be some lingering hope that India may escape the tariff onslaught in view of the visibly empathetic relationship between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Trump. It has been argued that since Trump is transactional, some mutually beneficial arrangement could be worked out. For example, by promising to buy more US oil and gas as well as defence hardware. This may buy India some time, but given Trump’s unpredictability, it would be prudent to look towards strengthening the country’s other trade and economic relationships.

It is almost certain that the US will no longer be

as welcoming to Indian technology professionals as before. Our preferential access to H1-B visas is almost certain to end. We should, therefore, create opportunities for skilled professionals at home.

India should conclude the long-standing trade and investment agreement with the European Union. While Europe’s economy is experiencing a slowdown, it remains an important source of capital and technology, as well as a significant market for both goods and services. Even if India needs to offer some concessions to clinch an agreement, it should do so.

There is, however, one relationship that must be managed cautiously—that with China. Our heavy dependence on Chinese intermediate goods and components must progressively reduce, as this offers the latter geopolitical leverage.

Secondly, pairing with China in regional trade arrangements such as the RCEP may give India greater bargaining power *vis-à-vis* Beijing, as other trade partners can work together to moderate Chinese dominance. China’s participation in these trade agreements also gives it preferential access to the markets of other member countries and disadvantages India.

Finally, one should not exclude the possibility of a China-US bargain, which will inevitably shrink our room for manoeuvre in both the economic and political spheres. The world is in flux. Multiple scenarios are possible. We should remain alert to both the risks they entail and the opportunities they offer.

Memefests may be fun but it’s about time we had restraints

Social media users and platforms need to consider the harm done



JESSICA KARL
is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist.

Every now and then, a jaw-dropping story takes TikTok by storm and morphs into a meme. This week, it was the tale of 33-year-old New Yorker Onijah Andrew Robinson, who flew to Karachi, Pakistan, to be with Nidal Ahmed Memon, a 19-year-old man she reportedly met online. It became a viral sensation that offers an unfortunate and familiar lesson. When properly crafted, memes are one of the high forms of modern humour. When steeped in cruelty, they’re a reminder that they also need guard-rails. There’s often a fine line between hopping on a harmless trend and exploitation. And in an era when images and soundbites can become untethered from whatever inspired them, creators and companies should prioritize meme literacy, and social media outlets should help provide more context.

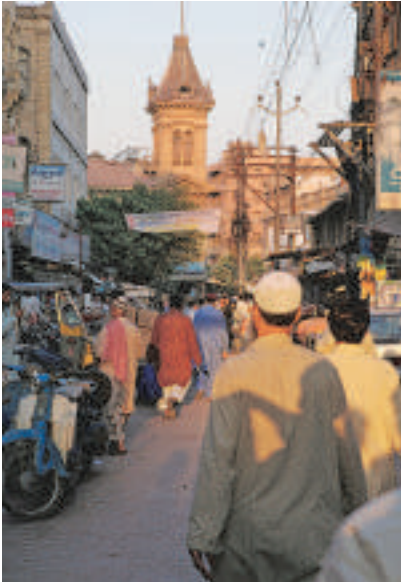
Robinson’s purported saga varies slightly depending on which creator is recapping it. As with everything on social media, you have to take what you hear with heaps of salt. But the bare bones of it seem to be that upon her arrival, Memon realized he had been cat-fished. He told her that his family opposed a marriage and encouraged her to leave. Instead of heading back to the US when her visa expired, Robinson stayed and started making daily demands of the government, drawing media attention and becoming a local celebrity.

In the midst of it, a man claiming to be Robinson’s son told a local news outlet that she has a history of mental illness. A local news report said she was admitted to a Pakistani hospital, where she was seen by psychiatrists. That didn’t stop creators from openly mocking her appearance and sharing her soundbites out of context.

While I’m all for a fun viral moment, the ubiquity of her story on social media illustrates meme culture’s pitfalls. So, at the risk of sounding like the ‘No Fun Police,’ I ask: Will social media users take a step back and realize that some memes—especially those rooted in tragedy—aren’t funny at all?

During what seemed like an impromptu press conference alongside Pakistani social worker Ramzan Chhipa, Robinson told newscasters that she wants to overhaul Pakistan’s infrastructure: “I’m asking for \$100,000 or more. I need \$20,000 by this week, in my pockets, in cash.” In another interview, she said, “I’m not talking unless y’all giving me land and \$2,000 or more every week. You hear me?”

Thousands of people are now using Robinson’s voice on videos about everything from grandkids to brand deals. The incentive for some is clear. The chief metric of



An American woman’s visit to Pakistan has sent various online memes viral. BLOOMBERG

digital success is how many eyeballs land on a post. But by exploiting a viral moment, creators—and even businesses—may forget to consider whether a trend is aligned with their brand. A simple way to avoid that trap is to be cautious and do some research.

Ideally, that should happen during the early stages of a meme’s rise, when there’s time to read up on the origin story of a trend before jumping on the bandwagon. Several influencers recently had to issue an apology after joining a racist trend that repurposed footage of an Indigenous Australian man to “prank call” their friends and family members.

Social platforms that house such content must play a role too, particularly when they make it easier for users to edit and share images and sounds. CapCut offers multiple templates of Robinson’s face and voice. TikTok has in the past banned overtly harmful trends like ‘legging legs,’ but Robinson’s story is murkier territory. Mental health concerns are present, but because there are no allusions to self-harm or body image issues, alarm bells don’t ring. At the same time, there’s been some genuine cultural exchange happening between Pakistanis and Americans because of the story.

Still, memes have often gone too far. What stops TikTok and CapCut from using a short explainer on videos telling people where a sensitive viral sound or filter has come from? Context could remind creators of the meme’s origin and might lead them to second-guess using it carelessly.

You may not know of the ‘absolute unit’ meme poking fun at an overweight British man. Or that the ‘my Shayla’ soundbite was about Tyrese Gibson’s 2017 custody battle for his then-10-year-old daughter. Or that the photo of George Bush getting something whispered in his ear is actually about 9/11. Years from now, people may not even know or remember that Selena Gomez was crying in an Instagram video about US President Donald Trump’s border crackdown. Mere days after the since-deleted video was posted, it was already being used as a soundbite about a clogged toilet.

The new year is just getting started, and there will be many more trending moments to come, so a little mindfulness could go a long way in ensuring that virality doesn’t come with greater and more damaging costs. ©BLOOMBERG

MY VIEW | EX MACHINA

Is anybody out there? Why the internet is falling silent

RAHUL MATTHAN



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Sometimes, hoping for civil engagement on the internet is like shouting into space. Every attempt at communication draws responses that feel alien—like unfamiliar aggressors attacking us in an unknown language.

One day in 1950, Enrico Fermi went out for lunch with his colleagues at the Los Alamos National Laboratory. No one recalls exactly how it happened, but the conversation turned to then-recent reports about unidentified flying objects (UFOs) and the possibility of extra-terrestrial life. All of a sudden, Fermi asked, “Where is everybody?” This simple question, a statistical reflection on the likely existence of alien civilizations, is a profound one and has since come to be called ‘Fermi’s Paradox.’

There are an estimated 100-400 billion stars in the Milky Way and over 100 billion such galaxies in the observable universe. Statistically, at least one (if not millions) of galaxies should contain within them planets capable of supporting life. Why, then, is it

that we have yet to see signs of extra-terrestrial life? If Earth is not the only habitable planet on which life could have evolved, where—as Fermi so succinctly asked—is everyone else?

Many attempted to answer this question. Among the more interesting explanations is the Dark Forest theory, proposed by Chinese science fiction author Cixin Liu in his ‘Three-Body Problem’ trilogy. To Liu, the universe is like a dark forest in which advanced civilizations like ours lurk—armed, tense and silent—wary of revealing their position for fear of attracting attention. Since there is no way for any of us to reliably judge the intention of any other civilization we might come across, the moment we detect the existence of another, the safest strategy would be to attack and destroy it. If we do not, it might do the same to us.

This is probably why advanced civilizations have not made their presence felt. They know better than to send out even the slightest hint of their location, given that it could invite pre-emptive destruction from another even-more powerful civilization that might be listening for just such signs of life. All of which is to say that the cosmos is most likely far from empty. Instead, it is far more likely to be a dark forest in which many

different intelligent life forms operate, all staying intentionally silent to avoid being spotted and becoming a target.

Nobody would call the internet a dark forest. When I first got online, the raucous cacophony of new ideas and unbridled conversation was invigorating. Yet, as much as I enjoyed these interactions, I rapidly realized that I had to learn how to navigate these online spaces. In a medium where it is impossible to detect the subtle signals that guide our in-person conversations, we need new rules of engagement. Everyone had to learn (and follow) an entirely new social grammar to avoid misunderstandings—a new etiquette that needed universal adoption to avoid causing and taking offence. Without this, we could not hope to sustain faceless and extended online interactions with each other.

The 2000s saw a sudden explosion of blogs, forums and social media platforms—all of which were trying to reshape the online space. Thanks to their efforts, the

internet graduated from being just a niche interest into a mass phenomenon. In order to capture more eyeballs and a greater share of our attention, these new platforms re-designed themselves to reward viral content. ‘Shock, awe and offend’ underpin this play-book and algorithmic feeds not only amplify

Fermi’s Paradox applies to online life with trolls pushing many of us to stay below the radar to avoid detection

content but also deliver it in a highly targeted fashion to those most likely to be enthralled, outraged and excited by it. This has reached a point where our automated moderation systems are no match for the volume of hate speech and coordinated trolling that has over-run efforts to hold them in check.

Many online interactions today are vicious and unnecessarily combative. The mildest comment could attract trolls who are lying in wait, ready to launch personal attacks or bait us into pointless arguments.

All of this sends out a powerful message—if you engage online, you proceed at your own peril. Either refrain from talking about certain things online or else be willing to

deal with online harassment or worse. If we don’t actively constrain our behaviour, carefully picking what to talk about and what not to, we must be prepared to be dragged down into the sewer.

In his 1970 paper, ‘Market for Lemons,’ George Akerlof described how bad products drive out the good. Similarly, online toxicity creates a vicious cycle of adverse selection. Thoughtful voices withdraw into private groups to avoid abuse and doxxing, leaving behind increasingly hostile spaces that have been emptied of participants. Our virtual town halls, once alive with diverse viewpoints, have fallen silent—save for the voices of the loudest and most aggressive.

Were Fermi among us today, he might be moved to ask, “Where is everybody on the internet?” But even teenagers know that though we are all very much around, almost all of us have opted to keep our heads down out of our own instinct for self-preservation.

Our approach to online interaction has created an online ‘dark forest.’ Just as an interplanetary species may want to stay below the radar, we now avoid doing anything that might call unnecessary attention to ourselves on the internet.

But, ever the optimist, dare I ask: “Is there anybody out there?”



THE SECOND STRIKE

With President Trump imposing tariffs on steel and aluminium, India must carefully negotiate its way

US PRESIDENT DONALD Trump has opened another front in the trade wars. On Monday, he signed orders levying 25 per cent tariffs on all steel and aluminium imports without any exception or exemption. Trump is also reported to have talked about unveiling “reciprocal tariffs” over the next few days. The tariffs on steel and aluminium will hurt a large swathe of countries — Canada, Mexico, Brazil and South Korea are among those likely to be affected – and have already evoked strong reactions. Canada’s industry minister is reported to have said that the country will give a “clear and calibrated” response, while Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, has said that the imposition of tariffs “will not go unanswered”.

It is possible that Trump will use the threat of imposing tariffs as a negotiating tool. A few days ago, he had signed orders imposing 25 per cent additional tariffs on Canada and Mexico and 10 per cent on Canada. However, the tariffs on Canada and Mexico were delayed by 30 days following talks between Trump and the leaders of the two countries, which led to some concessions by the latter. Considering that the levies on steel and aluminium will be effective from March, there may be room to manoeuvre yet. Trump may also view tariffs as an instrument to raise domestic production. However, tariffs could also trigger an increase in the cost of production of other goods, pushing up inflation. This will restrict the policy options before the US Federal Reserve. In its last meeting, as the Fed kept rates steady, it came under criticism from Trump. India accounts for a small share of US imports. In 2024, the country’s exports of primary steel to the US had touched \$450 million, while exports of aluminium were \$820 million. As per reports, there is also the concern that the higher tariffs in the US will push exporting nations to look for alternative markets, with India a likely target. An increase in supply, “dumping”, some have said, could further put pressure on prices. Over the past few days, the Nifty Metal Index and shares of steel companies have been falling, indicating investor concerns over the uncertainty. The Indian government will have to assess the situation carefully.

Trump’s latest tariff announcement comes just ahead of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s US visit. There are indications of the Indian government showing pragmatism in dealing with Trump. In the recent budget, duties on items such as high engine capacity motorcycles and high-end cars — items exported by the US — were cut. The government should leverage the goodwill Delhi enjoys in Washington, negotiate with the new administration, and take advantage of the opportunities that arise in an increasingly uncertain global environment.

NO IMPUNITY

Harassment of interfaith couples in MP and Uttarakhand is disquieting. State must act to uphold fundamental freedoms

THE PLIGHT OF two interfaith couples — one in Madhya Pradesh’s Bhopal and the other in Uttarakhand’s Udham Singh Nagar — tells a story of the odds stacked against young people who follow their heart when prejudice is allowed free play in a climate of impunity. In the first instance, members of right-wing outfits beat up a Muslim man inside a district court in Bhopal when he went to register his marriage with his Hindu partner under the Special Marriage Act (SMA). Despite the incident being caught on camera, it is bizarre that the only arrest made was of the youth — on charges of “forced conversion”. In the second, personal details of the couple were put online, resulting in harassment and opposition not just from the girl’s family but also from conservative groups. Together, the incidents show the disturbing work of the spectre of “love jihad”, kept alive by the state’s increasing intrusion into the private lives of citizens through provisions such as Section 378 of Uttarakhand’s Uniform Civil Code (UCC), which seeks to regulate live-in relationships, and by its tacit support for non-state actors to enforce ideological agendas.

As recently as December 2024, the Home Minister emphasised in the Rajya Sabha the Centre’s plans to implement the UCC in BJP-led states. In the name of “protection” and “equality” of women, cultures or communities, some of the provisions of the Uttarakhand UCC have been weaponised against individual freedoms. Likewise, provisions of the SMA, which require the couple to give a month’s notice to make room for public objections, can also be used to target interfaith couples. Reports in this paper have shown how vigilante networks sprang into action as soon as both couples tried to access legal mechanisms meant to safeguard them and their rights.

These travails of the young in a country that makes much of the youth, or demographic, dividend are disquieting. From the gaps that stretch between aspirations and opportunities to the infantilisation of their choices — they are, all too often, denied the autonomy and agency that they require and deserve to realise their potential and seize their opportunities. The incidents in Bhopal and Udham Singh Nagar also frame the toll taken by a shunning of all that is ameliorating about a plural, multi-cultural society – the opening up of spaces, and the enriching of possibilities. The state must take cognisance and uphold the rule of law. It must show that it is committed to protecting, in words and deeds, every citizen’s right to choose their partners without fear of retribution, discrimination, or violence.

TAKE A DEEP BREATH

In Rohit Sharma’s sparkling hundred, a message for fans: Don’t hasten to pass verdicts on cricket’s greats, or hype the young

IN A MATTER of a month, India captain Rohit Sharma experienced the contrasting emotions and extreme reactions of the famously fickle Indian fan. At the start of the year, because of weak Test-match form, he stepped aside as captain for the final Test of the series against Australia. There were questions about the 37-year-old’s place in the ODI team too. The rock of the team not too long ago, he was now seen as a roadblock for youngsters waiting in the wings. That’s when he scored a sparkling ODI hundred — a 90-ball 119 with seven sixes against England at Cuttack. Overnight, Rohit was back on the pedestal. In this volte-face is a lesson for die-hards following cricket. Show patience before passing verdicts on the game’s greats or hyping the young.

Sports fandom offers the pleasures of tribalism. It is easy to get carried away while being part of a passionate crowd. But the supercharged mob environment forces misjudgments that hurt the game and its stars. Over the years, the kangaroo court has moved from the stadium to social media, where agents and fan clubs pit one superstar against another. Rohitans never miss a chance to undermine Virat Kohli and the Viratians wait for their chance to hit back. Unlike any time in the past, this toxic fan culture has created a bitterness that threatens to spill onto the field and dressing room, too. Wrong calls that can hamper Indian cricket in the long run can be taken because of outside pressure.

Back in 2010, when Indian batting great Rahul Dravid was out of form and fans wanted him out, he received unsolicited advice from Australia captain Ricky Ponting. Ignore the critics, just score runs like you have always done, he said. Dravid did take a U-turn and had his best England tour ever after that. Stalwarts of the game are conscious of their image and legacy. They also know who to listen to and when to go.



RAJA MANDALA

By C Raja Mohan

THIS WEEK’S SUMMIT between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and US President Donald Trump will be a paradoxical moment in the diplomatic history between the two nations. It is a moment of continuity and discontinuity; it is about India dealing with a familiar leader who is moving America into unfamiliar terrain. India had a good run with President Trump in his first term, and Delhi is now dealing with a different leader.

Modi and External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar have negotiated many tricky waters over the last decade and will hopefully get this one right, too. India’s quick diplomatic work over the last few weeks — involving phone calls between Modi and Trump, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and his new counterpart, Pete Hegseth, and Jaishankar’s conversations with Secretary of State Marco Rubio and National Security Adviser Mike Waltz — helped organise the PM’s visit within the first month of a new administration.

So far so good, but the delicateness of the Indian task in Washington this week should not be underestimated. As Jaishankar put it, the test that Trump presents Indian diplomacy in his second term is quite “out of syllabus”.

For a quarter of a century, since President Bill Clinton’s visit to India in March 2000, the bilateral relationship has been on a continuous upward curve that has defied intensely sceptical conventional wisdom. The nations have found ways to overcome longstanding and difficult disputes, including those over Pakistan and nuclear non-proliferation. As large countries have diverse sets of interests, there are always differences. However, both sides have shown the capacity to prevent them from undermining the expansion of bilateral cooperation.

Today’s discontinuity in India-US diplomacy arises from the Trump administration’s distinctly different domestic and external orientation from not just its recent predecessors but also post-war America. Some would say that what is unfolding under Trump is not a mere regime change but a revolution of sorts driven by the America First movement. At home, Trump is determined to downsize the state, dismantle the regulatory burdens on the tech sector, revive manufacturing, reduce immigration, regain control over borders, and root out the liberal hegemony that has sought to impose a range of “woke values” on the American people. Externally, Trump wants to dethrone the ideology of “globalism” that, in

For both US and India, Modi-Trump meeting is an opportunity for pragmatic engagement across sectors

Trump is widely criticised for his ‘transactional approach’ to US diplomacy. This may not be bad for India. What you see is what you get, and there is no confusing ideological rhetoric. Modi is no less transactional. He and his national security team discarded many ideological shibboleths that guided Indian foreign policy in the past. In recent years, Delhi has shown the capacity to downplay the temptation for normative pontification and make deals based on presumed national interests.

the name of international leadership, has imposed unacceptable burdens on the American people — in the form of trade deficits, immigration, and the squandering of blood and treasure on needless military adventures.

Understanding the ideology and worldview of Trump’s America First coalition and the multiple contradictions within is a part of the diplomatic challenge this week. The other is the diplomatic finesse in handling Trump’s new aggressive negotiating style, coupled with an eagerness for deal-making.

Trump is widely criticised for his “transactional approach” to US diplomacy. This may not be bad for India. What you see is what you get, and there is no confusing ideological rhetoric. Modi is no less transactional. He and his national security team discarded many ideological shibboleths that guided Indian foreign policy in the past. In recent years, Delhi has shown the capacity to downplay the temptation for normative pontification and make deals based on presumed national interests.

The story of the Washington Summit, then, is about pragmatic dealmaking. In a statement before his departure to Paris and Washington, Modi laid out five broad areas of engagement: Trade, defence, energy, technology, and supply chain resilience. In all these areas, there is much room for negotiation.

President Trump has not missed the opportunity to not only praise Modi’s strong leadership but also highlight Delhi’s high import tariffs. Recognising the centrality of the trade issues for Trump, especially the \$45 billion trade deficit with India, Delhi has signalled its willingness to bring down some tariffs and open greater market access to US goods. Delhi also appears eager to pick up threads on bilateral trade talks that were left incomplete in Trump’s first term. However, Trump’s expectations and demands from trade partners have significantly increased in the second term.

On energy, where India is a major importer of hydrocarbons and the US is a major producer and exporter, there is room for greater collaboration. Trump is also doubling down on nuclear power to boost America’s AI industry, and Delhi can do so with a rapid expansion of its own nuclear power sector. While the government has recently declared its intent to reform its nuclear laws, it might need clear signals to translate it into reality.

Defence cooperation has emerged as a major pillar of Indo-US relations over the last

two decades. Trump is keen on expanding India’s purchase of US defence equipment, and Delhi is looking for more favourable terms of technology transfer and co-production. Delhi and Washington developed a roadmap for defence-industrial cooperation under the Biden administration. This ought to be taken up with greater urgency now, as both Delhi and Washington struggle to cope with the dramatic acceleration of China’s weapons production. This, along with more operational and logistical cooperation, could be at the top of new priorities as the two sides draft a more ambitious new 10-year framework for defence cooperation. The first framework was signed in 2005, and the second in 2015.

Technological cooperation has long been a priority for India in the US. Under the Biden administration, the initiative on critical and emerging technology (iCET) advanced that agenda. However, more needs to be done, as India and the US wake up to China’s innovations in AI and a range of advanced sectors. As technology becomes the main theatre of contestation between the US and China, Delhi has a dual task — to expand the range of cooperation with Washington while limiting the potential US controls over the diffusion of AI and other technologies to India.

The idea of “supply chain resilience” began under the first Trump administration as Delhi and Washington joined forces to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic that exposed the world’s overreliance on China for goods of all kinds. This reliance continues to grow today amid the boom in Chinese manufacturing exports. Addressing this challenge would involve imaginative solutions that the PM can discuss with Trump and in his interaction with American corporate leaders.

Finally, there is an opportunity for the PM and his delegation to watch and reflect on Trump’s effort to dismantle the bureaucratic state in America and downsize the “managerial class” that has acquired enormous power, overshadowing the will of elected leaders. After all, “minimum government and maximum governance” was a slogan that Modi raised back in 2014. In the end, the challenge of dealing with Trump and the rapidly changing global order cannot be met through diplomacy alone; it needs a massive bout of reform at home.

The writer is contributing editor on international affairs for The Indian Express



SURANJALI TANDON

AS THE INDIAN economy gears up for faster growth, demand revival will take centre stage. To kick-start the so far subdued growth in private investment and urban demand, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced relief to taxpayers with incomes below Rs 12 lakh. People in this category will not have to pay income tax. The new tax regime, already beneficial, has been rejigged to offer lower rates of tax on higher incomes. What does this shift mean for the fisc and the economy in general?

Based on tax data, the median gross total income is between Rs 5 and 5.5 lakh for individual returns filed. The taxpaying population, of course, is not representative of the overall income distribution as only 6.68 per cent of the population filed income tax returns in FY 2023-24. The exemption of incomes below Rs 12 lakh affects at least 83.52 per cent of individual income tax assesses. At the same time, people with incomes above Rs 12 lakh will benefit substantially. For example, at an annual gross income of Rs 25 lakh, the benefit of reduction could be more than a third of the current tax liability. This makes the cuts quite broad-based, and the outcome will be watched very closely.

It’s difficult to accurately ascertain the num-

TRUST IN THE TAXPAYER

Budget reinvigorates debate on whether taxes can encourage spending and growth

Thus, the tax break could have spinoff effects in the form of more consumption or expenditure on services, which, in turn, could create jobs. It will be interesting, however, to see if the economy is responsive. The corporate tax cut did not prop up investments in the corporate sector — even where there were immediate effects, they did not last beyond a fiscal year.

bers of the Indian middle class; consumption criteria are often used to define it. This raises two questions: Did the tax cut indeed target the section of the middle class that needed relief? Will it spur the consumption of goods? The monthly consumption expenditure of households around the median is Rs 6,334 in urban areas and Rs 3,866 in rural areas. Thus, the tax break could have spinoff effects in the form of more consumption or expenditure on services, which, in turn, could create jobs. It will be interesting, however, to see if the economy is responsive. The corporate tax cut did not prop up investments in the corporate sector — even where there were immediate effects, they did not last beyond a fiscal year. In terms of the fiscal impact, the cost of the tax cut has been estimated at Rs 1 lakh crore. If the cut works to raise demand, it can augment the future flow of revenue. However, income and consumption distributions will have a role in determining if this so-called “multiplier” effect will manifest. Perhaps a more serious look at indirect taxes may provide a better path to ensuring higher consumption than income taxes.

Beyond personal income taxes, the government remains steadfast in its resolve to ease

the operation of large corporations in India, including dispute prevention and resolution measures. An oft-contested issue in direct taxes is transfer pricing — the laborious exercise of ascertaining that transactions between two related entities are priced as if they were unrelated. This takes up the administration and taxpayer’s time. Often, the same issue comes up over different years. The proposal to introduce a block audit that locks in such assessment for two years means ease of compliance. Further, the rationalising of TDS thresholds and calculation of long-term and short-capital gains signals a commitment to improve compliance.

The much-awaited reform of the Income Tax Act is likely to be unveiled soon. The budget could be a precursor to repositing trust in the taxpayer. It remains to be seen what changes will be introduced. The Finance Minister suggested that the new Act would be half its present size and do away with penal provisions. Along with a more concise Act, the tax cuts announced in the budget could reinvigorate the debate on whether taxes can be instrumental in encouraging spending and growth.

The writer is associate professor, NIPFP

FEBRUARY 12, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

SRI LANKA MASSACRE

THIRTY-TWO MEN HAVE been shot dead in cold blood, often in front of their wives and children, in yet another massacre carried out by the Sri Lankan army in the Mannar area, inhabited predominantly by Tamils. *The Times* newspaper reported. In a pre-dawn raid, the paper said, troops carried out the killings in the Vattikandal village 12 days ago.

INDIRA MURDER CASE

A CHARGESHEET FILED in court in the Indira Gandhi assassination case accuses Satwant Singh, Balbir Singh and Kehar Singh, along

with slain assassin Beant Singh, of having entered into a criminal conspiracy to kill Indira Gandhi for the Army action in the Golden Temple. The four accused, the chargesheet said, were Sikhs by faith and were expressing their sentiments openly, holding Indira Gandhi responsible for the action.

SRINAGAR VIOLENCE

A 24-YEAR-OLD was killed and over 80 injured in violence, arson and bomb blasts here following the bandh called by secessionist groups to observe the first anniversary of the execution of terrorist Maqbool Butt. Police opened fire as mobs shouting anti-national

slogans and asking shopkeepers to down their shutters set a police vehicle ablaze.

GOVERNORS’ POWERS

THE PRIME MINISTER, Rajiv Gandhi, is reportedly toying with bringing far-reaching legislative steps to give a cleaner image to political organisations in respect of their financial resources. He is also thinking of curtailling governors’ powers in the event of large-scale defections in states. As a follow-up of the Anti-Defection Bill, the Prime Minister feels that producing legislators before the governor to prove a majority should be scrapped.



The idea of a university

Understanding its mission as producing knowledge-makers will provide much-needed clarity for UGC's initiatives



N S GUNDUR

WE HAVE COME a long way since establishing the first three universities in India — in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras — in 1857. Despite the significant role institutions of higher learning, especially universities, have played in shaping intellectual and social life in India, there is an appalling lack of reflective discussion on the idea of university education in our policies and practices.

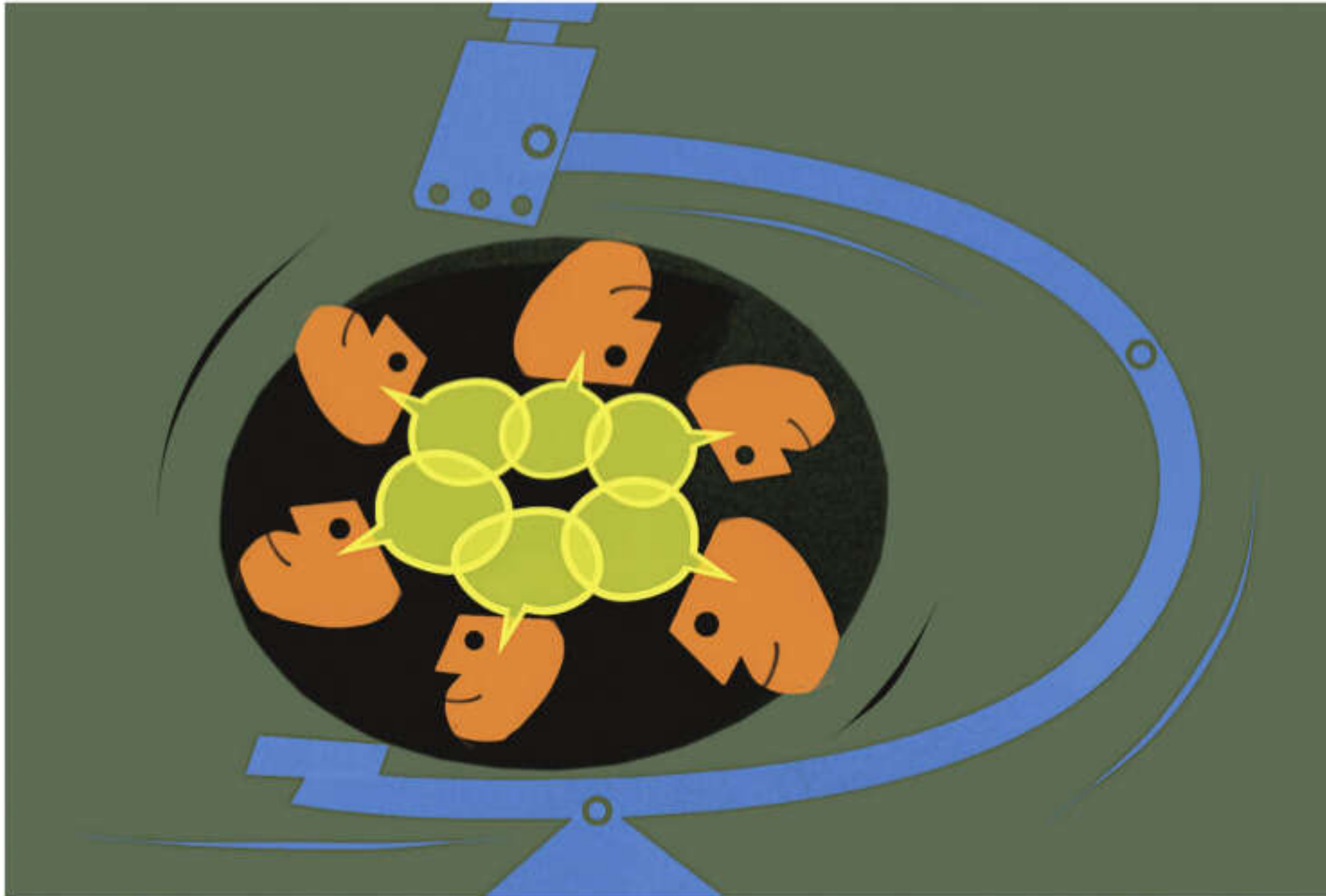
The University Grants Commission (UGC), which was set up in 1953 and became a statutory body in 1956 to regulate Indian higher education, is time and again at the centre of public debate due to its policy decisions. The inconsistency of its stances on issues such as M.Phil, PhD, and CARE-list journals often invites criticism. Yet, in these debates, both the policies and the ensuing critiques often miss a crucial element — reflection on the very idea of the university and the nature of the learning it should aim to foster. Therefore, it becomes essential to ask: What kind of institution is a university? From where and how has it come to us?

Though India boasts of ancient universities like Nalanda and Takshashila, our understanding of what kind of institutions they were — their disciplinary matrix and their pedagogical methods — is too limited to reconstruct their models. Our contemporary universities, for good or bad, have travelled far by inheriting the structures of the Western model. Therefore, understanding the intellectual history of universities in the West is a crucial step for developing policies and practices that can shape the future of universities in India.

The university, one of the oldest institutions, next only to the army and Church, has played an important role in shaping Western culture and civilisation. This role, however, is not without its crises. From Immanuel Kant to Jacques Derrida, philosophers have long debated the challenges faced by universities. As Shashikala Srinivasan, in her book *Liberal Education and Its Discontents* (2018), identifies, the debate on university problems in the West has often been articulated in terms of the idea of education, the nature of knowledge and learning that it involves. To make sense of contemporary challenges, it is helpful to delve into the historical development of the institution.

Medieval Europe birthed the institution of the *universitas*, which, in Latin, means whole, the universe, or the world. In Roman law, it implies persons associated with guilds, societies, corporations or bodies. It was a guild formed for the pursuit of learning by monks and was rooted in theological studies. Later, it became a place for instructing children of the ruling class, building them into gentlemen. Despite the transformation of the university from its theological roots into a secular institution, the pursuit of learning and the cultivation of the self remained central to the idea of the *universitas*.

The pre-history of universities in Europe may be traced back to the Greek tradition. The aspirations of the modern idea of the university resonated with Socrates's dialogic method, Plato's Academy, the



C R Sasikumar

Aristotelian disciplinary matrix, and goals of inquiry. If, as philosopher Michael Oakeshott emphasises, the university should be a place where many voices join in the conversation, Socrates, whose pedagogy engaged others in dialogue, and his dictum "an unexamined life is not worth living" should guide the university culture, not to mention Plato's dialogues and cave allegory. Aristotle's model of rational enquiry, his convictions in metaphysics about scholars' desire to know the world for its own sake and other intellectual virtues exemplified in his works should continue to inspire contemporary university practices. Therefore, one can see Western scholarship often revisiting the Greek tradition.

The ideal of university education, articulated by Wilhelm von Humboldt, a 19th-century Prussian educationist and reformer, inspired the establishment of the University of Berlin in 1809-10, a modern university, that became a global reference point. This idea of a university, which went hand in hand with the formation of nation-states in Europe, was conceived against vocational education, the polytechnics of the Napoleonic period. For Germans, nation-building involved the noble idea of *bildung*, cultivating the self of the citizens through liberal-arts education. Within this grand idea, voices like Martin Heidegger later thought about the university as serving knowledge to the state.

The university was conceived as a research institution, but the activity of research was not understood as a means to an end — for example, producing patents — but for *bildung*. It was presumed that along with material institutions like hospitals and revenue departments, reflective and scholarly institutions like universities were also a necessary condition for leading a "good life". While the Humboldt model focused on the freedom to teach, learn and research, John Henry Newman's *The Idea of a University* in Britain conceived the university as a place for imparting universal knowledge resulting in broader liberal education; it argued that

knowledge can be its own end.

Over the last 800 years, the concept and practice of university education have undergone a sea change, resulting in a vast body of knowledge about its past and future. Therefore, I am not proposing the idea of going back to the classical notion of the university. Instead, I roughly suggest, as Sheldon Pollock elsewhere has, that knowing how people acted and made choices in the past will help us make informed choices in the present.

Though we use terms such as liberal-arts education, conference, seminar and research to refer to knowledge production in contemporary times, we have yet to make sense of them as historically handed-down legacies with loaded content; simply reproducing them as blanket terms will not help us. Without historical understanding, these practices appear as mimics.

In an age where artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping the knowledge economy, the notion of *bildung* becomes even more urgent. AI tools like ChatGPT, for example, can produce better write-ups, but they cannot cultivate the self. Additionally, if we understand the university as a space for different voices conversing, our interdisciplinary centres, irrespective of sciences and humanities, will truly begin to converse with each other.

Likewise, understanding the university's mission as producing knowledge-makers, those who seek knowledge for its own sake, will provide much-needed clarity for UGC's initiatives to train teachers as scholars and scientists.

Holding on to the idea of the university sketched above is wise but it is wiser to look for alternative modes of learning and inquiry both in the West and elsewhere for building universities in the 21st century.

The writer, NIF translation fellow, teaches English literature at Tumkur University. His translation of D R Nagaraj's Allama Prabhu and the Shaiva Imagination will soon be published by Permanent Black

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"We hope that the Paris summit will open a new chapter in global AI cooperation, shaping a globally recognised governance framework for AI, which contributes to the construction and improvement of a community with a shared future for mankind in the digital and intelligent age." — THE GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA

Many ways of seeing

Constitution has always been terrain for contestation of competing visions of power



GAUTAM BHATIA

WHEN, IN DECEMBER 2023, the Supreme Court of India handed down a judgment upholding the abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution, it was primarily received — and discussed — in political terms: That is, the political character of Article 370, and the political incentives, and disincentives, that it had fostered over the years. Not much attention was paid to the constitutional reasoning that underlay the Court's decision. This, however, was an important omission: Although high-stakes constitutional cases are invariably political in nature, ultimately, their resolution depends upon — and is underlain by — a particular constitutional philosophy.

In the Article 370 case, this philosophy — which appears in flickers through the majority judgment — was that of "integration". While the Court rejected the constitutional mechanism that the government had deployed to abrogate Article 370, it nonetheless found that the Article granted the President of India unilateral power to abrogate the special constitutional arrangement between Jammu and Kashmir and the Union of India. This required the Court to engage in some interpretative gymnastics, such as explaining away a clause in the provision that made a recommendation by the Constituent Assembly of Jammu and Kashmir a necessary prerequisite before the President could act.

The Court did so by noting that Article 370 was born out of unique historical circumstances and that its ultimate goal was to ensure the incremental "integration" of Jammu and Kashmir with the Union of India. Smuggled into the Court's reading, however, was a particular definition — or understanding — of the word "integration": That is, integration as homogeneity. For the Court, a state having a "special status" — which, in this case, meant constitutionally guaranteed autonomy in certain respects — was antithetical to "integration", which required a homogeneous relationship between all the states and the Union of India.

This was, however, not the view of the petitioners who had challenged the abrogation of Article 370 before the Supreme Court. The petitioners, instead, advanced an alternative — and opposite — view of integration: That is, the diversity, plurality, and heterogeneity of a nation like India ought to be sufficiently reflected in its constitutional arrangements. Article 370, thus, was not to be understood as a "temporary" political expedient that was inserted to pave the way towards eventual homogenous "integration", but as reflecting that constitutional

pluralism was how a diverse nation was truly "integrated" and unified.

Indeed, this debate tracked a much older debate that had taken place at the time of the framing of the Constitution — albeit not in the context of Article 370. When the Constituent Assembly debated special autonomous areas for India's Adivasi populations — which would ultimately be known as the Fifth and Sixth Schedules — the argument was conducted in a similar register. Opponents of the Fifth and Sixth Schedules called them "tribalstans" and argued that they would lead to secessionist tendencies. On the other hand, Adivasi representative Jaipal Munda eloquently defended Adivasi autonomy within the Indian Union, memorably invoking the image of two flags — the Indian flag and the flag of the Adivasi republic — which would fly side by side, without either one dominating the other.

This excursion into history — a history that inflects and informs the present — reveals how the Constitution was, and always has been, a terrain for the contestation of competing visions of power. The Article 370 case illustrated the clash of visions upon the axis of constitutional homogeneity or pluralism: Does the Constitution imagine a uniformity of power (concentrated towards the centre) in its federal arrangements, or a diverse and decentralised set of arrangements? This was the debate in the Constituent Assembly, a debate that was inscribed into the constitutional text and then played out in struggles over interpreting that text, within and outside the courtroom.

The Article 370 case, and its long history, represents just one of the many examples of how the Constitution is a terrain for competing visions of power. As this document now turns 75 years old — a feat of remarkable endurance, by any standard — beyond the homilies and the encomiums that seek to sanctify or sacralise it, we must reckon with its continuing legacy of power. In my book, *The Indian Constitution: A Conversation with Power*, I argue that in the course of the last 75 years, the Constitution has been characterised by a centralising drift: Visions of power that favour concentration within the central executive have often prevailed over more decentralised and distributed visions of power. This is partly inscribed within the constitutional text itself, but has also been further entrenched through numerous judgments of the Supreme Court. While there might have been reasons for favouring a top-heavy set of constitutional arrangements in 1950 — and indeed, these reasons were frequently articulated in the Constituent Assembly — the time is certainly long overdue to critically interrogate those reasons, and to ask whether and to what extent they still hold in the plural and diverse India of 2025. Engaging in that debate would be the truest act of service to the Constitution, as it completes its 75th birthday.

Bhatia is a lawyer and author of *The Indian Constitution: A Conversation with Power*

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

FOR PEACE TO RETURN

THIS REFERS TO THE editorial, 'Good riddance' (IE, February 11). It is too little too late. The Centre and the state government allowed Manipur to burn for almost two years. When ethnic violence began, the responsibility for law and order fell on N Biren Singh but he failed miserably. Whosoever succeeds him will have to resolve the tensions between Meitei and Kuki communities. Other critical stakeholders like the Nagas, the security forces, and civil society groups have to be kept in the loop too. Peace should finally return to the state for good.

Bal Govind, Noida

THIS REFERS TO THE editorial, 'Good riddance' (IE, February 11). Biren Singh's resignation was a product of the growing dissidence within the BJP-led government even as the Congress-led Opposition planned a no-confidence motion in the Assembly. Singh's inability to rein in violent groups has created a culture of impunity. Under his leadership, there was little hope of any reconciliation. The Union government should now make the best use of this opportunity by looking for a new leader who will work towards genuine reconciliation.

Khokan Das, Kolkata

CAUTION IS KEY

THIS REFERS TO THE editorial, 'Turning on the heat' (IE, February 11). Chhattisgarh is making significant moves against Maoists by running high-security casualty operations and setting up security camps next to threat-prone areas. Past incidents indicate that Bastar still poses a challenge, with its hilly and

forested geography making it difficult for the forces to launch combat operations. It would be prudent for the security establishment overseeing crucial counterinsurgency operations to remain cautious. Elimination of some Maoist fighters can't end a protracted insurgency that has lasted decades.

Vaibhav Goyal, Chandigarh

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Turning on the heat' (IE, February 11). Apart from the great work by the security forces, credit must be given to the brave residents of Naxalism-affected districts in Chhattisgarh, especially in the remote rural areas. Many have come to realise the futility of violence as a tool of change and have begun to shun the ideology of the Maoists. Care must be taken to ensure their bravery is also recognised and they are protected from reprisals.

Anany Mishra, Bhilai

AN INFLECTION POINT

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'In Paris, an opportunity' (IE, February 11). The Paris AI Action Summit comes at a fresh inflection point. Establishing the rules of the game has assumed centre stage as China's budget-friendly DeepSeek foundational model shakes up the international competition. On paper, the summit aims to address how to harness AI's potential so that it benefits everyone, while containing its myriad risks. In actuality, the geopolitics around AI will be on display as US dominance cracks in the battle for tech supremacy. The Paris agenda also aims at a more ethical, democratic and sustainable AI.

SS Paul, Nadia

No more incrementalism

The scale of India's learning crisis demands bolder action



SRIDHAR RAJAGOPALAN

THE ANNUAL STATUS of Education Report (ASER) 2024 offers a glimmer of hope about India's education landscape. It suggests that the alarming learning losses inflicted by the Covid-19 pandemic are beginning to reverse, particularly in states implementing the NIPUN (National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy) Bharat mission with rigour. However, the report also underscores a sobering reality: Delays in achieving universal foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) risk leaving millions of children without the basic skills necessary to lead dignified lives. While states are making strides — through material distribution, structured pedagogy, and teacher training — four critical strategies remain underutilised. These steps, though politically challenging, could accelerate progress toward ensuring every child attains FLN by 2030.

Public awareness campaigns have proved transformative in sectors like health (for example, the Pulse Polio drive) and tourism. Yet, education — particularly FLN — lacks a comparable societal mobilisation. A sustained campaign could spotlight the urgency of foundational skills, clarify the roles of parents and communities, and destigmatise systemic shortcomings. For instance, framing questions like "Can every 8-year-old in your neighbourhood read a simple paragraph?" could ignite grassroots accountability.

Economically, the rationale is clear: Studies show that investments in FLN yield returns five to six times higher than later remedial programmes like vocational training. However, governments often avoid such campaigns, fearing that they expose systemic failures. This mindset must shift. Transparent communication about learning gaps, coupled with actionable guidance for parents (for instance, encouraging children to read signboards or newspaper headlines, practising counting), can turn households into allies.

Despite the private sector's potential, collaborations remain ad hoc and mistrustful. For example, most states dismiss ASER findings and seem to trust only government-led assessments like the National Achievement Survey (NAS) by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), or state government studies despite serious concerns over quality and methodological rigour in said studies. This reluctance limits opportunities for innovation.

Effective partnerships could involve education technology firms developing AI tools to assess oral reading fluency in regional languages, grassroots NGOs with expertise scaling remedial programmes, CSR initiatives funding classroom resources or teacher training and even individuals volunteering in a structured way as per an outline shared statewide.

Government officials often argue that the

private sector has many "shady players" but that should be seen as a challenge that can be overcome with due diligence. The goal is to position FLN as a national mission where all stakeholders — government, NGOs, corporations, and citizens — contribute.

Assessments are often viewed as punitive rather than diagnostic. States must reframe them as tools to "shine a spotlight" on gaps and guide interventions. For instance, ASER's simple, household-based tests reveal stark disparities: In 2024, only 45 per cent of Grade V students in rural India could read a Grade II-level text. Regular, transparent reporting of such data — paired with contextual analysis — can help teachers tailor instructions and policymakers allocate resources.

Emerging technologies can revolutionise assessments. AI-powered tools now measure oral reading fluency, providing real-time feedback to students. Edtech solutions that have been rigorously tested and assessed gamify and improve learning in mathematics and language and illustrate this potential. However, these innovations require government buy-in. By committing to systematic, tech-enabled assessments, states can transform raw data into actionable insights.

Many states treat low learning outcomes as political liabilities, suppressing unfavourable data. For instance, India's withdrawal from the Programme for International

Student Assessment (PISA) after poor rankings in 2009 reflects this defensiveness. Yet, communities are already aware of systemic shortcomings — evident in rising private school enrolments, despite the costs.

The Swachh Bharat campaign's success hinged on acknowledging India's sanitation crisis; similarly, FLN progress demands candour. States like Punjab, which publicly released the dismal NAS 2021 results and launched targeted reforms, show that transparency drives improvement. Celebrating incremental gains — while openly addressing setbacks — can build public trust and sustain momentum.

The NIPUN Bharat initiative, teacher training programmes, and curricular reforms are commendable first steps. However, the scale of India's learning crisis demands bolder action. A nationwide FLN campaign, robust private partnerships, data-driven assessments, and unflinching transparency could bridge the gap between intent and impact.

With 2030 — the deadline for the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals — approaching, India cannot afford incrementalism. As ASER 2024 reminds us, every year of delay represents a generation denied the right to foundational skills. The path forward is clear; it is time for states to walk it with courage.

The writer is co-founder of the Bengaluru-based Educational Initiatives



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Trump's trade wars: Implications for American farmers

HARISH DAMODARAN
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 11

US PRESIDENT Donald Trump has initiated trade wars so far primarily against three countries: China, Canada and Mexico.

On February 1, he imposed a 25% additional tariff on all imports from Canada and Mexico, and a similar 10% levy on Chinese goods entering the US. On February 3, he announced a pause for 30 days on the implementation of the new tariffs on Canada and Mexico, even while retaining the 10% blanket additional duty on imports from China.

China hit back through import taxes of 10-15% on select US imports — crude oil, liquefied natural gas, coal, etc.

But these tit-for-tat measures may not inflict much damage, as the targeted goods represented just about \$23.6 billion worth of US exports to China in 2024. That's small relative to the total US merchandise exports of \$143.5 billion to China. The 10% Trump tariff, in contrast, covers the entire \$438.9 billion value of Chinese goods imported into the US last year.

Vulnerability at the farm

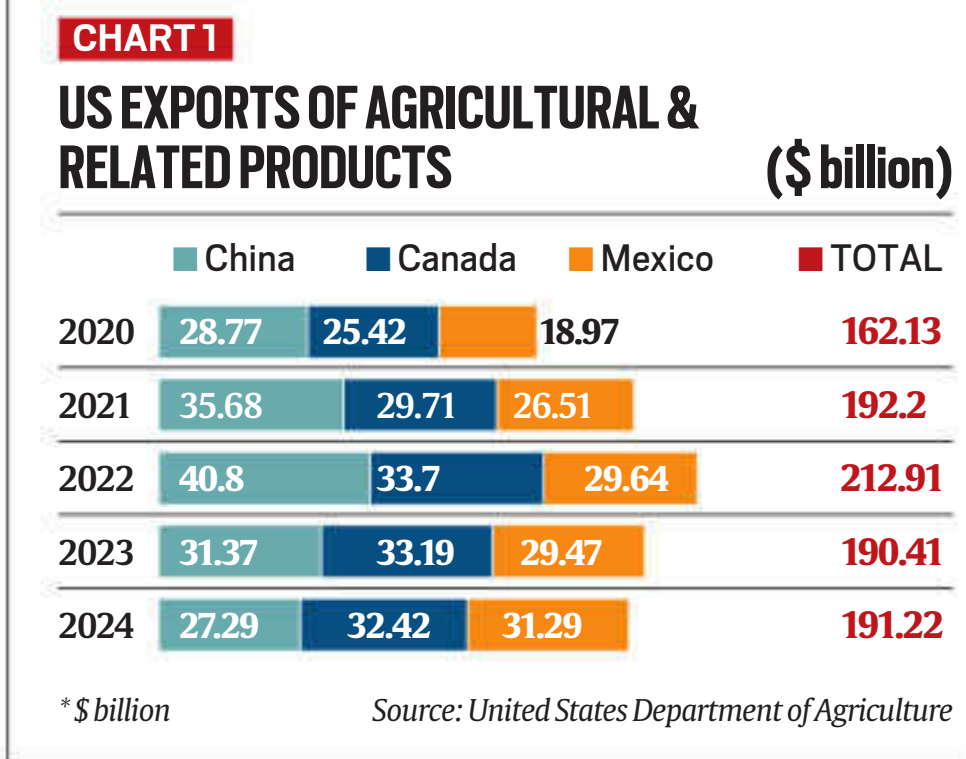
The real damage from Trump's trade wars

could come if the affected countries were to take retaliatory action targeting US exports of farm produce. These not only totalled \$191.2 billion in 2024, but a big chunk of that went to the same three countries — China, Canada and Mexico — whose combined share was \$91 billion or 47.6% (*chart 1*).

Take China, which is the largest buyer of US soyabean, cotton and coarse grains (excluding corn), besides being its No. 2 market for tree nuts (mainly almonds, pistachios and walnuts) and No. 3 for beef, pork, dairy, poultry meat and forest products.

Mexico is the biggest destination for US corn (maize), wheat, pork, dairy and poultry meat products, while No. 2 for soyabean. Canada is a major importer of American forest, dairy and poultry products (*table 1*), and even larger when it comes to fresh as well as processed fruits and vegetables; bakery goods, cereals and pasta; chocolate and cocoa products; confectionery, food preparations; ethanol; dog and cat food; and wine.

To get an idea of what retaliation can mean, consider the case of soyabean and corn. In 2024, China's soyabean and Mexico's corn imports from the US were valued at \$12.8 billion and \$5.6 billion respectively. In the event of a full-fledged trade war and higher duties, the



ultimate gainers would be alternative suppliers such as Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay (in soyabean) and Brazil, Argentina, Ukraine and Russia (in corn). China and Mexico would simply switch to importing from these countries rather than the US.

The losers will be farmers in the US "corn belt" states that stretch from Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin and Missouri to North and South Dakota,

Nebraska and Kansas. They are the ones growing the bulk of the country's soyabean, corn and wheat. Apart from these midwestern US states, beef farmers in Texas and Oklahoma, milk producers in Wisconsin, New York and Idaho, and tree nut growers in California, Oregon, New Mexico and Georgia would suffer loss of export markets from any extreme tit-for-tat strikes.

America has a mere 1.89 million farms, as

per the US Department of Agriculture's (USDA) annual survey for 2023. That's way below India's 146.45 million agricultural holdings in the last Agricultural Census for 2015-16.

But despite constituting less than 2% of the US population, farm and ranch families carry significant political voice. In the 444 counties labelled as "farming-dependent" by the USDA, Trump bagged 77.7% share of the popular vote in the 2024 Presidential election.

Implications for India

India isn't a big market for US farm produce. According to USDA data, Indian imports of agricultural and related products from the US were valued at \$2.4 billion in 2024. The bulk of it comprised tree nuts (\$1.1 billion), followed by ethanol (\$441.3 million), cotton (\$210.7 million), forest products (\$93.8 million), and pulses (\$73.4 million).

India's exports of farm products to the US were higher at \$6.2 billion, dominated by seafood (\$2.5 billion), spices (\$410.4 million), rice (\$395.4 million), baked goods, cereals and pasta (\$243.3 million), processed fruits and vegetables (\$227.7 million), and essential oils (\$121 million).

To the extent that India has an agricultural trade surplus with the US, there might be pressure from the Trump administration to further open up the country's market to American imports. India is already the largest market for US tree nuts, with \$868.15 million worth of almonds and \$129.74 million of pistachios getting imported during 2023-24 (April-March).

US farmers have a lot to lose from a protracted trade war. India may also feel some of its effects, as more of a seller than buyer of agricultural produce.

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EXPLAINED SCIENCE

EARTH'S INNER CORE MAY HAVE CHANGED SHAPE: WHAT NEW STUDY SAYS

THE INNER core of the Earth may have noticeably changed shape over the past few decades, according to a new study. The change in shape could have happened at the inner core's outer boundary, the analysis said.

The study, 'Annual-scale variability in both the rotation rate and near surface of Earth's inner core', was published in the journal *Nature Geoscience* on Monday.

John Vidale, a professor of earth sciences at the University of Southern California and co-author of the study, told *The New York Times*, "The most likely thing is the outer core is kind of tugging on the inner core and making it move a little bit."

Geophysicists have previously reported that the inner core does not spin at exactly the same rate as the rest of the Earth. They also showed that the pace of rotation changes — the inner core appeared to be spinning slightly faster than the outer layers a couple of decades ago, and now it is spinning slightly slower.

Scientists study the inner core as it helps generate the Earth's protective magnetic field and is even linked to the length of days.

The inner core is the deepest of Earth's geological layers. The crust — the layer where humans live — is just a few kilometres thick. Below that is the mantle, which is soft enough in places to flow up and down and generate the forces that push the continents around. Between the mantle and the inner core is the liquid outer core.

How was the study carried out?

Scientists observe the Earth's insides with the help of the vibrations generated by earthquakes. The speed and the direction of the seismic vibrations change depending on the density and the elasticity of the rocks.

For their study, the researchers looked at earthquakes in the South Sandwich

Islands, a volcanic chain in the South Atlantic Ocean.

So many earthquakes happen there that sometimes a new event is almost identical in magnitude and location to one that occurred years earlier.

The researchers identified more than 100 such "earthquake pairs," analysing readings from 1991 to 2004 at two arrays of seismometers more than 8,000 miles away from the islands, one near Fairbanks, Alaska, the other in Yellowknife, in Canada's Northwest Territories.

What were the findings?

The analysis originally aimed to improve on earlier work that suggested a slowing of the inner core's spin. But the scientists did not understand aspects of the signals at the Yellowknife array.

"Basically, the wiggles are different," Vidale said.

By coincidence, for some of the pairs, the inner core was in the same orientation during both quakes.

Identical earthquake vibrations passing through the identical part of the Earth should have produced identical seismic signals at Fairbanks and Yellowknife. At Fairbanks, that was true, but at Yellowknife the signals were different.

Because Yellowknife is somewhat closer to the South Sandwich Islands than Fairbanks is, the seismic waves from the islands' earthquakes did not travel as deeply into the inner core as those reaching Fairbanks. That suggested something had changed near the outer boundary of the inner core.

Turbulent flow in the outer core or gravitational pull from denser parts of the mantle could have deformed the inner core boundary, which might account for the change in the seismic signals, Vidale said.

"We expect it's soft because it's near the melting point," he said. "So it's no surprise if it deforms."

THE NEW YORK TIMES



SHUBHAJIT ROY

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi will visit the Trump White House on February 12-13. Trump is in the fourth week of his second presidency and, officials say, this is the earliest in an American President's term that an Indian Prime Minister has visited him.

Since his inauguration on January 20, Trump has so far met only Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Japan's Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba. A meeting with Jordan's King Abdullah was scheduled for Tuesday.

A personal rapport

As of now, Trump appears focussed on his domestic agenda. He has also spoken of a controversial plan for Gaza, and imposed trade tariffs on several countries and categories of goods. The last, especially, is an area of concern for India.

Modi and Trump enjoy certain personal rapport. From New Delhi's perspective, a face-to-face meeting between the two leaders is important.

This rapport was built over back-to-back visits by Modi and Trump to each other's countries — at the September 2019 Howdy Modi event in Houston, the Prime Minister famously declared, "Abki Baar, Trump Sarkar"; in February 2020, Trump loved the reception he received from Indians in Ahmedabad.

But the agenda of Trump 2.0 is much more aggressive.

Immigration, deportation

The US has sent back a first batch of 104 Indian illegal immigrants, in shackles, on a military aircraft. It was bad optics, and the political opposition took the government to task for the alleged mistreatment.

Another around 800 individuals — 487 presumed Indian citizens and 298 others in the final stages of verification — will be deported soon. New Delhi has said it is ready to take back its citizens, even though it has "registered concerns" on their mistreatment



PM Narendra Modi with US President Donald Trump during the 'Namaste Trump' event at Narendra Modi Stadium in Ahmedabad in 2020. ANI

by the Americans.

There are about 7.25 lakh illegal Indian immigrants in the US, of which 20,000 have been identified for deportation. Some 15,500 Indians have been deported since 2009 — of which 6,135 were sent back during the four years of the first Trump presidency.

For India, receiving illegal immigrants is part of complying with international law, but the handcuffs and shackles — part of US SOP — carry the politically damaging perception of "weakness" vis-à-vis another country.

As such, the humane treatment of Indian deportees will likely come up during Modi's meeting with Trump. From India's perspective, this is not an unreasonable ask of a close Strategic Partner. More importantly, India would like to ensure that the movement of Indians to the US through legal channels — for study, work, or tourism — is not affected.

Trade and tariffs

Tariffs, the "most beautiful word in the dictionary" for Trump, are a major irritant in the relationship. Trump, who has imposed tariffs on Canada, Mexico, and China, has described India as a "tariff king" and "abuser" of tariffs in the past.

On Monday, Trump announced a 25% tariff on aluminium and steel imports with "no exemptions, no exceptions" for any country. Indian companies fear downward pressure on domestic steel prices due to the risk of losing out in the US steel market, the largest in

the world. There are also concerns over dumping of steel in India — imports are already on the rise due to trade diversion that began after Trump imposed a higher import duty on steel products and certain aluminium products in his first term.

With the almost \$200 billion bilateral trade, what irks Trump is the \$40-50 billion surplus that is in India's favour. Lt Gen (ret'd), H R McMaster, who was the United States National Security Advisor (NSA) from 2017 to 2018, has written in his book *At War with Ourselves: My Tour of Duty in the Trump White House*, "India's lack of reciprocity in market access incensed Trump."

The US President has typically used threats of tariffs to negotiate better deals, and India has already slashed tariffs on high-end motorcycles and electric batteries ahead of Modi's visit to smoothen the conversation.

McMaster recalled, "On India, it was tariffs on motorcycle components that disadvantaged the iconic American company Harley-Davidson. Although the president often exaggerated the numbers — India's 39 percent tariffs became 200 percent tariffs — it was a good example of India's self-defeating protectionist policies. Three years later, Harley-Davidson would stop manufacturing in India, at a time when Modi was hoping to lure more foreign manufacturers to the country."

So, a more pragmatic approach from Delhi would be to negotiate a trade deal where both sides benefit from lowering tar-

iffs and market access. There is a growing realisation that the world's soon-to-be third largest economy cannot have high walls of protectionism. A trade deal was being negotiated in the first term of the Trump administration, but couldn't come to fruition.

Strategic alignment on China

Trump became the first US President to name China as a strategic threat and rival for the US. This was spelt out in the National Security Strategy in 2017.

McMaster wrote, "Japanese national security advisor Yachi Shotoro and Indian foreign secretary Subrahmanyam Jaishankar both shared their grave concerns over China's increasingly aggressive behaviour."

Later, he met NSA Ajit Doval and Jaishankar, where McMaster spoke about the war in Afghanistan and the threat to India from nuclear-armed Pakistan, but Jaishankar and Doval "spoke mainly about an increasingly aggressive China. The two men were open to unprecedented cooperation thanks to Xi Jinping's aggression."

In a meeting with PM Modi at the Prime Minister's official residence, he recalled, "Modi gave us a warm welcome. It was clear that deepening and expanding our relationship was a top priority for him. He expressed concern over China's increasingly aggressive efforts to extend its influence at India's expense and over its growing military presence in the region."

Quad (grouping of India, US, Australia and Japan) was revived in November 2017. Eight years later, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio's first plurilateral meeting was that of Quad Foreign ministers, where Jaishankar was present, testifying to the continuing alignment.

Although Trump has lowered the decibel against China in public rhetoric, New Delhi expects continuity in the substantive policy. And that frames the continuity in the tech cooperation — the initiative on critical and emerging technologies that focuses on everything from AI to space to quantum computing. This is crucial since Beijing is in a tight competition with the US in the AI race.

China is also likely to impact India-US defence cooperation. As Trump wants India to buy more American equipment, such as drones, the China challenge will be an important glue that Modi and Trump discuss.

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President's rule among options for Manipur: the provision and its history

AJOY SINHA KARPURAM,
ANJISHNU DAS
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 11

AFTER N BIREN SINGH resigned as Manipur's Chief Minister on Sunday, the BJP leadership is exploring its options. If the party fails to find a consensus CM candidate, the state may have to be put under President's rule — something the BJP wants to avoid, as it is against President's Rule in principle, sources told *The Indian Express*.

Article 356 of the Constitution

The imposition of President's Rule under Article 356 effectively transfers all the functions of the state government to the Centre and the function of the state legislature to Parliament during the period when

it is in force.

The process begins if the President, on receiving a report from the Governor, is "satisfied that a situation has arisen in which the Government of the State cannot be carried on in accordance with the provisions of this Constitution".

In this situation, the President will issue a 'Proclamation', which can remain in force for up to two months. The Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha must approve it through a resolution before this period expires for it to remain operative further. If approved, the proclamation of President's Rule can be extended to six months and Parliament can approve further six-month extensions for up to three years.

However, certain conditions must be met before a proclamation can be renewed by Parliament beyond a year since it was

first issued. Further extensions can only be approved if an Emergency has been declared in the country or that particular state, or if the Election Commission certifies that President's Rule is necessary due to difficulties in conducting elections.

President's Rule over the years

Since 1950, when the Constitution first came into force, President's Rule has been imposed 134 times across 29 states and UTs. It has been imposed most frequently in Manipur and Uttar Pradesh, at 10 times each. However, they are not the ones to have spent the most time under central control.

That distinction is held by Jammu & Kashmir, followed by Punjab and Puducherry. Since 1950, Jammu & Kashmir

has spent over 12 years (4,668 days) under President's Rule and Punjab has been under central control for over 10 years (3,878 days) in the same period. In both states, this is largely owed to recurring spells of militant and separatist activity, and unstable law and order situations.

The most recent imposition of President's rule was in Puducherry after the Congress government in 2021 lost power failing a vote of confidence. Puducherry has spent over 7 years (2,739 days) under President's Rule in its history, largely because of governments frequently losing support in the Assembly thanks to infighting or defections.

SC on President's Rule

The Supreme Court comprehensively

examined the power to impose President's Rule and its effect on Centre-state relations in *S R Bommai v Union of India* (1994). The matter came to court after several instances of the Centre imposing President's Rule and dismissing state governments.

A nine-judge Bench unanimously held that the President's power under Article 356 was subject to judicial review and courts could examine if the decision suffered from illegality, malafide, extraneous considerations, abuse of power, or fraud. While the SC acknowledged that the court could not weigh in on the correctness of the decision to impose President's Rule, it could examine if the material supplied to the President was relevant to the proclamation.

The court also created guidelines to protect the independence of state governments. Even after a valid proclamation, the

court held that only the state legislature would be suspended and that its other limbs would continue to function unless the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha approved it within two months. Without approval, the dismissed government would be revived.

Justice B P Jeevan Reddy was a part of the majority and stated in his opinion, "The fact that under the scheme of our Constitution, greater power is conferred upon the Centre vis-à-vis the states does not mean that states are mere appendages of the Centre".

He also noted that the courts should not adopt an approach that has the effect of whittling down the powers reserved to the states.

In the decades following the *Bommai* ruling, instances of President's Rule being imposed have decreased.

Market mayhem

There is a risk that earnings will not meet expectations at a time when the global environment is uncertain

THE STEEP CORRECTION in India's stock market may have gained pace due to US President Donald Trump's daily tariff bulletins but a correction has been in the making for quite some time now. Several experts have been red-flagging the glaring divergence between the very steep valuations that stocks were trading at and the muted growth in corporate earnings. They also have been warning about the impact of a global tariff war and also the strengthening dollar on India's economy. The problem is that a majority of fund managers and so-called strategists continued to remain in a denial mode by choosing to ignore the potential impact of this big disconnect on stock prices and continued to peddle the India shining story.

That's despite the sharp slowdown seen in the GDP growth for the September 2024 quarter and the unimpressive high-frequency indicators. Their contention has been that India's re-rating — as also that for stocks — is warranted because of the country's ability to pull off an annual growth rate of 7%-plus on a sustained basis. Such ambitions now seem clearly out of reach. Consumption demand, accounting for more than half the economy, is weak especially in large parts of urban India and investments are sluggish. Analysts appear unwilling to accept there is simply no room for earnings upgrades to justify the stretched valuations. And the strategists are not convinced that India's premium valuation multiples will remain under pressure until earnings stabilise.

To be sure, stock markets do see bull and bear phases and patient investors will ultimately be rewarded. That may be little comfort for the lakhs of small investors who have been pouring their savings into mutual funds as though it was going out of style. But, the principle of dollar-cost averaging should play out over time. Small investors have a lot at stake; the average monthly inflows into Systematic Investment Plans (SIP) have more than doubled to about ₹24,000 crore in FY25 so far from roughly ₹10,000 crore in FY22. Retail shareholders are now dominant shareholders in many companies — after the promoters. In fact, many promoters and private equity players used the rally in the markets to sell out or pare their stakes.

While the benchmark indices have fallen by about 11-12% from their recent peaks in late September, the mid-cap and small-cap benchmarks have lost about 17.5-18%. But stocks have tumbled by 30-40% from their peaks. Also, the mad rush for shares in initial public offerings (IPOs) of some of the new-age technology companies was clearly unwarranted. Shares of Swiggy, for instance, are now trading well below their IPO price of ₹390 apiece.

Much of the sell-off has been the result of foreign portfolio investors moving money out of India; between September 1, 2024, and now they have offloaded stocks worth a little over \$15 billion or about ₹1.32 lakh crore. They appear to have better assessed the problems that India could face with the Trump administration taking over and realised that the frothy valuations provided little or no room for comfort. Moreover, bond yields in the US have risen sharply and could stay elevated. As such, they are unlikely to return until there's better visibility on the economy and until trading multiples reflect the reality. At 23,072, the Nifty is now trading at a multiple of a little over 19X estimated FY26 earnings, which is not expensive. However, there is a risk that earnings will not meet expectations at a time when the global environment is uncertain.

Goldman Sachs' exclusive investing club a powerful draw

BLOOMBERG'S BONUS CALCULATOR offers a revealing look at the divergent value of Wall Street employee payouts. A stock award of \$100,000 from JPMorgan Chase in 2022 would now be worth \$115,000 fully vested; the same from Bank of America is worth only \$83,000. Pity the poor traders from Deutsche Bank (and, before it collapsed, Credit Suisse) whose stock grants would regularly depreciate before they were able to cash them in.

But the power of their stock isn't the only way firms differentiate themselves (and no, I'm not talking about "culture"). Among the many benefits that banks provide — health services, childcare centres, fitness facilities, and so on — one of them is access to special investment programmes. "The firm also looks to offer additional wealth-creation opportunities, including the Employee Special Investment Program," trumpets Goldman Sachs Group at the bottom of its benefits webpage.

These schemes allow access to funds that otherwise might not be available to employees, on terms that certainly wouldn't. Last week, the *Financial Times* reported that Goldman Sachs slashed the minimum investment on its latest 1869 Private Opportunities Partners fund to \$25,000 from \$250,000. The fund, which takes its name from the year the firm was founded, invests across multiple private-market vehicles managed by its asset-management division. It is open to former employees who pay annual fees of just 0.63% plus 6.3% on performance — a 50% discount to what the bank would normally charge outside investors.

The 1869 fund is unique in catering to alumni, but there are plenty of investment opportunities open to Goldman's current 46,500 employees and, in particular, its 400 or so partners. These funds generally don't levy management or incentive fees; in some cases, employees even get a share of the incentive fees paid by third-party investors. In an environment where some of the best opportunities reside in private markets rather than public, access to these funds is an attractive benefit.

While the firm doesn't disclose assets it manages on behalf of employees, it does disclose how much capital its executive officers take out. In the past five years, chief executive officer David Solomon has received \$65 million from employee funds, made up of both distributions and redemptions. That's equivalent to almost half what he earned in salary and bonuses. Chief operating officer John Waldron may not have partaken of the fund opportunity as much: He pulled out \$15 million over the period, equivalent to 11% of his total pay. Between them, the pair also earned \$4 million from incentive fees levied on paying customers.

As a vehicle for wealth creation, Goldman's funds have a strong track record. Since 2000, the firm's private equity funds, marketed under the brand West Street Capital Partners, have returned over two times capital before fees. This fund series has proved popular with staff. Its 2000 vintage, which returned 2.5 times its original investment, sourced around 18% of its capital from employees. Across the five vintages since then, employee contributions have averaged around 10%. The firm is currently raising capital for West Street Capital Partners IX, in which it targets around \$1 billion from staff.

In some cases, firms will even provide leverage against employees' own contributions. Loans aren't as generous as in the past when they allowed staff to double their exposure, but they still account for further upside. Problems can arise, though, if employees max out too much on internal funds. In 2008, Goldman had to bail out two senior executives who were short of cash, paying \$58 million to repurchase some of their investments in internal funds to avoid their having to sell Goldman shares.

Goldman Sachs is somewhat unique in marrying a trading and banking business with a thriving alternative asset management business. It currently oversees \$525 billion of alternative assets to which it gives traders and bankers exposure partly to "provide alignment with the firm's strategy to grow the alternatives business". The link offers Goldman a key advantage. Stock may be one way for Wall Street firms to distinguish themselves; access can be as useful a currency.

● **INDO-US TIES** TO EXPAND STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP, BUDGET ANNOUNCEMENTS SHOULD BE CRYSTALLISED WITH ACTION

The ace of tariffs

**MUKESH BUTANI
PRANOY GOSWAMI**

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strategic partnership. This article shall appraise the Budget outcomes, and the policy rationale in signalling these friendshoring waves.

The fine print

Inverted customs duty structures have been one of the biggest impediments to competitiveness of Indian exporters. Imposed mostly ad-hoc, in response to specific demands for import protection, the duty inversions have adversely affected prospects of Indian exporters in overseas markets. High customs duties on imported inputs have often inflated the cost of production leading to high prices of final products, which, ironically, have been higher than their imported substitutes.

This was a pernicious legacy that needed correction. The Budget has harmonised reform with revisions: basic customs duties have either been scrapped or reduced on critical items. The most notable examples are for parts used in the manufacture of LCD/LED television sets; capital goods for making lithium-ion batteries; textile machinery; knitted fabrics; telecom equipment; chemicals; plastic; jewellery parts; copper, lead, and tin; and solar modules, semiconductor devices, and photovoltaic cells.

Anticipating US action on tariffs,

India seems to have made the first move by revamping its tariff structure by reducing the slabs to eight rates. It proposes to fully exempt critical minerals such as cobalt powder, lead, zinc, and 12 other minerals for targeted manufacturing combines. Combined with trade facilitation measures, particularly extending the time for the end use of imported inputs, the prospects for exports certainly look brighter.

Prospects for a long-standing partnership

India and the US find symmetry in a basket of shared goals, which include building resilient supply chains; expanding collaboration in emerging technologies such as clean energy, semiconductors, and critical minerals; and tapping into India's digital and information technology strengths. India's growing influence in critical and emerging technologies also creates opportunities for collaboration with the US, particularly in high-value sectors such as clean energy, semiconductors, and critical minerals.

The windfall promised through an India-US collaboration on energy, climate, and technology is massive. To this end, the economies signed a memorandum of understanding on the critical mineral supply chain last October to

complement the India-US Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (ICET). With their collective repertoire in clean energy cooperation, robust bilateral frameworks, and evolutionary capabilities, the US and India are well-positioned to become strategic partners in ensuring global critical mineral security.

Additionally, the intention to amend the Atomic Energy Act and the Civil Liability on Nuclear Damage Act spells targeted transcendentalism. When corroborated with India's target of 100-gigawatt nuclear power by 2047, the centennial year of its independence, the offshoots are far-reaching. India's baroque presence on institutions like the Quad (a grouping that includes Australia, Japan, and the US) signal an intent to foster the next generation of collaboration with the States. If the announcement on amendments to the nuclear energy legislation is baptised, the Indo-US corridor on strategic nuclear initiatives can be unlocked.

The road ahead

Expanding cooperation in emerging technologies and artificial intelligence underscores the involvement in critical minerals. The ICET, which has been identified as a crucial policy development in furthering the India-US strategic partnership, is chaired by the key players in the national security establishment in the two countries. The February 1 exercise should be crystallised with seismic action, by setting up an exclusive, high-powered committee to examine the impact of the customs revisions, and a quarterly review of India's trade figures with the US. Such attempts shall not only salvage India's status in the realm of critical minerals, electronics manufacturing, and a trailblazing supply chain environment, but also influence and inspire scores of multinational enterprises and fund investors from the US to collaborate with the country on these sunrise sectors for the next decade.

Is GST a broken promise?



**PRADEEP S MEHTA
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A well-structured, targeted tax relief system is crucial to enhance economic inclusivity, stimulate demand, and position India as a globally competitive market

AS BENJAMIN FRANKLIN rightly said, "In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes." India's goods and services tax (GST) was introduced as a landmark reform to simplify the country's complex tax system, eliminate cascading levies, and create a unified market. However, years later, it has deviated from its original promise, entangled in inconsistencies that burden businesses and disproportionately impact consumers — especially the middle class and the poor. With the Union Budget 2025 under parliamentary discussion, there is an urgent need to recalibrate the GST into a system that is truly rational, equitable, and growth-friendly.

India's post-pandemic recovery has been K-shaped, benefitting the wealthy while leaving the most vulnerable behind. The growing economic divide raises a critical question: Does India's tax system aim to uplift or further burden the disadvantaged? According to a sound research report, the poorest 50% contribute a disproportionate 64.3% of the total GST revenues, while the top 10% pay just 3.9%. Rather than promoting redistribution, India's tax structure has deepened inequality, with corporations paying far less than individual taxpayers, compounded by the regressive nature of indirect tax, precisely GST.

By 2020, the income share of the bottom 50% had plunged to just 13% of the national income, while they owned less than 3% of the country's wealth. The stark reality? Nearly 70% of Indians cannot afford a basic, nutritious diet, leading to an estimated 1.7 million deaths annually due to diet-related diseases, underscores the report.

At the heart of GST's challenges lies its inconsistent tax classifications, often bordering on the absurd. According to the 55th GST Council meeting, there is an increase of GST on fortified rice — a crucial intervention to tackle malnutrition is one such case. Higher tax rates on such essentials make them less affordable for those who need them the most, contradicting government efforts to address food insecurity.

The recent popcorn controversy exemplifies further regulatory mess as unpacked, unlabelled salted popcorn is taxed at 5%, its pre-packed variant at 12%, and caramel popcorn at 18% under the sugar confectionery category. The outcome? Artificial market segmentation, compliance burdens for small businesses, and a direct impact on consumer prices — all at odds with GST's promise of a "good and simple tax". This isn't an isolated case. Recall the infamous paratha vs roti debate, or the tax disparities between packaged and unpackaged lassi. Such inconsistencies have always fuelled avoidable litigation, created confusion, and weakened public trust in the tax regime. It further hits the middle- and lower-income groups the hardest, where a small price hike on

household essentials impacts household budget significantly.

The classification chaos extends beyond nutritional food items and snacks. High and inconsistent taxes on second-hand vehicles, or on health insurance schemes limit affordability and market fluidity. Such tax distortions ripple across industries, affecting demand and competitiveness.

Even the hospitality industry advocates for a reduction in GST rates for hotel rooms and restaurants, besides tax incentives, in order to boost sector viability. As a result, there will be a lowering cost of operations and improved affordability for travellers. This can attract more investment into the sector, creating more job opportunities and thus contributing to economic growth. A well-structured, targeted tax relief system for essential goods is crucial to enhance economic inclusivity, stimulate domestic demand, and position India as a globally competitive market.

The GST must return to its core objective — simplicity, fairness, and efficiency. The government must take bold steps to correct the distortions. India's multi-tiered GST structure needs rationalisation. A simple system with lesser slabs, as seen in countries like New Zealand and Singapore, would eliminate unnecessary complexities, particularly

for small businesses that struggle with compliance costs and rent-seekers. Introduction of GST help desk, chatbots, and online training modules for these businesses can help in understanding and complying with GST regulations. In short, creating a more inclusive tax policy can prevent economic disparities from widening further.

Lower tax rates on research and development investments and innovation-driven industries will not only spur growth but also attract foreign investment, making India a manufacturing and services powerhouse. Encouraging ethical business practices through tax relief for environmentally and socially responsible companies can drive sustainable economic development. Artificial intelligence-driven compliance mechanisms can reduce the bureaucratic red tape, allowing businesses to focus on expansion rather than cumbersome tax filings.

India's GST regime needs a fundamental shift — from arbitrary classifications to a streamlined, transparent, and growth-oriented framework. The tax system should foster economic inclusivity rather than perpetuate inequalities. Instead of addressing individual cases in isolation, moving to a broader category or fewer slabs can eliminate ambiguities. Further, by aligning with global best practices and reducing compliance burdens, the GST can truly live up to its original promise — a reform that benefits all, not just a privileged few.

should be recognised by the Centre how strongly the US and China safeguard their industry's interests while we let our industry face global pressures and trade deficits on its own. The US and China advance their policies of trade and strategic interests for two decades. We must safeguard our industry's interests, exports, and trade balance.

—Vinod Johri, Delhi

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Vital soft power

Apropos of "Necessary evil or strategic asset?" (*FE*, February 11), HR has long graduated as an acronym from standing for "human relations" in the 1930s to "human resources" now. From its archaic role as the first and the last face of the company, modern-day HR is for creating supportive, ergonomic, and inspiring work environments to enhance employee well-being and productivity;

identifying essential current and future skills; and upskilling, hiring, or outsourcing to ensure organisational preparedness. Hybrid work culture and the genesis of artificial intelligence will challenge HR to adopt dynamic team structures over rigid hierarchies, fostering collaboration and continuous improvement. Employee dissatisfaction tends to spread rapidly in the modern environment to demand management insight and

deft transformation by leveraging business innovation principles. HR will ever remain the soft power to drive growth and enhance employee experience.

—R Narayanan, Navi Mumbai

Safeguarding trade

US President Donald Trump knows pretty well the global impacts of imposing tariffs and duties unilaterally. Industries in India apparently were not prepared to face this tariff war. It

should be recognised by the Centre how strongly the US and China safeguard their industry's interests while we let our industry face global pressures and trade deficits on its own. The US and China advance their policies of trade and strategic interests for two decades. We must safeguard our industry's interests, exports, and trade balance.

—Vinod Johri, Delhi

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FIREWALLS NEEDED AS STEEL, ALUMINIUM TARIFF PAINS SPREAD

BEFORE the implications of one set of Donald Trump's edicts get digested, new ones come in. The latest in the breathless pace of the US president's executive orders is a 25 percent import tax 'without exemption, without exception' on all steel and aluminium entering his country. Though the new trade barrier will hit Canada the hardest—as it's the US's largest supplier of metals—India, a steel and aluminium exporter, will feel the heat too. The immediate fallout will be on American consumers who will find the cost of every product using steel and aluminium going up. But Trump is staying the course with his America First policy with the declaration: "Ultimately, it will be cheaper... Our nation requires steel and aluminium to be made in America, not in foreign lands."

Shares of US steel companies hit the roof, but there was carnage everywhere else. India's stock markets have fallen over the last two days on fears that retaliatory tariffs by India and others will invite new and higher US tariffs. India has never been a big steel exporter to the US. However, what may impact India substantially is the dumping of steel by foreign manufacturers. In the last calendar year, China exported \$13.2 billion worth of steel in different forms to the US. Much of this may now find its way to India, creating a glut and disrupting prices here. On aluminium, the hit will be more direct. India is one of the largest producers of the alloy with a 6 percent global share, and exported almost \$1 billion worth of it to the US last year. This might now become a trickle.

These tariffs could not have come at a worse time. India's exports have shrunk 29 percent to 3.99 million tonnes during the April-January period this financial year. In an increasingly protectionist world, India will have to find new export markets and products, while simultaneously indigenising domestic product lines. On a happier note, Trump's first innings showed that his bark is worse than his bite; much of his swagger is designed to drive better trade deals for the US. Hopefully, Prime Minister Narendra Modi will bargain hard on these and other issues during his visit to the White House and convince the US president that a deal involves a give as well as a take.

LIVEN UP CITIES, MARK AREAS FOR PERFORMERS

WHEN British musician Ed Sheeran was unplugged by the Bengaluru police during an impromptu busking session on the weekend, it turned into a global headline and set off both annoyance and appreciation. The abrupt interruption came as a sour note for the cheering fans elated to see the star performing live, and left Bengaluru and the internet divided over whether such action was warranted. Was the policeman tugging out the cable being a killjoy or just doing his duty? While the police say Sheeran did not have permission for the gig on the busy Church Street stretch, the singer claimed on Instagram it was a planned event and they had a permit. Conscientious citizens are glad that rules were followed, no matter how big the star.

Busking—a street performance that could include dancing, singing, acrobatics or other forms of entertainment—has been a part of global culture for hundreds of years. It is often adopted by upcoming musicians to reach out and earn cash. But busking is not encouraged in India. While it's not illegal, it's often frowned upon as a public nuisance even though we have always had a culture of travelling musicians, acrobats and monkey trainers putting up roadside shows. Such gigs are often stopped by invoking colonial-era laws that criminalise street performances, like the Dramatic Performances Act 1876 and the Bombay (Prevention of Beggary) Act 1959. For one, dancer and busker Varun Dagar has often faced police harassment. Other countries, too, have their laws governing busking. The UK, Sheeran's homeland, mandates a busking licence or local council permit. In the US, busking is legal and protected as a manner of free speech. France and Italy allow performers only in certain areas, while singing and dancing in public is illegal in Dubai. It's well-known that the political classes are wary of street performances, especially theatre, which has been used by activists to foment dissent.

In metros caught up in the daily whorl of working life, community culture can bring a refreshing change. Bengaluru has a long and vibrant history of busking, though the police often play party poopers. It's time the authorities stopped being uptight. Urban planners across Indian cities should look at demarcating enclaves with a culturally rich vibe, much like Montmartre in Paris, to encourage artists and liven up the cityscape.

QUICK TAKE

ANOTHER P2P OUTREACH

IT'S heartening to see that after the promise of financial assistance during Maldivian president Mohamed Muizzu's visit to Delhi last October, India is following through with help for its parliament, the Majlis. On Tuesday, Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla reaffirmed India's 'Neighbourhood First' policy while promising his counterpart Abdul Raheem Abdulla help with technology and capacity-building initiatives through the Parliamentary Research and Training Institute for Democracies. There was a time legislators from around the world would come to observe proceedings in India's vibrant parliament. Though the recent behaviour of our parliamentarians has been far less than exemplary, the sharing of institutional competence should be taken ahead.

THE Aam Aadmi Party's defeat in Delhi has its way of showing that numbers can create their own narrative. The final result—48 to 22—reveals that the BJP overcame a deficit of nearly three decades in the capital to eventually break the phenomenon of AAP as a 'miracle party'. But numbers explain little of what happened. We have to go into the political dynamics of election strategies to understand how AAP was domesticated into a mediocre, marginal party that could be discarded. It involved a set of elaborate strategies.

First, the BJP had to break the myth of Arvind Kejriwal, who represented the dream of alternative politics. He was once cited in the same breath as alternative democracy movements. This dream was shattered.

There was a sense where democracy in India was being reduced to elections, and elections to a numbers game. Democracy here becomes functional, mediocre and majoritarian. Kejriwal had offered an alternative myth of politics built around a vision of citizenship, participation and a different vision of the future. The first thing the BJP did was to bifurcate the myths into an iconic Kejriwal more for academic consumption and an everyday Kejriwal caught in the mediocrity of governance and politics.

The central government did it brutally by arresting both chief minister Kejriwal and his deputy Manish Sisodia. It broke the halo of incorruptibility and disrupted the genealogical links to Anna Hazare's anti-corruption movement. Kejriwal was no longer an immaculate conception, but an everyday invention. The banalisation of Kejriwal began with the arrest and suspicions swirling around it. With the two top ministers in jail, AAP was in no position to claim an alternative political path.

The second strategy is about how the BJP has reshaped Delhi's image. The city is no longer seen merely as a hub for marginal migrants; it has been redefined as a middle-class dream. Delhi has shifted from a space of marginality to one that echoes the grandeur of Curzon-era Delhi, now reimagined under Narendra Modi's imperial vision. The city as an imagination has changed. The sociological dreams of migrants have yielded to a more permanent sense of residence.

Delhi can now dream of an instrumental majoritarian politics. To this the BJP added a clever caveat—it pointed out that AAP trying of administer Delhi without the support of the national re-

The BJP broke AAP's dream of alternative politics. This democracy is majoritarian and mediocre, and the opposition is too hegemonic and patriarchal. New AAPs need to be created

THE BANALISATION OF KEJRIWAL AND AAM AADMI PARTY

SHIV VISVANATHAN

Social scientist associated with the Compost Heap, a group researching alternative imaginations



SOURAV ROY

gime was a futile exercise; as Kejriwal's opponent pointed out, you need double-engine politics to govern Delhi. You need a party that is in power both at the Centre and in the capital.

Without such a twin order of governance, AAP sounded more like a children's crusade than a possibility of real politics. The BJP thus altered three myths to break the regime of Kejriwal.

First, it destroyed the iconicity of Kejriwal—he could now be a butt of jokes, as the headline's proclaimed. The broom, once a symbol of revolution, had become just an ordinary household object. Instead of representing reform and an alternative future, it now blended into the routine of everyday politics—where the BJP played the role of a far more domi-

nant and authoritative figure.

At a different level, BJP also changed the nature of AAP—with two leaders under arrest, the leadership passed to Atishi Marlena, who was definitely idealistic but was new too. She ran a brilliant campaign of resistance, but it was not enough to capture the earlier halo of AAP. It was no longer an integrated party of eccentric and radical individuals; it sounded more like a disparate collection of individuals—each eccentric individually, but adding little to the whole.

What is really impressive is not the result; it was how the BJP created a new myth of politics.

We have to remember that Delhi is no longer seen as a separate entity, a Union territory. It's seen as a part of the larger

THE MANY WAYS AMERICA FIRST HURTS GLOBAL TRADE

BISWAJIT DHAR

Former professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University and Vice President, Council for Social Development

procity was "going to be a key topic for the Trump administration". He favoured the use of across-the-board import taxes to strong-arm trade partners into lowering their tariffs on US exports.

Trump's threat puts at serious risk the agreements on tariff liberalisation that the US entered into with WTO members while acceding to the multilateral trading



Trump 2.0's unilateralism in trade is much more potent than Trump 1.0's was. His threat of levying 'reciprocal tariffs' jeopardises the agreements the US entered into with WTO members. In the name of reciprocity, India could face targeted pressure to lower tariffs on farm products

system. These agreements took into consideration the ability and institutional capacities of countries to adopt lower tariffs, and allowed developing countries like India to maintain relatively higher tariffs to prevent disruption in sensitive sectors.

Thus, India imposes higher tariffs on major agriculture commodities, especially foodgrains, to ensure adequate availability at home, protect the livelihoods of small farmers and promote self-sufficiency. Now, in the name of reciprocity, India could face pressure to lower its high tariffs on farm products, to bring them down to the levels the US imposes. But India must argue that the US never used tariffs to protect its agricultural sector, since the sector has historically ben-

efited from high subsidies that kept prices well below those in the international markets. This would be the foremost challenge of the Modi government.

India may also be targeted as the US president has directed his administration to investigate the causes of US's "large and persistent annual trade deficits in goods, as well as the economic and national security implications and risks resulting from such deficits, and recommend appropriate measures, such as a global supplemental tariff or other policies, to remedy such deficits". India maintains a trade surplus with the US, which has more than doubled during the past five years from \$17 billion in 2019-20 to \$35 billion in 2023-24.

The president has proposed elaborate institutional measures to implement these. There are indications that these measures would be implemented in conjunction with stronger application of antidumping and countervailing duties, which the US already uses in good measure.

If the Trump administration implements its president's directive, an overwhelmingly large share of the world's second largest trading nation's merchandise trade would be impacted. In 2023, the US ran trade deficits with 13 of its top 15 trading partners that accounted for nearly 92 percent of its total trade. Its largest trade deficits—of \$40 billion or more—are with 13 countries. Given the substantial deficits the US has with most of its major trade partners, it's not clear how Trump could lower the deficits without substantially damaging the global trading system.

America First comes at an awkward juncture for the WTO, which is already considerably weakened by Trump's actions during his first term when its institutional structure was severely damaged. With Trump's America First trade policy advocating stronger unilateral trade measures, questions will be asked about the legitimacy of the WTO as the enforcer of multilateral trade rules.

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

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

AI equality

Ref: *AI summit must deliver on more equitable access* (Feb 11). The AI Action Summit is a key moment for countries like India to push for fairer access to the technology. With Big Tech dominating the space, India's role adds weight to the Global South's concerns. The real test is whether the summit sparks action or just more discussion.
Kanishka Sipani, email

Rohit's recovery

Ref: *Big relief for captain Rohit and India in time* (Feb 11). Rohit Sharma's resurgence is a great boost for India ahead of the Champions Trophy. His leadership and form are crucial for success. Hope India continues this momentum.
Keerthana L, Chennai

Tariff troubles

Ref: *Don hints at new tariffs ahead of Modi's US visit* (Feb 11). Donald Trump's announcement of an additional 25 percent tariff on steel and aluminium will have adverse effects on India. If the new tariffs kick in, experts warn of retaliatory measures from China, South Korea, Japan and the European Union. His cuts on funding, like the one for USAID, will have severe ramifications for global health.
S Lakshmi, Hyderabad

Healing Manipur

While much-needed political improvements in the conflict-ravaged Manipur is commendable, the Centre must leave no stones unturned in expediting the economic advancement of the region. Recognising the root cause of the conflict, paying heed to the concerns of the locals and taking steps to integrate them into mainstream society is the need of the hour.
MRishidev, Dindigul

Resignation strategy

Manipur CM Biren Singh's resignation is an escape route from the ignominy of a defeat in the no-confidence motion, which would not have been pleasant for the state government. The resignation makes it look like an internal change in leadership. A wise move by the BJP high command.
Raju Mathai, Kochi

Offensive jokes

Ref: *Outrage over YouTuber's 'perverted' remarks, crass jokes; complaint lodged* (Feb 11). The highly indecent and undignified remarks made by YouTuber Ranveer Allahbadia, who was recently honored with the Youth Icon award, was outrageous. It is appalling that someone in such a position of influence would make such offensive jokes, particularly against parents—figures who deserve the utmost respect in our society.
K J Haroon Basha, Vaniyambadi

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How We Can Steel A March on US

Leave retaliation to the big steel exporters

New US tariffs of a flat rate of 25% on steel imports — from, in Donald Trump's words, 'all countries, no matter where it comes from, all countries' — have a weak direct impact on India. However, the knock-on effects of trade diversion can be significant. Imports from Mexico and Canada are integrated into the US steel supply chain, and may be up for tariff exemption before the rest of the world. Steel from the EU, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan has a specialised element that also strengthens the case for exemption. China has been at the receiving end of US tariff action over steel during the Biden administration as well. The country is expected to retaliate most vigorously against generalised and specific trade restrictions in the US. Chinese steel exports are most likely to be diverted away from the US and could be dumped. The rest of the world now faces oversupply and depressed prices.



This will affect India's domestic and export markets for steel.

Effects on the downstream auto industry will be significant. Unless US steel makers ramp up production to offset the import shrinkage, the US auto industry will lose export market share. This was the reason Trump had to dial back on steel tariffs in his first term. Now, the threat of cheap Chinese EVs has intensified. The automobile industry has a lower capacity to absorb costs as it grapples with higher emission standards. Extra protection to automobile markets will delay global energy transition because it has to be added to subsidies for EV adoption. Here, the stakes for India are not very high given its share of global automobile exports.

India's focus will be on deploying protective measures to sustain steel output by the world's second-largest producer. Most of the steel produced is for domestic use. It could leave retaliation to the big steel exporters as it focuses on ensuring its steel producers are assured of remunerative pricing. Indian steel makers will also need to spend more on trade diversification to ensure exports do not lose momentum.

Not Just Skilling, But Learning to Learn

India's higher education system is at a pivotal moment. The choices made today will shape the country's intellectual and economic landscape tomorrow. While NEP 2020 is ambitious, the current discourse, often fixated on skilling, risks missing the bigger picture. Education isn't merely about equipping young people with job-ready skills but about fostering adaptability, critical thinking and a deep-rooted ability to learn, a necessity in our rapidly evolving, tech-driven world.

State public universities (SPUs), set up and run by state governments, serve over 80% (32.5 mn) of higher ed students. Historically, their expansion has been instrumental in increasing access to education. SPUs have the reach and student base



to become hubs of R&D and innovation. Yet, as a new NITI Aayog report, 'Expanding Quality Higher Education Through SPUs', highlights, they remain underfunded and bureaucratically shackled. Over 40% of faculty positions are vacant. Only 10% of SPUs have well-equipped research facilities.

GoI is working on a framework to represent contributions of knowledge-driven sectors. This is commendable. But building a strong roof first requires building a solid ground floor. Instead of nurturing inquiry and innovation, many institutions churn out graduates who struggle to pivot beyond the limited scope of their degrees. If we genuinely seek a Viksit Bharat, both GoI and states must not only increase allocations for higher ed, as NITI rightly recommends, but also make smart and focused investments. Unis can't be degree factories meeting enrolment targets. This is not about abstract ideals but instilling an ever-evolving process suited to the ever-evolving real world. The transition from access to excellence is now an imperative.

JUST IN JEST

Super Bowl's pretty much everything but foot-ball – intriguing alien stuff

America's Fascinating Annual Super Bore

As an alien observer looking into Planet America, the most mysterious ritual doing the rounds has to be Super Bowl, the annual league championship game of the National Football League, a.k.a. the final game of NFL season. On Monday — that is America's Sunday — Philadelphia Eagles beat Kansas City Chiefs 40-22 in Super Bowl 2025. But that, dear reader, turns out to be incidental. For Super Bowl, apparently, is *really* about their president attending with his large entourage Roman emperor-in-the-Colosseum-style, Taylor Swift and Kendrick Lamar singing, Tom Cruise stretching his Dorian Gray face, etc. Oh, and a new season for advertisements.

Intriguingly, dubbed 'football', this American game (sic) has little to do with feet and much to do with hands — and padded shoulders. An oval object thrown through the air while the rest scramble makes for the game's sidelights. At intervals comes the real Super Bowl show — commercials. The pièce de résistance, as always, is the halftime show. We are reliably told that going by Lamar's headliner show, America has returned to flares — bell-bottoms. For those obsessing about Americana, understanding Super Bowl seems to be de rigueur, primarily because no one else cares for it. For the rest of us who know *real* football and cricket, it can be a fascinating study of an indigenous culture. Or a Super Bore.

One topic likely to be part of PM's talks with Prez in Washington this week, the other unlikely

TRUMP KI BAAT

Tariffs Are Just Riff-Raff



Neeraj Kaushal

New York: Do tariffs lower trade deficits? Donald Trump says 'yes'. Economists say 'no'. Evidence from Trump 1.0 proves he is wrong. Trump started his first term with a US trade deficit of \$479 bn, and ended, despite a slew of tariffs, with an even larger deficit of \$643 bn. He promised Americans that new tariffs would reduce America's trade deficit with China by \$200 bn. Four rounds of tariffs and eight years later, the target remains elusive.

Will tariffs on foreign goods encourage American manufacturing companies operating abroad move their businesses back to the US? Trump says 'yes'. American companies say 'no'. When Trump imposed tariffs on China in 2018, he had hoped that US manufacturers in China would bring back their production bases to the US.

Instead, they moved to other Asian countries, in particular, Vietnam, that did not face tariffs. Many Chinese manufacturers also moved their production out of China to escape Trump tariffs. America's trade deficit with China fell marginally, but rose sharply with the rest of the world.

Will tariffs on foreign goods help bring jobs to the US economy? Trump says 'yes'. Evidence from his first term, alas, suggests, 'no'. In March 2018, Trump imposed a 25% tariff on steel imports from most countries. He's just done it again.

During Trump 1.0, tariffs boosted demand for domestic steel production and created 6,000 new jobs in the first year. But, in 2019, steel demand fell, and the job gains in the steel industry disappeared. Because more people work in sectors that *use* steel than in sectors that *produce* steel, the overall effect of steel tariffs on employment was negative. According to a US Federal Reserve Board of Governors study, steel tariffs led to a loss of 75,000 US manufacturing jobs.

Trump's advisers say that he is using the threat of tariffs to extract deals with America's trading partners that would benefit Americans. Have these deals worked? Again, the evidence is not so impressive.

In his first term, Trump engaged in a gruelling trade war with China that included threats and counter-threats, tariffs and counter-tariffs. The US slapped tariffs on two-thirds of Chinese imports and average tariffs increased, in the course of four rounds, from 3.1% to 21%. In retaliation, China imposed tariffs on close to 60% of US exports, and the average tariff rose from 8% to 23%.

After three years of threats and counter-threats, the two countries came to an agreement in January 2020. But the agreement left the tariffs untouched, leaving a permanent damage to trade. China committed to buy, over the following two years, \$200 bn of US goods, and has not kept its commitment.

Trump says he loves tariffs. Alas, his love has no reason, nor bounds. During his campaign, the pendulum of his tariff threats oscillated from 10% to 100% depending on the forum in which he spoke. It is only three weeks since he became president and trade wars have already started between the US and its major trading partners.

Trump fired the first salvo by slap-

ping a 10% tariff on all imports from China. China has retaliated with 15% duty on imports of American coal, liquefied natural gas, crude oil, agricultural machinery and certain vehicles. China also launched a dispute against the US with WTO in regard to the new US tariffs.

Trump's primary weapon of attack is tariffs. China is responding with both tariffs and export restrictions. China has banned the export of three rare minerals required for making advanced chips and munitions — gallium, germanium and antimony — to the US. It has also added to an export control list several critical minerals and metal-based products.



Some delicate firefighting time

The looming threat is that Beijing can ban these items to the US or any other country. Ban on critical minerals will likely impact American manufacturing more than Chinese tariffs.

Trump is likely to turn his attention sometime soon to Europe by threatening new tariffs. The EU is a customs union and will likely retaliate as a strong entity. Mexico and Canada have received a month's reprieve, after which imports from America's two neighbours would face a 25% tariff. Both countries plan to retaliate. Trump hopes that these tariffs would encourage American automakers in Mexico to move back to the US. But automakers are saying no. The cost of moving is too high.

Trump's tariff wars have important lessons for other countries. Tariffs do not lower trade deficit. They do not boost manufacturing output. And they do not create manufacturing jobs. They may bring some short-term political gains, but leave enormous economic damage.

Trump calls India 'a very big abuser' of tariffs. He is not entirely wrong. Indian tariffs could become a major issue in relations between the two countries. Reducing tariffs will not just please Trump but also lower the cost of imported inputs for the Indian industry in turn, making it more competitive.

India should not get in a situation of aggressive tariff retaliation with the US. Trade wars have no winners. All parties suffer economic damage.

The writer is professor of social policy, Columbia University, US



Vivek Wadhwa

How Green is Not the Valley

Belmont, Silicon Valley: Speculation is rife about what Narendra Modi and Donald Trump will discuss regarding immigration when they meet in Washington this week. Many assume the focus will be on H-1B visas. But that would be missing the real issue. While the two leaders will likely find common ground on the fate of illegal immigrants, the biggest challenge for skilled immigrants isn't H-1B. The real problem, which both leaders will likely avoid discussing, is the massive backlog in employment-based green cards.

The backlog for highly skilled immigrants in the US has reached absurd levels. A 2023 Cato Institute report estimated that it had grown to a record 1.8 mn applicants, with 1.1 mn of

bring up the green card backlog — India benefits tremendously from it.

And while Washington frets about H-1B visas, the reality is that these aren't as crucial as they once were, particularly for startups and major tech firms. The landscape for hiring has shifted dramatically, and the H-1B mess is making the US less attractive for top-tier global talent.

My experience with Vionix Biosciences illustrates this issue. Failure of the US immigration system forced me to look elsewhere to build a world-class company, leading me to India. Developing Vionix required an exceptional mix of expertise, including plasma physics, thermodynamics, electrical and mechanical engineering, and machine learning — skills that were scarce in Silicon Valley. I would have had to hire talent from abroad and navigate the cumbersome visa process, which, given the anti-immigrant fervour and bureaucratic delays, would have made it nearly impossible to assemble the right team in time.

Recognising these challenges, I relocated my R&D operations to India, where I could access a deep and highly skilled talent pool, avoid unnecessary red tape, and accelerate innovation. If I had attempted this in the US, I would have needed to raise funding at the scale of Theranos just to navigate the regulatory and financial obstacles. Instead, India's innovation-friendly ecosystem allowed me to move faster, spend more efficiently and bring truly disruptive technology to market.

The talent pool in India is not only rich but also highly skilled, and cost efficiencies are undeniable. More companies are realising that they can build cutting-edge technology without being shackled by America's outdated immigration policies.

Moreover, with remote work now being the norm in the tech industry, barriers to building global teams have collapsed. The next generation of world-changing companies will increasingly be built in India and other emerging hubs, not in Silicon Valley.

The US is already losing out. If it doesn't fix its skilled immigration problem soon, it will continue hemorrhaging talent and innovation to countries that are more welcoming.

China has surged past the US in several key tech sectors. India is playing catch-up, driven by its thriving innovation ecosystem and returning talent. America can either wake up and reform its immigration policies to retain and attract the world's best talent. Or it can watch as other nations eat its innovation lunch.

The choice is clear: But will Trump and Modi have the courage to address the real issue? Unfortunately, the answer seems obvious. They will talk about illegal immigration, discuss trade agreements and possibly even celebrate the contributions of Indian Americans to Silicon Valley. But they won't address the employment-based green card backlog, because doing so would challenge the status quo that benefits Big Tech, the political establishment and, ironically, India itself.

Until the US realises that its broken immigration system is its Achilles heel, it will continue to cede its technological leadership to nations more willing to embrace the future.

The writer is CEO, Vionix Biosciences



THE SPEAKING TREE

Meditate On Kumbh

SURAKSHIT GOSWAMI

During the Kumbh, a unique energy field is created thanks to constellations in the sky, earth and water. Meditating at this time can connect the soul to a higher universal consciousness. This period offers the highest possibility of activating our chakras. Therefore, if you visit the Kumbh, be sure to meditate there. And if you cannot go, meditate at home. Just as the Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati converge at Prayagraj, similarly, within us, the Ida, Pingala and Sushumna converge at the Ajna chakra. Meditation should be focused on this point.

The Kumbh is held every 12 years. A cycle of cosmic energy becomes active every 12 years. The alignment of the constellations assists seekers in purifying their energy, breaking karmic bonds and preparing them for self-realisation.

Energy travels through water. Rivers are in constant contact with the Sun, absorbing divine properties. Water can also be charged with mantras, which is why sages and seers grant blessings or curses by holding water in their palms.

Millions of saints, yogis, sadhus and devotees come to the confluence of rivers with the sole intent of attaining liberation. Their collective prayers and meditation amplify the energy of the place. This energy helps achieve mental, physical and spiritual balance, enabling individuals to reach a higher state of consciousness. Therefore, bathing at the confluence and meditating on Kumbh can activate spiritual codes in human DNA.

Today is Maghi Purnima



A Walk On The Wild Side

'We listened to the warning. An angry hippo is 4 tons of bad attitude. And that's just the start of Kenya's wild side.' In the episode, **Kenya's Wildlife Warriors**, of the



podcast 'Overheard At National Geographic', you're taken deep into the heart of the country's

wildlife. This compelling episode is on conservationist Paula Kahumbu's mission to reconnect Kenyans with their own natural heritage. With host Peter Gwin's engaging narration, it's a must-listen for anyone interested in wildlife, environmental justice — and, simply, in a gripping story told well.

The episode flips the traditional tourism narrative — wildlife isn't just for foreign visitors snapping safari photos, it belongs to locals too. Kahumbu's passion shines through as she works to bring the wonders of the Serengeti into local living rooms.

The storytelling is immersive, packed with rich soundscapes — chattering colobus monkeys, eerie laughter of hyenas — and fascinating wildlife facts. From the thundering wildebeest migration to the elusive African wild dog, this podcast paints a vivid picture of the intricate ecosystem that needs protecting.

Chat Room

Friend's Enemy Is Not a Fiend?

Apropos the Edit, 'US Oil Can Boost India's Trade Play' (Feb 11), Donald Trump's continuing onslaught on tariffs — this time on steel and aluminium — are bound to hurt Indian industry. There's no way to forecast what will come next. In his quest for MAGA, he is bound to treat many of our exports to the US in a heavy-handed way. Irrespective of what he will achieve from some seemingly irrational steps, we have to do everything possible to protect our interests; and we must act fast. One believes strengthening our trade with China will be a good idea. Beijing is looking for new export markets — to replace their massive exports to the US — and our expanded relations with them should be of mutual interest.

Krishan Kalra
Gurugram

Babu-jis Dheere Chalna, Bring in AI



Swaminathan S Anklesaria Aiyar

In her budget speech, Nirmala Sitharaman proposed a high-powered committee to deregulate licences, certifications, permissions, inspections and other hurdles to ease of doing business. This committee would look into non-financial sectors, while a similar committee for the financial sector would be set up under the Financial Stability and Development Council. The aim, said the FM, was to create a 'trust-based' system, marking a revolutionary shift in approach from the usual 'guilty until proven innocent' to 'innocent till proven guilty'.

She asked state governments to join this endeavour. An investment friendliness index of states would be created to 'further the spirit of competitive and cooperative federalism'. Finally, she proposed a new Jan Vishwas Bill to decriminalise more than 100 provisions in laws, following up on the original Bill that decriminalised 180 provisions.

Sitharaman sounds serious about change and has the ear of the PM. Optimists see in this a chance for a truly major shake-up of the existing jungle of rules and regulations that facilitate corruption and endless delays. Pessimists say this is old wine in new bottles.

Countless similar committees in the past were asked to slash regulations and unwarranted rules, but ended up tweaking a few provisions. They left the bureaucratic state alive, healthy and kicking. This was hardly surprising. When bureaucrats are put in charge of committees, they cannot be expected to recommend measures that strip themselves of power and reduce ways to avoid accountability. Exceptions can occur in crises like that of 1991, when economists recruited from international agencies occupied key positions in the bureaucracy. They had the support of P V Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh in pushing through truly radical reforms. But when there is no crisis — as is the case today — few bureaucrats want to rock the boat, and direct recruits from outside wield no significant power.

This means that high-powered committees asked to suggest reforms adopt a brick-by-brick analysis followed by a recommendation to throw out some old bricks, which are in due course replaced by new ones. There's no effort to topple the entire structure and rebuild



Now, where shall we start?

from afresh. That would hurt so many vested interests, destroy so many careers and abolish so many ways to make money that it is possible only a crisis when drastic measures are unavoidable.

Will this time be any different? I'm not overly optimistic. But a difference can be made this time using AI. The arrival of DeepSeek to rival ChatGPT has raised frenzied debates about future developments in this field. But both are LLMs with limited uses. They represent a tiny fraction of what AI can do.

Andrew Lo at MIT has shown that AI can be used to identify overlaps and inconsistencies in complex legal and regulatory rulebooks. This holds promise for significant reforms even without upsetting the entire bureaucratic edifice, which Donald Trump seems to think is the only answer. Rulebooks are replete with duplicate provisions and powers. AI can be a cheap, quick tool to streamline rulebooks, and automate inspections and compliance.

Rachid Ejami, MD and editor-in-chief of Journal of Next-Generation Research 5.0, has shown ways to hugely improve the speed and fairness of judicial systems using AI. Currently, highly paid lawyers and their research assistants charge enormous fees for scrutinising documents to find cases and verdicts to support their arguments. AI can do that in one quick sweep, informing the judge as well as both parties of the key relevant verdicts in the past.

AI can never replace human judgement in the justice system. But it enables rapid and reliable searches, detection of biases, frequent evalua-


tions, and ways to analyse complex situations and facts. Indian courts have long used the internet to improve their search capacity, group similar cases together and find other ways of slashing pending cases. AI can greatly enhance the ability of prosecutors, defendants and judges to quickly come to conclusions.

Similar improvements should be possible in the overall regulatory system Sitharaman seeks to reform. Rules and inspections cannot be abolished without risking scams and disasters in health and safety. But AI can enable substantial streamlining.

A typical government committee brings out moth-eaten reports of earlier reform committees, giving reasons why more radical change would be too dangerous. Instead, Sitharaman's new committee should start by inducting outside experts with domain knowledge in each area to be deregulated.

Then, AI experts should be called in to help domain experts detect and eliminate duplicate provisions, highlight internal contradictions, and develop ways to reduce paperwork and physical inspections. AI could be used to find ways to implant remote-controlled sensors in factories to make inspections without an inspector physically visiting the factory, a procedure riddled with corruption.

I anticipate no great revolution in India's regulations and rules. We will continue with brick-by-brick incrementalism. For all her rhetoric, I doubt whether even Sitharaman seeks a revolution. But AI can make even brick-by-brick incrementalism a significant improvement.



CONTRAPUNTO

I don't care who or what judges me, nothing's going to stop me from living my life how I choose

- AMANDA HOLDEN

Curry Concerns

UK should crack down on illegal immigrants, including Indians. But its legal entry rules are self-harming

Eight Indian restaurants in London and Birmingham retained their Michelin stars on Monday. But the headlines were about a crackdown against Indian joints that didn't happen. At least, not in "Trump style". It's true that UK authorities raided 828 business premises in Jan and arrested 609 illegal immigrants, but only some were Indian. Specifically, 11 workers were arrested or detained at an Indian restaurant in Humberstone. Hardly a sweeping anti-Indian campaign.

That said, UK is certainly getting tougher on illegal immigration. There were 48% more raids in Jan this year than in Jan 2024. Anyone expecting Keir Starmer's Labour govt to coddle illegals will be disappointed. It's carried out over 5,000 immigration raids since taking office last July, and caught almost 4,000 migrants in its 'Blitz' on illegal work. Starmer doesn't have a choice. Nigel Farage's Reform UK – formerly Brexit Party – is breathing down his neck. There are seats where Labour narrowly beat Reform, and polls show Reform's stand on immigration and border controls drives its popularity. So, expect no let-up in the Blitz.

For India, the problem is one of optics. Indians form a very large chunk of illegal immigrants in UK. One estimate puts their number at 100,000. In 2021, both countries

signed a deal on returning illegal nationals, and 3,439 Indians were sent back in 2023. Regardless, over 1,000 Indians risked their lives to reach UK in inflatable boats over the English Channel that year. About 5,000 also applied for asylum. Every 'dunkie' dulls the shine of Indians who've made their mark legally in UK. And as illegal immigrants, they are vulnerable to abuse and depress wages of legal workers.

So, arrests and deportations aren't unfair. However, UK should rethink its restrictive immigration policy that's hurting its own economy. The dairy sector has warned about labour shortages hurting food security. The 'Indian' restaurant business – largely run by Bangladeshis – was said to be worth £3.6bn in 2012 and would be a bigger revenue generator now, but immigration curbs for South Asian chefs were already hurting it 13 years ago. Since then, the minimum wage to get a chef's visa has risen from £28,260 per year to £38,700. UK would have fewer illegals on its hands if it watched the border but let market forces decide wages.

It Doesn't Get Verse

Police are ever ready to target creative people. Surely, as SC observed, high courts should know better

The Supreme Court played literature teacher on Monday, tasking Gujarat police and high court to "apply their mind". SC was hearing Congress MP Imran Pratapgarhi's appeal against Gujarat HC decision to uphold a case against his posting a poem. BNS provisions under which he's accused run longer than the post – section 196 (promoting enmity between groups on ground of religion etc), 197 (prejudicial to national integration), 299 & 302 (outrage religious feelings etc), 57 (abetting commission of offence by public etc). Pratapgarhi told SC the poem is attributed to Faiz or Habib Jalib. SC was pained enough to say HC had "not appreciated the meaning of the poem", going on to explain: "This poem indirectly says even if somebody indulges in violence, we will not indulge in violence."

Two points. One, police have a penchant to crack down on creative people – satirists and cartoonists, artists, poets and writers, avant garde theatre and films, the long list keeps growing. Many have faced authorities' ire, police excesses. Not to speak of the excessive moral policing of creative property that publishers and OTT platforms often have to cope with. A light-hearted film on a woman chef who breaks with her family's food culture and cooks meat, was removed from an OTT platform. There was a case filed for "hurting religious sentiments". This news speaks for itself. The second point is the weakened application of mind that SC has often agonised over. In Pratapgarhi's case, it is the latter at work. SC has given counsel time to respond. A non-case drags on even when, as SC said, "It is ultimately a poem." A judge, not hearing this case, had called a children's book he authored *Can It Get Verse?* He was bang on.

SCAM Inc

How phone fraud is helping to solve the country's unemployment problem

Jug Suraiya

When my cell phone rang the app, which displays the identity of the caller, read: SCAM 100% Genuine. A scam which introduced itself not only as a SCAM, and that too 100% Genuine? Intrigued, I took the call.

Second opinion: Before you ask me my date, month, and year of birth, or tell me to respond to an OTP from you, or do any of those things by which you'll clean out my bank account before I can say 'Chhoo mantar!', lemme tell you I know all about these scams.

SCAM Inc: Of course you know all about these scams. What you don't know is that our scams are a public service.

SO: Scams as a public service? What public service would that be?

SI: The public service of helping solve the national problem of mass unemployment. Everyone knows there aren't enough jobs going to keep everyone employed. So instead of depending on the public or the private sector to provide us jobs, we provide *ourselves* with jobs in the true spirit of self-reliance or *atmanirbharta*.

SO: Wow. That's the most creative interpretation of self-reliance I've ever heard.

SI: That's just the half of it. Our scams generate jobs not only for us, but for a whole lot of other people as well.

SO: How do your scams generate jobs for other people?

SI: When you make a call on your mobile, don't you have to listen to a long spiel of do's and don'ts to avoid scams? It's thanks to scams that the person who did the recording got the job of doing it. No scams, no recording job. That's just the tip of the iceberg. Think of all the job creation by way of cyber sleuths and others employed to track down scams. And all those organisers of anti-scam seminars and conferences.

SO: Golly. Scams have become a Small-Scale Industry.

SI: Make that Medium Scale. And growing. That's why we call ourselves SCAM Inc, because we're registered as Strategic Commercial Advancement Managers.

Don't Let Don Steer You

GOI must resist Trump's aggressive trade negotiating style, like it did in 2018. Refuse to cut tariffs during bilateral meetings. Evaluate impacts thoroughly. Remind US what it gets from India

Ajay Srivastava

As Modi meets Trump for the first time after his return to office, we hope the personal rapport between the two that has previously facilitated significant bilateral achievements, will work this time too. The meeting tomorrow will be in Washington DC, where their talks will focus on strengthening ties in trade, investment, and defence.

While officials and ministers will have detailed discussions before the meet, India should be prepared for unexpected turns due to Trump's aggressive negotiating style.

Trump makes bold accusations – such as high tariffs on American products by a partner country or illegal immigration – and announces punitive actions to push the other side into negotiations. On the table, he offers temporary relief but seeks maximum concessions.

The best way to respond to such tactics is to counter false narratives with facts and stand firm. South Korea quickly revised its trade deal with US in 2018 under Trump's pressure, setting a precedent for more demands. In contrast, when India faced US tariffs in March 2018 on steel and aluminium, it waited for 15 months and then charged equivalent tariffs on 29 US products. We need a similar approach this time, especially on critical issues.

Avoid over-hasty tariffs revisions | While Trump is right that India has high tariffs on some products, like the 150% duty on whiskey, such rates apply to only a few items. US, in comparison, has even higher top tariffs, such as 350% on tobacco.

For the top 100 US exports to India – such as crude oil, LNG, coal, and diamonds, which account for 75% of shipments – the average tariff is below 5%. India has further reduced tariffs in this year's budget on items like Ethernet switches, motorcycles, satellite ground installations, synthetic flavouring essences, and certain waste and scrap, signalling its willingness to support US interests.

India should avoid cutting tariffs on the negotiating table. As such decisions have long-term consequences, it's prudent to take the necessary time to evaluate the impacts thoroughly.

Avoid mini deals too | Under WTO rules, Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with developed nations must cover a substantial trade volume, making limited product deals legally invalid. However, even a full FTA with US may not benefit India, as Trump is unwilling to lower tariffs. Most other aspects of an FTA have already been addressed through the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF).

Stand India's digital ground | US should recognise that, unlike China, India allows US digital firms to operate



and earn billions in ad revenue. As cheaper and open-source AI models like DeepSeek challenge the hegemony of US firms, India's continued support is crucial. Also, many US Global Capability Centres use Indian data to develop AI solutions.

In other areas, focus on specific actions | The top US export to India in FY2024 was crude petroleum oil, worth \$5 billion. India may increase purchases from US, but only if it offers the lowest global prices.

Indian students contribute significantly to US universities, and India buys military hardware from US. India remains a crucial counterweight to China in the Indo-Pacific.

Both countries may discuss strengthening ties in technology, defence, energy, space, supply chains, and geopolitics. It's time to focus on specific actions. For example, China controls over 80% of global solar cell production and 97% of polysilicon supply,

leaving US and India dependent on imports. They could collaborate to set up large-scale solar cell manufacturing in India. While initially costly, this would help reduce reliance on China.

High tariffs didn't help America | While Trump has started another tariff war, US must recognise that it did not win the last one. The US-China trade war began in March 2018 when Trump imposed 25% tariffs on steel and 10% on aluminium, later expanding them to hundreds of Chinese goods.

However, between 2017 and 2023, while US imports from China dropped by \$81.56bn (from \$519.52bn to \$437.96bn), total US imports surged by \$763.2bn to \$3.04 trillion – a 31.5% increase.

About 57% of this growth came from Mexico, Canada, and Asean countries, which benefited from zero tariffs under trade agreements like the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement and the US-Vietnam FTA. India's exports to US also grew by \$36.8bn during this period.

This data shows that Trump's tariffs did not boost US manufacturing. Instead, imports grew, with many Chinese goods still reaching US tariff-free through Mexico and Asean countries.

Trump's rise is fuelled by deep economic anxieties among Americans who feel globalisation left them behind. His promise to revive manufacturing and put "America First" secured him a second term.

Trump has consistently criticised trade partners with surpluses against US, ignoring the fact that US can print dollars to sustain its deficits.

US is India's top trading partner, with merchandise exports of \$77.5bn in FY2024. Total bilateral trade in merchandise and services exceeds \$190bn. Many Indian products, such as textiles, garments, and leather, face 15-35% tariffs in US. If US imposes new tariffs, it will surely hurt Indian exports, but Indian countermeasures will hurt US in equal measure.

But, tariffs on India and other countries look almost imminent, as Trump may prioritise appealing to US voters over assessing their actual benefits for America.

The writer heads a research group focused on trade and technology

Capricious Consumers: Greed, Fear & Art Of Spending

Policy wonks don't drive growth or riches. Temptation does, and what consumers take a fancy to – all a complex exercise of reptilian brain

Sivakumar.Sundaram@timesofindia.com

By now, one would imagine the economy is a grand, sophisticated machine, guided by brilliant policymakers, economists with impressive degrees, and central bank governors who – despite their sober suits – hold the fate of nations in their hands. Alas, this is but a charming fiction. The economy, much like a cat in a room full of rocking chairs, is dictated not by policy but by mood & impulse – no, not Trump's. The main drivers are fundamental human emotions of greed and fear.

Let us consider the hapless policymakers who spend their days concocting incentives, tax breaks, and rate cuts, all in a desperate bid to entice, cajole, and provoke the masses into spending their money. But, much like a suitor attempting to woo a capricious lover, they find that consumer sentiment whether on spending or investment follows its own mysterious logic. What else can explain the rise of gold or even the unpredictable crypto. One day, the masses are drunk on optimism, purchasing SUVs the size of small apartments, the next, they are hoarding cash & gold, dumping their investments, like misers in a Victorian novel, convinced the world is going under.

The consumer will always remain monarch without a crown | At the heart of this magnificent global circus stands the consumer, a creature driven by whims and fancies, forever teetering between euphoria and existential dread. He trumps all tariffs and deserves all the *tariffs*. Does the consumer care for a 50 basis points rate cut? Not in the least.

What excites the consumer is the fact that their neighbour just bought a 65-inch OLED television, and now they must have one, too. That is the true nature of demand.

Govts, seeing the consumer's propensity for mindless indulgence, design elaborate fiscal stimuli to 'mobilise spending'. But who are we kidding? Consumers do not need mobilisation – they need temptation. As Oscar Wilde said, the best way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it.

And yet, the cycle of uncertainty continues. The very institutions that encourage consumer spending also fret over inflation, debt, and excess liquidity – as if one can invite the tiger to dinner and then complain that it eats too much.



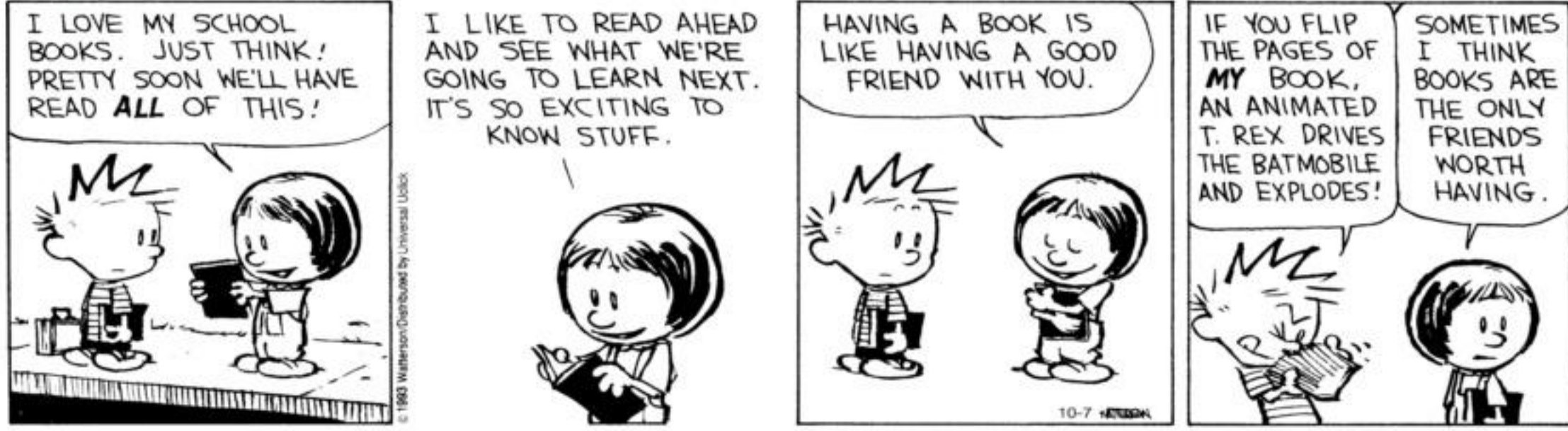
Reptilian economics | Or the primal forces of spending. At its core, the economy is an elaborate psychological experiment in greed and fear, governed by the reptilian brain. The moment markets soar, greed sets in, and everyone – yes, even the most austere saver – turns into an amateur investor, convinced they are the next Warren Buffett. Then, a minor wobble in global markets sends fear coursing through their veins, and suddenly, they are stuffing their savings under the mattress and waiting for financial Armageddon.

So, when central banks cut rates, govt hands back tax breaks, and commodity prices are falling, consumers should be deliriously happy, right? They should be racing to buy everything from luxury cars to imported cheese. But will they? Or will they – like a fickle party guest – suddenly decide they no longer wish to dance?

The grand conspiracy of markets | The bitter truth is that economists do not control the economy – consumers do. And consumers, bless their restless souls, behave not with the precision of an engineer but with the capriciousness of a poet in a watering hole. One moment, they believe in eternal growth and infinite prosperity; the next, they are convinced the world is collapsing.

And so, dear reader, spend as you like – or hoard as you must. Either way, the economy will survive. It always does.

Calvin & Hobbes



The Art Of Love Requires Nurturing

Swami Swaroopananda

The word 'love' is unrivalled as the most misused, misunderstood, and abused word in the world. Infatuation is mistaken for love; fleeting relationships are taken as love; 'I love you' is uttered repeatedly without genuine understanding or insight. We instinctively desire and try to acquire love. Yet, ironically, the deepest disappointments, heartaches, frustrations, and pain are all because of love.

What is this love that we all seek? More often than not, what we label as love is, in reality – attachment. As parents, we believe we truly love our children, yet our love is often tinged with desire and becomes attachment. Difference between love and attachment is simple and clear: attachment is selfish, even if it is a mother's attachment to a child – whenever an untoward incident occurs, the first thought is,

'What will happen to me?' Love, on the other hand, is selfless; attachment causes pain, love brings joy; attachment is about liking *something* in the other; love is about seeing *ourselves* in the other.

Our conventional understanding of love is to fall for someone so intensely that we are ready to fight against our parents, abandon our families, sacrifice our health and careers, and give up everything in a surge of passion. But what happens after marriage? For some, love deepens; for others, it turns bitter. Was this emotion truly love? Is it just an outpouring that eventually fades? Is love merely an intellectual admiration for someone? Or is it something far more profound – something that enriches and ensures the continuity of every relationship?

Of course, our love for family,

parents, children, and spouse is love. However, the pain, grief, and insecurity we experience stem not from love but from attachment. Tragically, we mistake one for the other and, in our disillusionment, stop loving altogether.

Swami Chinmayananda offers four beautiful essentials of love. First, be an active giver of love, not a passive receiver. Give, give, give... for in giving, you are a master; in receiving, a slave. Second, cultivate genuine concern for the beloved – be ever ready to respond to their joys and sorrows. Third, love requires a deep and accurate perception of the other's needs and nature. And finally, love must be rooted in respect – free from any desire to control. Love is not just a feeling, a fancy, or a state of mind; it is an art; it requires nurturing and sustained hard work. To experience the true depth of love,

we must expand our understanding of it. We must consciously strive to keep our hearts open and be as selfless as possible. When our focus shifts from ourselves to the other, love becomes a mirror and a medium for our own growth and joy.

Our sages gave a beautiful definition of love: that which constantly and continuously grows and never diminishes – that alone is love. That which fades or ends is not love but attachment based on mutual give and take. Sadly, this transactional mindset even extends to God. We love the Lord as long as He grants our wishes, but the moment one request goes unfulfilled, we declare, 'I don't believe in God.' We do not have permanent love even for the Permanent.

If we learn and practise these four essential aspects, we will not 'fall' in love – we will 'rise' in love. Love demands nothing. It wants nothing – not even love in return.

Sacredspace

By filling a reservoir, you supply water to all the pipes connected to it. If you pour water at the root of a tree, it will reach all the branches. In the same way, by loving God, we love everyone.

Mata Amritanandamayi

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Defence conundrum

Cutting down on imports a big challenge

IT's intriguing that India continues to be the world's biggest arms importer despite the Modi government's consistent emphasis on self-reliance (*Atmanirbharta*) and indigenous production in the defence sector. In his address at the ongoing Aero India 2025 in Bengaluru, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said the evolving global security scenario demanded innovative approaches and stronger partnerships. But is greater strategic collaboration helping India become a global powerhouse of defence research, development and innovation? Or is it making the country more dependent on foreign manufacturers? These questions need to be addressed with an open mind by the Centre as well as the top brass of the defence forces.

The government's resolve to cut down on arms imports and boost exports is being put to the test by US President Donald Trump. He is insistent that India should buy more US-made security equipment. Trump, who is set to host Prime Minister Modi, wants a 'fair' trading relationship with New Delhi. And he has made no bones about his zealotness to introduce new tariffs on steel and aluminium imports into the US, a move that could hit many Indian companies. India, which is keen on co-production of Stryker combat vehicles and fighter jet engines, needs to ensure that such deals are not skewed in favour of the US.

Russia's preoccupation with the Ukraine war has prompted India to rely less on its traditional defence partner and focus more on acquisitions from Western nations in a bid to diversify supplies. Transfer of technology is a prerequisite for bolstering domestic production in the long run, but some Western firms have shown reluctance on this count. The Defence Minister has asserted that India does not believe in transactional relationships or imposing solutions. However, the same cannot be said with confidence about the country's top partners. New Delhi must judiciously prioritise its strategic interests, striking a balance between indigenous capacity-building and its 'Make for the world' aspirations.

Justice delayed

SC calls out lax prosecution in 1984 riot cases

OVER four decades have passed, but for the victims of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots, time has not dulled the wounds of injustice. The Supreme Court's remarks on Monday questioning the Delhi police's laxity in prosecuting cases — especially their failure to challenge acquittals — highlight a troubling reality: justice for the victims remains elusive. Out of the 650 registered cases, charge-sheets were filed in only 362 cases, and convictions secured in a mere 39. The rest — more than 300 — resulted in acquittals, many unchallenged by the prosecution. The apex court's observation that "prosecution must be carried out seriously, not just for the sake of it" underscores a decades-long pattern of neglect. When the Justice Dhingra Committee — which was set up following a PIL filed by former Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee member Gurlad Singh Kahlon — found in 2020 that several investigations had been derailed, there was a flicker of hope for accountability. Yet, even now, the appeals against acquittals seem more perfunctory than purposeful.

For survivors, the trauma is not just about the horror they witnessed but also the systemic betrayal that followed. Statements given in court paint a grim picture — families torn apart, homes burned and a justice system that remains indifferent. The Supreme Court's intervention offers a chance to correct past wrongs, but will it amount to real action? The Delhi police's excuse of "lack of evidence" after nearly four decades is an indictment of their own inefficiency, if not complicity.

Justice cannot be an afterthought or a delayed formality. The court's scrutiny must translate into concrete steps — proper legal representation, fresh investigations where needed, and, above all, an unwavering commitment to ensuring that the guilty do not walk free. Until then, the victims of 1984 will continue to wait for a closure that seems forever out of reach.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 12, 1925

Indian exchange and currency

AMONG the motions recently passed by the Legislative Assembly was one by Vanakatpathi Raju for the immediate appointment of a committee with a majority of non-officials and with an Indian Chairman to examine the question of exchange and currency in the light of the experience gained since the Babington-Smith Committee submitted its report and to make recommendations as to the best policy to secure a system of currency and exchange most suited to the interests of India. The question is a very important one, as it vitally concerns the economic wellbeing of India and the improvement of India's trade, which is, to no small extent, affected by the recent changes in the position of exchange in Europe and America. Those who have followed the exchange variations and their effect on trade within the past four months have been anxiously looking for a favourable opportunity of effecting necessary reforms in the Indian currency policy so as to establish stable and reliable conditions. Raju's resolution asked for an immediate move in this direction and suggested the appointment of a committee which could be expected to effectively express the Indian view. Unfortunately, on this question, the Indian view differs from the European and Anglo-Indian view, as it has nearly always differed in the past, owing to the vested interests of European traders and capitalists in India being or supposed to be in conflict with the interests of India herself. This is why Raju insisted on an Indian majority and an Indian Chairman in the proposed committee.

ISRO's indigenous thrust gets a fillip

Equipped with re-ignition capability, cryogenic engine set to power spacecraft on ambitious missions



ON February 7, the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) successfully tested the re-ignition of the made-in-India CE20 cryogenic engine in space-like vacuum conditions at the ISRO Propulsion Complex, Mahendragiri, Tamil Nadu. This is another remarkable milestone in ISRO's saga of indigenous cryogenic technology.

Most of us turn off the motor while driving down a slope and let gravity accelerate us downward. We restart the engine and continue driving as we approach the foothill. Similarly, to place satellites in various orbits or for intricate interplanetary missions, we must turn on the cryogenic engine mid-flight, after a period of days or months. For example, a lander mission to Mars will require the engine to be turned on after roughly 10 months. Currently, ISRO has only one engine, the Liquid Apogee Motor, which can be re-ignited and powered by liquid fuel.

In the trial, the upgraded CE20-U engine worked as planned under fuel tank pressure conditions expected to prevail while restarting mid-flight. ISRO will make additional alterations and perform step-by-step trials before rolling out the CE20-U engine for the next-generation launch vehicle.

When released, pressurised air exits a balloon, thus propelling it in the opposite direction. This illustrates the basic rocket principle, known as Newton's third law. Likewise, if hot gas can be generated and released from a nozzle, the rocket can be made to propel forward in the opposite direction. Combustion requires fuel and



MILESTONE: The recent launch of the NVS-02 navigation satellite marked ISRO's 100th mission. PTI

oxygen, which are referred to as propellants. Rocket propellants are of three types: solid, liquid and gaseous. Instead of a solid propellant, one might utilise kerosene and a suitable oxidiser as fuel. This is a liquid propellant rocket. Solids and liquids are less voluminous than gases. In normal temperature and pressure, the amount of water in its vapour stage will take up 16 times the space it would take in its liquid state. As a result, gaseous fuels must be cooled to liquefy them before they can be used as rocket fuel. That is cryogenic fuel.

The term 'cryo' means ice-cold or chilled. Cryogenics is the science and technology of substances at temperatures below -153°C, the boiling point of methane. The most common cryogenic propellants are hydrogen liquefied at -253°C as fuel and oxygen liquefied at -183°C as oxidiser. When liquefied hydrogen and liquefied oxygen combine, they are highly reactive and produce steam.

The lighter the gas, the lesser the energy required to accelerate it. As hydrogen is the lightest of the atoms, we can use it as fuel and liquid oxygen as an oxidiser to achieve more thrust per kilogramme of fuel, making it ideal for space travel. Cryogenic rockets are critical for deep space

The US, Russia, Japan, India, France and China are the few countries operating cryogenic rocket engines.

missions such as lunar landings and interplanetary probes and for putting larger payloads into geostationary orbit 36,000 km above earth's surface.

The US, Russia, Japan, India, France and China are the only countries operating cryogenic rocket engines. These engines are used only in the upper stage of the vehicle and operate beyond the earth's atmosphere after the vehicle has entered space. According to international consensus, anything more than 100 km beyond the earth's surface is considered space.

If cryogenics are more efficient, why not use them immediately at liftoff? The high efficiency of cryogenic engines is not suitable for the initial launch stages, where more raw power is

required to overcome gravity.

Once the red light turns green, you try to go as fast as possible. You need fuel with good pickup. However, while driving long distances on a motorway, a fuel-efficient engine benefits your wallet and the environment. Petrol vehicles have a higher initial pickup than diesel cars, but the latter have more pulling power and mileage. Similarly, the launch vehicle must overcome inertia, climb into the sky, race against gravity's gripping hands and then overcome atmospheric drag. Solid or liquid fuel with a powerful thrust is the best option. However, once there is no atmospheric resistance in space, the vehicle is already propelling, and a fuel-efficient engine provides superior mileage.

The Soviets and the Americans fought to create more efficient launch vehicles capable of putting heavier spacecraft into orbit, reaching the moon, and undertaking interplanetary travel. The RL10, which debuted in 1963, was the first cryogenic rocket engine built in the US. It was utilised in the Saturn 1 rocket during the early stages of the Apollo moon landing mission and still powers US launch vehicles.

The Soviets designed the RD-56, also known as the 11D56, at

about the same time in 1964. They shifted their focus from fully cryogenic to semi-cryogenic, developing the powerful RD-180, which used liquid kerosene and liquefied oxygen as launch propellants. In parallel, the Soviets developed a better-designed cryogenic engine, the KVD-1, that was sold to India.

By the 1990s, ISRO was looking for cryogenic technology and had initially approached Japan and the US. The engines were far too pricey. Meanwhile, the Soviets were eager not only to sell their KVD-1 engines but also to transfer knowledge, allowing ISRO to manufacture and produce its own cryogenic engines at a significantly lower cost than that quoted by US corporations.

In the following months, the Soviet Union collapsed and the US exerted pressure on Russia not to export the technology, claiming that India might use it as a nuclear missile. The argument was flimsy because missiles must be ready for launch in seconds, while cryogenic engines require at least 24 hours of fuelling. It was a hypocritical irony because the US came forward only months ago to sell engines at significantly higher prices. The Russians honoured their word and delivered six engines, but they could not impart technology due to the American embargo.

Slapped with the ban, ISRO learnt from the six engines and created its own cryogenic engine, CE20. The Indian design is not a replica, as the Russian engines are staged combustion engines, but the made-in-India CE20 are gas-generator cycle engines. After years of hard labour, the CE20-powered LVM3 launch vehicle delivered the GSAT-19 into geostationary transfer orbit on June 5, 2017. The engine was fitted in the Chandrayaan 2 and 3 launch vehicles. The human-rated engine will assist Indian astronauts in reaching orbit during the Gaganyaan expedition. With re-ignition capability, the CE20 engine will power Indian spacecraft on ambitious interplanetary missions.

“ We have become a nation that is respected for our technological capabilities. — APJ Abdul Kalam ”

Misadventures on the tech front

ARCHIT WATTS

TECHNOLOGY is simply indispensable in today's world, but it doesn't always simplify life. Sometimes, it leaves us red-faced and gives us a 'hold my beer moment'.

One of my friends started using an app for translation as part of his official work. One day, he translated a document from Punjabi to Hindi with the help of artificial intelligence (AI). When he read it, he first laughed and then thanked God that he was able to spot the blunder. The document he translated contained the surname of a senior officer, which was incorrectly translated as 'chiknanyi' (greasiness). Had he overlooked it, his job would have slipped out of his hands — just like some greasy object.

Recently, another friend shared his horrendous experience with a speech-to-text app. While texting his colleagues, he said, "Finish your job and message me in the evening." However, the app misunderstood and changed it to "Finish your job and massage me in the evening." Luckily, someone informed him immediately, and the error was rectified before things got awkward. But imagine the flood of weird looks he would have got!

And then there are autocorrected messages, which often turn out to be loose cannons. Some new mothers have complained that Alexa played indecent content instead of what they expected — baby videos.

It is difficult to survive without technology. It is everywhere, right from powering our smartphones to driving our cars. Therefore, close monitoring of the tasks it performs is vital. It doesn't matter how advanced our technology is or will become; AI can be a force multiplier only with human intelligence (HI). For example, the global positioning system (GPS) powered by AI sometimes takes us to the wrong address or shows a lengthy route that could be just a five-minute drive.

Anyway, both AI and HI can learn from each other and improve over time. AI can handle large-scale data processing and automate tasks, but human judgment is vital for ensuring accuracy and appropriateness. This synergy between AI and HI allows us to harness the full potential of technology while mitigating risks — like ending up with 'massage' requests instead of professional ones.

In essence, while AI can greatly enhance efficiency and capabilities, the role of human or natural intelligence in reviewing and guiding its outputs cannot be overemphasised. Both AI and HI must continue to learn from each other to advance and improve. Humans are not perfect — nor are machines.

Technology is a blessing and a curse too. It's mostly a blessing, but we will need a few more advancements before we can implicitly trust it to send out professional texts without the dangerous 'grease' factor.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Legalising MSP problematic

The legalisation of MSP for wheat and paddy can have long-term implications. Strict quality standards will be enforced by the Food Corporation of India, which will only accept Fair Average Quality (FAQ) produce. This means that any crop with excess moisture, foreign matter, varietal admixture, shrivelled grains or diseases will face severe price cuts or outright rejection. These deductions will significantly reduce the actual price farmers receive, leading to financial setbacks instead of gains. Furthermore, unpredictable weather conditions and fungal diseases could further complicate the situation. In 1977, untimely rains led to widespread crop damage, but the Punjab Government was able to intervene in procurement. However, under a legal MSP framework, even the state government will be unable to bypass strict procurement rules, making it difficult to support farmers in distress. Farmers must reconsider the demand. Legal MSP may introduce challenges that outweigh the expected benefits.

MANMOHAN SINGH, CHANDIGARH

Global strategy for AI

Refer to 'AI summit'; AI is a double-edged sword raising the spectre of mass unemployment, deepfake manipulation, cyber warfare and autonomous weaponry. No single nation, however powerful, can unilaterally contain these perils; AI governance demands a unified global strategy. The Paris AI Action Summit has underscored the necessity of cross-border cooperation to establish ethical guardrails, ensuring responsible innovation. Without a binding international framework, the AI race will spiral into chaos, exacerbating inequality and geopolitical instability. Nations must resist the lure of unchecked competition and commit to collaborative governance, securing AI as a force for progress rather than a menace.

BALBIR SINGH KAKKAR, JALANDHAR

Big data centres required

Apologies of 'AI summit'; it is encouraging that several countries gathered in Paris on a single platform to safely and sustainably utilise AI's potential in a variety of fields. The exponential growth of data generation necessitates the need for data computation skills, big data centres to store large amounts of data and, most impor-

tantly, less expensive energy sources to maintain data centres. India possesses the necessary skills, but it will require technological cooperation with developed countries to establish such sizeable centres in India.

HARVINDER SINGH CHUGH, JALANDHAR

Restore trust deficit in Manipur

Apologies of 'Too little, too late'; Manipur CM Biren Singh's decision to resign came after the Supreme Court's intervention. He seemed to have seen the writing on the wall. With no clear consensus on his successor, the Centre might impose President's rule. The crucial question is how to address the Meitei-Kuki ethnic conflict. The immediate priority for the Central leadership must be the swift disarmament of insurgent groups to curb violence. However, the larger goal is to restore the lost trust between Kukis and Meiteis.

PL SINGH, BY MAIL

Centre must do more

With reference to 'Too little, too late'; Biren Singh continued as Chief Minister despite the fact that Manipur burnt for 21 months under his watch speaks of indifference not only on his part but also his political masters in New Delhi. Far from dousing the flames of discord among two major sections of Manipuris, Biren played a partisan role in the conflict, fanning the flames by standing resolutely behind his Meitei community. His exit is a positive development but there is much more to be done. The initiative has to come first from the Centre.

GREGORY FERNANDES, MUMBAI

AAP needs to do groundwork

Arvind Kejriwal's decision to summon all Punjab AAP MLAs to Delhi after his party's defeat in the Capital raises important questions. Shifting focus from Delhi to Punjab seems concerning. Punjab's voters elected AAP with high expectations. Interference from the Delhi leadership will undermine the autonomy of the Punjab Government. It would appear like an extension of AAP's central command. Kejriwal and his team should prioritise on-ground engagement in Punjab. Strengthening local leadership and addressing governance challenges will help more than holding discussions.

KAVNEET KAUR, LUDHIANA

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit. These should be cogently written and can be sent by e-mail to: Letters@tribunemail.com

Pulwama marked a shift in war against terror

LT GEN DUSHYANT SINGH (RETD)
DG, CENTRE FOR LAND
WARFARE STUDIES

ON a winding stretch of the Jammu-Srinagar highway, a convoy of 78 vehicles carrying 2,500 CRPF personnel was making its way to Srinagar on February 14, 2019. Among them were 40 bravehearts of the 76th CRPF Battalion. Unnoticed by the troops, a Mahindra Scorpio packed with 200 kg of explosives, driven by 22-year-old Adil Ahmad Dar — a suicide bomber from the Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) — rammed into one of the buses. The explosion killed 40 soldiers, marking one of the deadliest attacks on Indian security forces in decades.

This was not the first time that India faced such brutality. The 2016 Pathankot airbase attack, the 2018 Uri terror strike and the horrific 26/11 Mumbai attacks were all grim reminders of Pakistan's proxy war against India.

However, Pulwama became the inflection point that tested India's strategic

patience. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's statement after the attack reflected the nation's resolve: "Security forces have been given full freedom to choose the time and place for the future course of action. Terrorists have made a big mistake and will pay a heavy price."

The Pulwama attack forced India to rethink its counterterrorism strategy. For decades, Pakistan had waged a proxy war, bleeding India with "a thousand cuts."

While diplomatic efforts to isolate Pakistan globally were initiated, the national leadership, including the military, believed a stronger response was necessary. The challenge was to act decisively despite the nuclear dynamics between the two nations.

India had to move beyond reactive approaches, overcoming bureaucratic inertia, intelligence gaps and predictable military response.

Addressing the root causes of radicalisation in Jammu and Kashmir and transforming governance in the region became critical.

The abrogation of Articles 370 and 35A in August 2019 was a watershed moment. It revoked J&K's special status, extended the jurisdiction of Central agencies, and allowed them to target terror funding, money-laundering and other activities that fuelled terrorism. The state was also bifurcated into two union territories — Jammu & Kashmir and



TURNING POINT: The Pulwama attack was one of the deadliest on Indian security forces. PTI

Ladakh — further integrating the region with the rest of the country.

India's desire for a proactive counterterrorism strategy has often been hindered by several barriers.

First, geopolitical constraints, including Pakistan's alleged support for militant groups and the nuclear deterrence dynamics, have historically limited India's options.

Second, intelligence gaps — due to inadequate human intelligence, poor coordination and technological limitations — have made preempting attacks difficult.

Third, legal and institutional hurdles, such as delays in implementing counterterrorism laws and reforms, have slowed progress. For instance, the proposal for a

India must transform its information operations to counter Pakistan's propaganda effectively.

National Counter-Terrorism Centre (NCTC) after the 26/11 attacks remains stuck in bureaucratic red-tape.

Finally, anti-India propaganda fuelled by Pakistan and supported by internal actors, like the Hurriyat Conference, and overground workers has complicated efforts to balance public demand for swift retaliation with long-term strategic goals.

Post 2014, India began to adopt a more assertive approach. Surgical strikes across the Line of Control (LoC) in 2016 and 2019 demonstrated India's willingness to use military force.

Diplomatic efforts to isolate Pakistan and designate terrorists gained momentum.

However, Pulwama demanded an even

stronger response.

On February 26, 2019, the Indian Air Force conducted airstrikes on a JeM training camp in Balakot, Pakistan. This marked the first use of air power against Pakistan since 1971 and signalled a significant shift in India's strategy.

The strikes, which killed hundreds of terrorists, effectively called Pakistan's nuclear bluff and raised the threshold for India's response to terrorism.

Pakistan retaliated with airstrikes on Indian military targets, leading to a dogfight in which India lost a MiG-21 Bison and its pilot. Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman was captured, but not before he had shot down a much superior aircraft in terms of capability, the F-16 of the Pakistani Air Force.

However, combined pressure from India and the international community forced Pakistan to release him.

While India achieved strategic surprise and deterred Pakistan from major terror attacks since Pulwama, the operation also highlighted the need for better perception management.

India must transform its information operations to counter Pakistan's propaganda effectively.

Despite moving down the global terrorism index, India's challenges are far from over. With two hostile neighbours who act in a collusive manner against India

and the evolving terror tactics, the threat persists. Groups like the LeT and the JeM have rebranded as "The Resistance Front", while lone-wolf attacks, fuelled by social media radicalisation, are on the rise.

To counter these threats, India must invest in advanced intelligence technologies, improve inter-agency coordination and strengthen regional cooperation with countries like Afghanistan and Central Asian states. Hard power options, including punitive actions akin to those taken by Israel or the US, must remain on the table.

At the same time, India must balance counterterrorism measures with respect for human rights and civil liberties.

The Pulwama attack was a turning point in India's fight against terrorism. It shattered old mindsets and forced India to adopt a more proactive and multi-dimensional approach. The abrogation of Articles 370 and 35A, the Balakot airstrikes, and the integration of J&K into the Union Territory framework, were bold steps that redefined India's counterterrorism strategy.

While significant progress has been made, the road ahead remains fraught with challenges. India's ability to adapt, innovate and respond decisively will determine its success in securing its future from the menace of terrorism.

Balancing conservation and livelihoods in HP's forests

PRAKASH BHANDARI
CO-FOUNDER, HIMDHARA,
PALAMPUR, HP

THE longstanding issue of forest land occupation for agriculture and habitation in Himachal Pradesh remains unresolved. In its order on July 17, 2024, the Shimla High Court stated that encroachments on forest land cannot be regularised by the state government without approval from the Central government under the Forest Conservation Act, 1980. Following this, a series of eviction orders were issued.

In Himachal Pradesh, where two-thirds of the geographical area is classified as forest land and 90 per cent of the population resides in rural areas surrounded by forests, the dependence of communities on forest resources for survival and livelihoods is undeniable.

With agricultural land comprising only about 10 per cent of the total area and the average landholding size being less than one hectare, access to land

remains a critical issue.

Under the Land Regularisation Policy of 2002, approximately 1.67 lakh families applied to legalise their occupation of forest land.

Additionally, land settlement records indicate a significant number of unauthorised occupations. For example, during the 1989 land settlement in Spiti, over 1,200 cases of *najayaz kabza* (unauthorised occupation) were recorded, representing nearly 50 per cent of the total households.

To address the situation, the state government decided to intervene in the *Godavaram* case pending before the Supreme Court of India — a move that is only partially welcome.

While some aspects of this intervention align with the interests of the affected communities, concerns remain regarding the true intent and effectiveness of the government's approach in protecting the people who are facing eviction.

The government's decision to approach the Supreme Court to exclude the allotable pool and certain other land categories from the definition of forests is a crucial step. If the state secures relief, it could facilitate the allocation of land to landless families and those displaced by natural disasters.



SURVIVAL ISSUE: In HP, two-thirds of the area is forest land and 90% of the people live in rural areas surrounded by forests. Their dependence on forests for livelihoods is undeniable. TRIBUNE PHOTO

When implemented effectively, this move could help address land scarcity and support the vulnerable communities in need of rehabilitation.

However, the proposal to de-reserve certain land categories should not rely solely on revenue records. It must also include an assessment of the actual physical and ecological status of the land.

It will be necessary to present a well-founded argument, demonstrating that this will not cause any harm to the existing forest areas and that it will prevent new conflicts and eco-

The HP govt must demonstrate the political will to implement the Forest Rights Act effectively to safeguard livelihoods and justice for those facing eviction.

logical impacts.

This requires a cautious approach as the Supreme Court, in its order from February last year, ruled that the definition of "forest" would continue to have a broad and all-encompassing meaning, including 1.97 lakh square km of undeclared forest land.

The government's other decision to get the permission of the Supreme Court to conduct a forest settlement under the Indian Forest Act, 1927 (IFA), appears unnecessary. The Central government has already enacted the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006, the very

purpose of which was to address the anomalies of the settlement processes under the IFA. It explicitly acknowledges the failure, terming it as a "historical injustice" to forest-dependent communities.

We don't need to reinvent the wheel to settle the rights under the IFA. Instead of seeking the suspension of the Forest Conservation Act, 1980, to conduct the forest settlement process under the IFA, 1927, the focus should be on the proper implementation of the Forest Rights Act, 2006, which was specifically designed to recognise and safeguard the rights of forest dwellers.

Forests in India are governed by the Indian Forest Act and the Wildlife Protection Act (WPA). Seeking forest settlement solely under the IFA will not fully serve the purpose.

In Himachal Pradesh, many national parks and wildlife sanctuaries were declared without properly settling the rights of the forest-dependent communities. The case of settling 53 habitation rights in the Kalatop Wildlife Sanctuary, Dalhousie (Chamba), under the FRA highlights this issue.

To address such historical oversight, the state government must advocate for the recognition of the rights provided under the Forest

Rights Act, which applies to all types of forest land.

The government must demonstrate the political will to implement the FRA effectively to safeguard livelihoods and justice for those facing eviction.

It should first intervene in the high court, where it is already a party, and request time for the FRA implementation to protect the eligible right-holders from eviction.

Delaying action under the pretext of the Supreme Court intervention, while neglecting the available legal recourse, merely shifts responsibility and leaves the vulnerable communities without protection or justice.

The rights of people and forest conservation must go hand in hand. A well-balanced approach — one that safeguards livelihoods while ensuring communities take responsibility for conserving the natural resources they depend on — can be achieved through the legal framework provided by the Forest Rights Act.

This will help uphold both the rights of the forest dwellers and the integrity of the forests.

The government must act now to not only protect the rights of those who rely on forests for their survival but also uphold justice and sustainability in forest governance.

QUICK CROSSWORD

ACROSS
1 In a helpless position (4,3,3)
6 Public attention (4)
10 Viral disease causing paralysis (5)
11 An adherent (9)
12 Roused to protest hotly (2,2,4)
13 Female sovereign (5)
15 Clear enough to be read (7)
17 Contributing factor (7)
19 Release boat from moorings (4,3)
21 Session (7)
22 Evil spirit (5)
24 Rogue (8)
27 South American country (9)
28 To cap (5)
29 Detestation (4)
30 No longer of use (2,3,5)

DOWN
1 Feel fairly confident (4)
2 Islands, home of giant tortoises (9)
3 Fruit of oak (5)
4 Be worthy of (7)
5 Quick sharp reply (7)
7 Name of a book (5)
8 Eager for some activity (6,2,2)
9 Subjugation (8)
14 14th-century pandemic plague (5,5)
16 Husband-and-wife English poets (8)
18 Point above earthquake's focus (9)
20 Vogue (7)
21 A green vegetable (7)
23 Bodily strength (5)
25 Impurities (5)
26 Game of Scottish origin (4)

Yesterday's solution
Across: 1 Algebra, 5 Prior, 8 Sub judice, 9 Tug, 10 Each, 12 Crescent, 14 Static, 15 Unway, 17 Bulletin, 18 Skid, 21 Rut, 22 Ham-fisted, 24 Sinew, 25 Lozenge.
Down: 1 Aisle, 2 Gab, 3 Bout, 4 Aviary, 5 Pheasant, 6 In the dark, 7 Rightly, 11 Charlatan, 13 Sideshow, 14 Suburbs, 16 Dismal, 19 Dodge, 20 Fizz, 23 Tin.

SU DO KU

HARD

FORECAST

SUNSET:	WEDNESDAY	18:08 HRS
SUNRISE:	THURSDAY	07:05 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	26	09
New Delhi	27	11
Amritsar	22	08
Bathinda	25	09
Jalandhar	23	07
Ludhiana	25	10
Bhiwani	25	10
Hisar	26	10
Sirsa	25	10
Dharamsala	20	03
Manali	16	01
Shimla	18	05
Srinagar	12	02
Jammu	22	10
Kargil	-01	-13
Leh	0	-14
Dehradun	24	08
Mussoorie	15	07

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

CALENDAR
FEBRUARY 12, 2025, WEDNESDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1946
- Magh Shaka 23
- Phalgun Parvishite 1
- Hijari 1446
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 15, up to 7:23 pm
- Saubhagya Yoga up to 8:07 am
- Aashle Nakshatra up to 7:36 pm
- Moon enters Leo sign 7:36 pm
- Magh Purnima
- Phalgun Sankranti
- Shri Guru Ravidass Jyanti

A push for AI and defence

The Prime Minister Modi's France visit underscores a shared vision on technological innovation and global stability

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to France marked a significant chapter in Indo-French relations, focusing on advancements in artificial intelligence (AI), defence collaboration and honouring shared historical ties. AI Action Summit co-hosted by President Emmanuel Macron and Prime Minister Modi convened global leaders, tech industry executives and researchers to deliberate on the ethical deployment of AI and its potential benefits for the society. The summit aimed to position France and India at the forefront of the AI revolution, emphasising the need for responsible and democratic AI governance. Notable outcome of the summit was the announcement of the 'Current AI' partnership, a public-interest initiative with an initial investment of \$400 million. This partnership seeks to provide open-source access to databases, software, and tools for trusted AI actors, promoting the use of AI in addressing global challenges such as healthcare and environmental sustainability.



In a groundbreaking development, France is in advanced discussions to procure India's domestically developed Pinaka multi-barrel rocket launcher system. This potential deal signifies a shift in defence dynamics, as it would be the first instance of one of India's major arms suppliers purchasing Indian-made weaponry. The Pinaka system, with a range of up to 90 km, has been demonstrated to a French delegation and met with positive feedback. During his visit, Prime Minister Modi paid tribute to Indian soldiers who sacrificed their lives in the World Wars by visiting the Mazargues War Cemetery in Marseille. This gesture underscored the deep historical ties between India

and France and highlighted the shared values and sacrifices that bind the two nations. The visit also marked a milestone in diplomatic outreach with the inauguration of India's first consulate in Marseille. This move is expected to bolster bilateral relations, facilitate consular services for the Indian diaspora, and enhance cultural and economic exchanges between the two countries. Prime Minister Modi and President Macron reviewed progress on the Horizon 2047 Roadmap, an initiative launched in 2023 to chart the course of Indo-French relations up to 2047. The roadmap focuses on collaboration in key sectors such as nuclear energy, defence and technology, aiming to strengthen the strategic partnership between the two nations. Engaging in global AI dialogues and partnerships positions India to harness AI for public good, addressing challenges in healthcare, agriculture and education. The prospective sale of the Pinaka system to France not only boosts India's defence exports but also signifies international recognition of India's indigenous defence manufacturing capabilities. The inauguration of the consulate in Marseille and the review of the Horizon 2047 Roadmap reflect India's commitment to deepening bilateral ties with France, fostering cooperation across various sectors.

PICTALK



Farmers pluck Gladiolus flowers at an orchard, in Nadia

PTI

The comfort of relationships that need no validation

Let's free our relationships from the weight of constant maintenance, trusting that true bonds don't fade in silence but grow stronger in the depths of our affection

This is a sequel to my column of last week, wherein I underlined the need for us to stay in touch with people to build a robust circle of love, care, and compassion around us. The article, which was lauded by many, also raised a slew of questions. What do people who don't genuinely find the time to make calls and retain personal connections in a tangible way do? They accepted the merits of what I had highlighted in the column but doubted if, in this age when generations are passing in a jiffy and the race to the finish line seems to go on forever, we could squeeze in little niceties like making a call or strengthening our links with people by going beyond pleasantries. I was even asked if I have been able to maintain relationships in the manner I had suggested. The answer is, "No, I haven't been able to keep pace with my growing connections," but there is something that I do in order to spare myself the guilt of not calling people as often as I would like: keep them close to my heart even when there is prolonged silence, and when the oppor-



tunity to meet them or speak to them knocks, pick it up from where we had left off the last time, without complaints or frowns. Now, that's a different equation altogether, and not all are primed to keep up incognito relationships where love and care thrive even without regular check-ins. We look for reinforcements and reassurances, and when they aren't forthcoming, tend to blame it on the other for their lack of affinity. I have many connections where the foundations of the association are so firm and deep-rooted that no time or space can dislodge us from each other's lives. Months and years may pass, but when we meet, it is as if the bond has only grown stronger and our love for each other more pristine, untouched by the patina of time.

Why can't we allow our social bonds the freedom to exist without yoking them to formalities? Why don't we come to terms with the fact that there is no lack of love, but each one of us is just bogged down by the demands of life in the fast lane? There is an unspoken comfort in relationships that do not demand constant validation. Some bonds flourish in silence, in the spaces between meetings, in the warmth that lingers even when words are absent. It is a reassuring truth that not all relationships require the crutch of routine communication to remain strong. Yet, the modern mind struggles to accept this form of connection, often mistaking silence for indifference and distance for detachment. In an age where instant responses are expected, where friendships are measured in the currency of texts and calls, we have begun to equate attention with affection and availability with authenticity. And when someone does not reach out as often as we desire, we assume they have relegated us to the margins of their lives. The expectation that rela-

tionships must be constantly tended to, like fragile saplings that require perpetual watering, stems from a fear of being forgotten. But relationships built on mutual respect and a deep-seated connection are not fragile; they are resilient. Perhaps, instead of lamenting the lack of frequent contact, we should cherish the moments when reconnections happen naturally, without resentment or reproach. True companionship does not wilt under the weight of time—it endures, sustained by the simple yet profound act of keeping someone close in thought and heart. So let us release our relationships from the burden of constant upkeep. Let us trust that genuine bonds, once formed, do not wither in silence but gather strength in the depths of our affection. And when the moment to reconnect arrives, let it be a celebration of love that time could never diminish. This, perhaps, is the only way we can realign our relationships with the changing world. (The author is a Dubai-based columnist and children's writing coach. She has published six books. Views are personal)



ASHA IYER KUMAR

The US humanitarian legacy under siege

USAID faces an existential crisis as the Trump administration's aggressive restructuring and Elon Musk's vocal opposition threaten its very survival

USAID, long regarded as a pillar of American humanitarian aid and soft power, now finds itself embroiled in an existential crisis that threatens its very survival. Founded in 1961 by President John F Kennedy, the agency has historically been at the forefront of global development efforts, providing critical support in areas such as food security, healthcare, and economic development. Over the decades, USAID has built a complex legacy—on one hand, saving millions of lives through vaccination programmes, disaster relief, and poverty alleviation initiatives, while on the other, facing criticism for allegedly serving as a tool for American political influence and intervention abroad.

Now, under the Trump administration's aggressive restructuring plans and the unexpected involvement of billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk, USAID's future hangs precariously in the balance. At the centre of this upheaval is the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), a newly created federal body with a mandate to streamline government operations by cutting budgets, eliminating inefficiencies, and reducing the federal workforce.

With its expansive global footprint and substantial funding, USAID has become a prime target. The Trump administration, which has already frozen the majority of foreign aid programs, is pushing to either drastically curtail USAID's power or absorb it into the State Department—an action that would effectively end its independent operation.

The situation reached a boiling point when DOGE agents attempted to force their way into USAID's Washington, DC headquarters, leading to a tense standoff with security personnel. Eventually, the agents gained access to USAID's control systems, locked out employees, and combed through internal communications. Allegations have since surfaced that DOGE operatives were attempting to seize classified documents, though the department has denied any wrongdoing. The ease with

which USAID's offices were infiltrated has raised troubling concerns about the security of other government institutions. Elon Musk, known for his ventures in electric vehicles, space exploration, artificial intelligence, and social media, has emerged as one of USAID's most vocal critics. He has publicly labelled the agency a "criminal organisation" and a "viper's nest" of corruption, accusing it of funding radical leftist causes and supporting groups that oppose American interests. Musk has called for the complete dismantling of USAID, arguing that American taxpayers should not be footing the bill for foreign aid that, in his view, does not serve the nation's interests. While President Trump has not explicitly endorsed Musk's rhetoric, sources within the administration suggest that his views have influenced internal discussions about USAID's future. Signs of this shift are already visible—nearly 100 USAID employees have been placed on administrative leave, including two security officers who attempted to prevent DOGE's entry. Additionally, the agency's website and official X (formerly Twitter) account have been taken offline, signalling that a fundamental transformation is



THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION, WHICH HAS ALREADY FROZEN THE MAJORITY OF FOREIGN AID PROGRAMS, IS PUSHING TO EITHER DRASTICALLY CURTAIL USAID'S POWER OR ABSORB IT INTO THE STATE DEPARTMENT



underway. If these trends continue, USAID's six-decade existence may soon come to an unceremonious end. The ramifications of this crisis extend far beyond the political infighting in Washington, DC. USAID operates in over 50 countries, funding programs that provide clean water, healthcare, sanitation, and communities. At the same time, India has increasingly scrutinised foreign-funded NGOs, with the Modi administration tightening restrictions on organisations perceived as meddling in domestic affairs. In this light, a reduced USAID presence may align with India's push for self-reliance. Moreover, as the US pulls back from global aid commitments, India may see an opportunity to expand its influence in South Asia, filling the void left by Washington's retreat. The broader question at stake is what role the United States intends to play in the world moving forward. Should it continue investing in foreign aid as a means of exercising global leadership, or should it prioritise a more insular, America-first approach? Supporters of USAID argue that America's strength is not merely derived from military power but also from its ability to assist those in need.

A retreat from humanitarian efforts would create a vacuum that rival powers—especially China—are eager to exploit. Beijing has already made significant inroads through its Belt and Road Initiative, offering infrastructure financing and economic partnerships to nations that might otherwise have sought aid from Washington. If the US abandons its foreign aid commitments, it risks ceding valuable influence to geopolitical competitors.

The coming months will determine whether USAID's fate is sealed or if political resistance will salvage some version of the agency. What is certain, however, is that this is not just a bureaucratic dispute—it is a battle over the values that America chooses to uphold. If humanitarian aid is sacrificed in favour of a purely transactional foreign policy, the consequences will reverberate not only in the nations that once relied on US assistance but within America itself.

The world is watching, and history will judge whether this moment signifies the decline of American global responsibility or the dawn of a more ruthless, self-serving era in US foreign policy.

(Amal Chandra is an author, political analyst, and columnist; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

PM MODI ENCOURAGES STUDENTS

Madam — Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in the eighth edition of Pariksha Pe Charcha, imparted the invaluable mantra of confidence and positive thinking to students. He emphasised that exams are merely a milestone, not the final destination of life. They serve as a powerful medium to assess one's knowledge and preparation. Encouraging students, Modi advised them to master the art of handling mental pressure, just as a skilled batsman focuses on the next ball despite the loud cheers of the audience. This initiative reflects that the nation's leadership is not confined to policies alone but is also deeply concerned about the bright future of the younger generation. He urged parents not to compare their children with others and to stop treating them merely as a means of performance evaluation. Every child is unique and should be encouraged according to their individual capabilities. Highlighting the importance of mental balance, a healthy diet and adequate rest, Modi introduced students to the art of effective time management and emphasised that every student deserves the opportunity to fulfil their dreams. The Prime Minister encouraged students to focus on their studies without stress and to challenge themselves continuously. This interactive session not only helps students overcome the fear of exams but also instils confidence in them, fostering a positive outlook on life.

R K Jain | Barwani

ROHIT SHARMA BACK IN FORM

Madam — Form is temporary, class is permanent was at last proved by the Indian skipper Rohit Sharma by his scintillating century at Cuttack against England in the second ODI, which has come at the appropriate time by winning the match with a series lead. However big a player is, self-confidence matters most when it comes to a comeback when in a bad patch. The board and the selection panel have given more than the required time for Rohit to perform. He must be thankful for

Security forces kill 31 Naxalites



In another successful encounter, security officers killed 31 Naxalites in Bijapur district of Bastar division in Chhattisgarh, which is regarded as a den of red terrorism. The magnitude of the success in the recent elimination spree of the security forces against the Naxalites proves that Left Wing Extremism is heading to its end in the country. Their dream of establishing a red corridor from Nepal to Andhra Pradesh has been devastated

the selectors to repose faith in him. It will be prudent for Rohit to keep the past memories aside and ascertain his position as an invincible hitman to bring the ICC Champions Trophy for Team India as his next milestone. The upright decision to have included the mystery spinner Varun Chakravarthy for the second ODI has been a success when he made the breakthrough to begin with by adding salt to the wound of Englishmen by dismissing Phil Salt, the opener. The kind of form maintained by Ravindra Jadeja, both with the bat and ball, would do a world of good with the company of Varun Chakravarthy for Team India in the ICC Champions Trophy, giving them a certain edge to win the title.

A.P. Thiruvadi | Chennai

SAFEGUARD INDUSTRY INTERESTS

Madam — The US President Trump knows pretty well the global impacts of imposing tariffs and duties unilaterally. The industries in India apparently were least prepared to face this tariff war and the consequences. It should be noticed and recognised by our Union Government how

by the security forces. The success also reflects Union Home Minister Amit Shah's resolve to completely eliminate naxalism by March 2026.

The better coordination in the now BJP-ruled states of Chhattisgarh and Maharashtra has led to an effective implementation of the anti-naxalite operation. There were reports that some elements connected with left-wing student unions in JNU celebrated the massacre of 76 CRPF jawans by naxalites in Chhattisgarh. On the contrary, the Modi government has zero tolerance against Naxal violence. Besides counterinsurgency, welfare and development schemes launched in naxalism-affected areas have also made the tribal youths disillusioned with naxalism.

Manoj Parashar | Ghaziabad

strongly the US and China safeguard their industry's interests while we let our industry face the global pressures and turbulence and trade deficits on their own. The US and China advance their policies of trade and strategic interests of futuristic two decades. We have to safeguard our industry's interests, exports and trade balance.

The steel industry obviously may not be impacted on a substantial basis as hardly a fraction of its production is exported to the US but as detailed in the news, the Indian steel industry may be stressed if the major producers divert their exports to India, high on steel consumption. If the US continues with tariff escalation, it takes risks of consequent higher cost of domestic production. India will continuously face competition and rivalry in the global trade from the US and China, so there is a need to divert and set up our manufacturing bases in African countries, Southeast Asia and Europe and even in the US.

Vinod Johri | Delhi

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

FIRST COLUMN

PROTECT YOUR SPINE



RAVI VALLURI

How many of us get up in the morning and virtually struggle to get out of bed as the body feels sore, the neck remains stiff, knees wobble, shoulders and feet pain? In fact, the entire day is torturous. Such individuals run to doctors, seeking a magical cure for the pestilence. Unless the problem is genetic or hereditary, humans get afflicted with such disorders because of a deficient lifestyle, stress accumulated over a period of time and poor dietary habits. The vertebra and our skeletal frame are an extremely important part of the human body, which we ignore at our own peril.

Therefore, a healthy spine leads to a healthy life. Do we recall when a child begins to walk, the preliminary baby steps are raising his/her thumbs; this is called the 'Merudanda Mudra'. The vertebra consists of a series of small bones which form the backbone or the spine, having several projections for articulation and muscle attachment, and a hole through which the spinal cord passes. The spine is the first identifiable structure that provides us with a shape and form rather than being a ball of cells without any differentiation. It keeps us upright, allows us to bend and twist and connects the different parts of our skeleton. Office goers are programmed – for making a living – to undertake a typical quotidian 9 to 5 routine, and several among them use computers for prolonged hours, or those professionals who are compelled to drive long distances to their places of work from their dwelling paces ought to necessarily know how to protect their backs, necks and hand muscles. Not only are these muscles to be protected and fortified but the tissues should be sufficiently strengthened.

Such working men and women should be educated regarding deploying the correct posture. Many homemakers at times develop severe middle or lower back medical problems for a variety of reasons. Continuously undertaking repeated chores and even activities involving the handling of small or no weights, performed with an incorrect posture, can damage tissues and muscles, which causes irreparable damage to the back and neck. The afflicted suffer from the debility for years together in pain. Awareness about the structure of the spine and adopting the right postures along with simple strengthening stretches significantly helps to avoid these misadventures in one's life. In the cases where these problems assume the shape of chronic disorders the patient suffering can be guided through simple stretching exercises under the supervision of a physiotherapist or an orthopaedic. To ameliorate the condition of those suffering from these debilitating health issues, the patients should take treatment for it. Those in particular suffering from spondylitis, frozen shoulder, middle and lower back problems, and knee problems benefit immensely upon undergoing the rehabilitation process and will certainly see visible dramatic changes in their lifestyle patterns and daily routines. Such programmes generally encompasses the techniques mentioned below with the required sensitivity to an individual's health condition:

- Power Walk: alignment of vertebrae and to open energy channels
- Posture Awareness and its correction
- Ergonomics
- Simple but powerful stretches and yoga – for inner surgical alignment of the spine to release the nerves that were being continually pressed
- Gait Training
- Guided Meditation techniques to release stress

(The writer is the CEO of Chhattisgarh East Railway Ltd. and Chhattisgarh East West Railway Ltd. He has authored both fiction and nonfiction and is a faculty member of the Art of Living. Views are personal)

Trump's 'America first' policy causes chaos

As Donald Trump embarks on his second term as the US President, the nation faces a turbulent landscape of climate disasters and economic uncertainty

One of the first executive orders signed by Donald Trump after his inauguration as US President was the withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord, overlooking a whole lot of climate disruptions that the country has faced since his election campaign. At least 335 human deaths were attributed to Hurricane Beryl and Hurricane Milton, making 2024 the deadliest hurricane season in the continental US since 2005. What followed each time was damaged buildings, roads and bridges and power outages for several days, forcing people to live without electricity for days and weeks. The year 2025 welcomed the US with unprecedented snowfall in the central and eastern part forcing the shifting of Trump's second term inauguration indoors, and a week earlier, catastrophic wildfires ravaged the Los Angeles region in the western part of the country. The fire lasted for ten days and climate experts have attributed it to strong Santa Ana winds and extremely dry weather making forest vegetation readymade fuel. Los Angeles fire killed at least 25 persons, damaged more than 15,000 structures and ravaged more than 200 square km area. 60,000 persons including Hollywood stars left home for safety. The largest fire in the region the Palisades and Eaton have continued to burn for ten days. After El Nino and neutral weather conditions, La Nina arrived and pushed the storm back to the northern part of the US making the northern part wetter than usual and the southern part drier than usual. Santa Ana winds common in January and February in the region have been aggressive with wind speeds up to 120 km per hour. This made damage control difficult. The temperature contrast between cooler inland areas (southern California deserts) and warmer coastal areas is the recipe for these winds. The extent of dryness of the area can be understood by the fact that the last half-inch of rain received in the region was only a year ago. In his America First policy, Trump has been continuously announcing to increase tariffs on goods imported from Canada, Mexico, China and several more. He has also named Brazil and India among the countries that harm the US, through their tariffs. Trump's action has the potential to initiate a trade war among countries and impact many developing economies. He has offered two million federal workers the option to resign but get paid till September 2025, in his effort to cut the federal workforce and push out those who do not support his political agenda. Though federal law has long protected civil servants from pressure and political interference, yet President is testing his power. The process of deportation of illegal immigrants has started in a big way. Search for other undocumented immigrants is aggressively going on. Religious places like Gurudwaras have been searched in New York and New Jersey, at the cost of antagonising Sikh and other religious groups. He has also said that he will hold some in Guantanamo Bay away from legal and social services and support. Some of these migrants are so bad that countries cannot be trusted to



THOUGH FEDERAL LAW HAS LONG PROTECTED CIVIL SERVANTS FROM PRESSURE AND POLITICAL INTERFERENCE, YET PRESIDENT IS TESTING HIS POWER. THE PROCESS OF DEPORTATION OF ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS HAS STARTED IN A BIG WAY. SEARCH FOR OTHER UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS IS AGGRESSIVELY GOING ON

hold them back. Time will tell whether Trump's agenda to bring manufacturing back to the US would succeed in the absence of a labour force that is largely being deported/ housed in Guantanamo Bay where 30,000 beds are being added to expand the government's detention capacity. Renaming the Gulf of Mexico as the Gulf of America would hardly carry any meaning, but it can irritate a neighbouring country and may be a spoilsport in their relationship. Donald Trump wants Canada to become the 51st state of the USA and his justification is that the US is the only country Canada shares its boundary along the land and makes it secure. The countries have a free trade agreement and Canada takes full advantage of it. Further Trump has expressed to take over the Panama Canal from Panama and purchase Greenland from Denmark for strategic reasons and security of the USA. These steps are needed to have a check over growing Chinese control on trade with Latin American countries. Greenland is approachable by China from the Arctic side, while the Panama Canal is crucial for Chinese ships to cross from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean, which provides a shorter route for trade to all countries in South America. The taking over of the Panama Canal and Greenland can have serious environmental fallout. World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) secretary-general Celeste Saulo, while addressing the 150th Foundation Day celebration of the Indian Meteorological Department referred average global temperature rise of 1.55 degrees Celsius in 2024 over the preindustrial period and she termed it as a "very grave danger"

and called for decisive climate action in 2025 and speed up the transition to renewable energy. Trump has again withdrawn from the Paris Climate Accord and prioritised energy self-sufficiency through domestic drilling and exploration of oil and natural gas with the sole justification of cutting the cost of energy and thereby bringing down inflation. It is feared that the gains achieved by Biden through the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) 2022, where \$369 billion was invested in clean energy initiatives and that also created jobs in the US, will be dismantled. He has declared a National Energy emergency, a first in US history, which may lead to the suspension of environmental rules and grant permission for mining projects. He has halted the lease of federal water for offshore wind farms and called for shutting wind turbines that cause wildfire. The prohibition on drilling of oil and gas in Polar Bear Wildlife Sanctuary in Alaska has been lifted. It will not only threaten the life of wildlife species but would accelerate the melting of ice in the region, causing undue concern such as sea level rise etc. Why US is keeping an eye on Greenland? It has a history. Immediately after World War II, they planned there to build 600 nuclear missile bases to be mounted on a train riding 3000 km of track. It never took off. In the late 1950s and early 1960s US Army made a camp there for the 'Project Iceworm'. A small nuclear reactor was brought to power the camp. Once they realized after a few years that the project was not feasible, they gave up but left a lot of nuclear waste water at the camp. They also left thousands of litres of diesel fuel in the middle of Greenland's ice sheet, expect-

ing that it would remain buried in the ice forever. But climate change happened, the planet has warmed and ice has melted. It has the potential to contaminate water in Greenland. While China has deployed its vast foreign exchange reserve to secure long-term control over strategic minerals critical for advanced technologies in the defence sector, climate change etc. in resource-rich nations like copper and cobalt from Congo and Peru, nickel from Indonesia and lithium from Argentina, the Trump administration is looking to counter it by accessing rare earth and critical mineral deposits in Greenland. The southern pointed mountains of Greenland are gold belts, which is another temptation for the new US administration. Panama Canal, an engineering marvel constructed in 1913 enables ships to cross from the lower water level of the Atlantic to the higher water level of the Pacific Ocean, saving the costs and journey time in trades. A dam was built on river Cagres and water was impounded in Gatun Lake, where ships pass. The level of water in Gatun is managed through gates. With the rising water level ships from the Atlantic side gain height and sail towards the Pacific. The flow of water in River Cagres and many other rivers from Amazon forests has been depleted due to massive degradation and deforestation. Panama Canal efficiency is lowered and hardly half the ships can cross. Trump should strive to conserve river catchments, rather than owning the Panama Canal. *(The writer is Retd Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, Head of Forest Force, Karnataka. Views are personal)*

Union budget 2025: Transforming agriculture for a sustainable and inclusive future

Union Budget 2025 introduces a bold vision for agricultural transformation, addressing key challenges such as soil degradation, climate change and rural distress

Agriculture has been the backbone of India's economy, sustaining growth and the livelihoods of millions, thus correctly referred to as the primary engine for India's accelerated and inclusive growth in the annual budget presented on February 1, 2025. However, the sector is facing numerous challenges, including deteriorating soil quality, stagnating crop yields, inadequate technologies, shrinking farmlands, poor infrastructure and heightened vulnerability to climate change, which poses a threat to food security and the wellbeing of our Anndatta. Further, these difficulties have led to a troubling trend: many marginal farmers and agricultural labourers from rural areas are being forced to



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reform is undeniable. New policies and regulations are crucial for inclusive and accelerated growth. India's 2025 budget addresses issues in the agriculture sector with a forward-thinking framework, by enabling improved credit access, and infrastructure development, and preparing farmers for future growth. One standout initiative is the Pradhan Mantri Dhan Dhanya Krishi Yojana (PMDDKY). India's agricultural sector is marked by significant regional disparities, with certain districts lagging in infrastructure, productivity, and economic opportunities. This ambitious program stands as a transformative initiative for rural India, focusing on the 100 most underdeveloped districts, and directly benefiting around 1.7

crore farmers. PMDDKY focuses on these underdeveloped areas, directing resources to regions that have been overlooked in the broader development process. This initiative seeks to ensure that farmers in these areas have access to the same opportunities as their counterparts in more prosperous regions. The program aims to address long-standing agricultural challenges and empower farmers, particularly those affected by climate change and those from marginalised communities. With proper execution, PMDDKY can spark a ripple effect of development, improving infrastructure, technology access, and financial services in these districts thus enabling equitable growth across the country. By focusing on sus-



tainability, inclusivity, and empowerment, PMDDKY strives to uplift farmers, women, and marginalised communities while ensuring resilience against future challenges. The program also offers access to high-yielding varieties of seed and irrigation techniques and training to address the root causes of agricultural stagnation. By supporting farmers in overcoming unpredictable weath-

er patterns, outdated techniques, and limited market access, PMDDKY provides a pathway to more stable and productive farming. A distinctive feature of PMDDKY is its focus on empowering marginalised groups, particularly the poorest farmers. These communities often face barriers such as limited access to credit, technology, and education. PMDDKY seeks to address these gaps by providing women farmers with greater control over land, improved training, and better market access. For marginalised communities, the program aims to ensure they are included in the benefits of agricultural development, promoting equality and empowerment. PMDDKY is not only about boosting agricultural

output but also ensuring sustainable practices. One of the unfortunate consequences of rural stagnation is the mass migration of farmers to urban areas in search of better opportunities. By strengthening agriculture in rural areas, PMDDKY aims to create conditions where farmers can thrive while cultivating their farmlands. If executed well, PMDDKY could be the catalyst for a brighter, more inclusive future in agriculture, where every farmer has the tools to thrive. The hope is that migration for farmers will become a choice, not a necessity—allowing agricultural communities to thrive where they are. The budget also emphasises investment in innovation and technology, particularly in

developing high-yield, climate-resilient crop varieties. The creation of germplasm banks to restore and introduce local crop varieties will strengthen domestic production. Additionally, the government is working to enhance the agricultural value chain, focusing on better storage, transportation, and export infrastructure, benefiting both farmers and consumers. Targeted schemes for crops like cotton, pulses, oilseeds, and vegetables will help mitigate the effects of climate change on farmers. These programs aim to boost food security and export potential, all while securing farmers' livelihoods. *(The writer is Associate Director, The Energy and Resources Institute; views are personal)*