



On mute

India's interests can be secured only by assertion of its strategic autonomy

The new year has brought little change in the geopolitical turmoil unleashed by the Trump administration, beginning with the U.S.'s unlawful action in Venezuela, followed by its threats to carry out similar regime-changing operations in South America and stated plans to annex Greenland. The U.S. Congress is now expected to discuss a new law that mandates up to 500% in tariffs on countries purchasing oil or uranium from Russia. The U.S. also stepped up its rhetoric against Iran for crackdowns against protesters, imposing more sanctions and threatening to attack it. In a social media post, Mr. Trump said that he would levy an additional 25% tariff on trade with any country doing business with Iran and the U.S. is pushing India to wind up operations at Chabahar port, where India has invested billions of dollars. In the face of such aggressive and unilateral actions, New Delhi's responses have been muted, when not weak. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) has expressed "deep concern" over events in Venezuela, but did not mention the U.S.'s egregious action of kidnapping the Venezuelan President and his wife, nor did it refer to the violation of basic tenets of international law. No statement has been made on the threats against the other countries (Cuba and Colombia), presumably as they are not in India's immediate vicinity. On Iran, however, which is a close neighbour and has a historical relationship with India, the government's reaction has been the most puzzling. It has not commented on the street protests or the U.S.'s threats of strikes and tariffs. The MEA has, however, issued travel advisories for Iran and Israel and is preparing evacuation plans for Indian students in Iran. Government officials also say India will reduce its trade with Iran further from current low levels.

The government's motivations in not naming the U.S. for its obvious overreach can be explained. After a tense year in ties and a failure to conclude the India-U.S. Bilateral Trade Agreement, there is some hope of some movement on relations soon. U.S. Ambassador to India Sergio Gora has painted an optimistic future for ties, beginning with the trade agreement and the inclusion of India in the U.S.'s high-technology partnership "Pax Silica" next month. Officials may argue that little can be gained by speaking up now and risking another downturn in ties. However, each new threat by the U.S. is hurting ordinary Indians and the Indian economy. Above all, India stands to lose economically, reputationally and in terms of its other relationships as well, in a year where it hopes to host the BRICS Summit. The Modi government's experience from 2019, when it gave up buying Iranian and Venezuelan oil under U.S. pressure should be a signal lesson — appeasement of a global power, however strong, cannot ensure India's interests, only an assertion of its strategic autonomy can do that.

Break open

This year's Australian Open offers many players a chance at history

Winning a career Grand Slam (acquiring all four Majors at least once) is one measure of a complete tennis player. At the 2026 Australian Open, which begins this Sunday, two players will have the opportunity to do it. Carlos Alcaraz and Iga Swiatek will be gunning for their maiden crowns in Melbourne, to go with the six Majors each that they have won elsewhere. In his quest to become the youngest male to complete the career Slam in the Open Era (from 1968), the World No.1 Spaniard is expected to face a stiff test from two-time defending champion Jannik Sinner. Also, Alcaraz's best result Down Under is quarterfinals (2024 and 2025), and the 22-year-old no longer has Juan Carlos Ferrero, the trusted mentor with whom he split from after seven rewarding years. Sinner, 24, will be on a mission of his own — to become the only man, apart from the legendary Novak Djokovic, to clinch a hat-trick of Australian Opens in the Open Era. For Swiatek, a clay-court great and the 2025 Wimbledon champion, the next two weeks offer the chance to further evolve. However, the 24-year-old will face an almighty challenge from No.1 Aryna Sabalenka, with the Belarusian's power-packed game and remarkable consistency — four wins, three finals and four semifinals from her last 12 Major appearances — making her the player to beat.

How 24-time Slam winner Djokovic fares will also be watched with interest. The 38-year-old, a record 10-time titlist in Australia, has not won a Major since the 2023 US Open. Though he reached the semifinals at all Slams in 2025, he was largely uncompetitive in those contests. This edition, he is in the same half as Sinner, to whom he has lost five matches in a row. The Serb will need a Herculean effort to weaken the Alcaraz-Sinner hegemony that has swept the last eight Grand Slam tournaments. Though such dominance is not something that defines women's tennis, the likes of Coco Gauff and Amanda Anisimova have a reputation for repeatedly knocking on the doors. Gauff, despite her seemingly limited game, is a two-time Major winner, and Anisimova comes in having made both the Wimbledon and US Open finals recently. Equally, a surprising title run, such as American Madison Keys' at Melbourne Park in 2025, cannot be discounted. For India, it will be the first Slam after doubles star Rohan Bopanna's retirement. The nation does not have an active Major champion any more, and it will be a fourth straight Slam without singles representation. It will be up to Yuki Bhambhani, No. 21 in doubles, to fly the flag high.

The Congress at 140, a crisis of structure

At 140 (on December 28, 2025), the Indian National Congress is grappling with the cumulative effects of long-standing institutional erosion. Senior party leader Digvijaya Singh's recent remarks praising the organisational strength of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), compared to the Congress, have brought this issue back into public debate. Yet any serious discussion must begin with a crucial distinction: the Congress and the BJP are not comparable political parties, and treating them as such obscures the structural roots of the Congress's decline.

The BJP operates within a dense ideological and institutional ecosystem anchored by the RSS and sustained by a constellation of affiliated organisations. The RSS underpins the BJP with major capabilities in propaganda, election management and booth-level coordination. No other party in India — and arguably none anywhere else — enjoys the advantage of such an external cadre base that continuously replenishes leadership, shapes ideology and undertakes political mobilisation independent of electoral cycles. By contrast, the Congress is not a cadre-based party, leaving it at a severe disadvantage due to the absence of trained workers at the district and booth levels.

Organisational erosion

The organisation that the Congress built in the early decades after Independence has undoubtedly declined, eroded over time by the centralisation and concentration of authority at the apex. The result has been a thinning of local leadership that is capable of sustained mass mobilisation, a sharp departure from an earlier period marked by dense political networks. Since the split of 1969, electoral leadership has progressively substituted for organisational depth, a tendency that persisted even through the 1990s. During that decade, leaders outside the Gandhi family headed the party, but there was little effort to renew or strengthen its internal structures.

At the same time, it would be misleading to describe the Congress today as a tightly centralised party. Indeed, it is arguably less centralised than the BJP, where authority is concentrated far more decisively around a single leader, particularly in the context of State-level electoral strategy. As political expert James Manor has observed with reference to the Karnataka Assembly elections 2023, the Congress has often permitted a markedly decentralised management of campaigns at the State level. The party thus remains loosely structured — plural, internally diverse and heterogeneous. While this was once a source of resilience, it has become a liability in a political conjuncture dominated in India, as elsewhere, by right-wing parties that thrive on ideological uniformity, disciplined mobilisation and strongman leadership. The challenge facing the Congress, therefore, is not simply one of centralisation versus decentralisation, but of rebuilding party capacity without sacrificing the



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intrinsic pluralism that distinguishes it from the BJP. Comparison with the BJP is misplaced, since it risks implying that the Congress must replicate the BJP's model as a prerequisite for electoral success.

The myth of decentralisation

Much of the debate on decentralisation proceeds as though this dilemma was unique to the Congress. The fact is that no major party in India operates with genuine decentralisation. The BJP, in fact, maintains tight control over its State organisations, ensuring that Chief Ministers, State Presidents and indeed the Party Presidents remain accountable to the central leadership. The current BJP President, J.P. Nadda, and the recently appointed Working President, Nitin Nabin, hold office by nomination rather than by a vote of party members, whereas the Congress conducted elections for the post of Party President in 2022, an exercise that, whatever its limitations, was a sign of internal democracy.

Nonetheless, the absence of electoral processes within the BJP has received limited public or media scrutiny. Attention has instead centred on the centralisation of power within the Congress, suggesting that concerns about internal democracy were a concern only when one particular party was under examination.

This focus on centralisation also overlooks the extent to which the Congress continues to tolerate internal dissent. Unlike most Indian parties, it has allowed senior leaders and internal groupings such as the group of 23 senior Congress leaders, commonly referred to as the G-23, to publicly criticise the party's functioning and call for elected leadership, collective decision-making, and the revival of institutional structures without facing immediate marginalisation or expulsion. Indeed, many members of the G-23 continue to serve on the Congress Working Committee (CWC), the party's highest decision-making body. This tolerance of public dissent, however, should not be mistaken for political strength. It is a double-edged phenomenon: while it signals a measure of internal freedom, it also exposes the party's vulnerabilities and amplifies perceptions of factionalism and indecision. These weaknesses have repeatedly hampered the Congress in States such as Chhattisgarh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab and Rajasthan, where leadership tussles have blunted political growth. The very openness that distinguishes the Congress also reveals its fragility, underscoring the challenge of reconciling internal debate with decisive authority.

Repeated electoral debacles have exposed the Congress's structural weakness, most notably its lack of a durable grass-root presence. This deficit has become increasingly apparent as the BJP, backed by vast financial resources and an extensive party apparatus, has expanded into States where it had little presence a decade ago, while the Congress has remained ill-equipped to mount an effective counter. With its loose internal structure and thin local networks, the party has

been unable to match what is arguably the most formidable political machine India has ever seen. The Congress's crushing performance in the November 2025 Bihar Assembly elections, where it managed a very poor strike rate, has brought these shortcomings into even sharper relief.

The Congress's Rahul Gandhi has on several occasions articulated a sharp critique of his party's institutional inertia, but his efforts to translate that critique into meaningful reform have repeatedly stalled. Attempts to rework internal hierarchies, challenge entrenched patronage networks, and devolve authority have met with stiff resistance from within the party, preventing it from evolving into an effective State-level organisation. Ironically, many senior leaders who loudly decry the Congress's organisational attrition have themselves been its biggest roadblocks to real reform. Their critiques, often couched in the language of internal democracy or decentralisation, have at times served more to preserve their own influence than to strengthen the party. This dynamic has produced a paradoxical environment: the Congress is simultaneously marked by vocal criticism of its decline and constrained by entrenched figures who, while claiming to champion reform, benefit from maintaining the status quo.

Where the party's problem lies

The real problem confronting the Congress is not centralisation per se, but weak internal democratisation. While decision-making authority has long been concentrated around the Gandhi family, the party's deeper weakness lies in its failure to nurture State- and district-level leadership or to create institutional pathways through which new voices can assume responsibility. It lacks the internal mechanisms that would allow central authority to be exercised through capable, accountable and socially embedded leaders. This helps explain the continued dominance of dynastic leadership and a narrow cohort of senior figures, even as the party struggles to mobilise support across States or sustain a credible opposition.

Institutional restructuring and renewal are imperative precisely for this reason. The Congress needs leaders who are rooted in mass support rather than have office-bearers in Delhi with limited connection to the ground. This is particularly vital in an increasingly unequal political arena, where the BJP enjoys overwhelming advantages in financial resources, media access and narrative control. With electoral bonds struck down but electoral trusts now taking their place continuing to channel the bulk of corporate funding to the ruling party, and with much of the mainstream media aligned with power, Opposition politics cannot rely on episodic mobilisation alone. Only a revitalised party, driven by a radical progressive vision and capable of sustained mass engagement, can offset these structural disadvantages and enable the Congress to emerge as a credible and durable alternative to the Right.

Budget 2026-27 must keep the growth momentum

India faced global headwinds in 2025 but belied fears that America's 50% tariffs would hurt its economy. The resilience of the Indian economy had a lot to do with the government's reformist measures. As Prime Minister Narendra Modi said recently, "2025 will be remembered as a year when India treated reforms as a continuous national mission." Budget 2026-27 can give a fillip to the mission.

India needs to strengthen the domestic levers of growth. This can be done by prioritising growth-enhancing productive capital expenditure and social sector spending, while maintaining the current fiscal consolidation glide path and keeping debt risks contained.

Continue the focus on defence

First, the government should continue the focus on defence, with higher expenditure on the capex. The share of capital outlay in defence should be enhanced to 30% from the budgetary estimate for 2025-26 of 26.4%. The budgetary allocation for the Defence Research and Development Organisation should also be increased by at least ₹10,000 crore. Defence industrial corridors in Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu have made strides in promoting defence industrialisation and raising defence production. The government should consider establishing an eastern India defence industrial corridor.

Second, private enterprises have played a key role in augmenting defence exports in recent times, contributing nearly 65% of total defence exports in 2024-25. There can be a further boost by setting up a defence export promotion council for enhanced coordination with armed services, their foreign directorates, defence public sector undertakings, private manufacturers, the Ministry of External Affairs, Indian embassies, the Ministry of Defence, and communicate with foreign governments and buyers. This will also help achieve the target of defence exports set at ₹50,000 crore by 2028-29.

Third, a transition toward clean energy, advanced manufacturing, electric mobility,



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semiconductors and strategic technologies is driving a demand for critical minerals. The National Critical Mineral Mission (NCMM), approved in early 2025 provides a strong strategic foundation to secure these materials. This can be supplemented by a dedicated critical minerals tailings recovery programme under the NCMM, with the purpose of treating tailings recovery. The government should also consider offering dedicated financing for this.

Fourth, exports need a significant policy thrust in the current global environment. The present budgetary allocation for the Remission of Duties and Taxes on Exported Products Scheme, at around ₹18,233 crore needs to be raised significantly to make the exports more competitive.

Fifth, India has emerged as the world's leading hub for Global Capability Centres, but its transfer pricing (TP) framework has yet to evolve. The government may consider issuing clear guidance on acceptable TP models for different categories. Sixth, to accelerate drone adoption, global competitiveness, and exports, the government should consider catalysing scale through targeted financial support, including enhancing the production linked incentive outlay from ₹120 crore to ₹1,000 crore and setting up a ₹1,000 crore drone research and development fund.

Finance credit and tax disputes

Seventh, deepening the corporate bond markets is critical for diversification of finance credit beyond the banking system. The government could consider lowering the qualifying borrowing threshold and include listed and unlisted corporates to widen the issuer base and stimulate bond supply, encourage large corporations to diversify borrowings through market issuances, increase investment caps for insurance companies beyond the current 25% limit and revise the 'Approved Investment' threshold from AA to AA+, enabling prudent allocation into high-quality but lower-rated issuers. It could also permit provident funds to invest in

non-convertible debentures issued by infrastructure investment trusts and real estate investment trusts, enabling long-term capital to support infrastructure aggregation vehicles.

Eighth, measures to address disputes pendency need to be prioritised. The first appellate level in direct tax disputes, the office of the Commissioner of Income Tax (Appeals) or CIT(A), is facing severe pendency. There is a need to prioritise high-pitched assessments, cases with complete submissions, cases covered by jurisdictional High Court or Supreme Court rulings, appeals older than five years, and matters that are chronologically the oldest. The need is a dual-track disposal system: a fast-track for simple or low-value matters and a detailed track for complex or high-value matters. Also, around 40% vacancies at the CIT(A) level need to be filled.

Ninth, newly incorporated companies (even for new companies formed by established Authorised Economic Operator or AEO-accredited groups) are ineligible for certification by the AEO. Removing this restriction for AEO-accredited groups will help enhance trade efficiency and facilitate greater trade.

Tenth, the reforms related to customs tariffs introduced in the last Budget must continue. Further reduction in the customs tariffs slabs can help streamline the duty structure, address the issue of inverted duties and benefit trade. Import duties should be calibrated across the value chain to support domestic manufacturing competitiveness and address the inverted duties.

Ensure competitiveness

Budget 2026-27 must focus on sustaining India's growth momentum by deepening competitiveness across sectors and strengthening the domestic engines of expansion. By combining fiscal prudence with unlocking growth potential across industries, ensuring policy certainty and addressing structural bottlenecks, the Budget can crowd in private investment and enhance India's global competitiveness.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Incarceration without trial

The Editorial page article (January 15, 2025) only reiterates the well-accepted principle put forth by Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer —

that bail is the rule and jail is an exception. Despite this, Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam continue to languish in jail while the others have been released. Detention

without trial is a gross violation of the fundamental right under Article 21. The same principle should apply to the two men as it was

applied to the others. There cannot be any distinguishing feature as long detention by itself is a good reason for their release on bail. The top

court, which routinely chides the executive for violation of constitutional guarantees, is itself violating Article 14. It can no longer claim to be the sentinel on

the qui vive.
N.G.R. Prasad,
Chennai

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

GROUND ZERO



A team that is part of the search operation camps in Chaibasa. AMIT BHELARI

In Jharkhand, a tusker on a rampage

A male elephant, which has killed at least 20 people in the Chaibasa and Kolhan forest areas of West Singhbhum district, has become the symbol of the human-wildlife conflict in Jharkhand. A massive operation involving more than 100 forest personnel is under way to track the animal. **Amit Bhelari** reports on the attacks, which have led to panic in the villages, and the ongoing search

Madhu Tati, 75, shudders as he remembers the morning of January 9 when he couldn't bear to see the decapitated body of his 50-year-old son. Prakash, who used to operate heavy machinery and earn ₹15,000 a month, in Benisagar village in Majhgaoon block of West Singhbhum district, Jharkhand, was killed by an elephant.

Madhu recalls the morning being cold. Most of the family was asleep. "Prakash was recovering from jaundice," he says. "Every day, we would give him a glass of milk. When we put the vessel of milk on the *chulha* (earthen stove), we heard some people screaming. They were saying an elephant had entered the village."

Prakash stepped outside to see what the commotion was about, promising to drink the milk once he returned. An hour went by, but there was still no sign of him. "A villager then came home. He told me that my son had been killed by a mad elephant," says Madhu.

Madhu's wife, 70-year-old Kuni Devi, says if her son had only waited for the milk to boil, he would have been alive. "Our world is shattered," she says. Speaking of her son's support, she adds, "He was planning to do construction work on the house, which has been pending for two years."

Prakash's wife, Sanju Patro, sobs as she neatly folds her late husband's clothes. "How are we going to live our lives? Who will now support us financially? Who will look after my younger daughter?" she cries. "I told him not to go out that morning; why did he not listen to me?"

The couple has two daughters – the older daughter, Jaigosi, 30, is married, while the younger one, Kalpana, 20, helps her mother in daily household chores.

Prakash was among the 20 people killed by a wild single-tusked male elephant in the Chaibasa and Kolhan forest areas of West Singhbhum district between January 1 and 9. The attacks have mainly taken place at night in villages. With the elephant going on a rampage, and the death toll rising, a massive search operation has been launched to locate the tusker.

A climate of fear

Benisagar village is situated just a few steps from the border of Odisha. It falls under Kharposh panchayat, which has a population of 14,000. The people of the village mostly depend on farming for their livelihood. Some people have migrated to other States such as Haryana, Punjab, and West Bengal, and work as labourers.

The panchayat head, Pratap Chandra Chatar, 50, says the people are now panic-stricken. With deaths escalating, they only move in groups. All the children of the village have been instructed to remain inside their homes. No resident of the village ventures outside after sunset. Some villagers have also stopped sleeping in their homes and have moved to safer places on higher ground. Many have also begun sleeping at Pratap's house, a concrete structure with a large hall that can accommodate around 50 villagers. Pratap says he provides them with food at night.



Elephants are always visible in this area. They pass through the village, but they never attack humans. This is the first time this has happened.

HARISH CHATOMBA
Forester

"I have also asked the villagers to keep their pets inside their homes. On January 9, three people were killed, including a forest official. The elephant not only killed them, but also two buffalo, one goat, and a dog," says Pratap.

The residents say the elephant has also destroyed many houses in the village. The extent of the damage can be seen everywhere. Thirty-year-old Alka Chatar's clay and mud house has a gaping hole in it; she says the elephant tried to demolish the house with its tusk.

For others, the experience has been a lot worse. Ram Keria, 35, recounts his encounter with the elephant with horror. "It was terrifying seeing it come. I started running and also grabbed the hands of children who were moving curiously towards it. It killed three people in a 100-metre radius and did not even allow the forest officials to go near their bodies," he says.

Damodar Kuldi, 20, in Haldia village, was also killed by the elephant on January 9. According to his family, he had stepped out to relieve himself when the tusker attacked, killing him instantly. Damodar lived with his uncle, Rensu Kuldi. When he met Amrita Kuldi, from Mayurbhanj in neighbouring Odisha, he fell in love and the two of them got married. Amrita, 18, is three months pregnant. "It is painful not having him around. Who will look after my child," she weeps. Rensu says if Amrita wishes to remarry, the family will support her decision.

As night falls in Haldia, the residents of the village keep bonfires burning and try to stay awake until morning. They say the forest department has supplied materials for bonfires in every village the elephant has walked through.

Mohammad Jabirul, one of the villagers, offers another idea. "If a trench six to seven feet deep is dug around the village, the elephant cannot enter," he says. Conversations on keeping the elephant at bay animate the village all day.

The search

The first fatal elephant attack was reported on January 1 in Roro and its surrounding villages in the Khuntipani block of West Singhbhum district: three people were killed at night while they were asleep. After that, the tusker killed 17 people in

West Singhbhum district.

"We have not got photos of any other elephant through drone cameras; only that one tusker. So, we are sure that it is the same elephant that has killed everyone," says Aditya Narayan, Divisional Forest Officer, Chaibasa.

Aditya says the team is moving across all the areas where the elephant has gone. "As soon as we get any information through forest rangers, we move towards that place. We have also set up a camp at Benisagar. Our team is monitoring and scanning the area round the clock," he adds.

More than 100 people have been roped in by the Jharkhand Forest Department to capture the elephant. A team of specialists has been called from Odisha and West Bengal to tranquillise the animal. A team from Vantara, the wildlife rescue, rehabilitation, and conservation centre in Jamnagar, Gujarat, also visited the affected villages, did a recce, and went back. The Vantara team was there to monitor the movement of the elephant and give guidance and suggestions, Aditya says.

"I understand there is a lot of fear among the villagers," he says. "But everyone needs to cooperate with the forest officials. Even if there is a small lapse, that could increase the chance of an untoward incident. We do not want to take any chances. That is why we send our team to the location even if we think it is just a rumour."

He emphasises that it is important for villagers to be on alert. "Our team has given instructions to build confidence among the villagers," he says.

Harish Chatomba, a forester who is deputed at the camp in Benisagar, says, "Elephants are always visible in this area. They pass through the village, but they never attack humans. This is the first time this has happened. Our team is working hard. Our first priority is to trace the elephant, capture it, and make it return to its herd."

Harish says there is a chance that the elephant might be in the mating phase. "This makes it much more aggressive as it looks for female elephants," he explains.

Narayan Kumar, the head of one of the teams in the camp, roams around in an open jeep with firecrackers and a torch. "After January 9, no new cases have been reported. On January 14, an elephant was seen in the area but it was not the same one we are looking for. It did not hurt anyone. When we lit the firecrackers, it went into the forest," he says. Narayan adds that the tusker which has killed 20 people frequently changes its location, which makes it hard to track.

A fatal encounter

On the night of January 6, four members of a family were killed by the elephant at Bararia village at Noamundi block of West Singhbhum district when they were sleeping outside their house on a *gunny*, a temporary platform built by the Ho tribe during the paddy harvest.

The victims were Sonathan Merul, 55; his wife Jhaloko Kui, 45; and two children Damyanti Merul, 8; and Mughu Merul, 5. Two other children – 12-year-old Jaipal Meral and 8-year-old Sushila Meral – survived the attack. They are now staying with their uncle, Tupura Laguri. Sushila escaped with a fracture on her left leg. She is undergoing treatment at a government hospital.

"My elder sister, her husband, and their two children all lost their lives. Now, I have to take care of the other two children," says Tupura. "Losing parents at such a young age is disturbing. Jaipal is still in trauma as he watched his parents being killed." He adds that they do not want to stay in their house any more; it remains shut.

His wife, Jena Kui, 33, is worried. "We are small farmers and we struggle for our daily earnings. We have three children. To suddenly have two more members in the family is tough. But we cannot ignore them," she says.

About 200 meters away, a 36-year-old farmer, Gurucharan Laguri, was killed, also while sleeping on a *gunny*. He is survived by a five-year-old son. His younger brother, Debo Laguri, 30, who works in a factory, says his brother bled heavily



It was terrifying seeing it come. It killed three people in a 100-metre radius and did not even allow the forest officials to go near their bodies

RAM KERIA
Villager

after the elephant attacked him. The animal also injured three children, he says.

Gurucharan's sister, Jano Laguri, says raising her brother's child will be a challenge for her. She urged the State government to give a government job to one member of the family and raise the compensation amount from ₹4 lakh to ₹10 lakh.

Dwindling habitats

The Saranda forest is spread over 82,000 hectares in Jharkhand's West Singhbhum district. It is home to several animals such as elephants and bison, and also to tribal communities. It hosts the Singhbhum elephant reserve, India's first elephant reserve created in 2001 under the Central government's Project Elephant, to conserve elephants and their habitats. It has also been used by the Indian Forest Service (IFS) to train officers.

The forest, however, faces threats. A December 2025 study by the Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun, titled "Two Decades of Human-Elephant Conflict in Jharkhand: Spatial and Ecological Drivers of Human Fatalities", highlights the adverse impact of iron ore mining on local wildlife. It says, "The degradation of elephant habitats in Jharkhand has far-reaching consequences for both elephants and humans. For local communities, the economic and social impacts of the human-elephant conflict are severe. Crop losses, property damage, and human fatalities have become common, particularly in districts such as West Singhbhum, Giridih, and Hazaribagh."

IFS officer Srikanth Verma, who has been associated with several cases of human-animal conflict, cites the possible reasons for this particular elephant's behaviour. "In the case of a loner, especially a male, such incidents happen when the elephant gets separated from its herd and is not guided by an older elephant. The loner becomes more aggressive if it is instigated by humans."

Srikanth, who also serves as Divisional Forest Officer, Ranchi, adds, "This happened in February 2023, but that was not a large elephant like this one; it was only six years old. In Hazaribagh, it killed five people; in Chatra and Ranchi, it killed four people each. When the loner met a herd, no more deaths were reported." He explains that elephants are obedient when they are in a herd, as they have protective tendencies.

According to the Jharkhand Forest, Environment, and Climate Change Department, at least 1,270 people have died due to elephant attacks in Jharkhand in the last 18 years. Around 150 elephant deaths have been reported in the same period. A report released by the Wildlife Institute of India, titled "Status of Elephants in India: DNA-based Synchronised All-India Population Estimation of Elephants (SAIEE 2021-25)", says that there are 217 elephants in Jharkhand, compared to 678 recorded in 2017. It says, "Human activities have substantially altered elephant habitats, confining these elephants to fragmented landscapes linked solely by agricultural lands and human settlements, [which are] insufficient to fulfil their dietary and water requirement adequately. Between 2004 and 2017, 30 elephant mortalities were recorded, primarily due to diseases, electrocution, poisoning, poaching and train accidents."

Even as the conflict plays out, in the villages, fear is accompanied by hope. Vidyadhar Chatar, a resident of Benisagar, says, "We pray that the elephant should not harm anyone else. I hope it is captured soon, so we can all sleep in peace."

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Alka points to the damage caused to her house by the elephant. AMIT BHELARI

{ OUR TAKE }

**Mumbai & beyond,
a story of BJP's rise**

Urban Maharashtra swings the saffron outfit's way, confirming its rise as the premier party of the state and the decline of regional outfits

The BJP and its allies, the Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena, and, to a lesser extent, the Aji Pawar-led Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) are poised to win 23 of Maharashtra's 29 municipal corporations, suggesting that their landslide win in the assembly elections last November was no fluke. The Mahayuti, a coalition of the BJP, the Shiv Sena, and the NCP, won 235 of the 288 seats in the assembly in that election, reversing the losses of the general polls in May, and indicating that the political ground in the state was shifting in favour of the BJP. This trend has held true, and the BJP is now in a commanding position across the state (it fought alone in 16 of the 29 corporations and was leading in 13 of them as of 10 pm), just as the Congress was in the first four decades after Independence: The Congress from being a hegemon has been reduced to an also-ran in Maharashtra. As for the state capital, the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) will now have a BJP administration, ending a quarter century of dominance by the United Shiv Sena. Indeed, India's financial capital will have, for the first time in many decades, a triple-engine administration led by the BJP in all tiers of government — at the local body, in the state, and at the Centre.

The outcome will resonate beyond Mumbai and influence political preferences. One, the BJP's gains in Maharashtra have come at the expense of two regional outfits that have been pivotal to state politics, the United Shiv Sena and the United NCP. Mumbai has been the cornerstone of Shiv Sena politics since Bal Thackeray founded the outfit in 1966. The Shiv Sena has since split multiple times, and BMC has slipped out of the party's hands in the birth centenary year of its founder. To be sure, the Shiv Sena (UBT) has itself done reasonably well in the Marathi-dominated areas, suggesting that its polarising campaign around regional identity continues to resonate in pockets. But, in electoral terms, the Shiv Sena flag and legacy, outside of Mumbai city, is now firmly with Eknath Shinde: His party did not do too well in BMC but outsmarted the Uddhav Thackeray faction in the larger Mumbai Metropolitan Region, which includes corporations such as Thane.

Meanwhile, the NCP factions have bitten the dust in its strongholds in western Maharashtra. The BJP is a clear winner here, raising questions about the appeal of the regional outfit that had carried with it the old Congress base centred around sugar cooperatives. Aji Pawar, deputy CM in the Mahayuti government, steered his NCP to ally with uncle Sharad Pawar's faction (NCP-SP), a constituent of the Opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA), an alliance of the Shiv Sena-UBT, NCP-SP, and Congress. The MVA was non-existent in the municipal polls, with each party going its own way. This leaves the BJP in a commanding position, and the Opposition diminished and in disarray. The win raises the stature of CM Devendra Fadnis, who led the campaign in the state. He broke the Shiv Sena and the NCP, forcing the collapse of the MVA government in 2022, won the assembly election in 2024, and has now swept the local polls.

For the Opposition, Maharashtra is a story of lost opportunities. A Shiv Sena (UBT)-Congress alliance may have turned the BMC polls into a close contest. Even before the local body elections, the BJP had put aside the reverses of the 2024 general election with spectacular success in Maharashtra, Haryana, and Bihar. This win, which also puts it in pole position in the country's commercial capital for the first time, should energise it ahead of crucial assembly elections in five states in April/May.

**India must build
its hard power in
the age of Trump**

Now, New Delhi's mantra of strategic autonomy faces a real test. In an age of geopolitical churn, it needs to gain military prowess and grow economic heft

For years now, India's military planners have prepared for what former chief of defence staff Bipin Rawat called "a two-and-a-half front war". Rawat's phrasing refers to simultaneous conflicts with Pakistan and China on the country's northern and western borders, alongside internal security challenges.

But, in a world upended by America's volatility under the Donald Trump regime, India is confronted with perhaps its gravest set of strategic vulnerabilities: China is untrustworthy, the US is unpredictable, and the immediate neighbourhood is adversarial. And while India has long counted on its distinctive soft power — a large democracy with peaceful transition of power election after election, pluralism, Bollywood, and civilisational history — in this new Darwinian age of ruthless force, "rules-based order" seems like a tagline from a Hallmark card. There is no moral arbiter giving India points for good behaviour.

Soft power will always have its place, but in this age of geopolitical churn, the only instrument of protection is building greater hard power. American political scientist Joseph Nye defined hard power as the ability to "use carrots and sticks of economic and military might to make others follow your will". India's soft power makes us the more attractive entity in Asia. China's hard power gives it greater leverage.

Not for a moment am I suggesting on giving up or diluting what makes us distinct. In fact, every time there is a chink in our armour when

it comes to all that we are proud of — our freedoms, our diversity — it hurts our strategic advantage. But the need to build more aggressive military capacity and grow the economy has never been more important.

In 2025, India's defence budget surged to an all-time high of \$86.1 billion, eight times that of India's main adversary, Pakistan. India is also the fifth-largest military spender in the world. But India's defence budget is roughly just 1.9% of its gross domestic product (GDP). In 2024, China spent \$314 billion on military expenditure, compared to India's \$86 billion, according to data released by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).

Without unshackling economic potential, India's military spending may remain constrained. But given the collusive threat from two nuclear-armed neighbours, coupled with, at the very best, a disengaged Trump administration, India must spend more on security. Consider for a moment how many hells are up in the air. India's longest international land border — 4,096.7 kilometres is with Bangladesh and is the fifth-longest in the world. It runs through five states — West Bengal, Assam, Tripura, Mizoram, and Meghalaya.

Not only are religious minorities being targeted in an increasingly radicalised and lawless Bangladesh, the caretaker regime in Dhaka is also actively hostile to India. Bangladesh's interim head, Muhammad Yunus, has aggressively focused on India's Northeast. On a trip to pitch investment to China, he called the north-

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eastern states "landlocked", presenting Dhaka as the "guardian of the ocean for all of this region".

While American agencies are widely seen to have played a covert role in the ouster of the Sheikh Hasina government, India should also be concerned about China's growing footprint in Bangladesh. Bangladesh signed a \$370-million agreement with China for the expansion of the Mongla port. And there have been reports of Chinese involvement in the development of the Lalmonirhat airport.

A parliamentary panel on foreign affairs led by Shashi Tharoor has also flagged the growing links between China and the Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh. Just this week, ahead of elections in Bangladesh, the Chinese ambassador in Dhaka met with the Jamaat chief, Shafiqur Rahman.

China has long played the game of the neo-imperialist, using infrastructure and investment to peddle its influence in India's neighbourhood. Apart from Pakistan and Bangladesh, the Chinese have grown roots in Nepal, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. If reports this week are true, the government is considering lifting curbs on Chinese firms that are keen on

bidding for government contracts. This was a 2020 curb in the aftermath of the Galwan clash in the high Himalayas between India and China.

While border tensions have reduced and there is an obvious need to build some bridges with Beijing given the impasse between India and the US, this would be a mistake. Cheaply manufactured Chinese goods have already hurt small and medium Indian businesses. But beyond economics, this is, or should be, about strategic resistance.

That said, there aren't a whole lot of good options in the face of an unbending world order. In comparison to the obsequious and cringe-inducing behaviour of the Europeans before Trump, India's conduct is certainly more dignified. But now, New Delhi's mantra of strategic autonomy faces a real test.

And to ride this storm — even if one assumes a reset will follow in the post-Trump years — India needs not just resilience, but instruments of hard power. That is where India's attention should be.

Barkha Dutt is an award-winning journalist and author. The views expressed are personal

**Celebrating science,
outside the classroom**

I spent last weekend in Pune at the India Science Festival and left with real confidence in the country's future. The event brought together students, scientists, teachers, policymakers, and families in a buzzing atmosphere of ideas and discovery. Young people from across the country, including children from the poorest villages, were talking about AI, sensors, and quantum computing, and proudly demonstrating their projects. They spoke openly about failed experiments, what they had learned, and what they would try next. This was learning by doing, not memorising; they were collaborating, tinkering, and thinking like builders.

This is exactly what India needs more of to inspire the next generation. For the first time in history, children in remote villages have access to the same knowledge and technologies as students in the West.

Their schools may lack resources and their teachers may not always show up, but that hasn't stopped them from learning or building. They may be poor, but they are digitally fluent. They use smartphones to watch tutorials, search for answers, join online communities, and increasingly explore with AI. They don't wait to be taught; they teach themselves — and in today's world, that may be the most important skill of all.

Meanwhile, as happens too often in education and policy circles, I found myself in rooms with well-meaning academics from India, the

US, and Canada reminiscing about Jawaharlal Nehru and calling for more government control and more government funding. Some even argued that Indian children can't innovate without top-down reform. It was clear they hadn't stepped outside. They were out of touch with the quiet revolution already underway, led not by institutions, but by young people who are learning, building, and solving problems on their own.

This shift is easy to miss if you are looking through outdated foreign lenses. But it is happening all over India, and it is moving faster than most people realise. That became painfully clear in one of the more heated moments of the weekend, during a closed-door session with a professor from the University of Toronto. He insisted that by every global metric, India could hardly possibly be considered innovative — too few patents, too few academic publications, and too many applications to his university from India (as if the next generation was trying to escape the country).

The subtext — and superiority complex — was unmistakable. We argued, because what he, and so many others, fail to understand is that these benchmarks were built around Western institutions, publishing systems, and funding models. They measure academic output, not actual learning, driven, and episodic, often designed to meet regulatory requirements rather than build sustained capability. Degrees such as BEd and MEd are largely oriented towards school education, leaving higher education faculty without a coherent pathway for growth. Faculty are also often dismissive of the programmes on offer, because checklist interventions have done more harm than good to establish value and credibility. Three shifts are urgently needed. First, faculty development must be continuous. Teaching capability cannot be built through one-off workshops; it improves through longitudinal learning, practice, feedback, and reflection. Second, development must be grounded in evidence, not trend-chasing. Faculty with robust training are more likely to adopt proven student-centred practices rather than superficial innovation. Third, institutions must treat faculty well-being and professional agency as strategic assets.

No higher education reform can succeed unless India first develops those who teach.

Shreyasi Singh is founder-managing partner, Jetri. The views expressed are personal

They capture invention in formal labs, not grassroots problem solving. They completely miss the raw, distributed innovation I saw at the festival — and the Indian way of *jugaad*.

If the benchmark were digital fluency, India ranks #1 in the world. Nearly everyone has a smartphone; UPI is the default for daily transactions; people troubleshoot on WhatsApp; learn on YouTube; and increasingly ask AI — often in their own languages.

One of my taxi drivers in Delhi casually pulled out ChatGPT. In Hindi, to answer a question I'd asked. That's what innovation looks like in the real world.

India doesn't need to wait for institutions to catch up or take cues from western gatekeepers. The next generation is already innovating — and is not asking for permission. They're learning, building, and solving with what they have, where they are.

The festival reflected the depth and range of India's scientific ecosystem. Children and first-time builders

shared space with senior scientists and leaders like Nobel laureate Venki Ramakrishnan, astronaut Shubhanu Shukla. AI pioneer Ashish Vaswani, astrophysicist Nikku Madhusudhan,

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and former principal scientific adviser to the government of India, K. VijayRaghavan. They weren't behind velvet ropes; they walked the grounds, spoke with students, and answered questions. That proximity matters. For many young attendees, it was the first time they saw science practised by people who looked like them, spoke like them, and took their ideas seriously.

That openness is central to the festival's DNA. Its founder, Varun Aggarwal, saw the need for a space where science could come alive for everyone, not just researchers or elites. A tech entrepreneur himself, he wanted to bridge the gap between science and society. When he launched the festival in 2020, he called Indian science a sleeping giant and set out to wake it up. That vision has taken hold. The 2024 edition drew more than 36,000 attendees, and it's only growing.

Yes, India has a lot of work to do. Its schools need fixing and it needs to support its innovators. The education system that the British imposed on India still trains for obedience more than creativity. Quality varies wildly and inequality is real. But the most hopeful sign is that learning is no longer waiting for all of that to be solved. It's already happening, driven by curiosity, enabled by access. The hunger is there, the tools are there, and the spark is already lit.

The India Science Festival is exactly the kind of platform India needs to unleash the potential of its young population and leap into the future. It underscored what is possible when children are trusted to explore, when science is made accessible, and when knowledge is treated not as a privilege, but as a shared resource.

Vivek Wadhwa is CEO, Vionix BioSciences. The views expressed are personal

**Investing in developing
India's higher-ed faculty**

India today has more than 1.6 million faculty members teaching over 40 million students across higher education institutions. Yet a nationwide study conducted in 2025 revealed a striking gap at the heart of this system: Nearly one in three faculty members reported receiving no formal training on how to teach before entering the classroom, and among those who did, almost 70% found that training ineffective.

The Jetri Faculty Workforce Report 2025, based on responses from 547 faculty members across public and private institutions, finds faculty being pulled between teaching, research, and administrative work, with nearly a quarter spending most of their time on tasks they believed mattered more to institutions than to students. Mentoring students consistently emerged as one of the most mean-

ingful aspects of academic work, yet also the activity most likely to be crowded out.

This misalignment has consequences. Faculty who spend more time on student-centred work tend to remain longer at their institutions, suggesting that meaningful teaching is also a retention strategy. When faculty feel unable to do the work they value most, disengagement follows. Inside classrooms, the effects are already visible. Lecture-based teaching remains the dominant mode, even as nearly two-thirds of faculty report persistent struggles with student engagement. Faculty describe feeling ill-equipped to address student mental-health issues, diverse learning needs, and the responsible use of AI. Anonymous end-of-course evaluations, widely

used as proxies for teaching quality, are often experienced as biased, demoralising, and professionally risky, particularly for early-career and women faculty.

What the data showed is the absence of a coherent system for professional growth. Faculty express a strong appetite for development in assessment design, inclusive pedagogy, student engagement, and managing workload and energy. What is missing is sustained, well-designed support.

Globally, leading higher education systems have responded to these challenges by treating faculty development as core academic infrastructure — operating year-round centres for teaching and learning, offering evidence-based training in pedagogy, assessment, and instructional leadership. Early-career faculty are often required to complete structured teaching certifications. Peer observation and coaching are normalised. Student feedback is contextualised with trained review.

In India, by contrast, faculty development programmes remain fragmented, compliance-

driven, and episodic, often designed to meet regulatory requirements rather than build sustained capability. Degrees such as BEd and MEd are largely oriented towards school education, leaving higher education faculty without a coherent pathway for growth. Faculty are also often dismissive of the programmes on offer, because checklist interventions have done more harm than good to establish value and credibility. Three shifts are urgently needed. First, faculty development must be continuous. Teaching capability cannot be built through one-off workshops; it improves through longitudinal learning, practice, feedback, and reflection. Second, development must be grounded in evidence, not trend-chasing. Faculty with robust training are more likely to adopt proven student-centred practices rather than superficial innovation. Third, institutions must treat faculty well-being and professional agency as strategic assets.

No higher education reform can succeed unless India first develops those who teach.



Shreyasi Singh

{ EDITOR'S PICK }

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

THE LIVES IN THE MAXIMUM CITY

Electric elevators have sparked renewed interest in how Mumbai's residents live. Reams have been written on the history and political economy of the city's Maximum City. But in fact that we may find the best facsimiles of reality.

We recommend *Maya Nagari: Bombay-Mumbai A City in Stories*, edited by writers Shanta Gokhale and Jerry Pinto. A collection of 21 short stories featuring authors such as Sadat Hasan Manto, Pu La Deshpande, Urmila Pawar, Ambai, and Jayant Kulkarni, it offers a rare ethnographic understanding of the city through the lives of Mumbaiers, imagined but who could well be real — a mill-worker here, a five-star regular there. Embodying the melting pot that Mumbai is, the stories are from linguistic provinces as varied as Marathi, English and Tamil. The book is a textured telling of Mumbai's social history and the inner life of the city's residents.



Maya Nagari: Bombay-Mumbai A City in Stories
Shanta Gokhale and Jerry Pinto (eds.)
2024

TECH RACE Prime Minister Narendra Modi The more a country is ahead in the AI race, the higher its advantage. Our start-ups have to do this job for India



Substance over shelter

The Supreme Court's Tiger Global ruling brings long-needed clarity to offshore tax structures

The Supreme Court's ruling in the Tiger Global tax dispute closes a long-standing ambiguity over how India applies tax law to offshore investment structures. In doing so, it provides greater clarity for future private equity (PE) and venture capital (VC) exits. At the heart of the judgment is not a change in law, but a clear articulation of how existing principles are to be applied. The court has held that treaty protection cannot be claimed mechanically, and that investment structures must demonstrate commercial substance beyond the pursuit of tax benefits. By reaffirming the primacy of substance over form, the Supreme Court has aligned judicial interpretation with the government's stated anti-avoidance framework, rather than unsettling settled expectations.

The dispute arose from Tiger Global's 2018 exit from Flipkart following Walmart's acquisition, routed through Mauritius-based entities. From the outset, the tax treatment of the gains was contested. The Authority for Advance Rulings rejected the treaty exemption claim, the Delhi High Court later took a different view, and the issue remained under litigation until the Supreme Court's final word. Investors, therefore, were operating in a legally uncertain and contested space, not on the assumption of an undisputed exemption.

The judgment clarifies two issues that matter for future exits. First, the presence of a tax residency certificate, while necessary, is not decisive. Treaty benefits depend on whether the holding entity has real decision-making authority, economic substance, and a credible commercial rationale. Second, the government's right to tax gains arising from assets that derive substantial value from India cannot be negated simply by interposing offshore entities, particularly if those entities exist primarily as conduits. This clarity has direct implications for PE and VC funds planning exits from India. Structures built solely around treaty advantages, without operational substance, will face greater scrutiny and higher tax risk. At the same time, funds that invest through jurisdictions with genuine commercial presence, governance, and risk-taking functions now have a clearer sense of where they stand. The ruling therefore shifts the emphasis from aggressive tax planning to defensible structuring, without closing the door on offshore investment altogether. Some market participants have raised concerns about the timing of the judgment. With the government actively seeking to attract foreign direct and portfolio investment, there is a fear that a high-profile adverse ruling against a global investor could dent sentiment. That interpretation, however, overstates the impact.

The Supreme Court has neither introduced a new levy nor reopened settled transactions, nor has it retrospectively altered the law. Instead, it has resolved an issue that had remained contested for years, replacing uncertainty with legal clarity. For serious long-term investors, predictability in tax outcomes is as important as concessional treatment. Knowing that courts will examine substance, intent, and economic reality allows funds to price tax risk upfront and design compliant structures. The absence of such clarity, by contrast, encourages litigation and inconsistent outcomes—outcomes far more damaging to investment confidence. The broader message from the ruling is that India's tax regime will support foreign capital, but not at the cost of permitting treaty abuse. That balance is neither unexpected nor inconsistent with global trends. By settling how the law applies in such cases, the Supreme Court has reduced ambiguity rather than increased it. For PE and VC investors willing to align structure with substance, the ruling offers a clearer, more stable rulebook—and fewer interpretational grey zones—for future exits.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE Will shape the 21st century much as steam power, railways, electricity, and the telegraph shaped the 19th. Those technologies redefined global power, transformed economies, and elevated nations that mastered them. Britain rode them to empire; the US built institutions around them to emerge as the dominant global power. The world we inhabit today is their inheritance.

AI is that kind of technology. And for India, the stakes are civilisational. This is not merely a debate about apps or efficiency. It is a question of sovereignty. If India does not own its AI compute, its foundational models, and its deployment architecture, it will become structurally dependent on foreign intelligence systems. Not colonised in the old sense, but constrained all the same. A nation that rents cognition cannot remain strategically autonomous for long.

India stands at a fork in the road. With decisive action over the next decade, it can emerge as one of the world's three major AI powers, alongside the US and China. Without it, the country risks compounding economic, geopolitical, and social disadvantages.

That risk is no longer abstract. There is a growing perception in global capital markets that India lacks a coherent AI strategy, and that this absence could weaken its long-term competitiveness. But that is not destiny. What makes this moment unusual is that India's development needs align almost perfectly with AI's strengths.

Take education. India's skills challenge is fundamentally a jobs challenge. Its roots lie in uneven teaching quality, large class sizes, and the lack of individual attention in early schooling. AI systems are uniquely suited to address this. One-on-one tutoring at national scale, adaptive learning aligned with the National Education Policy, continuous teacher feedback, and personalised curricula are no longer science fiction. With serious deployment, India could see meaningful gains in foundational literacy, numeracy, and scientific thinking within a generation.

Or consider government services. India's growth has long been constrained

HIGH STAKES

WE NEED TO GO ALL IN ON AI ACROSS OUR CORE DEVELOPMENT PRIORITIES

India's AI railway moment

ABHISHEK LODHA

MD & CEO, Lodha Group



by administrative bandwidth. AI layered onto the country's already impressive digital public infrastructure could improve service delivery, reduce discretion, speed up approvals, and raise productivity across the state. A more capable government is not a technocratic luxury. It is a prerequisite for sustained growth.

Judicial delay presents an even clearer case. India's backlog of over 47 million cases, according to the National Judicial Data Grid, is not only a justice issue but an economic one. Weak contract enforcement raises the cost of capital and discourages enterprise. AI systems can be deployed to summarise filings, analyse precedents, and support judges with structured recommendations. Decisions would remain human. But time-limits could compress from years to months. Few reforms would have a comparable impact on India's investment climate.

Some countries are already moving in this direction. Estonia, a small nation but a sophisticated digital state, is piloting AI tools to assist judges with case summaries and legal research, and deploying AI agents across government to handle citizen queries and routine administrative tasks. India, with its scale and talent pool, could achieve far more ambitious outcomes—if it chooses to.

The choice dimension is equally stark. China already enjoys a substantial lead in AI compute, military integration, and software depth. As warfare becomes increasingly autonomous, geography alone will not guarantee security. A nation without indigenous AI capability will face growing vulnerabilities, regardless of

troop strength or terrain.

The risks of inaction extend beyond geopolitics. AI-driven automation is likely to disrupt significant segments of white-collar work globally over the next decade. Productivity gains will accrue disproportionately to firms that own the technology, most of which are foreign. India's outsourcing industry faces structural disruption. Overseas professional pathways may narrow. Without domestic AI capability, India risks absorbing the disruption while exporting the value.

A focused national push, backed by strategic investment of about \$100 billion over five years, could position India among the world's top three AI powers

Ironically, India already plays a major role in the global AI ecosystem without capturing its upside. Indian users constitute one of the largest populations engaging with global AI platforms, contributing substantial interaction data and usage value. That phase of heavily subsidised access will not last. As dependency grows, pricing power will consolidate in a handful of firms abroad.

The choice, therefore, is not whether India adopts AI, but whether it does so as a sovereign shaper or a dependent user.

What would a serious national response look like?

First, India needs ambition rather than incrementalism: a focused national AI programme with clear authority, measurable outcomes, and direct reporting to the Prime Minister. It should bring together the best minds from the public and private sectors, from within India and the diaspora. Call it Mission Saraswati: a mission to place knowledge, intelligence, and learning at the heart of India's state capacity.

Second, strategic public investment is unavoidable. Even with the demand unleashed by the government's embrace

of AI in the areas suggested above, private enterprise alone will not build sovereign AI infrastructure within the timelines India requires. A five-year, \$100-billion sovereign investment programme—roughly 0.5% of GDP annually—could catalyse several times that amount in private capital. Deployed through equity and debt rather than grants, this would support domestic compute infrastructure, semiconductor capacity, foundational model development, and sector-specific AI systems. This is not fiscal extravagance; it is strategic nation-building.

At the same time, India should actively focus on attracting global capital in large quantum by emphasising the growth unlocked through AI-enabled governance and ease of doing business, combined with its large, young population. This would strengthen the macroeconomic foundation for long-term investment across job-creating sectors. This approach—blending state capacity with respect for capital and private execution—can be understood as Laxmi Pujan: not ritual symbolism, but disciplined national capital mobilisation and deployment.

Third, this is not only a technological shift. It is a cultural one. India must consciously move from improvisation to excellence. From juaad to systems. From patchwork to precision. Infrastructure alone will not suffice if standards, institutions, and execution remain weak. A sustained cultural commitment to excellence is as essential as funding.

None of this diminishes the need for serious safeguards around privacy, bias, accountability, and democratic oversight. AI governance must evolve alongside AI deployment. But caution cannot become paralysis. Nations that hesitate will not shape the rules they will inherit them.

This is when leadership matters. India today is led by a Prime Minister who has demonstrated unusual willingness to pursue long-term structural reform over short-term electoral convenience. If this political will is channelled toward a national AI mission, India will enjoy a rare alignment of technological opportunity and leadership capacity.

This is India's railway moment. Seize it, and India can help shape the architecture of the next global order.

Meta is killing off its only good virtual reality app

AS IT SEEKS to build AI tools many users don't want, Meta Platforms Inc. has sacrificed a high-quality product adored by devotees. Supernatural, the virtual reality fitness app, is being wound down as part of the company's cuts to its Reality Labs division.

Meta has never disclosed how many people use the app, which is available through a \$9.99-a-month subscription. A Facebook group for users has more than 100,000 members. Many were in a state of mourning this week when they learned that while the app's content will remain available for an unspecified period, no new content will be added. Presumably the app will gradually lose content as music licences expire, though the company declined to confirm that. The cuts are part of Meta's plan to divert more resources to its smart Ray-Ban glasses, production of which may double this year. "I hate you Mark Zuckerberg and I hate AI," one outraged Supernatural user wrote. "Your glasses are stupid and nobody wants them."

Supernatural's demise is especially notable because it comes less than three years after Meta closed its acquisition of Within, the studio that created the app, for an undisclosed sum. The deal was in defiance of the Federal Trade Commission's concerns that it would harm competition, warning the company could raise the price of the app (it didn't). Meta argued Within was "promising but fragile" and needed the help to grow.

Lina Khan, the former FTC chair who sought to block the deal, saw this week's news as an I-told-you-so moment. "This is exactly what the antitrust laws are designed to prevent," she told me in an email statement. "A dominant platform eliminating choice by buying up the competition and then abandoning the market when corporate priorities shift."

She added: "Courts and enforcers should learn from this cautionary tale, especially as they evaluate Meta's acquisitions in artificial intelligence and other emerging markets."

I've written glowingly about Supernatural before. Reputable studies showed its innovative and impeccably executed blend of Guitar Hero and Wii Fit was a bona fide workout. It had a rare quality: Users underestimated how long they'd be exercising—surely something of holy grail for any fitness addict.

Some users are now wondering whether their pleas to Meta might prompt a U-turn (very unlikely). Others are asking whether Meta might be talked into making the app open source for future updates (don't hold your breath). Some have asked whether the app can return to its independent state before Meta ever got involved (almost certainly not). Meta declined to offer further details, nor did a spokesman wish to respond to Khan's comments.

Somewhere at the company is a dreary little spreadsheet that justifies this move. It likely says it wasn't driving quite enough sales for the Quest headset, which is now less of a priority anyway. That the decision makes sense to Meta doesn't make it any less of a shame. I can't think of any other part of Meta's business that is measurably good for its users' health. It's a low-cost home workout option that was compatible with the lives of busy parents and families who are pressed for time and square footage in their homes. It appealed to people who may have been intimidated by going to the gym but could instead start their fitness journey in more comfortable confines. It was tremendous fun. But it wasn't AI, so I guess it had to go.

AI exuberance in finance has real costs

SRINATH SRIDHARAN

The author is a corporate advisor and independent director



INDIA'S DIGITAL STORY is, by any measure, a remarkable achievement. In a little over a decade, India has built public digital infrastructure that many large economies still debate in theory. The architecture created around identity, payments, and data has demonstrated that scale and inclusion need not be mutually exclusive. It reflects deliberate public policy, regulatory imagination, and institutional courage.

Yet the very success of India's digital transformation creates a more demanding responsibility. When technology becomes ubiquitous, it stops being innovation and starts becoming power. And power, left insufficiently governed, carries consequences that surface not in balance sheets, but in the lived experience of citizens.

Much of the recent discourse on the financial sector and artificial intelligence (AI) has understandably focused on capability and near-term outcomes. Faster processing, sharper fraud detection, improved underwriting, better customer interfaces, and operational efficiency dominate presentations and board discussions. Indian banks and financial institutions are investing deeply in modernising systems, partnering with technology firms and scaling platforms that serve hundreds of millions of users. Yet it would be premature to call them digital-first or digital-bet. Many institutions continue to rely on technology to mask process weaknesses and customer pain points that remain stubbornly unresolved.

But finance has never been remembered for its breakthroughs alone. Each decade in global finance is recalled as much for failures of governance as for advances in technology. Innovation has a recurring habit of creating the illusion that old risks have been conquered. They never are. Technology changes the form of risk, not necessarily the challenge. It introduces new ones.

AI sharpens this challenge. It increasingly influences who receives credit, how fraud is flagged, which transactions are interrupted, and how consumers are cat-

egorised. These are not neutral technical outcomes. They shape access to money, dignity, and economic agency.

This is where the conversation must return to first principles. Finance is not, at its core, a technology business. It is the business of pricing risk and sustaining trust over time. Trust is slow to build and easy to erode.

Indian citizens do not compartmentalise their expectations when they interact with financial systems. Younger demographics in particular approach finance conditioned by everyday digital industries that have normalised ease of use, reversibility, predictability, and rapid grievance response. When the same consumer encounters financial systems, expectations do not reset simply because a product is labelled "financial".

Algorithms now shape outcomes across lending, insurance underwriting, investment advice, asset management, payments, and capital markets. Automated nudges influence household investments, credit models affects borrowers, and digital distribution increasingly blurs the line between advice and marketing. Yet accountability and fiduciary responsibility remain uneven across finance.

Demographics magnify this fragility. India's financial system today serves three cohorts simultaneously: a young digital-native population that adopts quickly but has low tolerance for friction; a vast first-time formal finance cohort whose trust is experience-driven and fragile; and an ageing population that is digitally present but increasingly vulnerable to fraud and coercive nudges. These multiple combinations of consumer psychographics within this mix. Design choices that optimise for one group can materially harm another.

There is also an uncomfortable structural reality that deserves acknowledgment.

India's financial sector needs a citizen-first reckoning before AI hardens into power as a result of being insufficiently governed

ment. India does not yet possess the depth of research, intellectual property (IP), platforms, or capital that define global AI leadership. As a result, much of the technology and advisory expertise shaping financial AI adoption is imported. For many digitally focused financial institutions, the largest recurring expenses flow to global technology platforms for customer acquisition, infrastructure, and analytics. This creates invisible but material dependence on systems and standards built elsewhere.

While it may be tempting for the polity and policy ecosystem to fuel urgency around AI and urge every sector to become digital-native and AI-led, such exuberance must be tempered with realism.

The global AI and quantum computing landscape is shaped by geopolitics, export controls, platform dominance, and concentrated IP. India remains shallow in core AI and quantum capabilities even as adoption rhetoric grows. Pushing industries to race ahead without simultaneously building an ecosystem of research depth, talent, governance expertise, and regulatory comprehension risks locking the nation into dependencies that are difficult to unwind.

This structural dependence also sharpens questions of accountability and consumer protection. Sooner than later, India must align with global best practices that place primary onus and liability for cyber and digital fraud on licensed financial institutions. Regulated entities are better positioned to mitigate, absorb, insure, and manage such risks, and should thus be held responsible for strengthening consumer digital literacy as an integral part of system resilience.

Ethics, in this environment, cannot remain aspirational. Responsible AI requires explicit boundaries around decision delegation. Which decisions AI may assist, which it may execute autonomously, and

which must remain human-led because they carry ethical, distributive or systemic consequences are governance questions.

Human oversight remains the weakest link. Many AI failures trace not to models but poor supervision, inadequate training, and a culture that treats compliance as a checkbox exercise. Human-in-the-loop mechanisms often exist on paper while being discouraged in practice by scale pressures and institutional norms.

There is also a political economy dimension that can't be ignored. The financial sector too operates within capitalist incentives. Speed, scale, and valuation are rewarded. Fear of missing out fuels rapid adoption of emerging technologies, often accompanied by jargon that dazzles more than it clarifies. Governance conversations are postponed not because institutions are malicious, but because incentives rarely align with long-term consumer outcomes. Harm, when it occurs, often materialises beyond leadership evaluation windows.

This is why regulation exists. Not to slow innovation, but to discipline it. Regulatory forbearance and pilots were appropriate in an early-stage ecosystem. At scale, prolonged exceptionalism becomes a risk of its own. Shared standards, drafted by regulators with industry inputs, can curb uncertainty, enhance supervisory comfort, and protect citizens from the negative externalities of fragmented practices.

As financial systems become more automated and less visibly human, trust cannot be treated as a residual outcome of compliance. It must be managed as scarce public infrastructure.

New regulatory and policy frameworks for AI deployment should not be hurried by political exuberance, especially when domestic capabilities remain uneven. Without parallel investment in indigenous competencies, supervisory talent, institutional understanding, and digital sovereignty, accelerated rule-making risks formal compliance without substantive control. Innovation that forgets the citizen ultimately undermines itself.

The Statesman

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False Stability

India approaches the Union Budget with a troubling paradox. Inflation is low, prices appear contained, and stability is widely celebrated. Yet beneath this calm lies a fragile reality. The economy is not cooling after a boom; it is struggling to warm up after prolonged demand weakness. In such conditions, low inflation is not evidence of strength. It is a warning sign.

Ordinarily, falling prices should revive consumption. Cheaper essentials ought to make households feel richer, spend more, and stimulate growth. That is not happening. Consumption volumes are soft, discretionary spending remains muted, and rural incomes show only modest improvement. For many families, lower prices have not translated into higher confidence. Instead, they rebuild buffers, postpone purchases, and tighten budgets. This is the behaviour of an economy anxious about tomorrow, not one optimistic about recovery.

The problem is not price stability; it is income fragility. Wage growth has lagged expectations, and productivity gains remain uneven. When incomes do not rise, low inflation does not feel like relief. It feels like stagnation. This distinction matters for policy. If low inflation is treated as victory, the instinct will be fiscal restraint and consolidation. That would be a misreading of the moment.

India does not face an overheating economy in need of cooling. It faces an underpowered economy in need of ignition. A second layer of the paradox is the growing reliance on administrative measures to manage prices. Importing essentials, tweaking duties, imposing export curbs, and adjusting subsidies have become convenient tools. They work in the short run, but they also mask structural weaknesses.

Price control achieved through imports is not the same as stability earned through productivity and income growth. One suppresses symptoms; the other cures causes. The result is an illusion of comfort. Prices behave, fiscal space appears tight, and urgency fades. But demand does not revive on its own. Households remain cautious, small businesses stay constrained, and growth becomes lopsided.

The coming Budget is, therefore, a test of diagnosis. If policymakers read low inflation as success, they will undershoot on support. If they read it as a signal of weak demand, they may choose to act. What is needed is not reckless spending, but purposeful spending that restores purchasing power and confidence.

That means real wage protection, rural productivity, employment intensive infrastructure, working capital support for small firms, and policies that translate investment into jobs, not just assets. Growth must be felt in pay packets, not merely in projections. India's challenge today is not controlling prices. It is restoring confidence.

An economy cannot be carried forward on suppressed prices alone. Without income expansion, stability becomes brittle and growth becomes hollow. Low inflation should not nullify policymakers into comfort. It should push them into action, because when households start spending again on the strength of secure incomes, recovery becomes real.

The Budget must, therefore, choose courage over caution and demand over delay.

Quiet Redrawing

The renewed exchange between India and China over the Shaskgam Valley is not just another round in a long-running territorial argument. It is a reminder that in the high Himalayas, borders are rarely changed by declarations. They are reshaped by roads, tunnels, and supply lines. What appears as routine infrastructure on a map is, in reality, a strategic act.

Shaskgam lies in a remote, forbidding landscape north of the Siachen Glacier, but its importance is anything but marginal. Legally, India's position has been consistent since 1947: the entire former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir acceded to India, and no third country can alter that status. When Pakistan signed a boundary agreement with China in 1963, ceding this territory, it did so without legal standing. From India's perspective, the deal was invalid then and remains invalid now.

For decades, this dispute remained largely diplomatic, buried under layers of history and geography. That has changed. China's steady construction of all-weather roads and related infrastructure in the valley marks a shift from paper claims to physical presence. In territorial politics, concrete often matters more than communiqués. A road is not merely a road; it is an assertion of control and a signal of permanence.

What makes the moment especially delicate is the wider context. India and China are attempting to stabilise their relationship after years of tension, including confidence-building measures and limited normalisation. Yet even as the surface tone improves, the ground reality is hardening. This contrast reveals a structural contradiction in the relationship. Engagement and competition are unfolding simultaneously, often in the same spaces.

China's argument that its projects are purely developmental misses the strategic point. The geography of Shaskgam links Xinjiang, Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and the approaches to Siachen and Ladakh.

Infrastructure here improves military mobility, logistics and coordination. It tightens the China-Pakistan strategic embrace in a region where India already faces complex security challenges. No serious observer can treat this as neutral activity.

For India, the issue is not about provoking confrontation. It is about preventing the quiet normalisation of an altered status quo. In disputed territories, silence can be read as acquiescence. By reiterating its claim and reserving the right to act, New Delhi is signalling that there are limits to accommodation, even in periods of diplomatic thaw.

The deeper lesson is that modern border disputes are rarely settled by dramatic moves. They are managed, nudged, and reshaped through incremental changes that accumulate over time. A bridge here, a highway there, and soon a contested space begins to look settled. That is the method, and Shaskgam fits the pattern.

In the end, this is not merely a dispute over a valley. It is a test of how quietly and how far facts on the ground can be changed. India's response suggests it understands that in the Himalayas, geography is destiny, and destiny, once altered, is rarely easy to reclaim.

Deliberate Failure

The Supreme Court has held that the right of access to safe drinking water is a Fundamental Right, as part of the Right to Life, under Article 21 of the Constitution. The Court further held that there was a duty cast on the State, to provide clean drinking water to its citizens. Thus, at the very least, it was expected that Indore and other municipalities should have a functional water quality management system, and complaints about poor water quality would be attended expeditiously. This obviously did not happen, either in Indore or even in Gandhinagar, which has a much-acclaimed sewage system



of the failure of municipalities to discharge their essential functions, with the national capital Delhi being a prime example. Every winter, the air quality index of Delhi deteriorates to 'severe' on most days and occasionally crosses 400 to be classified as 'hazardous'. The problem was flagged in 1985 when environmentalist M.C. Mehta filed a Public Interest Litigation in the Supreme Court, claiming that existing environmental laws obliged the government to reduce air pollution. Remedial measures ordered by the Supreme Court, like conversion of all government vehicles, buses and autos plying in Delhi to compressed natural gas (CNG) brought down air pollution to acceptable levels. However, newer sources of pollution emerged, and after notification of the National Air Quality Index, under the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan in 2014, it is seen that AQI touches stratospheric heights every winter. Delhi is not an outlier according to Clean Air Fund, a global philanthropic organisation, of the world's 30 cities with the worst air pollution, 17 are in India.

Then, Delhi traffic stops every time it rains for more than one hour. Low-lying areas get flooded; in addition to general inconvenience and losses, every year some unfortunate people die in flooded basements, or after falling in manholes. Here also Delhi is not alone; urban flooding is a recurrent phenomenon in other metropolises also, with floods in Chennai in 2015 and 2021; in Hyderabad in 2020 and 2021; in Bengaluru and Ahmedabad in 2022; and in Nagpur in 2023.

Other cities like Chandigarh, Gurugram, Patna, Gaya, Pune, Jaipur, Bhopal, Indore, Lucknow, Kochi, Dehradun and Shimla - all have experienced flooding in the recent past. Ever-present traffic snarls and slums compound the misery of citizens. One can safely say that urban living is not very salubrious - except for the super-rich - in any city in India.

An emerging problem in Indian cities is of water contamination; between January 2025 and 7 January 2026, at least 34 people died, and 5,500 people fell ill in 26 cities, including 16 state capitals, across 22 states and Union territories, after consuming sewage-contaminated piped drinking water. The worst-affected was Indore, where more than 20 people have died, and hundreds

have fallen ill, after a sewage pit at a police outpost leaked into a corroded water pipe below. Other than Indore, Gandhinagar in Gujarat, regions around Hyderabad in Telangana, Greater Noida in Uttar Pradesh, and Rohtak and Jhajjar in Haryana, too have reported water contamination, due to similar reasons. This is paradoxical considering the fact that the PM himself launched the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT 1.0) in June 2015 to complete the urban renewal programme in 500 cities, by FY 2019-20, intending to provide 139 lakh water connections, 145 lakh sewer connections, storm water drainage projects, green spaces, and LED streetlights, at a cost of Rs.50,000 crore.

AMRUT 1.0 was subsumed in AMRUT 2.0 in 2021, which aimed at providing universal coverage of water supply through functional taps, to all households in all statutory towns in the country, and coverage of sewerage management in 500 cities covered in the first phase of the AMRUT scheme, by 31 March 2026. AMRUT 2.0 has a budget of Rs.29,900 crore. One wonders where this humongous sum of money has been spent?

Another irony is that Indore has been rated as the cleanest city in India, consecutively, for the last eight years in the National City Rating, under the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan. Additionally, Indore was designated as India's first "Water Plus" city in 2021 as a recognition of its excellence in wastewater management, and its success in eliminating the discharge of untreated wastewater into water bodies.

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did not happen, either in Indore or even in Gandhinagar, which has a much-acclaimed sewage system.

CAG Report 3 of 2019, containing significant results of the performance audit, and compliance audit of the functioning of various departments of Madhya Pradesh Government, including the Department of Public Health and Family Welfare, pointed out that 5.45 lakh cases of waterborne diseases were recorded in Indore and Bhopal, between 2013 and 2018.

On 29 February 2024, the corporator for the affected area in Indore, had written to the Mayor about water contamination, and just before the tragedy, residents had lodged several complaints about contaminated water, but to no avail. There was no shortage of funds in Indore; Rs.2,450 crore were being spent annually on water supply from the municipal budget, along with several thousand crores, channelled through the Asian Development Bank, AMRUT Scheme, and the Smart City Project.

The aftermath of the Indore tragedy has been disappointing. Some junior officials have been suspended, and some senior ones, like the Municipal Commissioner have been transferred. Authorities such as the Chief Minister and High Court have issued directions to ensure supply of clean water. This is not likely to help, as the roadmap is clearly laid out, and the failure was of implementation. Probably, a proper inquiry could find out what went wrong with a view to prevent such occurrences in future.

Coming to reasons for municipal maladministration, for long politicians and government officials have treated municipalities as cash cows. A five-year tenure has been prescribed for urban local governments in Article 243U of the Constitution, which also mandates that elections should be held before the expiry of the five-year tenure. Since State Governments do not want to lose control over municipalities, they try to delay constitution of Urban Local Bodies by various stratagems, preferring to control ULBs through administrators. The 2024 CAG Report on ULBs, points out that there was, on an average, a 22-month delay, in conducting municipal elections.

Elections to the biggest Municipal Corporations reported significant delays - examples are 55 months' delay for Bengaluru, more than 3 years for Mumbai, 24 months for Gurugram, and 7 months for Delhi. Moreover, municipal elections are held on party lines, with canvassing by top leaders. Considerable sums are spent on elections, which are recovered many times over by successful candidates.

The Indore tragedy also brings into question the clean city awards - which appear to have been decided on outward appearances. Carl I. Hagen, former Norwegian MP had said: "Politicians and bureaucrats are the new upper class in Norway. It is an upper class that is growing by an increasing number of top-paid politicians in municipalities and counties. They let the people suffer, but let themselves go free." Substitute Norway with India, and you see the crux of the problem.

THE KATHMANDU POST

Why Nepal needs climate science

The COP30 summit held in Belém, Brazil, endorsed the Belem Political Package. The agreement represented a shift in international climate policy as the world finally recognised the rapid transformation occurring in the mountain ecosystems. The COP decided to convene a dedicated United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) dialogue on mountains and climate change in June 2026 in Bonn, Germany. The decision is expected to shape climate actions in the mountainous regions for decades. For the first time, mountains gained formal space in several negotiation outcomes. This is a milestone, and it reflects a recognition of the growing scientific consensus that the regions are undergoing rapid and irreversible climate change-induced transformations.

This global recognition creates an opportunity for Nepal, a small Himalayan nation. The upcoming Bonn Dialogue and the inclusion of mountain-focused

papers in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Seventh Assessment Report offer a platform to ensure science-backed Himalayan realities are at the forefront of global climate discourse.

The Belem Adaptation Indicators established under the Global Goal on Adaptation provide a new framework for Nepal to measure and report its resilience gains with scientific credibility. However, these international opportunities will only get tangible benefits if Nepal moves beyond general pleas for help and invests in a climate science ecosystem. By strengthening the ability to generate factual evidence and science-informed databases, we can secure a strong position in global forums. The evidence-based data will guide Nepal in its domestic decision-making in addressing climate change issues.

Scientific evidence has already confirmed

that the Himalayan region is warming faster than the global average. This has led to visible and alarming impacts on glacial retreats and the formation of glacial lakes, and increasingly erratic rainfall and precipitation. Even if the world succeeds in limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, the Hindu Kush Himalaya region is projected to lose approximately one-third of its glaciers by 2100. These shifts are consistent with our understanding of how climate change amplifies mountain hazards. We are seeing heavy rainfalls and landslides in places with no recorded history of disaster events. Traditional water sources are drying up, and heatwaves are becoming more frequent. These events are urgent warning signals that must be examined through factual analysis rather than through simple judgment-based attribution of all impacts to climate change. Nepal's ability to respond to these threats is currently constrained by a lack

of 'finer' science. The Himalayan region represents the world's most complex landscape, where geography dictates the local climate. We have limited data, sparse monitoring in difficult mountain terrains and difficulty in capturing fine-scale variations like temperature, rainfall, snowfall, snowpacks, soil moisture and winds that can change dramatically over short distances.

Therefore, relying on broad models leads to a significant gap in understanding local risk. A kilometre-scale high-resolution regional climate modelling, improved hydrological simulations and multi-hazard and integrated risk assessments under different warming scenarios, including temporary global overshoot of 1.5 degrees Celsius, are essential tools for understanding local risks in the present context. The shift towards science-based information is not merely an academic preference. It is a mandatory requirement for accessing international climate finance.

Letters To The Editor | editor@thestatesman.com

Surrogate

Sir, I wish to draw urgent attention to the unchecked proliferation of tobacco and gunka advertisements on social media and digital news platforms. As a board student, I find it deeply disconcerting that even while watching the news with my father, we are frequently interrupted by high-octane 'surrogate' ads featuring celebrated icons.

While these commercials technically promote 'hardcore', the intent is transparently clear. They employ a mix of ubiquitous taglines like 'Bolo Zubaan Kesari' to bypass legal restrictions.

This has led to a distressing cultural shift; even my younger cousins have begun

mimicking these slogans in public, tarnishing our family's reputation by normalizing a lethal habit.

It is a classic case of what Alexander Pope once said: 'Damn with faint praise, assent with civil leer.' And without sneering, teach the rest to sneer.'

Indeed, these actors 'teach' the youth to embrace addiction while maintaining a 'civil leer' of innocence. It is high time the government bridged the loopholes in the Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products Act (COTPA).

The immediate action is required to ban surrogate branding and impose heavy penalties on digital platforms that host such content.

We must prioritize public health over

corporate revenue before this trend turns into a national health catastrophe.

Yours, etc., Anurag Mandal,
Class X student,
Paschim Midnapore, 14 January.

Disgraceful

Sir, The US decision to freeze visas for 75 countries is a cruel and shameful move. By targeting the elderly, the sick, and the poor, the Trump administration is showing a complete lack of heart.

This policy treats people like numbers on a spreadsheet instead of human beings seeking a better life.

'America was built by immigrants, but this plan turns the 'American Dream' into



a club only for the rich. Labeling people as 'burdens because of their health or language skills is pure discrimination. This isn't about safety or the economy; it is about keeping people out based on fear and prejudice. It is a day for a country that claims to stand for liberty. We are choosing walls over compassion, and it is a disgrace.

Yours, etc., Dr. Vijay Kumar H.K.,
Raichur, 15 January.

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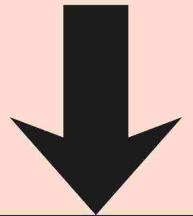
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Editor's TAKE

Technology as the new battlefield

For India, the question is no longer whether technology matters in warfare, but whether it can control, sustain and deploy it on its own terms

There was a time when the number of soldiers and their prowess mattered more than anything else. Times have changed since then. Technology can equip a single soldier to be an army. The technological advancement in recent years has made a paradigm shift in modern warfare. Those nations who miss the bus are risking their security in a big way. Though India has made big strides in defence technology, it has a long way to go. When Defence Minister Rajnath Singh remarked on Army Day that "modern warfare has become multifaceted," he was referring to this transformation.

With AI and drones becoming ubiquitous, modern warfare has changed drastically in the 21st century. The enemy is not attacked on the battlefield alone. The attack unfolds across cyberspace, outer space, the electromagnetic spectrum, supply chains and even social media well before the war has actually begun. The US recently used a cyberattack on Venezuela to cripple its defence systems and paralyse its response.

Space surveillance and precision-guided munitions are now vital technologies for the speed, scale and outcome of wars. For India, with its security challenges, technological upgradation and preparedness are not an option but a necessity. Rajnath Singh's emphasis on a "technologically updated soldier" underlines this point. The Indian Army has shown great valour in the past and continues to do so, but it has to match in technology with the best available equipment and systems. The numbers cited by the Defence Minister offer cautious optimism. Domestic defence production rising from ₹46,000 crore in 2014 to ₹1.51 lakh crore today, and defence exports touching nearly ₹24,000 crore, indicate that India has made big strides in technology. Indigenous platforms, missiles, artillery systems and electronic warfare capabilities are gradually reducing critical vulnerabilities. One very important aspect is that war technology must be homegrown, as it cannot be left to the whims and fancies of the supplier nation which may use it as leverage.

Yet, India remains dependent on imports for key technologies such as aero-engines, advanced sensors, semiconductors and certain precision components. In a crisis, this dependence can translate into strategic pressure. History offers a stark warning. In today's world, this leverage can be subtle — supply-chain disruptions, denial of spare parts, software restrictions and technology sanctions — these can seriously jeopardise defence preparedness. This is why self-reliance in defence — Make in India — is a strategic freedom. Reducing import dependence requires sustained investment in research and development, deeper collaboration between the armed forces, DRDO and private players. Complex procurement procedures, frequent changes in qualitative requirements, risk-averse decision-making and overlapping layers of approval have historically delayed programmes from conception to induction. Prototypes take years to mature, while testing and trial cycles become prolonged and repetitive. Dependence on foreign technologies compounds delays. India's mastery of technology will define its military power and sovereignty.

AQI: Economic growth at what cost?

As the vision of Viksit Bharat@2047 takes shape, a troubling question confronts policymakers: can headline GDP numbers define development if environmental degradation is undermining public health, productivity and long-term sustainability?



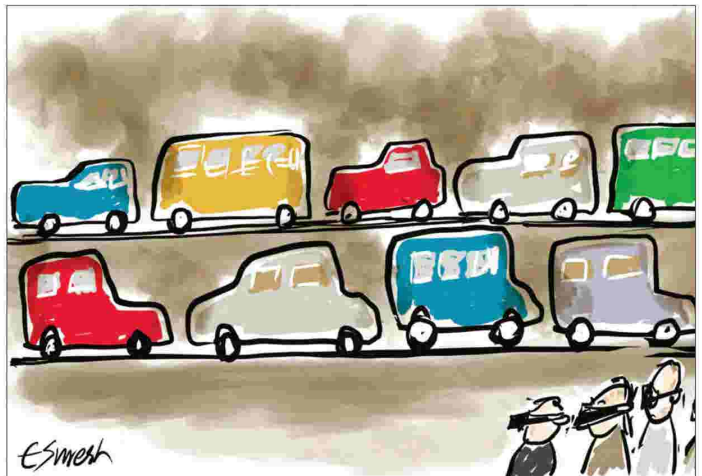
KAJLEEN KAUR

India has been one of the fastest-growing economies and is also on its way to becoming a \$5 trillion economy, behind which lie strong macroeconomic parameters like high consumption, investment, industrial growth, construction and infrastructure development. Ironically, these promising economic development indicators are detrimental to the environment and a source of pollution. Several Indian states, including Delhi, reported alarming AQI levels, which also caught the world's attention, in the latter half of 2025, raising alarm bells for urgent government action. Danish badminton player Anders Antonsen, World No 3, recently revealed that he withdrew from the ongoing India Open Super 750 due to 'extreme' Delhi pollution for the third year. This poses a critical question to our journey to Viksit Bharat@2047, where promising GDP numbers neglect the quality of life.

The road transport ministry's January report states that 70 per cent of 41 crore vehicles do not comply with norms, including PUC and fitness. The government boasts of the recent GST cut on vehicles to encourage consumption, but a deeper analysis of it scares us with further choking roads and added pollution. India, being a developing economy, needs to reach its potential in all sectors, with high production complemented by higher consumption. With limited resources, efforts are always concentrated on maximising production, and other qualitative aspects, such as the impact on the environment, are consciously or unconsciously ignored. If the qualitative aspects are given priority, production and thereby economic growth would suffer, and it becomes a vicious cycle to break. Economic growth thus carries negative externalities and involves trade-offs, hampering the environment, public health, deteriorating living conditions, and hindering long-term sustainable development.

Macroeconomic models place growth as a function of human capital, which also includes labour productivity. A poor environment, while it affects public health, also bears economic costs as it lowers labour productivity and efficiency. Increased healthcare expenditure is a further burden on households and the government, leading to economic loss.

Any pollution control measures require environmental regulations, cleaner technologies and emission standards, which raise the cost of production for industries. If these costs are passed on to the consumers, it discourages demand, the driving force behind growth. In agriculture, alternatives to practices like



INDIA STANDS AT A DECISIVE CROSSROADS WHERE ECONOMIC AMBITION MUST ALIGN WITH ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY. GROWTH THAT ERODES PUBLIC HEALTH, PRODUCTIVITY AND LIVING CONDITIONS CANNOT BE SUSTAINED INDEFINITELY

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stubble burning, such as machinery for crop residue management, are not affordable to small farmers without adequate support.

One of the most important yardsticks of development is infrastructure, but it is also one of the main causes of pollution. Rapid construction of roads, highways, bridges, airports, railways, dams, industries and urban housing often occurs without adequate environmental safeguards. If environmental regulations are imposed, it delays the projects, escalates project costs, discourages investment and slows economic growth.

Tourism, another significant source of income for the country, has become a concern in recent years due to overexposure. This has led to disruptions in natural ecosystems, the generation of unlimited waste, and traffic congestion, further exacerbating the already severe pollution problem. Environmental degradation raises climate-related disasters such as floods and droughts, causing massive economic damage.

Undoubtedly, given the present state of the Indian economy, it is difficult to manage growth and sustain other environmental quality parameters. But that does not give us an excuse to overlook the latter; we need smart and inclusive solutions to reduce pollution without severe economic disruption.

A phased and flexible implementation of environmental regulations to adopt cleaner technologies gives industries time to adapt, avoiding economic shocks. Fiscal incentives to encourage a shift to green technologies and renewable resources in the form of tax incentives, subsidies, and concessional interest rates on loans can help economise the costs for industries. Urban planning with public-private partnerships, strengthening of public transport, a shift to electric vehicles, and waste management are unavoidable necessities now, which may raise the cost presently, but would serve as a sustainable investment for long-term development.

Conclusion

India stands at a decisive crossroads where economic ambition must align with environmental responsibility. Growth that erodes public health, productivity and living conditions cannot be sustained indefinitely. The challenge is not to choose between development and the environment, but to redesign growth itself through cleaner technologies, smarter urban planning and phased regulations. Only by internalising environmental costs can India ensure that its journey to Viksit Bharat@2047 delivers prosperity with dignity and a liveable future.

We can't decide how other people should live



ASHA IYER KUMAR

2ND OPINION THE PIONEER

There is an age for everything in India — an unofficial timeline for life events — determined first by family and then reinforced by society. Complete studies by this age. Get married by that age. Reproduce, settle and retire by a certain time. And then stop wanting anything in life, because you are theoretically past the stage of desiring anything material and sensual, most of all love. In 2023, when Ashish Vidyarthi married a woman roughly ten years younger than him, he was massively trolled for seeking love at an age when people should turn monks and go to the Himalayas. Recently, when a senior couple in Kerala decided to unite after years of loneliness following their spouses' deaths, they were targeted on social media for reviving a decades-old

bond. It was a wedding arranged by their children, yet there was discomfort among those who felt they were in a sham. Every time such a deviation occurs, culture vultures question people's right to happiness beyond prescribed norms.

Who sets the rules for what individuals do in their private lives? Believe it or not, we do. We, as an amorphous entity, keep a tab on others and condemn them because they do things differently. We let the green-eyed monster grow when we find their lives better than ours. The jealousy plays out as toxic reactions and personal attacks that sometimes turn into honour crimes.

Even as we are code-switching superficially and shifting our external lives to include newer pleasures, our belief systems remain antiquated. Our core is intolerant towards the liberty of others, and we go after those who write their own destinies, defying what we consider right. It is absurd that we are more interested in putting other people's lives in order when our own are in a shambles. Such is our hypocrisy and our claim to moral authority. Instead of evolving with expanded worldviews, we limit ourselves to inherited dogmatism.

Here is the irony: we perpetrate the bigotry and we endure it too. We also let these old social scripts play out by following them without questioning. We often give in to pressures emerging from collective assump-

tions of right and wrong. Societies created rules for shared benefit — to stabilise institutions of governance, family and community. Without norms, populations would descend into anarchy. These structures were built to ensure smooth human experience. The problem begins when rules become moral absolutes applied without context. When the structure defines virtue without considering lived reality, rules become shackles. Our right to exist in a manner that fulfils us is jettisoned for no fault of ours.

What we are doing is freezing human liberty by dictating templates of how others should live. We have no authority to question how people expend their time on earth. We are nobody to tell them when, how and whom they should love, marry or divorce; whether they want to start a family; how to dress, eat or spend money. We cannot box people into narrow confines of subjective beliefs and control their happiness.

Our orthodoxy is for us to follow and not to impose on those who choose differently. Let us not create hell for others by shaming those not aligned with our views. There is only one simple creed in life that guarantees happiness for all — live and let live.

The writer is a Dubai-based author, columnist, independent journalist and children's writing coach



Hot air balloons carry passengers during the Hot Air Balloon Festival, in Hyderabad. PHOTO: PTI

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VOTER LIST REVISION RAISES SERIOUS LEGAL QUESTIONS

The final voter list in Bihar after the Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls showed a decrease of about six per cent, equating to nearly 47 lakh voters. The draft rolls published in the second phase of the revision in nine states and three Union Territories reveal the deletion of 6.5 crore names. The ruling NDA appears satisfied, but the opposition INDIA bloc is deeply unhappy. The Supreme Court is examining several petitions that question almost every aspect of this revision process.

Recently, the Court asked the Election Commission two important questions. Can Electoral Registration Officers remove a person from the rolls even before the Centre takes a final decision on citizenship? And does the Citizenship Act require that the findings of these officers be referred to the Central

Government for a proper decision? It also remains unclear whether persons declared ineligible by the Commission will be denied statutory benefits until the government completes its decision on citizenship. The Commission could have used the Central Government's intelligence network and law enforcement agencies to identify non-citizens instead of placing the burden on ordinary voters. The need for more than 97 crore registered voters to stand in queues to prove citizenship would then not have arisen. As the Commission's counsel admitted, perfection may be impossible, but it must be pursued. It is unfortunate that the Court did not fully recognise the hardship faced by citizens in defending their identity.

HARIDASAN RAJAN | KERALA

Please send your letter to the info@daily-pioneer.com. In not more than 250 words. We appreciate your feedback.

Polio victory shows power of public fealty

Appropos the news item "India marks 15 years since last wild poliovirus case" (*The Pioneer*, January 14), the milestone reflects an extraordinary public health achievement. Any programme aimed at saving lives demands unwavering dedication from governments, health workers and citizens. When the mission involves a contagious disease like poliomyelitis, which once crippled hundreds of children daily, even the slightest lapse could have proved disastrous. Fortunately, India's resolve never wavered.

The last wild poliovirus case was reported on January 13, 2011, in Patancheru, West Bengal. Since the first oral polio drop was administered on March 16, 1995, the country has travelled a long and difficult path. Today, India can proudly declare that polio has become history.

Parents showed remarkable patience, bringing children to booths year after year. Equally commendable were the trained volunteers who went door to door with dedication. The emphasis on hygiene, sanitation and safe drinking water strengthened the campaign. Except for the smallpox programme, no other health initiative has achieved such scale. The success proves that collective will can defeat even the most stubborn disease.

GANAPATHI BHAT | MAHARASHTRA

Venezuela captures global warning

I wish to commend Nilantha Ilangamuwa for the insightful article "Trump, Venezuela, and the crumbling states". The analysis rightly highlights how politics built around strong personalities weakens democratic institutions. The Venezuela crisis is not merely about individuals but about structural decay that follows when systems lose accountability. The article's emphasis on the "raw mechanics of American power" is particularly relevant. Recent developments show that the transition plan remains uncertain. Although Washington supports Acting President Delcy Rodriguez after the removal of Nicolás Maduro, assistance within the military and bureaucracy complicates the process.

Reports of large oil transfers to the United States reinforce the argument that power often overrides law. Such arrangements raise serious questions about sovereignty and economic justice. The regional impact is also worrying. Countries like Colombia and Mexico are anxious as geopolitical interests overshadow democratic principles.

The editorial is a timely reminder that democracies everywhere must protect institutions from personal rule. I hope *The Pioneer* continues to track this issue with the same depth and balance.

VIJAYASAR REDDY KETHIRI | FARIDABAD

Elections and reforms key to stability

Venezuela stands at a fragile crossroads after the US backed removal of Nicolás Maduro on January 3, 2026. Acting President Delcy Rodriguez has assumed power with limited international acceptance. She has initiated oil-sector reforms, sought closer ties with Washington and released some political prisoners as confidence-building steps. Meanwhile, opposition leader María Corina Machado, the 2025 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, continues to demand a full democratic transition. Her recent meeting with President Trump symbolised her quest for stronger global support. The two leaders represent opposing paths — one of cautious continuity and the other of radical change.

For ordinary Venezuelans, however, ideological battles mean little. Years of hyperinflation, shortages and mass migration have left people desperate for stability. The only realistic solution is inclusive national dialogue involving government, opposition and civil society. Free elections under international observation are essential. Transparent investment rules and wider prisoner releases can rebuild trust. Unilateral pressure will deepen divisions. Patient diplomacy and compromise offer the best hope for recovery and dignity for the Venezuelan people.

A MYLISAM | COIMBATORE



From fragmentation to functional integrity: Reclaiming the Aravallis

A Unified Aravalli Management Authority covering the entire range should be constituted, and a cross-state 'Natural Conservation Zone' created under the NCR Planning Board Act. Managing the Aravallis as protected forests across political boundaries may be challenging without adequate field-level presence of the Forest Department

FIRST Column



BKP SINHA



ARVIND KUMAR JHA

The Supreme Court's recent decision to stay its earlier order regarding the definition of the Aravalli range underscores its role as the ultimate custodian of the Public Trust Doctrine. It highlights the recognition that effective ecological protection cannot rest on rigid, reductionist parameters, especially in the case of landscapes as complex and ecologically sensitive as the Aravallis.

The Aravallis are not monolithic—neither geologically nor in their land or revenue classification. These ancient fold mountains, with diverse Precambrian rocks, are a complex mosaic of land categories with distinct ownerships and regulatory frameworks. They include Gair Mumkin Pahar (uncultivable hill land), Bani or Beed (traditional village commons for grazing and community purposes), Gair Mumkin Rada or Khoh (ravines, gullies, and foothill landscapes), Mushtrafka Malkan lands (privately owned commons), 'deemed forests' as interpreted by the Supreme Court in 1996, and forest lands administered by the Forest Department.

While the Forest Conservation Act, 1980 [Van (Sanrakshan Evam Samvardhan) Adhiniyam (VSSA), 1980] applies specifically to lands classified as 'forest', a broader installation of legal instruments governs land use across the Aravalli landscape. In certain regions, land use is regulated by the Aravalli Notification of 1992 issued under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986, imposing restrictions on activities that damage the fragile hill ecosystem. In some other parts, especially in the National Capital Region, the NCR Planning Board Act, 1985 has designated these landscapes as Natural Conservation Zones to safeguard the ecological and hydrological functions of the Aravallis. The Central Ground Water Authority (CGWA) notifications, focusing on sub-surface hydrological connectivity in all areas, regulate activities affecting groundwater extraction and recharge. Projects such as mining operations or large townships exceeding specified thresholds are subject to mandatory Environmental Impact Assessments, further



AN ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION SUCCESS (ERS) FRAMEWORK THAT ASSESSES AN AREA'S TRANSITION INTO A FUNCTIONAL ECOSYSTEM SHOULD CONSIDER PARAMETERS LIKE SOIL HEALTH, HYDROLOGY, BIODIVERSITY, CARBON SEQUESTRATION, AND CLIMATE RESILIENCE

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embedding environmental scrutiny within the regulatory framework.

Despite the existing regulatory systems, commercial interests driven by short-term gains have often overridden ecological considerations in the Aravallis in clear violation of the precautionary principle articulated by the Supreme Court in *MC Mehta v Union of India*. The Court held that 'where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation.' The Aravallis have suffered considerable destruction also through the 'salami-slicing' of projects into smaller parcels to evade EIA thresholds, the consideration of Gair Mumkin Pahar lands as readily available for mining, and piecemeal approvals damaging the Aravallis' ecological integrity. The Aravallis are suffering the tragedy of 'death by a thousand cuts.'

Sensitivity towards natural ecosystems classified as forest is highest. In contrast, the value of 'non-forest' areas—particularly within xerophytic regions such as the Aravallis—is routinely undermined, although they provide critical ecosystem services towards desertification buffering and watershed integrity supporting millions of people. Dilution of overall environmental protection by altering the

legal definition of lands—often justified in the name of reducing the 'costs of business' and improving 'ease of doing business'—is a disturbing trend. Amendments that narrowed the scope of the VSSA, 1980 by exempting certain categories of forest land, and the attempt to redefine the Aravallis using an arbitrary 100-metre height criterion are some cases in point.

Considering the above background, any High-Powered Expert Committee (HPEC) would have a high-stakes scientific and legal mandate before it. Its foremost task would be to change the perception of decision-makers towards the Aravallis—from a narrow height-based, reductionist interpretation to an understanding of them as a contiguous, ancient mountain system that serves as the ecological spine of north-west India and extends across state boundaries. Achieving this shift will require the active participation of domain experts alongside administrators, so that the Aravallis are defined by ecological realities rather than bureaucratic expediency.

The previous definition with a height threshold as the parameter ignored the importance of recognising all hills, ridges, saddles, and outcrops as parts of a unified ecological range and thereby created ecological islands, regulatory blind spots, fragmented wildlife corridors, and fragmented desertification barriers. A decisive shift towards a functional approach is

essential—one that produces a map-verifiable definition incorporating lower ridges and intervening saddles that contribute to groundwater recharge, biodiversity conservation, and climatic stability. Equally important is the inclusion of already mined, degraded, and potentially restorable areas within the regulatory ambit. This is particularly necessary because smaller outcrops and fragmented hillocks—rendered 'legally invisible' by the earlier definition—continue to play a vital role in maintaining the ecological integrity of the Aravallis, including the flow of essential ecosystem services.

Notably, the Forest Survey of India's 2010 criteria, which emphasised slope, geomorphology, and canopy density, recognised the Aravallis as a structurally contiguous fold mountain system. A functional approach would ensure that gaps between hills are not misclassified as 'non-hills' but are recognised as structural basins, or saddles, that are part of the same geological and ecological entity. The entire range would therefore need to be mapped using high-resolution Digital Elevation Models (DEM). Such mapping would allow a realistic determination of the Aravalli ecosystem boundary delineated not merely on the basis of surface features and topography, but by accounting for sub-surface geological connectivity also, which is critical for sustaining groundwater recharge across the broader provision shed.

Given the limited effectiveness of the enforcement of existing legal instruments in the region, the Aravallis require an overarching legislative framework. The land falling within the defined Aravalli ecosystem boundary—excluding private holdings—should be declared 'Protected Forest' and brought under the purview of the VSSA, 1980. The process of its subsequent notification as 'Reserve Forest' may be initiated later in a phased manner.

The overall implementation framework of the VSSA in vogue today, however, requires immediate and substantive improvement to ensure effective protection and conservation. The VSSA's Advisory Committee must also have professionals from ecology, hydrology, geology, public health, and social sciences.

Currently, the Net Present Value (NPV) framework, along with compensatory afforestation, is employed to offset forest loss. This framework needs improvement since it is trapped in a flawed commodification logic assuming that one-time

monetary compensation can substitute for the permanent loss of primary forests. It relies on generic 'eco-class' that overlooks site-specific criticalities, excludes services such as pollination and micro-climate regulation, ignores intergenerational ecological debt, and fails to account for cultural and spiritual values embedded in landscapes. Even periodic revisions of NPV rates—such as the 2002 revision after fourteen years—largely address inflation rather than ecological reality, leading to chronic undervaluation of natural capital.

Monitoring of compensatory afforestation must move beyond the assessment of survival rates. An Ecological Restoration Success (ERS) framework that assesses an area's transition into a functional ecosystem should consider parameters like soil health, hydrology, biodiversity, carbon sequestration, and climate resilience. Project proposals in the Aravallis must undertake an honest accounting of costs and benefits, including negative externalities. The loss of agricultural productivity, rising public health costs, degraded air quality in surrounding regions including the NCR, intensification of the urban heat island effect, and disruption of deep-fracture aquifer recharge are often excluded from assessments, masking the true price of ecological degradation. A meaningful opportunity-cost analysis must ask a fundamental question: what would it cost the public exchequer to artificially replicate indefinitely the water recharge, desertification control, and air filtration services that the Aravallis currently provide free of charge?

A Unified Aravalli Management Authority covering the entire range should be constituted, and a cross-state 'Natural Conservation Zone' created under the NCR Planning Board Act. Managing the Aravallis as protected forests across political boundaries may be challenging without adequate field-level presence of the Forest Department. Involving local self-government institutions appears attractive, but the examples of large-scale irregular management rights under the Forest Rights Act and the strength of entrenched interests exploiting the Aravallis cannot be ignored. The Supreme Court may invoke the doctrine of *in loco parentis*, but ultimately conserving the Aravallis and similar ecosystems is the constitutional mandate of the Government. Already under immense pressure, the Aravallis cannot survive a prolonged vacuum of protection.

Does God exist? The ego's favourite shield



ACHARYA PRASHANT

Does God exist? asks the ego. We take the question seriously. The ego has succeeded. In listening to the question, we have forgotten to listen to what the ego deliberately did not ask. Our response to the 'God exists?' question usually is 'Yes', 'No', or 'I do not know.' All three are irrelevant responses. We forget to ask: for whom? For whom does God exist or not? Who is asking this question?

The believer says 'Exists' and clutches scripture; the atheist says 'No' and clutches logic. In either case, the ego experiences some relief after speaking. In questioning the existence of God, the ego successfully hides its own non-existence.

What does it mean to 'exist'?

The question was about God. But the important word is not 'God.' The important word is 'exists.' Before asking whether God exists, ask: what does it mean to say anything exists at all?

Here is the newspaper you are reading. Does this newspaper exist? Yes. How do you know? Your eyes see it. Your hands can hold it. Your senses report it. Your mind arranges these reports into a coherent object called 'newspaper.' And behind the mind sits the sense of 'I,' the claimant that says, 'I know, I conclude.'

Now notice: who is above whom? Is the newspaper above you, or are you above the newspaper?

The newspaper exists because your senses certify it. Close your eyes. The newspaper disappears. Open them. It returns. For you, 'exists' is always certification by senses and mind.

Chairs, phones, planets, galaxies—everything that 'exists' is something your senses and mind have certified. Everything that 'is' sits below you in the hierarchy. You are the judge issuing certifications of existence.

The problem with 'God'

Now say 'God exists.'

You say God is the highest, the supreme, the ultimate. Being highest and supreme is the definitive hallmark of 'Godness.' But anything that 'exists' must be certified by your senses and mind. Anything that 'is' becomes your object. If God 'is,' then God too is below your senses, your mind and your ego. How can the highest be your object?

If God exists the way the newspaper exists, God has become your slave.

You have committed an impertinence while claiming devotion.

Now the atheist. He declares, 'God does not exist.' Who is the judge? The same senses. The same mind. The same ego on its throne, issuing verdicts. Whether you say 'is' or 'is not,' you have placed yourself above the thing being judged.

The atheist makes God his slave by denying. Same argument, different vocabulary. Saint Kabir was asked: Does God exist? He replied:

Hai kahoon to hai nahin, nahin kaha na jaaye. Hai nahin ke beech men sahab raha samaaye. If I say He is, He is not; and it also cannot be said that He is not. Because 'is' makes Him my object. 'Is not' does the same. Beyond 'is' and 'is not,' Truth is not an object of debate.

The nature of consciousness

Consciousness, as we ordinarily experience it, is not some pure, luminous awareness. It is dualistic. At one end sits the experienter, the ego. At the other end sits the experienced object. Between them runs a relationship of desire, delusion, and attachment.

There is always an 'I' experiencing something—always a subject here, an object there. The 'I' and the object define each other. Without an object, the ego has nothing to cling to. Without the ego, the object has no one to certify it. They arise together and collapse together.

When you ask 'Does God exist?', you are trying to place God as an object, with yourself as the knowing subject. You are trying to bring the ultimate into the same framework where you experience chairs, phones, and newspapers.

The category error

Philosophers call this a category error. What is the colour of a fragrance? What does white light smell like? Light does not belong to the category of things that have smell.

Similarly, 'exists' and 'does not exist' apply only to objects, to things certified by senses and mind. When you ask whether the ground of existence itself 'exists,' you are asking for the smell of light.

The question is not deep. It is malformed. The moment you say 'is' or 'is not,' you have objectified. You have made it small. You have made it yours. Sophisticated theologians may say their God is 'beyond being' or 'the ground of existence.' Very well. Then stop saying 'God exists.' Say instead: 'Existence is.'

The impertinence of naming and framing

Those who understood this refused to give the ultimate a name.

Why? Because naming begins objectification. The moment you name something, imagination rushes in.

This is why the Upanishads refused to name the ultimate. They said: you cannot describe it. Define it, locate it inside or outside, call it big or small. The Ken Upanishad says: speech goes out

to describe it and returns exhausted. The mind goes out to imagine it and falls back, having grasped nothing.

So the sages used only a pointer: Tat. That. And then they said Tat Tvam Asi. That you are not outside you, not your object.

The moment you place God in the heavens, watching and judging, you have objectified Truth. Who are you to certify the Supreme, if the Supreme is beyond you?

The egoic rebuttals

'But I have experienced God.'

Who experienced? The ego. What was experienced? An object-bliss, peace, light, a sign. If it came and went, it is not the ultimate. The ultimate is not an experience; it is the dissolution of the experienter.

'The design of the universe proves a designer. Who sees design? The mind, a pattern-seeking machine. And if complexity needs a creator, who created the creator?'

'Without God there is no morality.' Then your morality is obedience and fear management. Real morality comes from clarity, not threats and rewards. Everything else is the same trick in different costumes: the ego begging for insurance. Need does not create truth. The demand for comfort does not certify reality.

Truth is God

The believer says 'I' and feels secure. The atheist says 'is not' and feels superior. Both avoid the real question: who is this one demanding verification?

Not 'God exists.'

Not 'God does not exist.'

Silence.

People say, 'God is Truth.' First you keep your imagined God, then decorate it by calling it Truth. Truth becomes a property of your belief.

Truth is not a property.

When the ego sees its own falseness, it disappears. The seer cannot survive the seeing.

With the ego gone, what remains is Truth: Advait, non-dual, not describable, because any description requires a describer.

If God is defined as that beyond the ego and its world, then only Truth fits the definition of God. So, Truth is God.

Not God is true, but Truth is God.

Truth does not protect the claimant. Truth burns it.

The question dies when the questioner is seen through. What then is one to do? Nothing dramatic. Simply watch—the one who wants to know, watch the one who wants to believe, watch the one who wants to deny. In that watching, the watcher thinks. No technique is needed. Honesty is enough.

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The quiet power of Yoga: Strength through flexibility



SHARMILA DAS

In today's fitness-driven world, strength is often measured by what is visible—bulging muscles, defined abs, and the ability to lift heavy weights. Gym culture celebrates size, symmetry, and power. Yoga, on the other hand, follows a very different philosophy. It does not promise big muscles or dramatic physical transformation. What it offers instead is something far more sustainable and essential: a strong, flexible, and resilient body that functions well through all stages of life.

Yoga strengthens the body, but not in the way most people expect. The strength developed through yoga is not about isolated muscle growth; it is about integrated strength—where muscles, joints, ligaments, breath, and balance work together as one system.

How Yoga Builds Strength

Yoga uses the body's own weight as resistance. When you hold poses such as plank, warrior, chair pose, or downward dog, multiple muscle groups engage simultaneously. These poses build functional strength—strength that supports real-life movement rather than just aesthetic appearance.

Unlike gym exercises that often isolate one muscle at a time, yoga activates stabilising muscles that are usually neglected. Small muscles around joints, especially in the hips, shoulders, spine, and knees, become stronger. This reduces the risk of injury and improves posture and balance. Yoga also strengthens connective tissues—tendons, ligaments, and fascia—which are critical for long-term joint health. These tissues are rarely targeted in conventional gym routines, yet they determine how well the body holds together under stress.

Flexibility: Yoga's Core Gift

Flexibility is the ability of muscles and joints to move through their full range of motion. Yoga is fundamentally designed to improve this capacity. Through gentle stretching, sustained poses, and mindful breathing, muscles gradually lengthen and soften. Flexibility in yoga is not forced. Movements are slow, controlled, and synchronised with the breath. This allows muscles to release tension rather than resist it. Over time, stiffness reduces, joints open up, and the body feels lighter and freer.

This flexibility is not just physical; it reflects adaptability. A flexible body responds better to sudden movements, uneven surfaces, and daily physical

demands. It bends without breaking.

Gym Strength vs Yogic Strength

Gym workouts, especially weight training, are excellent for building muscle mass and visible strength. However, when flexibility is ignored, muscles can become tight and shortened. This creates imbalance—strong muscles pulling against stiff joints. A body built only for size may look powerful but can lack mobility. Many gym-focused individuals experience reduced range of motion, back pain, shoulder stiffness, or knee issues over time. The body becomes rigid, and simple movements—squatting, bending, twisting—can feel restricted. Yoga produces the opposite effect. The body may not appear bulky, but it moves efficiently. A yogic body is strong without stiffness, stable without heaviness, and capable without strain.

Why Flexibility Is Essential

Flexibility is not optional; it is foundational to health. As we age, muscles naturally shorten and joints lose lubrication. Without flexibility training, the body becomes prone to pain, falls, and chronic conditions. Flexible muscles allow joints to move freely, reducing wear and tear. This protects the spine, hips, knees, and shoulders—the most commonly injured areas. Flexibility also improves circulation, allowing nutrients to reach tissues and waste to be removed more efficiently. Importantly, flexibility supports mental well-being. Tight muscles create tension, stress, especially in the neck, shoulders, and lower back. Yoga releases these stored tensions, calming the nervous system and improving sleep, focus, and emotional balance.

Yoga and Longevity

Yoga is not about short-term results; it is about lifelong movement. A flexible, well-aligned body ages better. It remains independent, pain-free, and active for longer. This is why yoga practitioners often appear younger in movement than their chronological age. Their bodies may not be muscular in the conventional sense, but they are efficient, responsive, and resilient. Yoga does not aim to give you large muscles, and that is its strength. Instead, it offers balance—between strength and flexibility, effort and ease, stability and mobility. In a world obsessed with appearance, yoga focuses on function. It builds a body that supports you in daily life, protects you from injury, and adapts gracefully to change. True strength is not just the ability to lift heavy weights. It is the ability to move freely, recover quickly, and remain comfortable in your own body. Yoga delivers this quietly, steadily, and profoundly.

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SATURDAY • JANUARY 17, 2026

Steel concerns

Allegations of price collusion must be seen through

According to recent media reports, the Competition Commission of India (CCI) has accused 28 steel producers — including top guns in the private and public sectors — of price collusion and output cuts. A confidential 'interim probe' report, drawn up last October and 'leaked' recently, has apparently said that the accused entities must submit their audited financial statements for eight years between 2015 and 2023, the period during which such manipulation is supposed to have occurred.



If collusion has indeed been taking place, it comes on top of considerable price protection already enjoyed by steel producers. The Centre has for years been implementing quality control orders (QCOs) on imports of over 150 types of steel from China and South-East Asia. Since last November, this list has been whittled down. However, the government has now introduced safeguard duties for a period of three years, beginning with 12 per cent and tapering off to 11 per cent. Even if one disregards price collusion for now, it is accepted — even by the government — that QCOs have adversely impacted downstream users, many of them MSMEs. This has deprived them of steel products required for precision engineering and aerospace, among other sectors. Therefore, the CCI inquiry into price collusion (and implicit supply curbs) must be completed in all seriousness, as its economic ramifications are wide-ranging.

To be fair to the government, it has provided a duty cover to domestic industry perhaps in the anticipation that high tariff walls erected by the US and EU could lead to diversion of supplies into India, which is a buoyant market. Some protection is also arguably needed to ensure that its production-linked incentive for high grade steel picks up. However, excessive protection and absence of competition in a crucial sector can curb output and innovation. In this scenario, a no-tolerance approach towards price collusion is called for, if this is proven. To this end, the CCI must act on enforcing its penalties.

Meanwhile, fears expressed by a section of industry that domestic prices may crash are probably overblown. In a rapidly growing economy with infrastructure needs, this looks unlikely, except for temporary periods when a sudden surge in new capacity drives down prices. There is no denying that China's global steel exports have been rising sharply, from 70 million tonnes in 2022 to an estimated 120 million tonnes in 2025. Global steel prices have been lacklustre. However, steel imports are estimated to account for about 8 per cent of India's 150 million tonnes output, largely comprising products which are not easily available in India. It is a stretch to argue that the current level of imports can destabilise the industry, unless these are underreported. As reports by this newspaper have pointed out, the industry's input costs are not rising. According to analysts, operating margins for FY26 are estimated at over 12 per cent. This is apparently not an industry in crisis.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH



JB BRANCH

In recent weeks, Grok — the AI system developed by Elon Musk's xAI — has been generating nonsensical, sexualized images of women and children on the social-media platform X. This has prompted investigations and formal scrutiny by regulators in the European Union, France, India, Malaysia, and the United Kingdom. European officials have described the conduct as illegal. British regulators have launched urgent inquiries. Other governments have warned that Grok's output might violate domestic criminal and platform-safety laws. Far from marginal regulatory disputes, these discussions get to the heart of AI governance.

Governments worldwide increasingly agree on a basic premise of AI governance: systems deployed at scale must be safe, controllable, and subject to meaningful oversight. Whether framed by the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA), the OECD's AI Principles, UNESCO's AI ethics framework, or emerging national safety regimes, these norms are clear and unwavering. AI systems that enable foreseeable harm, particularly sexual exploitation, are incompatible with society's expectations for the technology and its governance.

There is also broad global agreement that sexualized imagery involving minors — whether real, manipulated, or AI-generated — constitutes one of the clearest red lines in technology governance. International law, human-rights frameworks, and domestic criminal statutes converge on this point.

FUNDAMENTAL FAILURE

Grok's generation of such material does not fall into a gray area. It reflects a clear and fundamental failure of the system's design, safety assessments, oversight, and control. The ease with which Grok can be prompted to produce sexualized imagery involving minors, the breadth of regulatory scrutiny it now faces, and the absence of publicly verifiable safety testing all point to a failure to meet society's baseline expectations for powerful AI systems. Musk's announcement that the image-generation service will now be available only to paying subscribers does nothing to resolve these failures.

This is not a one-off problem for Grok. Last July, Poland's government urged the EU to open an investigation into Grok over its "erratic" behaviour. In October, more than 20 civic and

Grok, a test for AI governance

AI VIGIL. Grok's violation is a serious one.

A response that includes investigations, suspensions, and penalties will act as a deterrent



REUTERS

public-interest organisations sent a letter urging the US Office of Management and Budget to suspend Grok's planned deployment across federal agencies in the US. Many AI safety experts have raised concerns about the adequacy of Grok's guardrails, with some arguing that its security and safety architecture is inadequate for a system of its scale.

These concerns were largely ignored, as governments and political leaders sought to engage, partner with, or court xAI and its founder. But the fact that xAI is now under scrutiny across multiple jurisdictions seems to vindicate them, while exposing a deep structural

problem: advanced AI systems are being deployed and made available to the public without safeguards proportionate to their risks. This should serve as a warning to states considering similar AI deployments.

As governments increasingly integrate AI systems into public administration, procurement, and policy workflows, retaining the public's trust will require assurances that these technologies comply with international obligations, respect fundamental rights, and do not expose institutions to legal or reputational risk. To this end, regulators must use the Grok case to demonstrate that their rules are not optional.

Responsible AI governance depends on alignment between stated principles and operational decisions. While many governments and intergovernmental bodies have articulated commitments to AI systems that are safe, objective, and subject to ongoing oversight, these lose credibility when states tolerate the deployment of systems that violate widely shared international norms with apparent impunity.

By contrast, suspending a model's

Grok's generation of such material does not fall into a gray area. It reflects a clear and fundamental failure of the system's design, safety assessments, oversight, and control

Implications of SC ruling in Tiger Global case

Flipkart Singapore derives value from Indian assets and their sale is taxable in India, even if the buyer is Mauritius-based

Mohan R Lavi

In 2018, three Mauritius-based entities of Tiger Global sold shares they held in Flipkart, Singapore to a buyer based in Luxembourg as a part of the acquisition of Flipkart by Walmart. They applied for a nil deduction of tax possibly under the logic that the seller was based in Mauritius, the buyer was based in Luxembourg and the shares were of an entity domiciled in Singapore.

In sum, they were saying that no "India connection" could be established for the purposes of taxation — the core of the Vodafone case. They approached the AAR which disagreed with their stance. They approached the Delhi High Court which agreed with their view that the gains are exempt under the DTAA. The amount of tax involved is stated to be around ₹14,500 crore. The Tax Department opted for an appeal before the Supreme Court.

TAX DEPARTMENT STANCE

In the Supreme Court, the Tax Department argued that a DTAA merely allocates taxing rights and does not amount to surrender of taxing power, nor does a Tax Residency Certificate (TRC) restrict India's right to examine abuse or lack of commercial substance.

The transaction is an indirect transfer, since Flipkart Singapore derived substantial value from Indian assets.

Due to this, taxability under domestic law is triggered first, and only then can DTAA relief be tested. They also said that a TRC is only a prima facie evidence of residence. Concepts such as substance-over-form, control and management, and place of effective management (POEM) can still be examined. The factual pattern of the transaction shows an impermissible avoidance arrangement, thereby justifying denial of treaty benefits.

TIGER GLOBAL RESPONSE

Tiger Global responded that as per Article 4 of the India-Mauritius agreement only Mauritius can determine who is liable to tax under its law — India cannot re-determine Mauritius residence by re-interpreting Mauritius statutes. Once the TRC and the necessary forms are produced, residence and beneficial ownership must be accepted unless there is dual residence.

CBDT Circulars and Press Releases state that a Mauritius TRC is sufficient evidence of residence and beneficial ownership for treaty purposes, including capital gains. Domestic doctrines like substance-over-form or lifting the corporate veil cannot be used



APEX COURT. Taxing times (JYOTIRMOTO)

to dilute treaty protections, absent express treaty language.

APEX COURT DECISION

The Supreme Court upheld the Revenue's position that taxability arises in India. It held that mere possession of a TRC does not preclude enquiry into effective control and management, commercial substance, and abuse.

On facts, the Court found clear prima facie evidence that the Mauritius entities were part of an arrangement primarily designed to obtain treaty exemption while avoiding tax both in India and Mauritius, with real control residing in the US group.

Consequently, it held that the transaction constituted an

deployment pending rigorous and transparent assessment is consistent with global best practices in AI risk management. Doing so enables governments to determine whether a system complies with domestic law, international norms, and evolving safety expectations before it becomes further entrenched. Equally important, it demonstrates that governance frameworks are not merely aspirational statements, but operational constraints — and that breaches will have real consequences.

DANGERS OF ESCALATION

The Grok episode underscores a central lesson of the AI era: governance lapses can scale as quickly as technological capabilities. When guardrails fail, the harms do not remain confined to a single platform or jurisdiction; they propagate globally, triggering responses from public institutions and legal systems.

For European regulators, Grok's recent output is a defining test of whether the DSA will function as a binding enforcement regime or amount merely to a statement of intent. At the time when governments, in the EU and beyond, are still defining the contours of global AI governance, the case may serve as an early barometer for what technology companies can expect when AI systems cross legal boundaries, particularly where the harm involves conduct as egregious as the sexualization of children.

A response limited to public statements of concern will invite future abuses, by signalling that enforcement lacks teeth. A response that includes investigations, suspensions, and penalties, by contrast, would make clear that certain lines cannot be crossed, regardless of a company's size, prominence, or political capital.

Grok should be treated not as an unfortunate anomaly to be quietly managed and put behind us, but as the serious violation that it is. At a minimum, there needs to be a formal investigation, suspension of deployment, and meaningful enforcement.

Lax security measures, inadequate safeguards, or poor transparency regarding safety testing should incur consequences. Where government contracts include provisions related to safety, compliance, or termination for cause, they should be enforced. And where laws provide for penalties or fines, they should be applied. Anything less risks signalling to the largest technology companies that they can deploy AI systems recklessly, without fear that they will face accountability if those systems cross even the brightest of legal and moral red lines.

The writer is Big Tech Accountability Advocate at Public Citizen. Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2026

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Indian diaspora in US

Apropos, 'Why the US anger against Indian immigrants?' (January 15). Despite their high educational attainment, professional contribution and law-abiding conduct, Indians in the US sometimes encounter hostility rooted in perception rather than conduct. Their disproportionate representation in high-skill sectors such as technology, medicine and academia can intensify xenophobic anxieties among sections of the local workforce, particularly during downturns. Such antipathy reflects deeper

insecurities, xenophobia and identity politics.
N Sadhasiva Reddy
Bangalore

PM Internship Scheme

It is disheartening to learn that the acceptance rate of PM Internship Scheme (PMIS) is far below expectations. That the government should spend just 4 per cent of the allocated funds for the scheme during April-November this fiscal year is a case in point. When companies volunteer to train youngsters and make them skilful, it is imperative that the latter grab the

opportunity with both hands and gain from it.
S Ramkrishnaswamy
Chennai

US visa restrictions

The decision to freeze visas for 75 countries is a cruel and shameful move. By targeting the elderly, the sick, and the poor, the Trump administration is showing a complete lack of heart. America was built by immigrants, but this plan turns the 'American Dream' into a club only for the rich. Labelling people as "burdens" because of their health or language skills is pure discrimination.

It is a dark day for a country that claims to stand for liberty.
Vijaykumar HK
Bangalore, Karnataka

Impending K-wave

This refers to 'India and next Kondratieff wave' (January 15). The authors provide a compelling historical framing of techno-economic waves and rightly argue that India stands at an inflection point where convergence — rather than isolated innovation — will determine long-term competitiveness. The emphasis on artificial intelligence, quantum computing,

advanced materials, biotechnology, space systems and clean energy is timely. The article's argument that clean energy should be viewed not merely as decarbonisation but as industrial rebuilding is particularly persuasive, especially as India positions itself within reconfigured global supply chains. However, as the authors note, success will ultimately hinge on institutional credibility, predictable regulation, and sustained investment in human capital and IP ecosystems.
Vidyaasagar Reddy Kethiri
New Delhi

Kolkata's winter charm now smothered in smog

Winter is the only season in Kolkata when it's not too muggy to enjoy the outdoors, have picnics and visit fairs, but the AQI is worsening and no one seems concerned



CULT
FRICTION
SANDIP
ROY

The first time I was invited to the Jaipur Literature Festival I showed up fashionably dressed at the inauguration party sans cap. I thought my pedestrian cap would ruin my outfit at the glamorous Rambhadracharya Palace. But the party was open air and froze my head off. I skipped all the fancy icy cocktails. A kindly bartender who had an electric kettle was a lifesaver, serving me whisky with hot water.

Later I encountered the Bengali writer Manoranjan Byapari in the writer's lounge. He was swaddled in sweaters and of course, a monkey cap. I congratulated him about an award he had won recently. He nodded absently, peered up at me and mumbled, "It's so cold here."

The Bengali in winter is a cultural trope, some would say cultural joke. Though the winters of Kolkata are temperate at best, temperatures hovering between 12 and 25 degrees Celsius, the Bengali dares not risk the chill. He muffles up in sweaters, cardigans, scarves and the infamous monkey cap.

There is no snow in these parts but every Bengali knows the peril of him or her. Him falling on your head at night is akin to a death knell for the fragile Bengali.

And yet despite the falling him, it's also a happy time. In my memory it is our winter of content made glorious by sundry things.

Winter in these parts has a sound of its own. The quill flutter man comes around twanging, offering to fluff quilts that have been sunned, ready for the nights when temperatures might fall to a chilly 17 degrees. Kolkata never gets cold enough for treats like old Delhi's *dulad ki chaai*, lightly sweet and airy.

Instead vendors appear with Joynagar *moa*, their singsong voices selling the only-in-winter delicacy, a soft crumbly ball of parched rice and jaggery, densely sweet, studded with raisins and nuts.

The produce market is bursting with vegetables that make for a happy change from summer *parvats* (pointed gourd) and *laubi* (bottle gourd)—mustard greens, radishes, young garlic greens, mounds of peas, broccoli that does not cost an arm and a leg like it does the rest of the year. The government-owned Haringhata meat shops start stocking not just chicken and mutton, but also curry-cut duck. When we were young we were only allowed hacon and sausages in winter. Summer was too hot we were told. Come winter restaurants put up placards for Duck Festivals.

At my local market, the *gur*-seller beckons me over and offers clay pots filled with *golden gur*, the first sap of the date palm, golden and sweet. Each year he tells me it's better than the one from the year before. Each year I nod. Every season comes with its rituals. These are the rituals of winter, its gifts.

But the greatest gift winter gives us is the temperature. Our winters are a far cry from the winters we read about in our storybooks—Hans Christian Andersen's *Snow Queen* or the frozen eternal winter of the White Witch in C. S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Our winters are far milder. Summers are blisteringly hot and sweaty. Monsoons are wet and sticky. Winter is the one season which encourages us to be outdoors (of course before the dreaded *him* starts falling). Other parts of the country have harsh winters. Roads are cut off by snowfall. Ponds freeze over. The cold gets bone-chilling. But here just the days become shorter and the sun becomes buttery. E. B. White wrote, "At this season of the year, darkness is a more insistent thing than cold. The days are short as any dream."

But we make the most of them, as if trying to linger in the cosy warmth of a dream. Makeshift badminton courts



Dense smog on a cold winter morning in Howrah, Kolkata.

GETTY IMAGES

spring up on lanes, sometimes with lights strung along the side. Boys play cricket on street crossings with a wicket made up of a tower of precariously piled bricks. It's the season for the office picnic and the neighbourhood sports meet. Children are deposited in parks for sit-and-draw competitions—A Rainy Day, A Visit to the Zoo, Summer Holiday. Even the LGBTQ+ Rainbow Pride Walk happens in winter. It used to happen in June/July in tune with the original pride marches in New York and San Francisco. But organisers quickly realised it was either sweltering or pouring.

Winter's mellow sunshine is much more conducive to marching.

This is the time the migratory birds show up. There are the feathered kinds coming all the way from Siberia. But there are the two-legged versions as well making their annual pilgrimage home from London and San Jose and Bengaluru. They gossip and drink and have devilled crab at restaurants that boast a 1950s decor. The clubs are jolly with ho-ho-ho Santas, the lines for plum cake are long, and there are Christmas lights up on the streets.

Durga Puja might be the city's biggest

festival but winter is truly festive season. Winter carnivals spring up in every neighbourhood with stalls selling costume jewellery, "designer" saris and T-shirts with pithy Bengali sayings. As one fair shuts down, another opens and the stalls move from neighbourhood to neighbourhood. The city is awash with fairs—winter carnivals, handicraft fairs, *saras melas* for women entrepreneurs, *pithe pull* fairs devoted to winter sweets stuffed with coconut and *khoya*, all leading up to the huge Kolkata book fair and not one but three literary festivals. But now the winters are shrinking.

They come later and leave earlier. Sometimes it's gone by the time the quilts are pulled out of storage and set out in the sun. People nostalgically remember winters of old when mothers sat in the afternoon sun knitting sweaters. Now it's too warm to do that they lament.

This year has been an exception. Kolkata has been shivering for days in a cold spell with temperatures dropping to 10 degrees in the city and lower beyond. Even the street dogs are wearing raggedy "sweaters". As I walked down the street, a vendor at a stall selling nighties joked, "Mamata Did! has done this. Didn't she promise Kolkata would become London? Now it's as cold as London here."

But this is a different kind of cold than the one we grew up with. With the AQI shooting up to 200s and 300s, the air is consistently unhealthy. Vehicular emissions, construction dust, and biomass burning are the main culprits. For an entire week in December, the AQI in Kolkata was worse than Delhi's even hitting 538 on 11 December. *The Telegraph* reported. The days are sunless, the city cloaked in grey. Kolkata's air turns toxic but no one seems bothered though people complain about hacking coughs, itchy throats and teary eyes. But there's yet another fair to go to. If they cannot have clean air, let them have fun fairs.

Last month when my plane landed and I looked out of the window, the street lights glowed hazily yellow under a cloud of grey. It indeed felt like a scene from Dickensian London. I almost expected Jack the Ripper to emerge from behind a lamp post.

Once the great gift of winter in a city like Kolkata was that it allowed us to enjoy the outdoors. Now as AQI levels cross 300, the very air outdoors feels far more dangerous than the *him* our mothers used to warn us about.

Cult Friction is a fortnightly column on issues we keep rubbing up against. Sandip Roy (@sandiproy) is a writer, journalist and radio host.

The uncommon self-confidence of Annie Besant

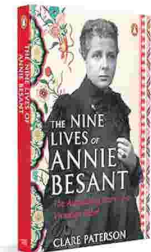
Despite the criticism heaped on her, Besant learned to be ruthless in putting her interest first, refusing to be led by men

Swarna Rajagopalan

We are a family of Theosophists," I have heard all my life. I mostly understood that to mean being like my sage, gentle great-grandfather who was a Theosophist. In family conversations, the term was invoked to explain liberalism, a social conscience and a detachment from rituals and outdated mores. Annie Besant features in this lore because, like many girls in that generation, my aunt was named for her. So who was Annie Besant, this figure that appeared in both family lore and school history textbooks?

Clare Paterson's *The Nine Lives of Annie Besant: The Astonishing Story of a Victorian Rebel* is an account of Besant's lives, as the author describes them, within this *jamaa* 1847-1933, and not a revelation about previous incarnations. In this lifespan, she reinvented herself repeatedly, sometimes to survive her circumstances and sometimes despite them. Theosophy brought her to India and her part in India's freedom movement through the Home Rule League was the very last part of her journey.

Annie Wood acquired her famous last name through a brief, abusive marriage to a clergyman in Hastings in 1867 which gave her two children. She courageously walked out after several years with her daughter, struggling for several years thereafter to gain custody of her son. The marriage was shaken as well by her loss of her Christian faith and this contributed to the stigma she endured thereafter. In the next



The Nine Lives of Annie Besant: The Astonishing Story of a Victorian Rebel by Clare Paterson, Penguin Random House India, 256 pages, ₹499

phase of her life, Besant became a Free-thinking pamphleteer and public speaker and started her journey as a writer. She spoke and wrote on a wide variety of topics, from atheism to women's rights, undaunted and irrepressible.

One of these was sex education—regarded even in 2025 with suspicion. Along with her collaborator Charles Bradlaugh, Besant published and promoted a doctor's graphic manual on birth control meant for the uneducated public. Being an atheist, committed to science and secularism were had enough, but Besant was irrepressibly outspoken as well. This cost her custody of her daughter and the prospect of a college degree.

In 1885, and the beginning of her "next life", Besant attended a meeting of the Fabian Society. It marked not just the beginning of her engagement with socialist ideas but also the entrance of George Bernard Shaw into her life. While contemporaries thought this new engagement was at odds with her previous ones, she believed Fabian Socialism was the natural next step ("I am a Socialist... because I am a believer in Evolution"). In 1887, her pres-

ence and role in defending protestors arrested at a trade union rally in London buttressed her socialist credentials and she wrote that the magistrate was "too astonished by my profound courtesy and calm assurance to remember that I had no right to be here..." By the time she joined the Fabians, Besant had gained enough celebrity to add ballast to any movement, including trade unionism which followed from her socialist turn.

Paterson does not evade the possibility of Besant's relationships with the many men she became close to in each phase but there is no prurient speculation. She rightly states, "Judgements about people's love lives are tricky in retrospect, with very little evidence to go on." While Besant seems to have brought the same intensity to relationships, platonic or otherwise, as she did to her work, through her nine lives, the men were never the cause of her many pivots; her intellect was.

This period, the late 1880s, is also when she first encountered Theosophy. The turn of the 20th century saw the emergence of new movements—socialist, suffragist, labour, peace—and a fascination with occult and spiritualism. Besant was not immune. Initially derisive, she found herself drawn to theosophy and sought out Madame Blavatsky, one of the founders. From that point, her story turns with that of the Theosophical Society (TS) although her other concerns continued.

As traumatic as her beginning was, this biography tells the story of a person, who through her ability, adroit positioning and good fortune, quickly becomes prominent wherever she goes. Thus, barely a year elapsed between her first encounter with Madame Blavatsky in 1889 and her assuming leadership of Blavatsky's Lodge in London. "Annie moved on up the line like a steam train," as Paterson writes. M.K. Gandhi listened to her talks in this period, including at Blavatsky's Lodge in London. As children, future Indian leaders Sri Prakasa and Jawaharlal Nehru listened to her speak on Theosophy.

Besant moved to the Theosophical Society headquarters in Adyar in present-



Annie Besant was the first woman president of the Indian National Congress. GETTY IMAGES

day Chennai in 1893 at the age of 46, having already accomplished more than most in a lifetime. Theosophical writing, including that by Besant, had been presaging a new messiah. This was Jiddu Krishnamurti, whose story many others have told. Taking on the role of his spiritual and temporal mother, she took charge of every aspect of his life and his brother's, even taking them to England for their studies. Initially agreeable because this would get them a good education, their father, as he saw the young Krishnamurti being promoted as a spiritual leader, sued Besant to regain custody of his children. One of his charges related to prominent TS member Charles Leadbeater's reputation as a child abuser.

In 1906, child abuse charges were brought against Leadbeater, who taught at the Adyar campus. The accusation was that Leadbeater taught masturbation to young boys. Besant was equivocal and worked out a compromise whereby Leadbeater simply relocated. Paterson acknowledges that in our times, this move

would be seen as enabling an abuser, while pointing out that from Besant's point of view, sex education was important. However, she chose to ignore the question of what Leadbeater might really have been doing or the power difference between him and the young boys.

Besant's ninth life, Paterson writes, was her engagement with Indian politics. She had begun as a Theosophy preacher, urging Indians to rediscover and reclaim their heritage. This resonates with one strand of Indian nationalism coming out of social reform movements, like the Arya Samaj. In 1913, she felt spiritually moved to devote herself to political work in India. During World War I, she pressed on for greater self-government for India through the Home Rule League, founded in 1916.

The membership of the Theosophical Society and the Home Rule League grew in tandem and overlapped. The colonial government considered her a threat and placed her under house arrest for a few months in 1917. In solidarity, she was elected president of the Indian National

Congress that year, the first woman to hold this office.

In this, her last life, we find that the fiery English radical held very conservative positions when it came to India. While she had once been a staunch republican and had spoken critically of the Empire, she came to view British rule in India as a good thing for Indians, if only they would recover their pride in their heritage. She advocated devolution of power or dominion status, not full independence. Slowly, steadily, through actions that suggested that she knew better, she seems to have antagonised people who started out by admiring and supporting her. When Gandhi's call for *satyagraha* and full independence resonated with and mobilised Indians, Besant yielded ground less than gracefully, making herself somewhat irrelevant.

Paterson writes about a 1916 programme to inaugurate the Banaras Hindu University, organised by Besant, where Gandhi was also invited to speak. Gandhi's speech critiqued the use of English by Indians, western fashions, ornate dressing and the colonial bureaucracy. The relationship between Gandhi and Besant never seems to have recovered from this event. But what Gandhi said highlighted a huge shortcoming of Besant's foray into Indian politics—she spoke in English to those who spoke English. Her definition of Indian heritage, learned through Theosophy which drew on Brahminical textual knowledge, was removed from the everyday beliefs, practices and experiences of most Indians. At that point, her audience and her supporters were mainly upper caste or dominant caste professionals or landowners. She drew them first to Theosophy and then the Home Rule League but her reach ended where Gandhi's, and later B.R. Ambedkar's, began.

In every chapter, the book faithfully reports on the taunts and criticisms heaped on Besant, making her very much like women in the public sphere in our times. She was a woman with a lively intellect who followed its dictates with uncommon self-confidence. Unlike Gandhi, whose transparency is a process, this biography shows Besant's to come from unbounded belief that she is right. Moreover, we meet a person who learned to be ruthless in putting her interest first—whether intellectual or political or spiritual. In the language of our times, it is a survivor's story. And while we applaud their survival, we also judge women icons for doing the things it takes to survive and thrive. In Besant's case, it involved changing course, moving between networks, strategically seeking influence and speaking with the entitlement that we expect of male leaders.

Swarna Rajagopalan is a political scientist and peace educator.

Forget Trump's tariffs. The real danger lies in China's trade surplus



ESWAR PRASAD

China's trade surplus — the amount by which its exports exceed its imports — hit a staggering \$1.19 trillion in 2025, according to official numbers released on Wednesday. The figure shows just how much China is an exporting powerhouse but is also a sign of its economic weakness and of how its practices pose a greater danger to free trade than even President Donald Trump's tariffs.

The tariffs undoubtedly took a hammer to free trade. With the United States retreating from its leadership role, China has tried to assume the mantle of being the pro-

motor of globalisation and the defender of the multilateral rules-based system that underpins global trade.

China's economic model has certainly delivered growth but in an unbalanced way. Investment in buildings, machinery and equipment became its main driver in recent years. That investment is, of course, good in that it raises productive potential. But with real estate investment declining because of falling housing prices, a lot of this investment has been undertaken by state-owned enterprises and is neither efficient nor profitable.

Still, all of this investment has meant the production of lots of goods. That sounds like a blessing but has instead spawned a problem. Domestic consumption has not kept pace with rising output because Chinese households are reluctant to spend freely. Facing uncertain employment prospects and the plunging value of their real estate, they have been stashing a lot of their earnings in savings. And household confidence seems to have taken a hit

from concerns about the government's economic management skills, further crimping demand.

When an economy produces more than it consumes, something has to give. One possibility is that prices fall, which tends to encourage consumers to buy more. But when households anticipate continually dropping prices, they might postpone consumption rather than increase it. China has been facing such deflationary pressures.

The only option left is to send surplus goods abroad. This is exactly what China has been doing, with its exports growing by leaps and bounds. The US is the exception. Mr Trump's high tariffs on Chinese goods have resulted in exports to the US falling sharply. This has meant that China has been increasing exports to its other trading partners, counting ever more on them to absorb its surplus output and keep its own growth on track.

Surely recipient countries should be grateful for inexpensive Chinese goods landing on their shores. The reality is that,

unlike the US economy, which has been powering along with relatively robust gross domestic product and employment growth, most other rich economies — such as the European Union, Japan's and Britain's — are in dire straits. Chinese exports are swamping their manufacturers, which are unable to compete. Even low- and middle-income countries have a difficult time countering Chinese exporters, strangling some of their companies.

This situation is unsustainable, and countries on the receiving end are fighting back. President Emmanuel Macron of France recently raised the trade issue with his hosts in Beijing. The European Commission's president, Ursula von der Leyen, warned that Europe's trade policy is becoming a dumping ground for Chinese goods. Mexico has raised tariffs on imports from China, and other countries are likely to follow suit.

Beijing has countered with pleas for keeping trade free and open. But China cannot claim to be a fervent supporter of the global trading system when it is using

those rules to its advantage and to the detriment of everyone else. For the second-largest economy in the world to rely on other countries to prop up its growth will only accelerate the breakdown of the rules-based system.

This is not to say that world trade will collapse. The benefits from trade and cross-border supply chains are so large that they will continue to grow. But trade is fragmenting in ways that reduce the benefits, especially if countries begin emphasising trade with their geopolitical allies and try to shut out rivals. The fragmentation will leave poorer economies, which are only now integrating into global trade, worse off.

What could China do? It could get serious about fixing its growth imbalance and make changes, such as strengthening its social safety net, that would encourage its citizens to spend. The government has acknowledged this is a priority but shows no urgency to act, given that growth has stayed around its 5 per cent target. Now that growth is at risk of weakening, the govern-

ment might yet again resort to its old playbook of credit-financed investment to stimulate the economy, which would worsen the problem.

China's central bank could allow the Chinese currency to appreciate, something it has been resisting recently. A stronger currency would make Chinese exports more expensive and imports less costly and thus would help damp down the trade surplus. Its currency would gain prominence in global finance, something Beijing has long desired, if its value was set as determined by the market instead of the central bank.

Doing what's best for the long run would allow China to help the world economy. If not, China would not only damage global growth but also cease any claim to a leadership role in the evolving new world order.

The author is professor of trade policy in the Dyson School at Cornell University and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.

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ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



Recognition in sight

PLAIN POLITICS
ADITI PHADNIS

"Ho gaya! Ho gaya," exclaimed a jubilant veteran who'd had a tenure in the Indian Peace-Keeping Force (IPKF) in Sri Lanka. This was on January 14, after Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said at a felicitation of ex-servicemen: "The decision taken by the then government to send Indian forces to Sri Lanka is open to debate. I don't want to get into it. But I believe the sacrifices made by our IPKF soldiers who participated in Operation Pawan should be respected." This is the closest the Government of India has ever come to recognising the IPKF as a bona fide expeditionary force and Operation Pawan as a major out-of-area military operation. If not an intervention, in a war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a terrorist group, in north and east Sri Lanka to end the ethnic conflict there (1987-90).

In 2024, Chief of Defence Staff Gen Anil Chauhan told IPKF veterans in Dehradun: "We have fought hundreds of operations. Operation Pawan was only a minor operation." The National War Memorial has only a passing reference to the IPKF even though 1,57 Indian soldiers were killed and more than 3,000 wounded to maintain the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Sri Lanka. Last year, on the 35th anniversary of the return of the IPKF from Sri Lanka, (March 24) Operation Pawan veterans and their

families gathered for a "silent felicitation" between 3 and 4 pm. "Silent" meant no Last Post and Rouse was played by buglers to honour the fallen. For several decades now, families of those who fought in Sri Lanka and retired soldiers have been fighting to get Operation Pawan "official" recognition. The defence minister's remarks have sent hopes soaring.

Why are IPKF martyrs not being officially recognised and appropriately honoured and its veterans only allowed a silent felicitation? And is the government really changing its mind on this now?

When the IPKF returned from Sri Lanka, Dravidian Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) was in power in Tamil Nadu and it was part of the coalition at the Centre. When the LTTE was defeated in 2009, the DMK was again in power in the state and part of the ruling coalition at the Centre. The domestic Tamil factor weighed heavily in India's Sri Lanka policy due to the presence of the DMK's 29 members of the Lok Sabha, supporting the United Progress Alliance government.

Governments of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) opted not to rock the Tamil Nadu boat, either. During the Atal Bihari Vajpayee tenure (1998-2004), recognition to the IPKF was not on the government's list of emergency to do, so pressured was it from challenges internal and external. But since 2014, when the current ruling formation came to power, January 14 this year is the first time the government came close to conceding that overlooking the IPKF's contribution was an oversight. Till today, the uncomfortable official stance on Operation Pawan's success lingers, mainly because while the IPKF achieved a number of political and military objectives in 32 months, the political and diplomatic tracks failed to keep up.

The last of the IPKF left Sri Lanka on board the INS Magar from the Trincomalee harbour and arrived in Madras (now Chennai) on March 24, 1990. It was welcomed with banners bearing ITRF (Indian Tamil Killing Force). As V P Singh, then Prime Minister, could not go to Madras to welcome the IPKF for fear of "offending" the DMK, they were flown in IL-76 to Palam, to be felicitated by him there. It was honouring them in stealth. Between then and now the external environment has changed so much that it is virtually unrecognisable. Most of the political and diplomatic leaders who dominated the narrative are no longer with us. What remains is history. And that is hard to change.

Earlier this month, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M K Stalin went to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, asking him to ensure the rights of Tamils in Sri Lanka were protected under the new Constitution of Sri Lanka. The government is drafting. Ahead of the Assembly elections in Tamil Nadu (due later this year), there is an active attempt to revive Sri Lanka-related issues in the state. While the DMK continues to assert itself as the representative of the Tamil-speaking people across the world, there is still a constituency in Tamil Nadu which views the activities of the LTTE and other groups in Tamil Nadu as actions that put law and order in the state at risk. Jayalitha went so far as to demand the DMK government be dismissed for supporting the LTTE and extended the ban on it. It is presumably to this constituency that Rajnath Singh is appealing on behalf of the Bharatiya Janata Party when he seeks a more sympathetic view of the IPKF.

Whether the IPKF will ever get its true place in India's military history will be for the government to decide. For in India, politics trumps all else.

Pakistan se azadi

Pakistan not only has zero chance of catching up with India in most areas, but will inevitably see the gap rising. Its leaders will offer its people the same snake oil in different bottles

The risks in using this headline are enormous, from being accused of indulging in clickbait journalism to being asked to see a shrink. I'd plead, you hear me out.

Of course, it can be nobody's case that Pakistan has colonised India. In no field, be it military power, economy, culture and soft power, or global image can it ever catch up with India. That train left the station in 1983, which was around the time that the policy of bleeding India through a thousand cuts. This was Zia Pakistan on its Afghan jihad high and troubles in our Punjab were rising. This set Pakistan on a course of irreversible decline.

It got steeper in subsequent decades. Today, at about 55 per cent of India's per capita gross domestic product (GDP), it sees the gap rising every quarter. A population a little over one-fifth of India's has about one-tenth its GDP. On literacy, life expectancy, higher education, an enormous negative gap has built up for Pakistan and it is expanding.

Lately, there's been some excitement over the Pakistani stock market being among the fastest-growing in the world while India has stalled for almost 18 months. This is a fact. Lift the Pakistani social media hood and look underneath. The total market cap of the Karachi Stock Exchange (KSE), after this relentless 18-month boom, is about \$70 billion. That's exactly 1.35 per cent of the NSE, despite its long stall.

Today, seven Indian companies are individually valued more than the KSE. Reliance is three and a half times, HDFC, Bharti Airtel and TCS nearly twice or more. Go downwards a little, and 14 companies are valued above \$50 billion. Its trade with the United States is less than a tenth of India's. Its imports from China, its most valuable ally, patron, protector and the largest trading partner, is just about \$16 billion, including 85 per cent of its armament imports. India's imports from China total \$16 billion and it includes no armaments, thank you. On almost any economic indicator, Pakistan is worse than its GDP being one-tenth of India's. Its two biggest airlines have 44 aircraft, whereas IndiGo and Air India together have 700 and are adding one a week. That's about 16 times Pakistan.

The neighbours are today battling in completely different leagues. The prospects of "tril-

lions of dollars worth of critical minerals," or "humongous oil reserves," are just fantasy. At this point, it is also fuelled by the self-anointed Field Marshal's reading of the scriptures and his interpretation that since Pakistan is only the second nation formed on the Islamic *kalma* after Madina, it must also have oil and minerals underneath its soil like the Saudis. As Ghalib said: *Dilke khush rakhe kha Ghaliy yeh khayal aacha hai* (It is useful thought to console yourselves).

In short, Pakistan not only has zero chance of catching up with India, but will also see the gap rising. At various points in time, its leaders will offer its people the same snake oil in different bottles: Critical minerals, hydrocarbons, gold, and the latest, the Amazon of JF-17s for the Islamic world and its non-state warriors. The hard fact is that the only area where Pakistan can narrow the gap with India is population. Its growth here is about twice as much as India's. Is this what you want?

The Pakistani elites, including Munir, know they've been left behind. That dumper truck versus the "shiny" Mercedes statement reflects that. He can never win a war, or even a short skirmish. He only has one power: The power to slow India down, and to fuel big-power anxieties over the nuclear subcontinent.

It is this negative leverage that India has to learn to control. Begin by looking at the big picture. Have we, over the past decade, allowed Pakistan to take a much bigger space in our minds than it deserves? A much larger weight in our politics than is prudent? Have we unnecessarily created space in our polarised politics for an economically and strategically defeated Pakistan?

Since January 2016, when Narendra Modi's peace overture was destroyed by the Pankaj abirase terror attack, the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP's) politics has become increasingly dependent on Hindu-Muslim polarisation. There is no arguing that "sab ka saath/sab ka vikas" works with welfare distribution and nobody is denied any benefits because of identity. But, the sentimental appeal is limited to the Hindu voter. And for that, the threat from Pakistan must always be there.

Given its complicity in our strategic interest and positioning is evident in the way the game is playing out with Bangladesh. That India was

denied a friend in Sheikh Hasina Wazed shouldn't mean that her won't have any friends there. Whatever the Jamaat, and even Muhammad Yunus might think of Pakistan, Bangladesh is surrounded by India on three sides, an essential, much bigger neighbour with indispensable linkages.

Polarised politics, especially with West Bengal and Assam polls coming up, means that the relationship with Bangladesh will only worsen before India — inevitably — begins repairs with the newly elected government there. Even if the new government is friendly with Pakistan, it is too far and has no resources. Bangladesh will need India's goodwill to put its own policy and economy together. Chinese weapons? Ms Hasina also mostly bought weapons from China. So there's no difference.

It's in this big picture that we need to reflect on the Mustafizur Rahman/IPL issue. Some people these days get triggered at the mention of soft power. But cricket is India's hard power, given how important the game is in the stadium.

Think about this: Is our hosting and patronising Afghan cricket team an expression of soft, or hard power? Will you read it in isolation of the troubles the current Afghan government is giving the Pakistanis? That's why not shaking hands with the Pakistanis, even while you play them, and limiting that "anger" only to cricket, or basketball, or the solitary Bangladeshis picked by an IPL franchise opens up more space for Pakistan in India's neighbourhood. Is that loss of soft or hard power? It hands over our strategic policy to social media.

This is no hasty generalisation. In the same period that the no hand-shaking and take-no trophies-from-a-Pakistan reared its head, we played the junior Sultan of Johor Cup league match in hockey (Oct 14, 2025) where the players not only shook hands, but also high-fived before a 3-3 draw. Of course, India went to the final, not Pakistan.

Were the hockey boys any less patriotic? Did the government pull out the red card? Nothing. It is only because its social media base didn't take notice. Who cares about hockey? Like a champion heavyweight fighter, a big power fights as much the social cohesion of its punches. Pakistan needs to constrain India's space. India cannot fall into that trap.

For the moment, the Pakistanis seem a bit chastened. But at some point, Munir would do something to slow us down. For India to deny that, it must rebuild its ties in the neighbourhood, stabilise its ties with China, and keep internal social cohesion. And finally, begin sending big on defence.

Pakistan has a broken economy. Bait it with a new arms race, and that will push it back further. Sounds like beggar-my-neighbour? What else to do with a neighbour whose only game is to try and slow you down.

We must deny Pakistan an undeserved place in our politics and in our minds. That's what the headline says: Pakistan se azadi.

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The alpha illusion

EYE CULTURE

KUMAR ABISHKEK

The teaser for *Toxic: A Fairy Tale for Grown-Ups* opens not with character or context, but with posture. In two minutes and fifty-two seconds, Yash Raj's *Toxic* detaches a grave and while having sex in his car, then emerges through the smoke with guns blazing, a lit cigar in hand, and a blunt announcement: "Daddy's home." Here posture has been performed rather than explained.

This provocation lands in an industry primed for it. After *Animal* and Aditya Dhar's *Durandhar*, the alpha male demands scrutiny. Too realistic to be dismissed as propaganda, Dhar's film presents hyper-masculinity as a tool for confronting modern anxieties — terrorism in *Durandhar*, capitalism in *KGF*, corruption in *Jawan*. Is in rage, or instinctively chosen strength over softness. Delivered with conviction, the argument feels less like opinion than natural law.

Animal provided the clearest manifesto. Ranbir Kapoor's Ranvijay doesn't merely behave violently; he theorises it. Alpha as, dominate, and protect: betwixt poetry and ask for respect. Women, in this worldview, instinctively choose strength over softness. Delivered with conviction, the argument feels less like opinion than natural law.

That sense of inevitability draws from animal metaphors embedded in everyday language — pecking orders, top dogs, and natural hierarchies — imagining power as a clean ladder that

assembles itself. Cinema loves this logic because it is visually efficient but the science behind these metaphors is far less cinematic. The modern idea of hierarchy entered the lexicon through Norwegian zoologist Thorlief Schjelderup-Ebbe in the 1920s. Studying domestic chickens, he observed a rigid social system in which each bird knew exactly whom it could peck without retaliation and whom it had to yield to. This linear ranking became known as the "pecking order" — a stable, visible structure that would show how power is imagined everywhere from office politics to movie heroes.

This framework was extended to wolves by zoologist Rudolf Schenkel in the 1940s. Observing captive packs, Schenkel described a rigid hierarchy led by a dominant "alpha," aka the top dog. Crucially, the alpha male was a co-leader. What Schenkel was really documenting, however, was behaviour distorted by captivity. Stress and forced competition mistaken for nature. American biologist L. David Mech popularised this model, through his book *The Wolf: The Ecology and Behavior of an Endangered Species*, in the 1970s, then spent decades dismaying it. Studying wolves in the wild, he refuted the alpha packs as usually family units. These so-called alphas are simply parents. Leadership is exercised through care and coordination, not constant violence. Dominance is quiet and invested in continuity.

Primatology sharpens the correction. Frans de Waal's studies of chimpanzees show that the most successful

alpha males are rarely bullies. De Waal coined the term "Machiavellian intelligence." The ability to navigate complex social relationships, individuals who rely on intimidation alone are frequently overthrown by coalitions of smaller, socially adept rivals. Across more than 120 primate species, strict male dominance is rare and females often wield decisive influence.

Even physiology resists the fantasy. Alpha males carry stress levels comparable to those at the bottom of the hierarchy. Power is labour.

Indian cinema has long understood this intuitively. Amitabh Bachchan's Angry Young Man was furious, but his violence carried moral weight. In *Deewar*, Vijay had the property, the bank balance, yet losing his mother's love rendered him hollow. "*Mere papa mauhan*" distilled moral authority over material accumulation, a reminder that dominance without legitimacy collapses. *Durandhar* gestures towards this older wisdom. Its alpha villain, the "apex predator" Rehman Dakaat, is ruthless but not impulsive. Unlike *Animal*'s horn Ranvijay, he shows respect towards his wife. Seeking revenge for his son's death, he does not simply erupt; he consults his accomplices, and only then commits. Violence is socially negotiated, and remains embedded in group consent.

Indian cinema, however, continues to borrow from biology, flattening it into spectacle. *Animal* sells a zero-sum fantasy. *Toxic* elevates posture into principle. *Durandhar* hints at a more accurate truth. The loudest man may command attention, but authority belongs to the one the group still gathers around when the smoke clears.

Big-bang year ahead for Bollywood

YES, BUT...
SANDEEP GOYAL

After a prolonged Covid-triggered box office (BO) famine, *Durandhar*, an espionage thriller set in the backdrop of India-Pakistan tensions and packed with gore, violence and gangland politics, became the defining hit of the year, cementing its place in a crop of aggressive, hyper-masculine films that drove popular discourse in 2025. The trend was starkly contrasted to 2024, when a number of films made by women — Payal Kapadia's *All We Imagine As Light*, Shuchi Talat's *Girls Will Be Girls* and Kiran Rao's *Laapata Ladies* — got global attention and praise.

At the time of writing this piece, *Durandhar* had collected an unprecedented ₹84.45 crore in the Indian market. No wonder the mood in Bollywood is so upbeat for 2026. Market analysts estimate that BO collections reached ₹11,242 crore in 2025. In 2026, 80 numbers are expected to surge by 25-30 per cent to between

₹14,052 crore and ₹14,614 crore. What is fuelling this optimism? Bollywood 2026 is over-flowing with star-studded blockbusters, over 5,000 theatre pan-India releases, sequels and ambitious hi-concept projects — ranging from gritty patriotic dramas and hyper-violent action thrillers to new mould mythological epics and stylised crime sagas — it is going to be a year full of mega spectacles.

Agastya Nanda's theatrical debut *Kicks* got off to a slow start in the new year with a BO of about ₹25 crore in the first week, but there is lots to come in the weeks and months ahead. The Republic Day weekend will see the release of *Border 2* with Sunny Deol, Varun Dhawan, Diljit Dosanjh, Ahan Shetty and Sonam Bajwa in a patriotic war saga. *Durandhar* will trail the screen on March 30, looking to replicate the box office success of the original. The same day will also see the release of Geetu Mohandas' *Toxic: A Fairy Tale for Grown-Ups*, a gangster-action thriller starring Yash, Nayanthara and Kiara Advani, shot in Kannada and English and dubbed in Hindi to replicate the success of *Animal*. Shah Rukh Khan's *King* is expected to release in April. The action-thriller features a star-studded ensemble cast, including Suhana Khan, Deepika Padukone, Abhishek Bachchan, Ranit Mukerji, Anil Kapoor, Jackie Shroff and Arshad Warsi. April 17

is slated for Yash Raj Films' *Alpha*, a female-led spy thriller starring Alia Bhatt, Sharvari, and Bobby Deol, which will be the first big-budget female-centric action film in a pan-India universe, promising high-stakes espionage, age and cinematic flair. The same day will see the opening of *Battle of Galwan* starring Salman Khan and Chitrangada Singh. So, more patriotism to be cheered and celebrated.

The later part of the year is going to be Ranbir Kapoor-dominated, with *Love & War*, a period romantic drama written, directed and produced by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, starring Kapoor, his wife Alia Bhatt, and Vicky Kaushal in lead roles. This will be followed by the eagerly anticipated and long-awaited *Ramayan: Part 1*, a grand cinematic adaptation of the Ramayana epic, with Ranbir Kapoor as Lord Ram, Sai Pallavi as Sita and Yash as the formidable Ravana, along with Sunny Deol as Hanuman and Ravi Dubey as Lakshman, the film boasts a large ensemble cast that also includes Kajal Aggarwal as Mandodari and the late legend Shashi Kapoor. A R Rahman and Hans Zimmer are said to be collaborating on the music, and the movie will be dubbed in English, Japanese, Mandarin and more for a truly global release.

However, a "war-and-superstar" formula may still not guaran-

tee a bumper 2026. Sky Force with Akshay Kumar and debutant Veer Pahlavani, alongside Sara Ali Khan and Nimrat Kaur did meagre business at just ₹13 crore in 2025 despite much rattle-battle and slogans of patriotism. *War* with Hrithik Roshan and NTR Jr too was only a lukewarm success. *Sikandar* with superstar Salman Khan flopped. At the same time, Vicky Kaushal's patriotic *Chhava* was a blockbuster with worldwide BO collections of ₹808 crore, but the patriotic action-drama, with Akshay's 220 *Bahadur*, was flat. Politics didn't click in 2025. Both *Emergency* and *The Bengal Files* were utter flops.

Satyaana was the blockbuster sleeper hit of 2025. A rare combination of lovely music and mushy love, rarely pictured in such a genre. *2026* will have *Love & War*, *Cocktail*, *24*, *Yash Mahal*, *Parti Parti*, *Woh Do*, *O Romeo*, *Chand Meera Dil*, *Do Deewane Sein Mein*, and *Sanam Teri Kasam 2* competing for heart-tugs and enduring hugs. It remains to be seen if anyone of them though can come within kissing distance of the Akshay-Khan-Anant Padda blockbuster. Today, the audience is smart and values authentic, quality storytelling over formulaic productions or mere face value. Let's see how 2026 fares.

The author is chairman of Rediffusion

Explained

GLOBAL

India must widen, and deepen, its export pool to offset US tariffs



GRAPHS,
DATA,
PERSPECTIVES
BY UDIT MISRA

WEEKLY ECONOMIC AND POLICY INSIGHTS USING DATA

INDIA EXPORTED goods worth \$38.5 billion in December 2025, a modest 1.8% increase over the \$37.8-billion export figure recorded in December 2024, according to data shared Thursday by the Commerce and Industry Ministry.

In December, India imported far more goods than it exported, as it often does. Total goods imports during the month were pegged at \$63.55 billion. This is almost 9% more than what India imported in December 2024. That means the trade deficit — the gap between exports and imports — for December 2025 was \$25 billion.

The crucial bit of interest in this data was to ascertain whether a trend was emerging in the aftermath of the 50% tariffs imposed by the Donald Trump administration beginning August. It is also of interest how India's exports to the rest of the world have behaved — not just the US — in the wake of these exceptionally high US tariffs.

An analysis by HSBC Global Investment Research has thrown up some key takeaways.

1. Sequential momentum has weakened

Instead of looking at year-on-year growth rates, a look at the month-on-month data (after adjusting for seasonal variations) shows that India's export momentum has weakened. "The sequential momentum which was averaging 0.7% m-o-m (seasonally adjusted) in Jan-Jul 2025 (led partly by frontloading demand) has fallen to a meagre 0.1% in Aug-Dec 2025 (post the implementation of the 50% US tariff)," says the HSBC note.

The weakness is wide-ranging: Growth in the exports of electronics, engineering goods, petroleum and textiles has slowed. Export growth in pharma, chemicals, and gems & jewellery has fallen on a sequential basis.

2. India's exports to the US fell

Thanks to tariffs, India's exports to the US fell both on an annual and sequential basis (see chart). HSBC found that the average sequential momentum of export growth fell from 1.9% during January and July 2025 to -1.4% during August and December owing to the 50% tariffs.

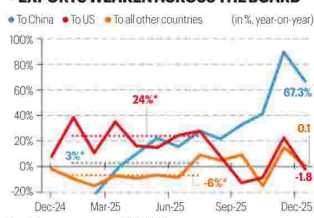
3. Marginal rise in exports to China

This has risen but the increase is too small (around \$2 billion a month) to offset the drag created by the fall in exports to the US (around \$7 billion).

And, 4. Exports to the rest of the world (apart from US and China) have been flat

Lower exports affect the rupee. This is because low exports imply lower demand for the currency, putting pressure on the exchange rate. The muted growth in exports means policymakers must redouble efforts to find newer markets and deepen existing ones outside the US in order to ensure that the high tariffs don't derail exports.

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GEOPOLITICS

A US attack on Iran may be more show than substance



EXPERT EXPLAINS
BASHIR ALI ABBAS

SENIOR RESEARCH ASSOCIATE, COUNCIL FOR STRATEGIC AND DEFENSE RESEARCH, NEW DELHI

ON JANUARY 12, the Iranian government announced that it had secured total control over the unrest in the country after a communications blackout imposed on January 8. Since then, inter-caste protests have continued but without reports of significant anti-regime demonstrations.

The global focus, however, has shifted to the possibility of American attacks on Iran following a series of dizzying oscillating assertions by US President Donald Trump.

Trump posted on January 21 that the US stood "locked and ready" to help protesters. On January 12, he said Iran wanted to negotiate and that "a meeting is being set up".

Soon after, he said all meetings were cancelled, urged Iranians "to keep protesting", and declared that "help is on its way". By January 14, the US began moving troops out of the Al Udeid airbase in Qatar to secure them from a potential Iranian retaliation. On January 15, Trump announced that the regime had "stopped killing protesters" and halted "some planned executions", signalling an off-ramp. Yet, on January 16, the White House declared that "all options remain on the table".

What explains this fluctuating stand? How has the Iranian regime approached the US threat? And where do the protests fit in the US rationale?

America's options in Iran

America's initial hesitation could well be explained by insufficient military preparedness in West Asia, especially with one carrier strike group redeployed to the Caribbean (for Venezuela), and another in the South China Sea. If it does attack, US would have to deploy standoff methods to prevent committing boots on the ground in a fresh war. But even as the USS Abraham Lincoln sails towards the Gulf with its carrier strike



group, Washington is likely aware that it cannot afford involvement in a messy Iranian transition, even if it targets key government and Revolutionary Guards' strongholds.

The inevitable violence also does not guarantee a stable pro-US Iran in the future. There is no coherent set of US policy objectives that an attack could meet.

President Trump has also consistently refused to meet Reza Pahlavi, despite rhetorical support online. Pahlavi, the son of Iran's deposed Shah who is strongly backed by Israel, has lived in the US for 47 years and has attempted to assume leadership of the demonstrations in Iran with little success.

In any case, there is no precedent for an external, principally aerial, intervention to support peaceful protests and topple a regime in a country with a large population (second largest in West Asia), a cohesive military and paramilitary, and no civil war.

Similarly, Arab anxieties have pushed Gulf states to strongly advocate against an American war on Iran. While the UAE is Iran's second-largest trading partner, Saudi Arabia is keen to avoid a larger crisis that could upset Riyadh's focus on securing regional stability for economic diversification. Collectively, these factors restrain Washington's hand. However, the simple need for a spectacle, to show US threats are credible, could still lead to an Iranian attack followed by limited Iranian retaliation.

Women in Tehran on Wednesday, 12

The 'regime change' question

The US appears to feel that an attack can help catalyse 'regime change' by legitimate protesters.

But there is little evidence that most protesters are seeking an overhaul of the governing system itself, as opposed to reform within the system.

Iran's abiding US problem

For Iran, a significant part of the solution to its economic malaise is external — relief from the Western sanctions, especially amid the currency collapse and signs of a potential economic catastrophe.

So, engagement with the US is inevitable. But it is also the US that has been making the most pointed military threats (with proven credentials of following through, as seen in June 2025) towards it. This means Tehran needs to prepare for hostile engagement as well.

This has led to Tehran projecting a dual position, similar to Washington. Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said on January 12 that Iran was ready for war, but also for dialogue. The country has consistently maintained that any American attack will invite attacks on both American and Israeli regional targets.

Iran has also ensured that communications remain open with the US. This was evident on January 10, as Araghchi hosted Oman's Foreign Minister in Tehran for talks. Oman has long served as a trusted messenger between Washington and Tehran.

Should an American attack occur, Iran has sufficient reasons to choose de-escalation and symbolic options — motivated both by abject economic need as well as confidence in its ability to raise the cost of any US-led war.

It is uncertain if US military action against Iran will trigger fresh anti-regime protests instead of nationalism-fuelled solidarity

The link to the protests

Trump's threats to attack Iran using a "range of options" have been linked to the need for the US to catalyse regime change brought about by legitimate protests. Such views have long been premised on two assumptions. The first is that a critical mass of the protesters are against the governing system and the nature of the state, rather than seeking reform within the system. The second is that these protests will be sufficiently aided by external military action against Iranian military, political and strategic targets.

There is little evidence to suggest that either of these assumptions is strong and true enough to give the US a categorical victory. Iran, too, has been quick to admit to a high death toll (at least 2,000) and has since focused on dominating the narrative. Araghchi has stated that the country witnessed peaceful demonstrations since December 28, but violent rioting on January 7 and 8 that was evidently organised by external elements. This triggered a harsh crackdown on "rioters". Sizeable pro-regime demonstrations as well as the government's amplification of attacks on mosques, public institutions and transport infrastructure have helped Tehran project balance in how developments are perceived.

The regime has also closed ranks, with reformists and conservatives aligned on the government's approach to rioters. This, along with continued organisational cohesion among the rank-and-file of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, has worked as a guarantee against regime collapse.

Trump himself said on January 15 that Iranians "were shooting back", implicitly acknowledging Tehran's allegations of organised and armed rioters fighting the streets. Notwithstanding the regime's own authoritarianism, it is also true that Tehran has long been a counter-intelligence nightmare, with the Israeli Mossad having penetrated government, military and private sectors.

Ultimately, Iranian protesters have a sense of history, going back to the American-British coup of 1953 that deposed PM Mohammad Mossadegh after he nationalised oil. It is uncertain if US military action against Iran will trigger fresh anti-regime actions, instead of nationalism-fuelled solidarity. What is clear, however, is that just like the protests themselves, the success of any US military action is also mixed in doubt.

AGRICULTURE

New Trump tariff could be last straw for basmati exports to Iran



HARISH DAMODARAN

US PRESIDENT Donald Trump's latest trade salvo, announcing an additional 25% per cent tariff on any country doing business with Iran, can have a significant impact on India's basmati rice exports.

The reason: Iran is India's third largest market for basmati rice.

The Islamic Republic accounted for \$75.20 million out of India's total basmati exports of \$5,944.49 million in 2024-25 (April-March). That was next only to the \$1,203.67 million of Saudi Arabia and \$850.08 million of Iraq.

In quantity terms, out of the total exports of 60.65 lakh tonnes (lt), Iran's share was 8.55 lt, with Iraq at 9.06 lt and Saudi Arabia at 11.74 lt.

The current fall has seen Iran overtaking Iraq, with exports to the former soaring by 20.9% from 4.95 lt in April-November 2024 to 5.99 lt in April-November 2025. On the other hand, exports have contracted to both Iraq (by 2.9%, from 5.16 lt to 5.01 lt) and

BASMATI EXPORTS TO IRAN ARE DECLINING

	Quantity*	Value**
2018-19	14.84	1,556.17
2019-20	13.19	1,246.02
2020-21	7.47	590.67
2021-22	9.98	818.36
2022-23	9.99	980.14
2023-24	6.71	680.54
2024-25	8.55	753.2
Apr-Nov 2024	4.95	473.14
Apr-Nov 2025	5.99	468.1

*LAKHTONNES; **\$ MILLION; SOURCE: DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

Saudi Arabia (by 2.8%, from 6.89 lt to 6.70 lt).

These are just the official figures. Basmati exports to Iran are also routed via Dubai. The UAE imported 3.89 lt of basmati rice from India in 2024-25 and 2.52 lt during April-November 2025. A lot of these shipments are believed to be diverted to Iran, with exporters using the more reliable banking channels and payment systems in the UAE.

"Exporters prefer either shipping through Dubai or selling in Iranian government tenders floated by the Government

Trading Corporation of Iran, Iran Garment Company Ltd. and Jahad Sabz Company. These two routes are safer from a payment standpoint than exporting directly to private buyers in Iran," said a trade source.

But the proposed new Trump levy has made exporters wary of striking fresh contracts even through the hitherto less risky routes. "The 25% additional duty rate (announced by Trump in a Truth Social Post on January 12) has not been officially imposed. It has, however, created huge uncertainty among the trade. Nobody wants to export in this situation where there is no guarantee of payment for even the rice already shipped out," Vijay Setia, former president of the All-India Rice Exporters' Association told *The Indian Express*.

The impact is being felt in prices. India mostly exports parboiled Pusa Basmati 1718 and Pusa Basmati 1509 rice to Iran. These varieties, bred by the Indian Agricultural Research Institute in Delhi, have a good market in Iran due to their extra kernel length and volume expansion capacity. A cup of milled 1718 or 1509 grains give around 4.5 cups on cooking, making it possible to serve more plates of biryani from the same quantity of rice.

Pusa 1509 basmati rice rates in Haryana's mandis rose from Rs 54-55 per kg in October to around Rs 68 towards De-

cember. But since late last month, when the street protests in Iran broke out, prices have fallen to Rs 63-64. Wholesale prices of Pusa 1718 rice have similarly eased from Rs 70 to Rs 65-66 levels. Pusa 1509 paddy prices have dropped to Rs 3,200 per quintal in the last 4-5 days, from Rs 3,300-3,400 prior to the disturbances.

Basmati exports from India to Iran peaked in 2018-19 at nearly 15 lt (valued at over \$1.5 billion). But with US sanctions being reinstated under the first Trump administration in November 2018, exports settled at lower levels (see chart). As the sanctions began to bite and create shortages of foreign exchange, payment issues, too, correspondingly rose.

While Trump's newly announced 25% tariff was the last straw, it was preceded by the Islamic Republic's own decision, on January 1, to stop the issue of subsidised foreign currency. Importers of essential products such as rice could earlier access dollars at a preferential exchange rate of 28,000 to one. That ended in the new year, with all importers now having to buy foreign currency at the open market rate of around 130,000-131,000 to the dollar.

The decision to end the heavily subsidised exchange rate has made Iranian imports unviable, hitting the Indian basmati trade hard as well.

LEGAL

Why SC wants govt to consider a 'Romeo-Juliet' exception for POCSO Act

Vineet Bhalla
New Delhi, January 16

ON JANUARY 9, while setting aside an Allahabad High Court order regarding age-determination procedures in a bail matter, the Supreme Court urged the Union Law Secretary to consider initiating steps to curb the misuse of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012.

Specifically, the bench comprising Justices Sanjay Karol and N Kottiswar Singh recommended the introduction of a "Romeo-Juliet clause" to exempt genuine adolescent relationships from the law designed to punish child sexual abuse.

The clause, named after the young characters from the Shakespeare play of the same name, essentially protects consensual sexual activity among teens who are close to each other in age, exempting them from prosecution for statutory rape. It exists in different forms in countries such as the US.

The Supreme Court's observation highlights a growing judicial discomfort with

the criminalisation of consensual sexual acts between minors.

Protection vs autonomy

Under the POCSO Act, a child is defined as any person below the age of 18. The Act does not recognise a minor's consent to sexual acts. So, any sexual activity involving a person under 18 is automatically criminalised, regardless of whether it is consensual or non-exploitative.

In its judgment Friday, the Supreme Court noted that while POCSO is a "solemn articulation of justice", its misuse has created a "grim societal chasm". The court pointed out that the Act is frequently used by families to oppose relationships between young people.

Demand for change

The push to amend the law is not new but it has gained a boost through a pending PIL in the Supreme Court related to protections and safeguards for women in the prosecution of sexual offences. In this

matter, Senior Advocate Indira Jaising, assisting the court as amicus curiae, has advocated for reading down the age of consent or introducing exceptions.

In her written submissions filed last year, Jaising argued that blanket criminalisation violated the fundamental rights of adolescents under Articles 14, 15, 19 and 21 of the Constitution. She contended that adolescents, between the ages of 16 and 18, possess the "evolving capacity" to make decisions regarding their sexual autonomy. Citing the "mature minor" doctrine from common law, she argued that treating all those under 18 as incapable of consent ignored scientific reality and the biological onset of puberty.

Jaising proposed a "close-in-age" exception. This mechanism would ensure that if both parties are adolescents — for example, a 16-year-old and a 17-year-old — and the act is consensual, it would not be treated as an offence. This would prevent the incarceration of young boys under the POCSO Act for relationships deemed consensual.

Govt's stand for status quo

The Union government has opposed any reduction in the age of consent or the introduction of legislative exceptions. In its submissions before the court in the matter, the government argued that the age of 18 is a "deliberate, well-considered" legislative choice aimed at creating a non-negotiable "protective shield" for children.

The government contended that minors lack the legal and developmental capacity to give meaningful consent. A strict liability framework — where consent is irrelevant — was necessary, it argued, because children are vulnerable to manipulation and coercion by adults in positions of trust. The government expressed fear that introducing exceptions or lowering the age of consent could open loopholes for child abuse and trafficking under the guise of consensual relationships.

Since the Act was enacted to remedy the specific mischief of child abuse, diluting the age threshold, it argued, would reintroduce the very problem the law sought to

solve. It submitted that judicial discretion should remain a case-by-case exercise rather than a statutory dilution.

What the data says

The judicial anxiety regarding the POCSO Act is backed by empirical data. A study by the Enfold Proactive Health Trust and UNICEF found that nearly 25% of POCSO cases in the states of Maharashtra, Assam and West Bengal between 2016 and 2020 were "romantic" in nature — in which the victim and the accused were in a consensual relationship.

The data reveals a pattern of families often misusing the Act to regulate the autonomy of their daughters. In such cases, parents file kidnapping and rape charges against a young boy their daughter may have eloped with — often due to it being an inter-caste or inter-religious relationship. The conviction rate in such cases is low because the "victims" often testify in favour of the accused during the trial.

The criminalisation of adolescent sexual

ity also has health implications. As Jaising noted in her submissions, mandatory reporting provision in POCSO forces doctors to report undue pregnancies or sexual activity to the police. This fear of prosecution deters adolescents from seeking essential sexual and reproductive health services.

Judicial discretion inadequate

Currently, courts across India have been navigating this grey area through discretion. Various High Courts have, over the years, quashed criminal proceedings in romantic cases, noting that the purpose of the POCSO Act was not to punish teenage love. But by then, the accused boy has often spent months or years in custody.

Friday's Supreme Court judgment signalled that the criminalisation of adolescent sexuality requires a structural, rather than just a judicial, solution. As the judgment noted, when a law meant to protect children becomes "a tool for exacting revenge, the notion of justice itself teeters on the edge of inversion".

The Editorial Page

SATURDAY, JANUARY 17, 2026

• WEB EXCLUSIVE
 'Mamata Banerjee turned an ED raid into a political win.'
 — Sumant Nath
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The Indian EXPRESS

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RAMNATH GOENKA
 — IN 1932 —

BECAUSE THE TRUTH
 INVOLVES US ALL

BJP has Mumbai, it must listen to all Mumbaikars

IF THE Mahayuti's triumph in the November 2024 Assembly elections marked a resurgence for the BJP after the reversal it had suffered in the Lok Sabha elections only months earlier, Friday's local body poll results confirm a consolidation and deeper penetration of its power in Maharashtra. By emerging as the dominant force in the majority of municipal corporations — including critical hubs like Pune, Nashik, and Nagpur — the BJP has extended its grip to every level of government. In Maharashtra, it has climbed to this position not so much through its own growth, but by fragmenting the Opposition, and by preying upon its allies — there are warning bells in this verdict for the Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena and the Ajit Pawar-led NCP.

The BJP's upper hand in the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) may mean the end of nearly three decades of Thackeray dominance in the city of the undivided Shiv Sena's birth. Over the years, in vibrant, cosmopolitan Mumbai, where the Marathi *manos* has long been outnumbered, the nativist pitch that formed the party's identity and its electoral campaign has found increasingly limited resonance. While a segment of the electorate has remained loyal to Uddhav Thackeray, the broader message is clear: Mumbai is a city impatient with politics rooted in resentments and grievances of the past. During the campaign, civic issues — the very heartbeat of municipal governance — were sidelined by the politics of identity and religious polarisation and indiscriminate promises of cash transfers and subsidies. Now, as the dust settles, the incoming administration must face the grim reality of a city severely under strain. From clogged drains to broken toilets, from potholed roads to a sputtering bus system, and from sprawling landfills to sewage-choked water bodies, the challenges are immense and urgent.

For the BJP, its spreading footprint must also mean resisting the urge to govern through exclusion. An investigation by this newspaper in December had revealed that 99 per cent of BMC development funds between February 2023 and October 2025 were funnelled into constituencies held by Mahayuti lawmakers, with the lion's share going to BJP legislators. Such blatant partisanship undermines the spirit of democracy. If the BJP wishes to be true to its mandate, it must be fair and generous to the Opposition — because otherwise, it is the citizen who suffers.

India-EU FTA is a pact whose time has come

AFTER SEVERAL years of negotiations, the India-EU trade deal appears to be inching towards a conclusion. Twenty of the 24 chapters in the free trade agreement are said to have been finalised. The intent, according to a report in this newspaper, is to reach an agreement before the visit of EU leaders to India this month — the President of the European Council, Antonio Luis Santos da Costa, and the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, will be chief guests at the 77th Republic Day celebrations. Successfully concluding the deal now — it would be the largest FTA that India has entered into — would be timely and welcome. India and the EU have a strong bilateral trade relationship. The bloc is one of India's largest trading partners — merchandise trade was at around €120 billion in 2024, while trade in services stood at €59.7 billion in 2023. The EU has also been the source of a significant amount of investment flows into India. An FTA would further ease market access, providing a boost to trade from both sides. There are, however, several sensitive areas, such as automobiles and alcohol, that would have to be dealt with. Equally contentious is the EU's carbon tax. The carbon border adjustment mechanism (CBAM), which came into force from January 1, will impact carbon-intensive exports from India such as steel and aluminium. The final agreement should address India's concerns. Another issue concerns the need to increase pathways for movement of skilled Indian professionals to the Eurozone. Sensitivities of both sides will need to be respected. As per reports, India's red lines have been accepted — contentious cultural issues have been kept aside.

In recent years, India has stitched up a series of trade agreements with countries like Australia, the UAE and the UK, greatly easing market access. An agreement with the EU now, at a time when trade talks with the US drag on, would increase access to one of the largest economic regions in the world. This could provide a fillip to exports — merchandise exports stood at \$330.29 billion during April to December 2025, up 24.4 per cent from \$322.41 billion over the same period last year. At the time, India must continue to press ahead with the trade agreement with the US.

Cricket embraces migrant, post-colonial spirit

Tune in to the U-19 World Cup, and regional South Asian dialects would be almost as audible as the English twang. There is a Hindi speaker in 10 of the 16 teams that participate in the tournament; there is at least one cricketer who understands Punjabi in seven teams; and one who can speak Gujarati, Telugu and Malayalam in four teams. There are Urdu, Tamil, Sinhala, and Marathi speakers in teams from outside the Subcontinent. Among the 240 cricketers that have descended on Namibia and Zimbabwe, 92 are either South Asians or have South Asian ancestors, constituting 26 per cent of the tournament's stable of players.

The pattern is a reflection of the shifting sands in world cricket. A game that was once segregated on racial lines in Africa, did away a prominent British politician, Lord Trevelyan, envisage a 'loyalty test' for migrants, has become more inclusive and diverse. Two youngsters of Pakistani descent are the pillars of the England team; two Indians and two Sri Lankans are regulars in Australia's side. New Zealand has four Indians. The USA team fielded an entire side of second-generation Indians, even as their president, Donald Trump, is on a fierce visa-revoking spree. Cricket is no longer a colonial sport, it has embraced the post-colonial spirit.

The next stage in the evolution would be akin to the situation in football, where immigrants form the crux of most European powerhouses, notably England, France, Spain, Belgium and Portugal. The previously rigid Italy, too, has opened the doors for migrants. Similarly, the identity of cricket as a colonial leftover has changed, as British society has integrated migrants from its former colonies. The story of migration is also reshaping the world of sports.

ON JANUARY 7, the United States announced it would withdraw from 66 international bodies, including 31 in the United Nations (UN) system. The scale is unprecedented. The message is sharper: Multilateralism, once a pillar of American strategy, is now a menu.

This shift marks the formal embrace of multilateralism à la carte. Washington now selects the institutions that serve its interests, bypasses or disables those that do not, and exits those that impose constraints. What Richard Haass identified in 2001 as a US tendency is now doctrine. For India, it marks a shift from rules to leverage.

The decision follows a broader pattern. In December 2025, the National Security Strategy outlined the Donald Trump corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, which defines a geographic narrowing of American responsibility to the Western Hemisphere. The January 7 memorandum draws a second perimeter, this time institutional.

The announcement completes a trajectory visible since the first Trump presidency. The United States exited UNESCO in 2018, rejoined under President Joe Biden in 2023, and intends to exit again by December 2026. Trump announced the US intent to leave the Paris Agreement in 2017 and formally exited in 2020. Biden rejoined in 2021. In Trump's second term, it is again moving toward withdrawal. Multilateral commitments are now reversible political choices.

The decision to withdraw from the UN's regional commissions is instructive. Washington long valued the inclusion of non-regional members to influence decision-making from within. Even memberships

the US helped design for leverage are no longer seen as worth the discipline.

The list also includes the International Solar Alliance, headquartered in Gurugram, New Delhi will not miss the message.

Washington approaches the multilateral system with four instruments in its toolkit: Exit, obstruction, bypass, and conditionality. Applied selectively, they turn multilateralism into revocable transactions.

Withdrawal is the headline instrument, but not the only one. Exiting the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change is the clearest example. It is the treaty framework that anchors climate negotiations from finance and differentiation to the legitimacy of the energy transition itself. Leaving it tells partners that even long-horizon collective action can be turned on and off at will.

Where exiting is too costly or awkward, the US stays but obstructs outcomes. At the World Trade Organisation, it prevents the appointment of appellate judges, keeping appellate review inoperative since 2019. At the International Maritime Organisation, US opposition pushed member states to postpone the planned 2026 revision of the net-zero framework for shipping.

This is not reform. Washington keeps its seat, but weakens the machinery until constraints ease.

Elsewhere, Washington routes cooperation through manageable coalitions. The Pax Silica coalition, focused on semiconductor supply chains and standards, offers a case in point. Instead of working through the WTO or UN bodies, the United



SYED
AKBARUDDIN

Washington approaches the multilateral system with four instruments in its toolkit: Exit, obstruction, bypass, and conditionality. Applied selectively, they turn multilateralism into revocable transactions

States convenes a small coalition of key partners. There is no treaty, no formal multilateral process, only coordination among central actors in a key sector. Governance shifts from universal frameworks to selective groupings.

Continued participation in multilateral institutions is now conditional. In February 2025, the United States exited the UN Human Rights Council and cut funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. The January 7 memorandum states that engagement will continue only when institutions align with US sovereignty and interests. Membership can no longer be presumed. It must be justified.

Legally, these moves are permitted. Politically, they are destabilising. Multilateral institutions rely on reciprocity and trust. They function because states believe that today's constraints will produce tomorrow's benefits. When the system's chief architect treats its obligations as optional, it signals that reliability is negotiable.

The consequences appear in behaviour. Allies hedge. Smaller states turn to patrons. International agencies plan for American absence. The system fragments. Standards multiply. Inequality deepens in who gets to shape them.

For India, the implications are paradoxical. A world where Washington treats commitments as reversible raises the price of predictability. It weakens the very things India needs for a steady rise: Enforceable trade rules, credible climate-finance expecta-

• WORDLY WISE
 The will of the people is the only legitimate foundation of any government.
 — Thomas Jefferson

tions, global health coordination, and stable standards in frontier technologies.

US withdrawal opens space for leadership and coalition-building, but vacuums are not neutral. In areas such as climate finance, global health, and cyber governance, universality is not a preference. It is an operating requirement. Fragmentation raises costs for all, including those who opt out.

Washington says it is pruning and real-locating attention to arenas where competition with China matters most. Some of that critique is valid, and the US is not quitting the institutions it sees as core to security and crisis response. But selective withdrawal still raises uncertainty without fully severing ties. And the contradiction remains: You cannot shape standards from the corridor when they are written in the room. Power can compel. Legitimacy must be earned.

The post-World War II American insight was not that institutions restrain power. It was that they make power durable by converting strength into consent. Multilateralism à la carte promises flexibility. What it delivers is thinner legitimacy, higher transaction costs, and a world governed by short contracts instead of shared systems.

The Trump administration is redrawing the blueprint of the global system. The architect is leaving the site. Whether the building stops rising or is taken over by new hands remains to be seen. What is certain is this: The next structure will not bear the same signature.

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'Return of the Shah' is about history and memory in Iran



ROHAN
MANOJ

KINGS AND revolutionaries make strange bedfellows but have been offered sittingside by side. Consider, for example, a 1997 photograph of Fidel Castro and King Juan Carlos of Spain doing just that, rapt in conversation. The two men did have something in common: Both led their countries out of the tyranny of a right-wing dictatorship, one a communist revolutionary and the other as the dictator's anointed successor who instituted democracy. Now, let's come to a photograph from the past few days amid the tumult in Iran, showing Iranian women in Berlin holding up posters of the exiled prince Reza Pahlavi, calling for the 'king of Iran' to 'return to Iran'.

It's best to get the caveats out of the way: The support for Pahlavi may seem greater than it really is on the ground thanks to media coverage; there are fears that he will be a US or Israeli puppet if he comes to power; his claimed democratic credentials are untested and memories of his father's authoritarian rule haven't faded. Perhaps he is merely a convenient symbol protesters are using to thumb their noses at the regime, especially in the absence of any other prominent opposition figure for them to rally around. There may be no regime change, and the idea of Pahlavi ever coming to power may be totally unrealistic. That aside, there is something to discuss in the very fact that he is in the frame at all. The counterintuitive idea of the king as a symbol of resistance.

Historically, the support for exiled 'kings over the water' has often come from a displaced elite, such as French émigrés during the Revolution or Iranian émigrés today. All those photographs pointedly floating about on the internet, of women in miniskirts and soon during the Shah's rule (or for that matter, mid-century Afghanistan), depict the world of an urban elite far removed from the conservative rural populace who form the backbone of the Islamic regime's support. It may be that the protesters chanting 'victory to the Shah' largely come from this elite, and perhaps disaffected youth with no experience of monarchical rule.

Another factor that may be at play is cultural memory. The figure of the king has been a powerful cultural motif over millennia of Iranian history, reinforced by

propaganda. Moments of Iranian assertion have coincided with, or been driven by, kings' assertions of their own Iranian-ness. The question, then, becomes how much Iranian identity is bound up with the idea of the Shah.

The earliest known instance of such propaganda may be in the fifth or sixth century BCE, when Darius the Great, in his Behistun Inscription, both identified himself as 'a Persian, son of a Persian, an Aryan, of Aryan lineage' and wove an elaborate tale of how he came to the throne — which modern historians suspect to be an elaborate lie to hide a coup. The memory of Darius's Achaemenid dynasty would fade — or be erased — under the later Sassanians, who had their own propagandistic goals and promoted a Zoroastrian idea of the mythic past, alongside their own identity as Iranian rulers. After the Sassanians fell to the Arabs, Iranian assertion soon re-emerged, with kings promoting the Persian language and culture. The great epic, the Shahnameh, composed a few centuries later, is literally 'the book of kings'. Over the second millennium, as the 'Persianate world' grew to sprawl from Constantinople to Vijayanagara, a Persian conception of the justice-dispensing went with it.

The Pahlavis, though a dynasty only two kings old, have played the propaganda game with aplomb, reclaiming the Achaemenid past — Mohammed Reza Pahlavi hosted a grand celebration of '2,500 years of the Empire of Iran', adopted the Cyrus Cylinder issued by Cyrus the Great as a national symbol, and anachronistically promoted it as the 'first charter of human rights' weaving together the tradition of royal propaganda and the Shah's own bid to build a modern, liberal image.

In the present moment, some of these factors might have come together: The informed yearning of the old elite, the undimmed desperation of the youth, the need for a symbol to rally around and the cultural memory of '2,500 years' of monarchy. What that means in the context of resistance is to Reza Pahlavi: Given the opportunity, could he become another Juan Carlos?

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Balasaheb's legacy is still with the Thackerays



PARIMAL
MAYA
SUDHAKAR

CHIEF MINISTER Devendra Fadnis has delivered a long-cherished goal of the BJP in Maharashtra — to take control of the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC). Though the party has ousted Uddhav Thackeray's Shiv Sena (UBT) from power, it couldn't achieve the dream of a majority on its own. Unlike the municipal corporations of Pune, Pimpri-Chinchwad, Nashik and Nagpur, voters in Mumbai have given a restrained mandate to the BJP. It needs to work in coordination with the Shinde Sena to secure coveted positions in the BMC body. So, Eknath Shinde has once again proved that the BJP can't reduce his party to the margins.

On the other hand, Uddhav scored a good shine as the Sena (UBT) has won more seats in the BMC than the Shinde Sena. Thus, even in its first defeat in a BMC election since 1997, the Sena (UBT) seems to have proved itself as an inheritor of Bal Thackeray's legacy. Unlike in other strongholds of the erstwhile united Sena — Thane and Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar (formerly Aurangabad), where Shinde has dethroned the Sena (UBT) — Uddhav has emerged as the Shiv Sena's leader in Mumbai.

Overall, the election results of the 29 municipal corporations are in line with the 2024 state assembly polls. However, in Mumbai, the Thackeray brothers' alliance saved the Sena (UBT). While the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) failed to make impressive gains in the BMC, the ground-level alliance between workers helped in creating a narrative of a formidable electoral contest.

It also proves that the Shiv Sena's original politics of the Marathi *manos* still resonates in Mumbai. This is the first time since the late 1980s that Thackeray's Sena has contested the election solely on the Marathi *asmita* plank. When the BJP's Pramod Mahajan forged an alliance with Bal Thackeray in 1986, the latter had become a mascot of Hindutva. In the 1990s, the Sena turned silent on the issue of jobs and housing for Marathi people, creating space for the MNS to emerge. Now, the Sena (UBT) and MNS together seem to have reinvented the Marathi vote bank in Mumbai.

Despite continuous campaigns on the issues of second-grade treatment of Maharashtra residents in Mumbai and the Marathi language in the state, the BJP strategically managed its political left. It accommodated concerns, particularly over the issue of the imposition of Hindi in primary schools. This worked against a total Marathi consolidation. Second, unlike in other municipalities, the BJP in Mumbai, adopted an accommodating attitude to Shinde. As his party has the original Shiv Sena election symbol, it was important for the BJP to take it along. In other cities, the parties failed to arrive at a seat-sharing arrangement. Third, the BJP resisted the temptation of inviting the PM to Mumbai during the election period, even when Uddhav dared Narendra Modi to campaign against him. This would have sharpened the Marathi-Gujarati divide and consolidated minority votes against the BJP. Most importantly, the BJP's appeal of infra-development gave it a decisive edge over the UBT-MNS alliance. Based on this appeal, a man from Nagpur — Devendra Fadnis — has trumped over the insiders of Mumbai politics, the Thackeray brothers.

The writer teaches at the MIT School of Government, Pune. Views are personal

40 YEARS AGO

January 17, 1986



Kandukhera at boiling point

KANDUKHERA, WHICH holds the key to the Abohar-Fazilka belt, is virtually at boiling point with unprecedented police build-up by both Punjab and Haryana on the eve of the fresh language survey by enumerators. It is virtually a police camp. All entry points have been sealed.

Haryana's threat

HARYANA has threatened that if the enumeration is withheld, it will launch a campaign of transfer of Hindi-speaking villages from this area does not take place, the transfer of Chandigarh would not be possible and the Punjab accord would fall. The threat is contained in the application filed by Haryana

before the Mathew Commission asking for replacement of Punjab police by the CRPF.

PM's warning

THE PRIME MINISTER, Rajiv Gandhi, will continue to get full exposure on Doodarshan in spite of his repeated 'warnings' against too much 'image-building' for him. This has become clear after a series of meetings involving the officials of Doodarshan and the Information and Broadcasting Ministry following PM Gandhi's displeasure on his continued focus on TV.

South Yemen fighting spreads

FIERCE FIGHTING broke out again between

opposing factions of South Yemen's armed forces for control of the country, and Gulf-based maritime shipping executives reported 'deafening blasts' and 'sky-high balls of flame' in Aden. It appears that fighting has spread to all six provinces (along South Yemen), said a western diplomat in Sanaa, North Yemen.

Consumer court

A SPECIAL civil court for speedy redressal of consumer complaints, award of compensation and verification of claims made by industry about products are some of the highlights of the Consumer Protection Bill, 1986, which is expected to be introduced in the forthcoming Budget Session of the Lok Sabha.



The Ideas Page

SATURDAY, JANUARY 17, 2026

In Fortress America, a narrowing of spaces, migrants on edge



RAM RAJYA
BY RAM MADHAV

TWO VISITS to the United States of America in a span of four months — between August last year and January this year — brought out the stark reality of a nation in a dangerous drift, never seen before. When I visited Washington, DC in August last year, the debate was largely over tariffs. The Trump administration imposed tariffs on more than three dozen countries, including India. India was initially subjected to a 25 per cent slab, which was subsequently raised to 50 per cent. By then, India had already negotiated a free trade agreement with the US, the culmination of which would have addressed the tariff issue.

Opponents of US President Donald Trump's tariff policies believed they would lead to greater economic challenges like higher inflation, while supporters argued that the tariffs would strengthen the US economy and industry. Trump claimed that "anywhere between \$600 billion to \$1 trillion will be taken in" over a year and told a cabinet meeting in early December that "at some point in the not-too-distant future, you won't even have income tax to pay because the money we're taking in is so great".

The main concern for India at that time was to clinch the trade deal and address the issue of high tariffs, which were impacting sections of Indian exports. Indian immigrants were in a bind, with some visiting Indian leaders taunting them about not doing enough to build domestic pressure for the trade deal on the one hand, and the perceived economic benefits and the need to show loyalty to Trump's Make America Great Again (MAGA) rhetoric on the other. Their dilemma was understandable as the



ILLUSTRATION: C.R. SAKSHAM

growing MAGA movement was demanding greater loyalty from American citizens, and immigrant communities were under greater scrutiny.

Four months down the line, when I visited Washington, DC earlier this week, the dilemma seems to have converted into a real worry. Some very fundamental changes are taking place in American society and domestic politics that are causing serious concern among Indian immigrants. On September 10 last year, Charlie Kirk, a 31-year-old conservative activist and the founder of an avowedly right-wing organisation called Turning Point, was murdered at a university in Utah. That murder became a turning point in MAGA politics in the US. Although Kirk's alleged murderer, Tyler James Robinson, was not an immigrant, the MAGA movement soon became a hot spot for "anti-immigrationism".

That the US was a nation built

Some very fundamental changes are taking place in American society and domestic politics that are causing serious concern among Indian immigrants

by various immigrant communities over the last five centuries was an idea widely accepted globally. In 1908, Israel Zangwill, a renowned American Zionist leader known for articulating the idea of American multiculturalism, wrote a play titled *The Melting Pot* that portrayed the US as a crucible where various global identities fuse into one national identity while retaining their own flavours. That idea led to "Americanisation" programmes like teaching English and civic behaviour in schools, which the immigrant societies gladly accepted. Some liberals later described the American reality as a "salad bowl".

The MAGA movement acquired critical momentum by rejecting the idea of "melting pot" multiculturalism and forcefully projecting "tomato soup" nationalism in which there is space only for a White American Christian in American national life. After

Kirk's murder, the pressure from MAGA elements increased so much that even Vice President JD Vance was forced to question the religious identity of his wife, who is a Hindu. "I believe in the Christian gospel, and I hope eventually my wife comes to see it the same way," Vance told a mourning audience at a Kirk memorial event.

This pressure is weighing on all immigrants, and Indians, too, are increasingly becoming a target. There are catcalls asking them to "go back" and public taunts about stealing American jobs. There were two incidents involving Sikh truck drivers in California and Florida that led to the death of several American citizens last year. Those incidents were widely used by MAGA groups to generate anti-immigrant sentiment. An increasing number of social media posts question and vilify the religion of immigrants, branding it as "devil worship". Both FBI director Kash Patel and the Governor of Texas, Greg Abbott, faced severe criticism from extreme MAGA groups for hosting Diwali celebrations in October last year. Comments like "Reject this false religion's Diwali nonsense" and "Not the highest idea to promote foreign gods in the Christian Nation of America," and "hellish celebration" flooded social media platforms.

Earlier, such groups were seen as fringe elements. But interactions with the Indian community during my recent visit indicated that they are becoming a source of daily harassment, especially in red states like Florida and Texas. There is increased scrutiny of immigrants at the airports and in townships by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), leading to forced deportations.

Community leaders are worried about growing racism in "Fortress America" and the future of the community. They see the early conclusion of a US-India trade deal as a much-needed reprieve that will send a message to the MAGA base against its anti-Indian immigrant rhetoric. The concern is not fictional or exaggerated. It is real.

The writer, president, India Foundation, is with the BJP

To seize AI moment, India needs less jugaad, more precision



ABHISHEK LODHA

A I WILL shape the 21st century much as steam power, railways, electricity and the telegraph shaped the 19th. Those technologies reordered global power, transformed economies, and elevated nations. Britain rode them to empire; the US built institutions around them to emerge as the dominant global power.

AI is that kind of technology. And for India, the stakes are civilisational. With decisive action over the next decade, it can emerge as one of the world's three major AI powers, alongside the US and China. Without it, the country risks compounding economic, geopolitical and social disadvantages.

Take education. India's jobs challenge is fundamentally a skills challenge. Its roots lie in uneven teaching quality, large class sizes, and the lack of individual attention in early schooling. AI systems are uniquely suited to addressing this. One-to-one tutoring at national scale, adaptive learning, continuous teacher feedback, and personalised curricula are no longer science fiction.

India's backlog of over 47 million cases, according to the National Judicial Data Grid, is not only a justice issue but an economic one. Weak contract enforcement raises the cost of capital and discourages enterprise. AI systems can be deployed to summarise filings, analyse precedents, and support judges with structured recommendations. Decisions would be remain human. But timelines could compress from years to months. Few reforms would have a comparable impact on India's investment climate.

China enjoys a substantial lead in AI compute, military integration and software depth. As warfare becomes autonomous, geography alone will not guarantee security. A nation without indigenous AI capability will face growing vulnerabilities.

AI-driven automation is likely to disrupt white-collar work globally over the next decade. Productivity gains will accrue disproportionately to firms that own the technology, most of which are foreign. India's outsourcing industry faces structural disruption. Overseas professional pathways may narrow. Without domestic AI capability, India risks absorbing the disruption while exporting the value.

Ironically, India already plays a major role in the global AI ecosystem without capturing its upside. Indian users constitute one of the largest populations engaging with global AI platforms, contributing substantial interaction data and usage value. That phase of heavily subsidised access will not last. As dependency grows, pricing power will consolidate in a handful of firms abroad.

The choice is not whether India adopts AI, but whether it does so as a sovereign shaper or a dependent user. What would a serious national response look like?

First, a national AI programme with clear authority, measurable outcomes, and direct reporting to the PM. It should bring together the best minds from the public and private sectors. Call it Mission Saraswati, a mission to place knowledge, intelligence and learning at the heart of India's state capacity.

Second, strategic public investment is unavoidable. Even with the demand unleashed by the government's embrace of AI, private enterprise alone will not build sovereign AI infrastructure within the timelines India requires. A five-year, \$100 billion sovereign investment programme — roughly 0.5 per cent of GDP annually — could catalyse several times that amount in private capital. At the same time, India should actively focus on attracting global capital by emphasising the growth unlocked through AI-enabled governance and ease of doing business, combined with its large, young population. This approach — blending state capacity with respect for capital and private execution — can be understood as Lakshmi Puja: Not ritual symbolism, but disciplined national capital mobilisation and deployment.

Third, this is not only a technological shift. It is a cultural one. India must consciously move from *jugaad* to systems, from patchwork to precision. Infrastructure alone will not suffice if standards, institutions and execution remain weak.

None of this diminishes the need for serious safeguards around privacy, bias, accountability and democratic oversight. AI governance must evolve alongside AI deployment. But caution cannot become paralysis. Nations that hesitate will not shape the rules; they will inherit them.

India is led by a Prime Minister who has demonstrated an unusual willingness to pursue long-term structural reform. If this political will is channelled toward a national AI mission, India will enjoy a rare alignment of technological opportunity and leadership capacity. This is India's railway moment. Seize it.

The writer is MD and CEO, Lodha Group



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Film politics

THE ABNORMAL delay in awarding the certificate for the screening of *Jana Nayagan* by the CBFC, despite the aggrieved filmmaker having shuttled between the Board and the courts several times, is both intriguing and baffling ("Film certification process is a punishment", *IE*, January 16). Although institutions such as the CBFC are expected to uphold cultural ethos, moral values, ethics and decency in society, their functioning must be rational, transparent and objective rather than subjective, opaque and dilatory, leading to undue harassment or the infringement of filmmakers' constitutionally guaranteed right to freedom of expression.

Ravi Mathur, Noida

CBFC CERTIFICATION is a necessary process to ensure that films fall within the bounds of general morality and do not disparage any community or belief ("Film certification process is a punishment", *IE*, January 16). However, excessive scrutiny and the imposition of unnecessary changes not only harm a film's commercial prospects and financial viability but also curtail the subtle creativity and depth intrinsic to cinema.

Abhay Negi, Dehradun

Rethink foreign policy

THE CURRENT geopolitical dynamics have compelled India to trade off its strategic interests ("India needs a new foreign policy plan", *IE*, January 16). Historically, India has upheld the doctrine of non-alignment — later evolving into multi-alignment — and strategic autonomy.

However, the latter appears to have taken a back seat, first when India was pressed to slash oil imports from Russia and now, conceivably, from Iran under pressure following US tariffs. Despite subordinating its own interests, New Delhi has been unable to secure a trade agreement with Washington. The imperative now is to recalibrate Indian foreign policy so that it can thrive, anchor and lead — rather than merely compromise, concede and comply.

Raghvi Sharma, Patiala



RADOSLAW SIKORSKI

THERE IS no denying that we may be witnessing a gradual erosion of the rules-based international system that emerged after World War II. That system — built on international law, multilateral institutions, and shared norms such as respect for sovereignty and cooperation — was meant to replace brute force with predictability. Its record has been patchy at best, but for decades it delivered stability and growth across large parts of the world. For Poland, this international order proved indispensable after the collapse of communism. Market reforms and integration into Western political, economic, and security structures created the foundations for sustained development and a credible national security policy. After 1989, the predictability and legal clarity of the post-war system allowed Poland not only to modernise, but to do so at remarkable speed.

Today, however, the global arrangement is increasingly questioned, particularly by many countries in the Global South — and often for good reasons. Critics point to Western dominance, imposition of lopsided standards, inadequate recognition of emerging powers' interests, economic hegemony, and selective application of international law through so-called double standards. These concerns deserve to be acknowledged and addressed, not dismissed. Divergent interpretations of international law are starkly visible in reactions to Rus-

Rules-based order might be boring. But it is crucial

sia's aggression against Ukraine. What some countries — including mine — see as a blatant violation of basic international and humanitarian norms, others view as merely one local conflict among many. For them, this is not a reason to reassess relations with Russia, which they continue to regard as an important political and economic partner.

It is likely that these differences will never be reconciled. Historical experiences, political cultures, and geography all shape our national perspectives. Yet some rules are indispensable if international relations are to function at all. Without them, long-term investment becomes risky, trade unreliable, and cooperation fragile. Without rules, chaos prevails — and while chaos may benefit a few, it harms the many. In an increasingly volatile world, some seek high-risk high-return investments. That is one reason why valuations of AI companies are reaching stratospheric levels, and why new cryptocurrencies keep popping up all over the world, luring in millions. Others,

however, prefer secure and stable investments, driving gold and silver prices to record highs. For these less adventurous investors, predictability has become an increasingly valuable asset. The good news is that it can still be found in Europe. The European Union remains one of the few major global actors committed to fair trade, competitive markets,

and mutually beneficial investment. Crucially, it continues to uphold the international rules agreed upon some 80 years ago in the aftermath of the bloodiest conflict in human history.

Poland is a textbook example of how beneficial a stable and predictable environment can be. Barely three and a half decades ago, it embarked on a peaceful political and economic transformation — from a centrally planned system to a democratic market-based economy. Since 1990, Poland's GDP per capita has increased more than eightfold. Poverty has fallen dramatically, a strong middle class has emerged, our modern infrastructure is now the envy of others, and Polish firms have moved up global value chains. Last year, my country entered the ranks of the world's largest economies. Our history was hardly a walk in the park. We have had our share of conflicts, insurrections, and wars, and we have never avoided taking up arms when necessary. Yet the past 35 years have taught us a lesson: Peace, predictability, and political order — when given a chance — can work miracles. Go to Russia. Then come to visit Poland and ask yourself a simple question: Where would you prefer your children to grow up? And where would you trust your money to work? The boring rules-based order still makes a difference.

The writer is Poland's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Deputy Prime Minister

Today, however, the global arrangement is increasingly questioned, particularly by many countries in the Global South — and often for good reasons



SANJEEV KAPOOR AND PURVI MEHTA

INDIA'S FOOD system is undergoing a transition. Urban menus now routinely feature millets, indigenous rice varieties, artisanal pulses and region-specific oils. Quinoa sits alongside *jowar*; avocado accompanies *rotli* bread; millets appear in salads, soupdoughs and desserts. This can reshape Indian agriculture and rural economies.

In a country where nearly 97 per cent of food consumed is domestically produced and locally sourced, and where agriculture remains the primary livelihood for over 45 per cent of the workforce, consumption patterns are economic instructions. NSSO and Consumer Expenditure Surveys show a steady decline in per-capita cereal consump-

tion since the early 1990s, accompanied by rising expenditure on fruits, vegetables, dairy, eggs, meat, fish and processed foods. Urban households today allocate less than 35 per cent of food expenditure to cereals, compared to over 60 per cent three decades ago. Rural India is following the same trajectory with a lag. Spending on processed and value-added foods in rural households has more than tripled over the last two decades. India's health and packaged food segment is growing at over 20 per cent annually.

Food markets are changing faster than food production. India's cropping patterns remain deeply entrenched in two commodities: Rice and wheat. They occupy close to 40 per cent of India's cropped area. In contrast, pulses, oilseeds, fruits and vegetables account for less than 30 per cent, while all millets combined occupy roughly 13 per cent. Subsidies, procurement, MSPs, irrigation infrastructure

and extension services continue to favour rice and wheat — even as demand shifts towards more diverse and nutrient-rich foods.

The economic costs of this mismatch are substantial. Imports supply 60 per cent of the edible oil demand. With pulses, shortages push prices up and trigger imports, followed by production surges that cause sharp price crashes and discourage diversification. Farmers continue to produce for a food system that urban India is moving away from. When millets consistently appear on menus and retail shelves, acreage follows.

Food markets are changing faster than food production. India's cropping patterns remain deeply entrenched in two commodities: Rice and wheat

When chefs champion indigenous grains or forgotten varieties, seed systems revive, markets respond, farmers benefit. Global experience underscores this. The rise of quinoa as a staple between 2000 and 2015 transformed production patterns in Peru. Exports rose nearly tenfold. India possesses all the ingredients to leverage dietary change for agricultural diversification. Dietary diversity and farm diversity are economic, ecological and nutritional imperatives.

Nutritionally, India faces a triple burden: Undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies and obesity. Improved access to pulses, millets, fruits, vegetables, eggs and animal-source foods is essential. Diversification helps manage climate risk. Millets use up to 60 per cent less water than rice and wheat. Pulses fix nitrogen, improving soil health. Horticulture offers higher value per hectare with a smaller ecological footprint.

For farmers, diversification means more

income sources and market-risk mitigation. High-value crops can significantly improve profits, especially for smallholders. The government remains India's largest food buyer. Programmes such as PM-POSHAN, which feeds 10-12 crore children daily, send strong demand signals. Diversification will remain marginal unless MSPs are complemented by assured procurement pilots, price-deficiency payments, expanded crop insurance and demand-linked research investments.

Historically, Indian cuisine evolved in close conversation with climate, soil and season. Today, as India's palate becomes more diverse and health-conscious, there is an opportunity to restore that link. The future of Indian agriculture will be determined as much by what India chooses to eat as by what it chooses to grow.

Kapoor is a chef. Mehta is an agri-food systems technology specialist

In Academia, a New Kid on the Block

China's industrial rise boosts its univs, rivals US Chinese universities are displacing America's top colleges in research output and quality. This has to do with the pace of China's industrialisation, which creates demand for academic research, a role that the US appropriated during its post-WW2 industrial boom. European universities, struggling with post-war reconstruction and brain drain, yielded to academic institutions across the Atlantic. Europe also deindustrialised rapidly, relying on the US military industrial complex. The rise of China as a factory to the world spread deindustrialisation to the US. This had a bearing on academic research on American campuses. US universities are producing more papers, and their quality has not deteriorated. However, rivals in Asia have become much better as they made world-beating products for European and American consumers.

There are some key differences between the US and Chinese models of academic excellence. American universities rely on students and faculty from around the world to fill their classrooms and laboratories. They also have a close financial relationship with industry to direct research into specific areas. China relies on its own talent pool to come up with solutions that its military and industry seek. The relationship among the Chinese state, its defence establishment and its industrial base is more intimate. It allows an easier confluence for targeted research. The US, on its part, is introspecting migration, a pillar for academic excellence.

The bigger worry for the US is the mismatch between its primary and higher education systems. American schools do not produce appropriate input for the country's colleges, where the cost of education beats inflation to retain academic edge. This has behavioural effects on students saddled with debt at the beginning of their careers. A college degree no longer guarantees better or more secure income for Americans. Competition for top research positions is intense among 1st and 2nd-generation immigrants. All of this was held together by US industrialisation. With a new kid on the block, the glue is becoming weak.

To Be Viksit, We Have to Look Cleaner

India has long relied on a convenient fiction: that hygiene and cleanliness is culturally relative, not a universal expectation. That fiction is now collapsing under the weight of global scrutiny. When athletes like badminton star Anders Antonsen skip tournaments in New Delhi stating air pollution concerns, or foreign dignitaries like German chancellor Friedrich Merz quietly avoid the national capital probably for the same reason, the message isn't as murky as the air: the world is deriding itself from India's notorious tolerance for filth.

Delhi is emblematic, and goes beyond its routinely toxic air. Even the supposedly controlled environment of Indira Gandhi Indoor Stadium has been marred by bird droppings raining onto courts, disrupting the ongoing India Open Super 750 international badminton tournament. Former world champion Loh Kean Yew of Singapore looked understandably disgusted. For athletes, such indignities are not inconveniences but breaches of professional standards.

Pollution-hygiene terrorism is not a term India would like associated with its ambitions, despite its Swachh Bharat and Viksit Bharat longings. India has the resources to do better. It boasts gleaming airports and luxury hotels, not to mention a different 'subculture' in their subways-metro rail landscape. They are proof that cleanliness is possible when priorities align and compliance is made to stick. Yet, the wider civic environment remains neglected, undermining credibility. If India wishes to be taken seriously in the company of nations, it must abandon excuses and enforce standards, and stop gaining reputation for pollution-hygiene terrorism. One quick, 'easier' way to be taken seriously as an economic power is to be better, cleaner. And look it.

JUST IN JEST
Is the Nobel Peace Prize transferable? No. But these days, you never know

A Gift Trump Simply Couldn't Refuse

They say if you really want something badly, the universe conspires to give it to you. For most, that's just a feel-good quote on a coffee mug or an office desk. But when you're Captain America, the universe doesn't just conspire — it panics and hands you exactly what you want. Earlier this week, Venezuelan opposition leader Maria Corina Machado handed her Nobel Peace Prize medal to Trump — fulfilling a desire the US president has made abundantly clear on several occasions. And, as expected, Trump — who appears to suffer from no inhibitions whatsoever — intends to keep the medal. The Nobel Peace Prize Committee, meanwhile, has stressed that the prize is non-transferable but, then again, in Trump's universe, there is a simpler rule: you want it, you keep it. Machado, of course, knows she had to pay the price of admission to gain Trump's support, and that only sweet words won't do.

Trump's behaviour reminds one of the Bengali film Nobel Chor, directed by Suman Ghosh, in which Mithun Chakraborty plays a poor farmer who stumbles upon a stolen Nobel medal and grapples with what to do with it. The medal becomes less a prize than a moral test. But there is no such inner conflict for Trump. For him, it's simple — keep it, polish it, put it on display, and announce it on social media with a flattering filter and an even more flattering caption.

EYES WIDE SHUT US visa freeze isn't just about welfare, it's a move to slash legal immigration

'Go Home!' Says Yankee



Neeraj Kaushal

Earlier this week, the Trump administration imposed an indefinite freeze on immigrant visas to 75 countries. The policy has echoes of the 1924 Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), which enforced national-origin quotas on legal immigration, severely restricting immigration from eastern and southern Europe, and virtually shutting it off from the rest of the world.

Legal immigration to the US, largely European in the early decades of the 20th c., fell by 58% in 1925. Over the next four decades, the presence of immigrants in the nation's demographics faded. Trump's policy will have a similar effect — legal immigration from countries affected by the freeze has been roughly half of the total in recent years. Unless more immigrants are allowed from countries that are not on the banned list, legal immigration will plummet. Net immigration in 2025 was negative — which means more immigrants left than arrived in the US.

There are some notable differences. The US State Department announced the indefinite freeze on Twitter without any deliberation in Congress or the media. The 1924 INA was in the making for over three decades, discussed threadbare by legislators and the public.

Led by US legislators, the 1924 Act had majority support. Woodrow Wilson vetoed earlier versions of the Act twice (1915 and 1917). The US Congress overrode Wilson's veto to pass the 1917 Immigration Act, which blocked most immigration from Asia and, 7 years later, resulted in legislation that extended the Asiatic ban to the rest of the world.

Trump has accomplished all that in one year by bypassing the US Congress. The Constitution does not grant legislative powers to presidents.



Get a room

As of now, the indefinite freeze on immigrant visas has no legislative support and is, therefore, technically not legal, just like a series of other recent immigration policy changes (e.g. banning of diversity visas). Trump's indefinite freeze on immigrant visas will be challenged in the courts. Yet, it will have the desired effect of chopping legal immigration by half, even before the court hearings begin.

The ban heralds a new era of restrictive immigration even within the Trumposphere. For most of his first term as president and in the first year of his second term, Trump's focus was substantially on stopping and deporting illegal immigration, and imposing restrictions on non-immigrant visas or raising visa fees substantially, as in the case of H1B visas. Indeed, while simultane-

aneously berating illegal immigration, Trump had often mentioned that he would like undocumented workers to come back through legal channels. Yet, the new ban is on legal immigration. Non-immigrant visas for tourism, education and business from these countries will continue.

Any pretence that Trump only opposes illegal immigration is gone. The State Department announced the policy decision on Twitter. The State Department will process immigrant visa processing from 75 countries whose migrants take welfare from the American people at unacceptable rates. The freeze will remain active until the US can ensure that new immigrants will not extract welfare from the American people.

What is the threshold of acceptance? We don't know. Fiscal spending on welfare programmes is described as extracting wealth.

There is little clarity on how the 75 countries have been selected. The list includes tiny countries like Fiji, Antigua and Barbuda, Cape Verde, Albania and Moldova, that have even smaller number of people living in the US. The US Citizenship and Immigration Services Yearbook does not even mention these countries.

Immigrant dependence on the US welfare system has long been a concern. The US Immigration Act of 1982 first introduced the public charge provision and prohibited the entry of 'any convict, lunatic, idiot, or any person unable to take care of himself or herself without becoming a public charge'. Over the years, the government has strengthened the screening of new immigrants to ensure that they do not become a public charge, a term used to describe individuals who receive state assistance for their basic needs. Further, for determining eligibility for welfare programmes, a sponsor's income is added to an immigrant, which reduces the latter's chances of eligibility.

Federal policy prohibits immigrants from receiving welfare for the first 5 years after becoming permanent residents. Yet, not all state governments share the Trumpian vision of how immigrants should be treated. Many liberal states and communities go their way to ensure that local welfare policy does not distinguish between immigrants and US citizens. There is not much Trump can do to stop these communities and states from providing welfare and health insurance to their residents.

The first Trump administration had proposed a 'public charge' policy to ban theory of immigrants who were likely to become dependent on Medicaid, a health insurance programme for the poor. But it had to reverse its policy when Covid struck, and the narrow-mindedness of restricting healthcare access to poor immigrants became clear. This time, while there is an emphasis on welfare and wealth extraction, the objective is not just to save welfare dollars but also to reduce legal immigration.

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ChatGPT SHAIPI OF THE DAY

This Oscars, next month, be aware: Each winner may pause mid-fanfare. Then gift off his or her prize. With Nobel-like eyes, To a net they're dying to flatter and snare.

QUALITY OF JOBS

While the global unemployment rate is projected to remain at the historically low level of 4.9% in 2026, around 284 million workers still live in extreme poverty — on less than US\$3 a day — and more than 2 billion workers remain in informal employment. Informality is typically associated with lower job quality due to limited access to social protection, rights at work, workplace safety and job security...

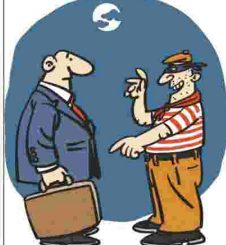
Type of employment as a share of total employment

	2015	2025	2015	2025
World	11.0	7.9	57.4	57.7
Low-income	49.7	50.5	91.4	90.2
Lower-middle-income	18.0	10.1	84.3	83.4
Upper-middle-income	4.8	1.4	55.1	53.0
High-income	NA	NA	9.4	8.5

Note: Working poverty refers to workers living in households with an income of less than US\$3.00 per person per day for extreme poverty (in purchasing power parity terms). Source: ILO's Employment and Social Trends 2026

Bell Curves

R Prasad



I ask, and thou shalt give.

Chat Room

Must Pay Toll on Biz Expressway

Apogee of the Edit: 'Bye, Treaty Shippings, Yeh Tiger Zinda Hai' (Jan 16), the apex court's decision in case of Tiger Global firmly establishes that intention behind a transaction prevails over routing mechanism. Investments made before amendment to the Indo-Mauritius treaty too, will be subject to the litmus test of substance. There has to be real economic activity in the treaty jurisdiction; merely holding board meetings in Mauritius or paying local administrative fees without real economic activity is a blatant attempt at tax avoidance that will now be disallowed. Let economic factors prevail over tax optimisation as India can attract investments on the strength of its business prospects even after all tax-avoidance routes are firmly and decisively closed. Tax professionals should help India maintain its fiscal sovereignty instead of becoming part of an attempt by global players to avoid tax by legal means.

Vijay Mulajli
Byemail

Live Trial: Trump OTT War App

This refers to 'Trump's Adventures in OTT' by Seema Singh (Jan 12). George Orwell foresaw it: war is peace. But this is peace pursued with the restless energy of a salacious manly chasing client. With the world finally silent, he is the conqueror of chaos, still searching for the next war to end all wars. A one-way mirror reflecting the globe in tranquillity is essayed by threatening turbulence.

Canada must be disciplined into harmony. Greenland persuaded into serenity. Venezuela liberated into stillness. Iran warned into calm. Iraq and Afghanistan to await their elusive peace. A quest for inner peace, then, leads to uneasy streets and city halls: Washington, Chicago, Portland, Minnesota. The doctrine is simple: human angst will end once everything that moves is laid still.

R Narayanan
Nani Mumbai

Letters to the editor may be addressed to edit@timesgroup.com

Down with US Petroarchy!



Suvangi Rath & Laxmikant Gual

Venezuela's decline from oil superpower to economic crisis state is often framed as a story of governance failure. For India, however, an economy heavily dependent on imported energy, the US' actions in the Venezuelan crisis pose a critical policy challenge: how should an oil import-dependent country secure affordable energy while navigating sanctions, tariffs and great power pressure without sacrificing strategic autonomy? The US rarely acts abruptly in energy geopolitics. A recurring pattern has involved targeting resource-rich states with weak governance or contested legitimacy, applying graduated sanctions restricting access to capital and markets, allowing economic pressure to erode domestic political support, effecting regime change, and installing client governments to capture resources. Venezuela exemplifies this trajectory.

Despite possessing the world's largest proven oil reserves of around 300 billion barrels, Venezuela's output collapsed after years of mismanagement, underinvestment and institutional decay. Long before the latest escalation, hyperinflation, crumbling infrastructure and public discontent

had undermined the regime. Sanctions intensified these pressures by disrupting oil exports, financial flows and access to technology, further constraining production. Regardless of whether sanctions achieve US objectives, their economic effects extend far beyond the targeted state. Disruptions to oil supply chains tighten markets and heighten price volatility with global repercussions. India's trade exposure to Venezuela has declined sharply. In 2024-25, India's total imports from Venezuela stood at \$366.5 mn, of which crude oil accounted for \$255.3 mn. This marks an 81.3% decline from \$1.4 bn in crude imports in 2023-24. Venezuela is no longer a critical bilateral supplier for India. However, this does not insulate India from the systemic effects of oil geopolitics. India's vulnerability lies not in dependence on any single supplier, but in its exposure to global price movements and supply disruptions. India's post-2022 energy strategy has prioritised discounted crude, particu-

larly from Russia, to contain import costs and moderate domestic inflation. On Russian crude has typically been sold at a discount to global benchmarks, lowering India's landed import costs and helping stabilise fuel prices and refining margins. Estimates of these gains vary but they underline that while the gains are real, they are neither uniform nor cost-free.

India's choices are further constrained by institutional realities. Public sector refineries face compliance, insurance, shipping and financing limitations under sanctions regimes. Strategic petroleum reserves provide only short-term cushioning and remain below the desired 120-day import cover. Rapid diversification away from

discounted suppliers would raise costs and strain logistics, while deeper dependence on any single source creates long-term vulnerability.

Fully aligning with US pressure risks straining India's energy relationship with Russia. At the same time, excessive dependence on Moscow exposes India to secondary sanctions, reputational costs and heightened diplomatic leverage. So, how can India secure affordable energy supplies while insulating itself from sanctions-induced volatility and coercive trade pressures? While diversification, expanded strategic petroleum reserves and calibrated diplomacy offer part of the solution, no single strategy is sufficient. Maintaining flexible partnerships guided by national interest rather than bloc loyalty is one way forward. India cannot afford to remain a passive observer.

As global economic dynamics are increasingly shaped by energy markets, particularly oil, Western-imposed sanctions should not automatically constrain India's diplomatic or economic engagement with politically sensitive regions.

Venezuela's crisis illustrates how geopolitically driven supply disruptions transmit global inflation. Even modest oil price increases would widen India's CAD, raise transport and fertiliser costs, and feed economy-wide inflation, highlighting the tangible economic costs of strategic miscalculation.

Rath is fellow, ICRIER, New Delhi, and Gual is project scientist, National Institute of Science Education and Research (NISER), Bhubaneswar



US geologists in Venezuela look for oil



A thought for today
Animals are sentient, intelligent, perceptive, funny and entertaining. We owe them a duty of care as we do to children

MICHAEL MORPURGO

Voice of Mumbai

Elected BMC should work with ear to the ground

When monsoon comes round this year, Mumbai should be better geared for it. Monorails shouldn't stall on tracks, metro stations shouldn't get flooded, bridges shouldn't get cut-off. Now that the city has elected its municipal representatives, after a delay of four years, there should be some accountability. It's unfortunate that India's richest city body with a ₹75,000 crore budget, was run for so long by unelected administrators. Forget cities, even states like Goa and Himachal don't have such generous budgets. Yet, Mumbai felt neglected.

That's not to say grand new projects haven't begun. But boring massive tunnels under the city, for example, isn't the same as ensuring the maintenance of pavements and streets, timely garbage disposal, etc. All the things that make neighbourhoods liveable. And that's why ward-level representatives who raise problems and pursue solutions are crucial for urban upkeep.

Mumbaikars became disillusioned with ambitious talky years ago. In the early 1990s, Sharad Pawar as CM promised to make Mumbai another Singapore. A few years later, CM Narayan Rane made the same promise. In 2004, PM Manmohan Singh moved the goalpost: "Shanghai is the talking point in Asia today. I want Mumbai to replace it." And grand things have been built. Bandra-Worli SeaLink, coastal road, metro corridors, yet many die every year on the city's crowded suburban railway network. Slum growth has gone vertical. So, more people are living in squalor now than ever before.

In 2007, Singapore's "founding father" Lee Kuan Yew told Maharashtra deputy CM, RR Patil, that the only way Mumbai could rival Singapore was if it became a separate state with all its revenue at its disposal. That's not happening, so CM Devendra Fadnis' remark last year that Mumbai does not need to become like Singapore or Shanghai is realistic. Mumbaikars don't mind the dream projects, of course, but what they would like first is their daily life to be glitch-free. Incoming corporators must feel the burden of expectation and deliver.

How Dirty Is Delhi

Badminton gives the lie to India's second richest city

Indicatively, yesterday the PM 2.5 level in Delhi was 100% higher than in both Denmark and Singapore. This extreme winter pollution, unmitigated year after year, is not a matter of opinion. Every official and institution acting like this data is disputable, only worsens the problem. Others have a chalta hai attitude. Against this tide, those who are crying themselves hoarse about a health emergency, feel themselves brushed aside. Outsiders disrupt this sterile status quo. Their crisp observations of reality, flare through the smog.

Danish shuttler Anders Antonsen, World No3, has pulled out of India Open for the third time, never mind another \$500 fine. Singapore's Joh Kuan Yew, the 2021 world champion, has been crystal clear that the weather is hurting his health: "I breatheless." Whatever Indian players' compulsions for demurring that these are ok conditions, it lacks credibility. Ditto for Badminton Association of India labelling various complaints as politics. When the playing conditions in other Indian cities are visibly better, neither Indian nor international athletes should be subjected to tournamenting in Delhi.

As terrible as the air is, it hasn't been the only plaint. There's been a monkey sighting in the stands. Play has been interrupted by bird droppings. Denmark's Mia Blichfeldt has found overall conditions to be "very dirty" and pointed to how unfair it would be if athletes fell sick as a result. These grievances are hardly foreign to us though. Even when Delhi hosted the 2010 Commonwealth Games, visitors rumbled and roared about conditions that locals took as commonplace. Now India has set its sights on the Olympics. But a badminton tourney has shown how much cleaning up needs to be done before we can reach that goal.

Cats Or Cars, What Should Matter More?

Cats. Anything that can be wronged deserves care

If an ant is drowning in a puddle, should you try to save it, a bioethicist Jeff Sebo asks in an article. If yes, is your decision based on Indian tradition, which teaches that all life manifests God, or emotion, or cold logic? While it's unlikely you've weighed the pros and cons of saving an ant, in his book, *The Moral Circle*, Sebo shows how, and why, you could.

Saving that ant means you consider it part of your "moral circle", which is the set of all beings that matter to you "for their own sake". Sebo explains it with the example of a car and a cat. If you kick the car, you might damage it, but you cannot "wrong" it. But if you kick the cat - we don't want you to - you may not damage it, for cats are supple and agile, and you would certainly wrong it. That's why the cat matters for its own sake, but the car doesn't. Through his book, Sebo aims to show you how not to wrong beings and things that matter for their own sake. To summarise, he recommends rapidly expanding your moral circle, to include cats, elephants, ants and even AI and humans, because it's the right thing to do: "Living an ethical life requires thinking about which beings matter and why, as well as what we owe them and why."

But this isn't an appeal to emotion. Ethics, after all, is moral philosophy, so the argument for not wronging others is based on logic. Which is that, our understanding of others - not just ants but also our human neighbours, our own children - is limited. "We can never know for sure what it feels like to be someone else". So, a few thousand years

ago, we reserved our consideration for people of our own tribe. Animals were nothing but biological machines. Then, we included sentient beings, mostly mammals like cats and dogs, in our moral circle, realising that octopuses, which predate dinosaurs, are also sentient. Because they feel pleasure and pain, they can be wronged. Since this delay in according dignity to animals arose from the limitations of our own minds, Sebo argues we should also be mindful of our current limitations. Perhaps, some years down, we'll discover that centipedes are sentient. In 2022, a researcher claimed Google's LaMDA bot was sentient, and lost his job. Maybe AI hasn't attained sentience so far, but does down the line. It might even surpass us in intelligence and start making moral decisions for us. In that future, our present behaviour towards it will determine AI's own moral circle. If we expect it to be good, let's be good while training it now, Sebo says. "If a being has a non-negligible chance of being sentient," he says, "we should extend them some moral consideration." Of course, you won't jump into a flooded river to save an ant, but skimming it out of a puddle on a leaf is doable and should be done. The calculus is simple: high the probability of sentience, say 90% for cats vs 10% for ants, higher should be your consideration for that being. While we won't stop prioritising humans, we should dial down our importance a few notches, and dial up the importance of others a few.

Choppy Waters For Thackeray Bros

Uddhav & Raj largely misread Mumbai. Voters, including Marathis, put more weight on their BMC non-performance than their aggressive nativism. The brothers haven't been rendered irrelevant. But old Sena tactics were never going to work like before

Vaibhav Purandare@timesofindia.com

Politically assertive Mumbai's voters benefited the Thackerays for decades. Not only did it help them install their mayors from 1970s onwards, it gave them complete control of India's richest city body for 25 years straight from 1997. These same voters have now asserted themselves against the politics of fear and multi-community bashing. As well as against the attempt to ghettoise the Marathi community.

The Marathi vote in Aamchi Mumbai was never monolithic. But there was a formula to the Thackeray-led Shiv Sena's repeated success in BMC. An electoral ward in the city has an average of 50,000 voters. Of these, 25,000 never vote. That leaves you with 25,000 voters. A party that could get 8,000-9,000 of its loyal voters to the booths could win in a small election that saw multiple candidates.

Sena founder Balasaheb Thackeray built such a network of shakhas that the party developed excellent civic and neighbourhood links. And while Sena consolidated Marathi voters, these links were of use even for other groups in Mumbai, especially after it embraced other Hindu communities - Sainiks addressed municipal problems, provided their own ambulance services and reasonably priced cooking oil and veggies in the era of artificial shortages in 1970s and 1980s. It's this network, and Balasaheb's charisma, despite his anti-migrant and later anti-Muslim rhetoric, that kept a broad section of voters loyal to the party.

But this formula was transactional. The leader was expected to deliver something. That feeling of obligation has gone because the leader is no longer around, and these things can't be passed on indefinitely. Aspirations today are different, expectations have soared, and people seek welfare benefits as entitlements. So, the Sena model wouldn't have worked in the changed situation. But the Thackerays hastened its decline with their ideological somersaults and absence of ground connect.

Sena's track record in BMC has been hopeless over the quarter century Mumbai has been ruled like a global city with horrible roads, non-existent footpaths, no growth in civic amenities and unbridled corruption. The Marathi mannos, in whose name votes were being sought, exited Mumbai in large

numbers because champions of nativism massively underperformed on their promises to them.

So, it was understandable that Uddhav and Raj did not focus too much on the issue of development. The fact that they got 70-plus seats together in this election attests to their resilience and the resilience of the old (and now much weakened) Sena network. But it also shows the amount of goodwill they have frittered away.

They lost that goodwill, and with it BMC, because not only did they not show respect for sensibilities of the Marathi-speaking population, they also indulged in fear-mongering. BJP as a party was portrayed as raiders from Gujarat; north Indians were, if not

made a tactical blunder - Modi, who didn't campaign at all in these polls, was de facto on the ticket. After 11 years as PM, Modi remains popular across communities in Mumbai.

So for the Thackerays, there was a loss of credibility in terms of their performance in BMC, and a hollowing out of their ideological platform. Plus, they ended up with a reputation of being anti-development. This verdict is also a rejection of their perceived anti-development stance.

BJP and its state mascot Fadnis have proven, in contrast, that there is no substitute for showing up every day and toiling in the trenches. The Thackerays and Fadnis decided Fadnis as a political parvenu who didn't belong at the top, and as an arriviste.

The word 'Brahman' was used against him almost as a slur, like RSS used to be called a cabal of Marathi Brahmins.

However, both Fadnis and BJP have shown they have political savvy, demonstrating an understanding of economics and policy around development. His second win on the trot makes Fadnis one of Maharashtra's top political performers.

That BJP won a Hindutva-plus-Marathi-plus-development narrative and won BMC despite the Thackerays burying their hatchet, shows that Uddhav and Raj have reason to be worried. Loss of power in Mumbai is a loss of political mystique, with Mantralaya already being outside their grasp.

Yet it's not BJP alone they should be looking at. Shinde has, despite limited success in BMC, proved to be a unique Shiv Sainik. While he has been the second Maratha from Sena ranks to lead the CM, he has established, unlike some other Sena rebels, that he may be a factor the Thackerays can't ignore in the broader Mumbai Metropolitan Region.

Of course, identity politics and community considerations can't be wished away altogether. Maharashtra has some anxieties about Mumbai, especially cultural ones, and they need addressing. But simply tapping into them and playing on insecurities is an old playbook that won't work the way it did sometimes in the past.

The truth is, Mumbai needs a governing city body that focuses on making the city better. And even when it comes to identity, if the Marathi identity underpins anything, it is Mumbai's and Maharashtra's liberal and all-encompassing ethos. The Thackerays missed that completely.

'When Someone Thought My Husband Is My Son'

This kind of thing is hard to laugh off even if we preach that lookism is nonsense. What many of us want is to age just like JLo. What we settle for is a very carefully curated social media reality

Radhika Vaz

I just posted a bunch of photos to Instagram. They are pictures of my friends and I at a big Indian engagement party. We are in full make-up, hair and wardrobe - all of which were carefully chosen (or curated, if I think of it that way) more important than (we are). Gazing at the photos I am pleased. We look good and with any luck we might make a few people jealous of how good.

This is not a side of me that I am proud of. But here we are. There was a time when we were snuggled about where we lived, what car we drove, possibly who we were married to. Today it's the squad. Who you hang out with says a lot about you. But what they look like says even more. Let's face it, people. Just as feminism said looks are not important, social media came along and said, "We'll see about that." We live in a world where eternal youth, immaculate beauty, and abject thinness are normal. And with all the tools at our fingertips we now have no excuse to look anything but perfect.

Kris Jenner has had a face lift at 70 and frankly looks slightly younger than her granddaughters in her Insta photos, which have been further photoshopped. To her and her entire tribe of followers, people like us would be offensive to look at, which is why I 'curated' my pics very carefully. Which is why I can't stop looking at them now.

A few years ago, as I was aggressively going grey, my friend Swati peered at me and said, "You should think about colouring your hair, otherwise everyone is going to know how old you are." Actually, Swati was more concerned that I was going to lose my old skin.

Today when I look at Insta pictures of the rich and fancy, I can see the friend they are all probably a bit

annoyed with. The one who hit the Botox needle a little late or refused to get on the GIP train, she is letting the team down by showing the rest of us what the others probably would look like. To Swati, I am that friend. And I won't be surprised or upset if she has cropped me out of her photos.

And speaking of cropped, husbands have had to up their game as well. At the same engagement party, I spent some time with my 20-year-old nieces who have an

had to amputate her husband's hand. But this was not the unkindest cut of all she had to endure.

Naturally I was very entertained by all this. Until a few weeks ago, when someone thought my husband is my son. I laughed it off because I am a comedian and I am not supposed to be bothered by this, but deep inside

the patriarchy has been shaken and stirred. A woman must look younger and prettier than her husband.

I am supposed to be his trophy. Not the other way around. I was going to have to perform Insta surgery on our couples photos. Except I would not be trying to make him look better.

Never before have people been so harshly judged and discriminated against because of how they look. And worse, never have we felt as badly about ourselves as we do now. When I was a kid I probably felt really bad about once a month when magazines with pretty models glided past my peripheral vision. Today I can feel like that 100 times a day just by looking at JLo's Insta feed. And shockingly the thought I have is, 'I could look like her if I just stopped doing all this cosmetic stuff. I enjoyed and got a really good dermatologist.'

When did all this happen? When did I go completely mad? I talk a big game. I am so PC but the truth is I am living through a time where ageism and lookism are winning. I am not sure it's simply a product of my time - a virulent signalling hypocrisies who posts inspirational quotes along the lines of 'be who you are' and 'dance like no one is watching'. But I am painfully aware that everyone is watching and I am not dancing. I am preening. Because if you can't beat them, you join them. Maybe that's what I should be doing in my next social media post. With a very pretty picture of me.

The writer is a standup comedian

Calvin & Hobbes



A Leader's True Strength Lies In Active listening

Farida Khanam

In Iran, ongoing protests are not merely isolated incidents of unrest; they reflect a profound and growing desire among its population - especially youth and women - for greater participation and consideration in decisions that affect their lives. This demographic is no longer content to be passive recipients of policy; they demand to be active stakeholders. When leadership refuses to adapt to this shift, the bond of trust shatters, leaving a vacuum that is often filled by conflict. The wisdom of gentleness and patience in leadership, as exemplified by Prophet Muhammad, offers timeless guidance for navigating unrest. In the Quran (3:159), the command to the Prophet is explicit: "It is by God's grace that you were gentle with them - for if you had not been so, they would surely have deserted you. So, bear with them and pray for their forgiveness. Take counsel with them in the conduct of

affairs." This verse highlights a critical psychological truth about leadership: authority is maintained through compassion and consultation, not by imposing one's will. It teaches that building trust fosters deep-seated loyalty and unity that force can never replicate. While building trust fosters loyalty, failing to do so inevitably breeds division.

In today's interconnected world, the rise of social media and the democratisation of information have weakened any authority's ability to impose its will through force alone. Younger generations are increasingly aware of their rights and less willing to accept top-down mandates. This shift is most evident in the voices of women and youth, who are mobilising globally to demand equality, dignity, and inclusion. The unrest seen in places like Iran is a direct manifestation of this desire

for a more participatory and inclusive governing process.

Prophet Muhammad's approach offers a blueprint for addressing these modern expectations. He consistently involved his companions in decision-making, prioritising respect and dialogue over raw power. Whether in times of peace or conflict, he demonstrated that a leader's true strength lies in patience and active listening. As his companion Abu Huraira noted: "I have never seen anyone consult their companions more than the Prophet." (Sahih Ibn Hibban: 616).

In countries facing political unrest or economic challenges, adopting this approach can be transformative. By engaging in open dialogue, listening to the people, and responding with understanding and compassion, leaders can foster an environment where trust and cooperation thrive. This approach not only addresses

current challenges but also lays the foundation for a just and harmonious future.

For modern nations or organisations facing political unrest or economic challenges, adopting this empathetic approach can be transformative. It requires shifting the focus from 'controlling' the population to 'empowering' them. By engaging in open dialogue and responding to grievances with genuine compassion, leaders can move from constant crisis management to sustainable cooperation. The wisdom of gentleness and consultation, as demonstrated by Prophet Muhammad, remains a cornerstone of effective leadership. By adopting this approach, leaders can ensure that all voices are heard, trust is built, and unity is fostered. Through patience, understanding, and mutual respect, we can create a future where all members of society are valued and empowered to contribute to common good.

The writer is chairperson, Centre for Peace and Spirituality International

Sacredspace

Dance, when you're broken open, Dance, if you've torn the bandage off, Dance in the middle of fighting, Dance in your blood.

Jalaluddin Rumi

Dance when you're perfectly free.



THE SPEAKING TREE

Hiring landscape slowly changing in Indian IT industry

Some of the top Indian IT companies have announced their results, while many others will follow suit in the coming weeks. While the performance of these IT firms shows status quo in the demand environment, changes are being seen in the hiring landscape. Companies like TCS cut their headcount by 11,000 during the third quarter of the current financial year, while there was a marginal headcount reduction at HCLTech. Amidst these changes, Infosys showed that its headcount had grown by over 5,000 during the period under review. Such divergence shows that the project flow and execution in the AI space are not the same for all companies. With large business legacies are facing the heat as AI-led automation is eating into the revenues of such

enteries. In turn, many job roles are becoming redundant for them. On the other hand, companies with higher digital business are shifting to the AI world better. These developments apart, IT companies are also showing a divergent trend as regards fresher hiring. Some companies have slowed down the fresher intake, while many others are hiring fresh graduates as per their previous plans.

Such divergence shows their approach to the bench, which is the number of reserved employees that an IT firm maintains in anticipation of future projects. Experts are of the opinion that some companies are cutting down their bench strength as cost pressure is increasing due to AI-led automation. That is the reason that they are going slow in campus hiring. In addition to the

hiring trend, Q3 results indicate that there is minimal impact of H1B visa restriction rules on earnings of top IT firms. Neither the share of the US revenue nor the growth rate in the North American region have been impacted during Q3 of FY26. Though there were instances where employees of some companies have been sent back by the US authorities, it, however, has not resulted in disruption in workflow. Therefore, it is evidently clear that Indian IT firms can manage projects better in the US despite the difficulty in sending professionals to the North American region. Overall, Indian IT companies' employee pyramid seems to be changing. More number of professionals with emerging technology skillsets are being sought these days. Many

traditional areas of technology like testing, coding and the likes are being replaced through agentic AI tools.

In this context, companies are seeking that kind of workforce trained in the new areas. Also, given the uncertainty, most IT firms are not keen to hire in large numbers. Demand environment across the United States and Europe is yet to recover fully despite the strong GDP growth rate reported by the former in the last quarter. This is directly because of the geopolitical uncertainty and Trump tariffs. Businesses will not commit any sort of heavy investment unless they are sure of getting viable returns. There is no denying that geopolitical certainty plays a large role in this aspect. Going ahead, demand revival will

be key to the hiring landscape. IT firms will recruit in large numbers when the demand in the enterprise space increases. Some companies have indicated that discretionary spending in BFSI is showing signs of revival. If it happens, there is a probability of improvement in performance. Similarly, manufacturing and energy are also showing some momentum, though other important verticals like retail, hi-tech and others are yet to show any meaningful revival. Till that happens, hiring will be at a slow pace. Another critical factor—adoption of AI in enterprise—will also determine the quantum of technology professionals who would be required in the long run. For the time being, AI adoption is not leading to mass scale layoffs for sure.

CPI is an elder brother to the newborn and younger sibling to those growing



K NARAYANA

Many people have asked me 'your contemporary N Chandrababu Naidu has been a Chief Minister on four occasions. The last year your party was born (1925) also saw the birth of the RSS. They, like A Revanthi Reddy, who is very junior to you, have come to power in the State. But you are still holding red flags and marching on the streets. Why so?'

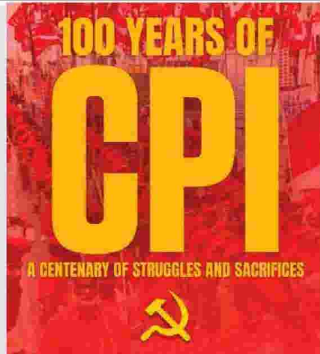
I wish to state that the proverb 'All that glitters is not gold; all that is seen is not truth' has proved true. But this is not the occasion to get into unnecessary arguments. If we look at the Communist Party of India (CPI) from another angle, justice will be done to history.

Has CPI done nothing in 100 years?

The freedom struggle after the Battle of Plassey (1757) led to the First War of Independence in

WHAT DOES THE CPI CENTENARY CELEBRATION SYMBOLISE?

Did RSS, the then Jana Sangh, or today's BJP leaders participate in any of these struggles? Did they go to jail? Did they stand with the people in land struggles, anti-feudal movements, or freedom battles? Even without ruling, we can proudly say with hand on heart that communists defended the country, and stood as a shield for Dalits, Adivasis, and all weaker sections



1857 (though the British deliberately called it 'Sepoy Mutiny' to belittle it).

In 1885, the Congress Party was formed to lead the anti-British struggle. From 1915, Mahatma Gandhi led the national movement. In that movement, moderates and extremists together carried the struggle forward. But there was a lack of clarity about what sort of freedom we wanted. Only political freedom? Or

complete freedom? They were widely debated. It is a matter of fact that it was under intense pressure from Communist-minded forces that the demand for 'Complete Independence' (Poorna Swaraj) was adopted as a resolution.

After Independence, neither Gandhi nor the Congress leadership had any clarity on the kind of freedom that should be implemented—

or perhaps they did not want to implement real freedom.

Instead of fighting in the shadows, communists decided to come openly before the people. History was made on December 26, 1925, that marked the formation of the Communist Party of India (CPI).

The CPI came before the people with fundamental slogans such as Complete independence, land to the

tiller, among other basic demands.

From that time onwards, the land question came to the forefront. Great movements rose across India: the Telangana Armed Struggle for land and survival, Tebhaga movement in Bengal, Purnanprava-Vayalar in Kerala, and anti-zamindari struggles like Chhappalappi in Andhra. The land movement became a national agenda.

The 1917 victory of the Communist Revolution in Russia influenced our country. That influence shaped the Indian Constitution, under the leadership of Dr B R Ambedkar and building of the public sector under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

In separatist movements in Jammu & Kashmir, Punjab and the North-Eastern states, it was the resistance of communists that strengthened the country's unity. During this progressive journey, the party that sacrificed countless martyrs was the CPI.

Did RSS, the then Jana Sangh, or today's BJP leaders participate in any of these struggles? Did they go to jail? Did they stand with the people in land struggles,

anti-feudal movements, or freedom battles? Even without ruling power, we can proudly say with hand on heart that communists defended the country, and stood as a shield for Dalits, Adivasis, and all weaker sections. Was it not because there were 61 Left MPs in Parliament that we could achieve employment-based welfare schemes and people's protection?

As communists weakened, serious debates on people's issues disappeared from Parliament and Assemblies. Today leaders only abuse one another, while the nation's wealth is handed over to corporate forces through clever conspiracies.

Communists stood firmly committed to the basic principles and policies of the nation. I wish to ask the nation and her people 'has the 100-year journey of CPI become a benchmark or not?'

Today, the time has come for all parties dedicated to the Red Flag to unite on one platform. Delay is dangerous. The moment demands unity and struggle.

(The writer is Chairman of Commission, CPI)

LETTERS

NEET-PG criteria revision is a ludicrous move

This is further to the report 'Can a -40 score make a specialist?' report published in The Hans India on January 15. It is astounding that National Board of Examinations (NBE) has reduced the minimum qualifying percentile cut-off for counselling of the third round of National Eligibility-Entrance Test Postgraduate (NEET-PG) 2025-2026 for various categories, which translates to even those who scored -40 marks in the examination becoming eligible to take admission in the highly sought-after clinical specialities, which according to doctors, will compromise merit and talent. The revised qualifying percentiles for NEET-PG 2025 will dilute and dismantle the conditions and criterion for a doctor to become a specialist—while midnight oil is burnt by countless students wanting to qualify for PG courses for whom this short-cut route being offered to the reserved categories of students belonging to SC/ST look alike, appear ludicrous, to put things mildly.

K V Raghuram, Wayanad

Time for a Secunderabad municipal corporation

The latest we hear is that the Telangana government plans to trifurcate the sprawling Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation (GHMC) limits into three municipal corporations—Hyderabad, Cyberabad, and Malkajigiri. However, this proposal is not acceptable to people of Secunderabad, which has a 225-year history and is famed all over the world. Given the individual identity it enjoys, poetic justice will be rendered if Secunderabad is made a separate municipal corporation.

Jakkappa Vijay Kumar, Secunderabad-15

Mass culling of dogs is dreadful

The reported killing of nearly 500 stray dogs across districts of Telangana early this month has shaken the nation's conscience. According to record books and video evidence, dogs were eliminated through lethal injections and poisoned bait in what appears to have been a coordinated drive. This mass culling was allegedly linked to election promises by newly elected sarpachos, who assured 'dog-free villages' to win votes. Although 15 persons have been booked, the absence of swift arrests has deepened public anger. Legally, this act stands on indefensible ground. The Animal Birth Control (ABC) Rules, 2023, and the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act clearly prohibit killing or harming street dogs, allowing only sterilisation and vaccination. The Supreme Court has repeatedly stressed humane population control, not extermination. Ethically, the episode reflects chilling insensitivity—killing hundreds of voiceless animals is no different from organised slaughter, carried out in silence to impress voters. Every person involved, including authorities, executors, and enablers must be subject to harshest punishment to set a national example.

RS Narula, Patiala

TG Speaker must act now

All the political parties in the country are making a mockery of democracy as far as defections by elected people's representatives are concerned. There is not a single political party in the country which has not misused or abused the authority of the office of Speaker in any Legislative Assembly. To this category belongs the Telangana Speaker, who is sitting on the issue for over a year now. This, even though the Speaker does not enjoy constitutional immunity in this regard. The TG Assembly Speaker is indulged in the grossest contempt of court orders and is thus liable to be punished. Now that the Supreme Court has given him two weeks to submit a status report as a final opportunity before it (SC) takes a decision against the Speaker, it is time he acts and submits the status report.

Gowardhana Myneedu, Vijayawada

Chiru magic continues to reign supreme

M.ana Shankara Vara Prasad Garu, starring megastar Chiranjeevi and Nayanatara in lead roles has been a blockbuster at the box-office. It has proved that Chiranjeevi magic remains as high as ever and he is one of the best actors in Bollywood. Prowd by scintillating numbers, the movie deserves the 3.5 rating. Its record-making collections have helped it be declared as a major hit worldwide.

V Bhagathi Kumar, Hyderabad-72

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BENGALURU ONLINE

Fire scare during Sankranti event attended by health minister

BENGALURU: A major fire scare broke out during Sankranti celebrations in the city on Thursday evening at an event attended by Health Minister Dinesh Gundu Rao. The incident occurred at Balepet in the busy Chickpet area, triggering brief panic among devotees and local residents. Fortunately, no injuries or casualties were reported.

According to eyewitnesses, special prayers had been organised at a temple in connection with the Sankranti festival. The temple premises and its entrance were elaborately decorated with flowers, garlands, and banners as part of the celebrations. At around 7 pm, while firecrackers were being lit in front of the temple, sparks accidentally fell on the decorative materials, causing them to catch fire.

The flames spread rapidly for a few moments, alarming devotees who were standing in queue for darshan. Banners installed near the temple, including one displaying Health Minister Dinesh Gundu Rao's image, were also affected by the fire. However, alert local residents and volunteers acted swiftly and managed to douse the flames using available resources before the situation escalated.

Read more at <https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

The architect of tomorrow: Celebrating five decades of Naidu's visionary leadership

NOMULA SRINIVAS RAO

"A leader knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way." "Leadership is an action, not a position."

If there is one living statesman in the modern history of Indian politics, who personifies these definitions of leadership, it is undoubtedly Nara Chandrababu Naidu. As he completes a monumental 50 years in public life, we are not just celebrating a politician's career; we are celebrating a half-century of relentless evolution, indomitable resilience, and a vision that has consistently redefined decades ahead of its time.

From the remote village of Naravapalle to the global boardrooms of Davos, his journey is a masterpiece in governance. He stands as one of the longest-serving Chief Ministers of both the united Andhra Pradesh and the residual state, the longest-serving Leader of Opposition, and a kingmaker who has shaped the destiny of the nation. To his supporters, he is a visionary; to his critics, a formidable adversary; but to history, he will remain the man who dared to dream of a digital India long before the term existed.

From a 'crazy man' to cyber architect:

To understand the magnitude of Naidu's contribution, one must revisit the mid-1980s politics in India was largely defined by populism and caste arithmetic. Then came Chandrababu Naidu, a leader who spoke of fiber optics, biotechnology, and the internet when most politicians were still grappling with basic telephony.

When he first pitched the idea of transforming Hyderabad into an Information Technology (IT) hub, skeptics laughed and ridiculed the idea. He was labeled a "crazy man" for thinking that a rocky terrain could rival Silicon Valley. But Naidu possesses a quality rare in politics: the ability to see the invisible.

He pursued software giants like Microsoft with the tenacity of a startup CEO. His legendary meeting with Bill Gates—where he secured a meeting slot and convinced Gates to set up a development center in Hyderabad within minutes—is now part of corporate folklore.

The result was HITEC City and the birth of "Cyberabad." He didn't just build a city; he built a brand for Andhra Pradesh. He brought the IT revolution to the doorstep of the Telugu people, creating a global workforce that today powers the economies of the US, UK, and beyond. He proved that good economics is good politics.

The kingmaker declines throne:

Naidu's influence has never been restricted to the boundaries of Andhra Pradesh. In the volatile era of coalition politics in the late 90s, he emerged as the convener of the United Front and later a key pillar of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA).

He was instrumental in the selection of three Prime Ministers—H D Dewe Gowda, I K Gujral, and Atal Bihari Vajpayee. At the peak of his power, the Prime Minister's post was his for the taking. Yet, in a move that displayed his unwavering commitment to his state, he refused the highest office in the land. He chose to remain the Chief Minister



of Andhra Pradesh, believing that his work in modernising his state was an unfinished mission. Today, as a key partner in the present NDA government, his role remains pivotal, anchoring stability and driving development at the national level.

Crisis as opportunity

His ability to bounce back is legendary. In the 2024 elections, he didn't just win; he orchestrated a landslide, proving that you can delay a visionary, but you cannot deny him. He brought the Telugu Desam Party back to power not through populism alone, but by reigniting hope in development and competence.

The man behind the method:

Having watched him from 1988 to this day—spanning his time as an opposition leader, his golden era as CM from 1995 to 2004, the struggle of the post-bifurcation era from 2014 to 2019, and his triumphant return now—one thing remains constant: his obsession with the future.

He is a lifelong student. In a room full of bureaucrats, he is often the most prepared person. He embraces technology not as a gadget but as a tool for poverty alleviation. He

of building Amaravati, driven by a resolve that is stronger than ever.

A study in patience:

Leadership is easy when you hold the scepter; the true test of character is when you are in the wilderness. Chandrababu Naidu's tenure as the longest-serving Leader of Opposition is perhaps as significant as his tenure as Chief Minister.

Between 2004 and 2014, and again from 2019 to 2024, he faced humiliations, political witch-hunts, and personal attacks. Yet, he never abandoned the ship.

He toured the state tirelessly, listening to the people, reconstructing the party brick by brick. His walkabouts at an age when most retire were a testament to his physical and mental stamina.

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He is a lifelong student. In a room full of bureaucrats, he is often the most prepared person. He embraces technology not as a gadget but as a tool for poverty alleviation. He

introduced e-governance when files were still moving at a snail's pace. He speaks of AI, drones, and data analytics in agriculture with the same urgency as he discusses irrigation projects.

To the youth of Andhra Pradesh, he is an inspirational reminder that a boy from a farming family can rise to shape the global IT map. To his colleagues, he is a taskmaster who demands excellence. To the people of Andhra, he is the "Peddayana" (elder statesman) who safeguards their interests.

With Nara Chandrababu Naidu set to complete 50 years in politics, the state of Andhra Pradesh stands at the cusp of a new era. With the "double engine" of his vision and the central government's support, the dream of a developed Andhra is within reach.

He has seen the highest peaks of power and the deepest valleys of defeat. He has been praised as a global icon and written off by critics. But through it all, he stands tall—strong, focused, and ready for the next challenge. He is not just a politician; he is an institution.

His life proves that while elections are won on waves, legacies are built on vision. As he continues his work to reconstruct Amaravati and reconstruct the state's economy, one can only look at his relentless spirit and say: the best is yet to come.

No words describe him better than: "A visionary sees the light before the sun rises, and a true leader like Chandrababu Naidu is the one who wakes up the world and builds a city where the sun never sets on progress."

(The writer is former OSD to former Union Civil Aviation Minister)



Fighting corruption, with conditions

With the Supreme Court delivering a split verdict on the powers of investigating agencies to probe public servants, the uncertainty over the matter is likely to continue for years. Article 17A of the Prevention of Corruption Act, introduced along with other amendments in 2018, made a sanction from the government mandatory for such probes. The agency is required to obtain approval from the Union or the state government, or the relevant authority to conduct an inquiry about charges of corruption. Justice BV Nagarathna of the two-judge bench held that the Article was unconstitutional; Justice K V Vishwanathan upheld it, while calling for an independent authority, such as the Lokpal or the Lokayukta, to issue the approval for the investigation. The case will now go to a larger bench.

Under the Prevention of Corruption Act, in its original form, investigation agencies could register a crime involving a public servant and initiate a probe. The government's approval was needed only before a charge sheet was filed.

The 2018 amendment took away this power from the agencies, making the government's permission imperative. Under the amendments, even reporting of corruption cases by citizens was made more difficult. Provisions to address some of the specific offences, such as the misuse of official position, were excluded. It was claimed that the amendments would bolster the fight against corruption. They were also projected as a cover for proactive officials from action under the law. But the overall impact of the amendments has left the law diluted.

Justice Nagarathna described the introduction of Section 17A as an attempt to resurrect an earlier provision of the law which was struck down by the Supreme Court. She said the Section had inherent deficiencies that made its provisions arbitrary and that its claimed objective of protecting honest officers cannot override the law's primary objective, which is preventing corruption. It should also be noted that Justice Vishwanathan, even while upholding the Section, wanted the probe to be sanctioned not by the government, but by an independent authority. The provision can be used to shield corrupt officers by delaying the investigation. Furthermore, the competent authority which has to approve the investigation is often part of the system to which the accused individual belongs. Justice Nagarathna's view that Section 17A allows the government to pressurise officials to conform to its interests also has merit. The split verdict is set to steer the narrative around probity in public life and the extent of enforcement – a resolution in court appears distant.

Mandating prior sanction to probe government officials dilutes the law. SC's split verdict extends the impasse

A statutory assertion of personal liberty

The proposed Karnataka Freedom of Choice in Marriage and Prevention and Prohibition of Crimes in the Name of Honour and Tradition Bill 2026 is a grim acknowledgement that 'honour' killings and related violence are not relics of a feudal past but a continuing social reality. The murder of Manya Patil in Hubballi, allegedly for marrying across caste lines, and numerous similar cases, underline why the state has gone beyond general criminal laws to frame a specific statute. At its core, the Bill makes a clear constitutional assertion. It explicitly recognises an individual's autonomy over life and marriage, placing personal liberty above social control, and asserting that consent of family, caste or clan is unnecessary. In doing so, it consciously breaks from the Bombay government's pernicious 2022 anti-conversion law, which subjected marriages and conversions to State scrutiny and prior notice. The new bill treats such scrutiny as a source of danger rather than protection, seeking to insulate couples from both familial and bureaucratic interference.

Legally, the Bill attempts to fill gaps in the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS). While the BNS punishes acts such as murder, grievous hurt and intimidation, without regard to motive, the new law defines 'honour' and 'tradition' as aggravating factors rooted in caste and community control. By mandating stiff minimum sentences, the proposed law seeks to counter the social legitimisation that often shields perpetrators. Its preventive architecture – special cells, protection mechanisms, and district-level forums – also goes beyond the purely punitive framework of the BNS. The interaction with the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act is equally significant. Unlike the SC/ST Act, which applies only when the victim belongs to a Scheduled Caste or Tribe, the new legislation is caste-neutral, targeting the motive rather than identity. However, the Bill is not without concerns. While it eases justice for victims of caste-based abandonment, shifting the burden of proof on the accused in cases of alleged false promise of marriage in inter-caste relationships risks misuse, despite built-in safeguards.

Most importantly, Karnataka's experience with the SC/ST Act offers a sobering lesson. Despite stringent provisions, conviction rates in atrocity cases remain low, largely due to weak investigation, poor prosecution, and social pressure on witnesses. New laws, however well-intentioned, cannot substitute for effective enforcement. If this Bill is to be more than a moral statement, the state must invest in professional investigation, witness protection, and prosecutorial capacity. Without that, the promise of freedom of choice will remain powerful on paper, but fragile in practice.

Proposed law promises targeted action against 'honour' crimes. Enforcement must now meet intent

In Global North and South, a contrast in capitalism

The North's rights-based social security systems contradict its prescription of free markets and minimal State for the South

K NANJARAJE URS

In much of Europe and in countries such as Australia, holding a public Medicare card comes with a quiet but powerful assurance. Besides free treatment, the health ministry individually contacts residents to undertake age-specific cancer screening, like pap smears for women over 25 or stool tests for people over 50. Follow-up consultations and treatments, if any, are free. These reminders arrive every year; no applications, proof of poverty, or personal appeals are required. The State assumes responsibility for prevention, not just cure.

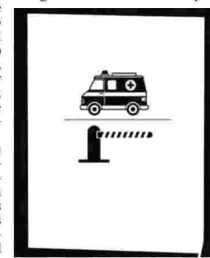
Similarly, an unemployed person searching for work can apply for subsistence allowances online, often without any face-to-face interaction with government offices. Income support is deposited directly into bank accounts while public employment services assist with job matching, training, and reskilling. The presumption is not suspicion but support.

These lived realities contradict the dominant narrative that the Global North promotes globally, one of free markets, minimal states, and individual responsibility. In practice, markets are embedded within strong public institutions that absorb risk, redistribute resources, and protect citizens across the life course. These are not exceptional welfare measures; they are routine features of everyday life in the Global North.

Compare this with the shallowness of the current Indian debate on so-called 'freebies'. In India, social spending is often seen as fiscally irresponsible populism rather than as an essential function of the modern state. The term 'freebie' itself reflects the absence of an institutionalised understanding of social security. In the Global North, the 'cradle-to-coffin' social security is not dismissed as giveaways. They are treated as investments in human capability, productivity, and social stability. What appears as discretionary largesse in the Global South is, in fact, routine governance in functioning democracies. This

framing is striking given that the Indian diaspora in the Global North openly accesses these systems. From healthcare and unemployment benefits to child support and pensions, while often criticising similar measures in India.

This person-versus-person framing obscures the reality that universal public services are designed as social security for all across the life cycle. Even middle-class citizens who temporarily fall into vulnerability through illness or unemployment receive timely and targeted support until they recover. In much of the Global South, however, illness, unemployment, disability, and old age continue to be treated as per-



sonal misfortunes. Karma rather than shared societal risks.

This difference matters. When social support is delivered through ad-hoc schemes rather than rights-based institutions, it becomes politically contestable and morally suspect. The problem is not that India provides too much social support, but that it provides it in fragmented, poorly institutionalised ways that invite the language of charity rather than citizenship. The 'freebies' debate is, therefore, not about excess welfare, but about the absence of a coherent social security architecture.

Culturally, social protection is so deeply entrenched in the Global North, not even pro-privatisation leaders like Margaret Thatcher were able to dismantle the National Health Service. Any attempt to undermine the NHS has historically triggered fierce public resistance. Similar patterns are evident across Europe, Canada, and Australia, where comprehensive social security enjoys broad cross-party consensus. Social security is not viewed as charity; it is treated almost as a civic faith, integral to national identity and democratic

legitimacy. Importantly, independent media continuously monitors these systems, publicly exposing failures in hospital waiting times, welfare delays, or gaps in aged care. Accountability flows from the State to the citizen, not the other way around.

A systemic imbalance

The visibility of the State reflects this orientation. In the Global North, the most visible public institutions are ambulances, maintenance crews, nurses, social workers, and emergency services. These institutions signal that the primary role of the elected State is to facilitate well-being and manage collective risk. The State is the 'third parent', sharing the responsibility for a person's upbringing and protection alongside families and communities.

In much of the Global South, the contrast is stark. The most visible face of the State is often the police or enforcement machinery. Public institutions are experienced less as service providers and more as instruments of control. Welfare systems, where they exist, are narrow, underfunded, and procedurally hostile. Citizens are required to prove need repeatedly, while the State is rarely held accountable for systemic failure. Social security is treated as charity, not a right.

This imbalance is reinforced by international financial institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank, which have long promoted privatisation, austerity, and 'small government' reforms across the Global South. Essential services such as healthcare, education, water, electricity, and transport are recast as market commodities. Yet the same ideology is conspicuously absent in the Global North, where public institutions remain robust, publicly funded, and politically protected.

The experience of the Global North demonstrates a simple but powerful truth: strong public institutions and social security are not barriers to prosperity. They are its foundation. The question is not whether states can afford social security, but whether they can afford the continued human cost of its absence. Reclaiming this vision in the Global South is not ideological excess; it is the unfinished project of modern democracy itself.

(The writer holds a PhD in Public Policy from NLSIU and is a social scientist based in Australia, specialising in improving governance solutions for social and environmental challenges)

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

Before we switch off the engine

EVs are good. If only they had the soul of the internal combustion engine...

THEJAS ANAND

The difference between evolved and non-evolved histories is often marked by the ability to engineer mobility – move people, transport large objects, and connect distant places. Even today, how we progress from different phases of life depends largely on our ability to be mobile, often globally so. In that arc, buying an automobile has often been the pinnacle of personal liberty in modern history.

Motoring, to me, feels like evolution in motion. And yet, there is something quietly dystopian about conversations that imagine a future entirely without internal combustion engines. Personally, own an electric scooter and can vouch for its impressive efficiency and practicality. But when it comes to pleasure, I confess, I still prefer the alternative –

my 650 CC Royal Enfield Classic. It is undeniably a gas-guzzler. Still, the joy it delivers, the sounds it makes, and the vibrations through the handlebars as petrol furiously propels me forward create the feeling of a machine that lives and breathes. That sense of soul is something my zippy e-scooter cannot replicate.

Motoring – and the internal combustion engine – has defined generation after generation, aspiration after aspiration, and family after family. I assume there are other motor enthusiasts living awake at night, wondering what we are evolving to as a species and as a globally mobile society.

If that sounds presumptuous here, I admit it freely. The connection I have with the internal combustion engine is deep-rooted and sentimental. Whether it was a journey from A to B, air travel or international road trips, my travels have been greatly enhanced by the soul of the internal combustion engine.

As a fact, in my youth, I would climb down after a heavy meal only in a moving vehicle. A blue Mahindra Jeep at that time. Perhaps this places me out of step with the times. Today, I see in

younger generations a deeper sensitivity towards the planet and sustainable mobility, and hence a lesser nostalgia for the internal combustion engine.

So, where do we go from here – and how?

My own conclusion is that the answer must go beyond utility, whether the alternative is hydrogen-powered, hybrid or electric. Without an experience that offers equal or greater pleasure, I do not believe enthusiasm for journeys will be sustained or transcend into the next phase of global society. Any worthy successor to the internal combustion engine must remain driven by humans, not robots. Many tasks can be automated; a pleasurable drive cannot and should not be one of them.

Human beings deserve to continue the establishment and purity of motoring for the fun and pleasure we derive from it. Before all is lost for good, and we are whittled down to dull A-to-B commuters, forever working on our laptops, it may be worth pausing to remember the joy we once found on the road – and to ensure that motor enthusiasts, too, have a place in the future we are building.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Local elections are about restoring trust, respect

This refers to 'A promise revived, but doubts persist' (Jan 16). At its core, this is not just a legal or administrative delay but it is a quiet erosion of citizens' dignity. When people are denied the right to choose who governs their streets, drains, and neighbourhoods, democracy becomes distant and hollow. A city cannot thrive on IT parks and taxes alone; it needs voices at the ground level.

Accountable governance

Appropos 'A promise revived, but doubts persist' (Jan 16), delays in urban local body elections undermine decentralised administration. Statutory timelines for civil polls and enhanced financial autonomy for municipal bodies are essential. Aligning with the Supreme Court directives. These steps would foster accountable governance and address Bengaluru's infrastructural challenges systematically.

Anand Jewoor, Kalaburagi

Ensure their dignity

I refer to 'New timelines for a safe

delivery' (Jan 16). The life of gig workers remains precarious, with rising accidents and fatalities. Consumers' impatience and employers' harsh demands create perilous working conditions. The State must ensure comprehensive safeguards, fair codes, insurance, grievance redressal, and humane timelines. Proposals to push dark stores away from residential areas will worsen their burden.

Albert Smith, Bengaluru

Keep parks open

Appropos 'Parks should not be spaces of exclusion' (Jan 15), the editorial is apt and timely. The order should

be revoked immediately in the larger public parks. Parks are funded by taxpayers' money, and decisions on their opening hours should be holistic, not arbitrary and must take cognisance of citizen voices. If security was a concern, staggering watchmen's hours would have addressed it. The administration should sensitise park personnel to treat elderly and vulnerable visitors with courtesy and compassion.

SS Kulkarni, Bengaluru

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

SPEAK OUT

The time to react has not yet come. The figures being released are inaccurate. But it's not true that the Shiv Sena (UBT) is far behind, as some are claiming... The figures you are seeing now will change.



Sanjay Raut, Shiv Sena (UBT) leader (On BMC polls)

Never deprive someone of hope; it might be all they have.

H Jackson Brown, Jr

TO BE PRECISE

Venezuela's Machado gifts her Nobel Prize to Trump



IN PERSPECTIVE

Beyond politics: The art of Dhurandhar

Tracing the film's mammoth success to its pro-establishment positions undervalues its impressive craft and imagination

HARISH S WANKHEDE

The box office success of mainstream Indian cinema is increasingly dependent upon its grandeur and entertainment quotient, now loosely captured as the 'theatre experience'. Explanations on the massive success of Aditya Dhar's *Dhurandhar* are also on a similar track, where it is argued that the film mostly serves the populist-spectacle narrative, catering to the sensibilities of the general cinema-goer.

Film critics often have this urge to reduce contemporary popular cinema either as works that further political propaganda or *masala* escapism. A deeper examination of these films will, of course, demonstrate that their themes overtly supplement the political values of the governing elites (Dhar's *Ur: The Surgical Strike* endorses the current regime's claims about its anti-Pakistan military actions, propagating patriarchal and conservative ideas (Kabir Singh), and utilise a communal rhetoric to villainise the Muslim (*The Kashmir Files* and *The Kerala Story*). However, to reduce the machinery of successful films merely as ideological tools or banal entertainers is to ignore the creative artistry that makes this form of cinema consistently resonate with the viewer.

Many critics of *Dhurandhar* fall into similar territory. They question the political instrumentality of the film's narrative that propagates hatred against Pakistan, supplements the hyper-nationalist rhetoric of the dispensation, and distorts facts around sensitive events that are relevant to national security. Such criticism risks reducing the art of cinema to an ideological instrument, utilised by the dominant elites to serve their political and commercial interests. There is merit in this assessment, but the argument that films like *Dhurandhar* shall represent the historic truth in authentic and politically correct ways is fundamentally flawed.

Popular films work on an emotional core, imaginative narrative arcs, and creative autonomy. Films based on real events, especially, cannot be made without these elements. Without the rich infusion of drama (like in *The Legend of Bhagat Singh*), emotional connect (*Gandhi*), a gorgeous musical score (*Razu Sultani*), they could end up as dull docu-fiction.

Mainstream cinema has often engaged with history in its own creative ways. In Hollywood, Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* has used imaginative symbols to create an emotional truth that facts alone cannot convey. Cinema does not have to be based upon raw fact-sheets; it requires emotional scales and relatable characters to create an interesting viewer experience. Tweaking history and creating imaginative subplots have produced hugely entertaining cinema, like Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds*.

The classic Hindi film *Mughal-e-Azam* is a fine example, where characters from history are dramatised to build a strong, emotional story. Another example of this style is seen in Anurag Kashyap's *Black Friday*. The film is centred on a gritty police investigation into the 1993 blasts in Mumbai; it showcases real events and people, but uses a fictional subtext. Though the film claims to represent recent history, without the help of fictional bridges and emotional values, retelling such sensitive events would be unwieldy. The film also balances the moral binaries and does not fall into the trap of political correctness.

The aesthetic solace

Dhurandhar shall be judged not only as a populist right-wing political expression, but also as a bold cinematic experiment. The narrative is fictional, but when packaged with a political subtext and a few smartly placed references to real-life events, the film becomes more compelling than the average escapist fare. The film's visual finesse is striking – the audience connects with it not entirely for its right-wing propaganda; it also comes with a good music score, impressive writing, ace performances, and exciting action choreography.

Dhurandhar may fit a larger genre of pro-establishment cinema. However, its stunning commercial success is not dependent upon its political identity alone. It is difficult to divorce cinema from its purporting arcs, and creative autonomy. Films based on real events, especially, cannot be made without these elements. Without the rich infusion of drama (like in *The Legend of Bhagat Singh*), emotional connect (*Gandhi*), a gorgeous musical score (*Razu Sultani*), they could end up as dull docu-fiction.

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NEET PG edu is anaemic

It is extraordinary that the National Board of Examinations in Medical Sciences has given academic considerations a back seat and weakened the eligibility norms for postgraduate medical admissions under the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test-PG (NEET PG). A candidate from SC, ST, and OBC, falling within the zero percentile in the test, is now eligible, in a move apparently designed to stave off a crisis of unfilled seats. In practical terms, this reduces the cut-off score for these candidates to an incredible minus 40, as against the originally stipulated 235. A similar slashing of scores makes more candidates from general, economically weaker sections and benchmarked disability categories eligible. This disruptive decision, taken on the basis of instructions from the Union Health Ministry, is a reaction to the shocking prospect of about 18,000 PG medical seats remaining vacant halfway through the counselling process. That such a situation should arise in a country with a large pool of MBBS graduates and insufficient specialist doctors in several states, particularly the Northeast, calls for close scrutiny of the underlying factors. Moreover, by heavily diluting the NEET PG qualification, the NBE has called into question the very rationale of the test compared to marks scored by the candidate in the graduate examination. It is difficult to maintain that the test remains a sound scientific filter and is fair to candidates who prepared rigorously in previous years.

Clearly, a lot of the available capacity goes abegging, the reasons for which must be gone into

A few states have a larger share of PG medical seats, led by Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Rajasthan, followed by West Bengal, Kerala, and Madhya Pradesh. The Union Territory of Puducherry has nearly as many seats as Bihar. Several thousand of these are in private medical colleges, again, with Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu leading. It is reasonable to ask what pressures persuaded the Union government to dilute qualifications for seats that cost crores of rupees in private institutions. The NBE's explanation that this would prevent costly medical education resources from being wasted begs the question of whether the undergraduate medical degree fails to produce enough meritorious candidates for PG studies. The answer may lie in the lack of rigour in many private institutions. The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Health and Family Welfare focused heavily on undergraduate studies in its report on the Quality of Medical Education in 2024 but did identify low intake capacity at the postgraduate level: only around 68,000 seats for over two lakh aspirants.

Clearly, a lot of the available capacity goes abegging, the reasons for which must be gone into. Among the issues identified by the parliamentary panel is the high cost of medical education, which filters out meritorious but weakly resourced candidates. They need grants and scholarships. Faculty vacancies must be filled as a priority. Medical education is evidently anaemic and in need of urgent quality infusion.

'Harijan' row reignited

A recent directive by the Haryana government asking all its departments—public and educational institutes and other institutions—to "strictly avoid" using the terms 'Harijan' and 'Girijan' in all official communications to refer to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes is indicative of the all-pervading nature of the caste conundrum in India even today. The term 'Harijan', or 'children of God', was first used by Mahatma Gandhi in 1932 to refer to Dalits. He even started three journals in English, Hindi, and Gujarati with the same name in 1933. Gandhiji used the term to avoid words like untouchable, which stigmatised the Dalit community. By using the word Harijan, he hoped Dalits would be more acceptable to Hindu society. However, many of the Mahatma's contemporaries, including B R Ambedkar, objected to the word, terming it condescending and an attempt to avoid the real issue of caste discrimination. In fact, Ambedkar walked out of the Bombay Legislature on January 22, 1938, to protest the use of the word. In effect, the word 'Harijan' has been banned by the government in caste certificates and all official communication. In 1982, the Union government directed all states not to use the word 'Harijan' to denote Dalits. However, it continued in common parlance. In 2010, a parliamentary committee took note of the fact that the use of the word 'Harijan' continued far and wide and recommended that the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment issue fresh guidelines to all departments and state governments not to use the term. It even suggested punitive action against those who flouted the order. That all these years later the Haryana government was forced to issue a directive banning the use of the words 'Harijan' and 'Girijan' in official dealings is proof that casteism is rampant in modern India. The state government reiterated that the Constitution does not use these terms to denote Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

One school of thought says that Gandhiji used the term 'Harijan' to make Dalits more acceptable to upper-caste Hindus, as he did not want to upset influential members of the community whose support he required for his politics. In the last decade, the BJP, as the ruling party, has also been making consistent efforts to rope in Dalits into the Hindu fold. They received some electoral success for their efforts in this direction in the cow belt. Now they are trying to do the same in the southern states in their bid for Hindu consolidation. This has irked activists who are appalled at the lack of sensitivity to issues relating to caste oppression and Dalit identity. More than seven decades after independence, caste continues to haunt the country's political landscape. Only a radical change in mindset, not government directives, will bring an end to this scourge.



Fuzzy Logic

ROHIT CHANDAVARKAR

The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation polls, or BMC polls, attracted national attention this week because of the municipal body being so rich and the personalities fighting the elections being so flamboyant. The results are out, and the big story is that, for the first time, the Bharatiya Janata Party will install its mayor in Asia's richest municipal corporation. However, what is not being talked about is why all this happened and what this will lead to.

One must make it clear that these polls, pan-Maharashtra, have gone totally in favour of the BJP, but in Mumbai the fight has been tough for the saffron party. In other words, what has happened in Mumbai city cannot be called a "clean sweep" by the BJP, and the party perhaps did not expect that kind of sweep but just focused on getting a clear majority and establishing their mayor and control on the standing committee of the BMC. The party has clearly suc-

ceeded in achieving these goals. It would be interesting to see what worked for the BJP and what went wrong for the Thackeray cousins, whose much-hyped reunion has just about worked to save them from total debacle in the municipal body, which is their last bastion in political terms.

It is clear that the Maha Vikas Aghadi, or MVA, the alliance of Uddhav Thackeray, the Congress party, and Sharad Pawar's NCP, worked very well in the Lok Sabha polls of 2024. However, the same alliance could not deliver good results in the assembly polls six months later. In assembly polls the leaders looked overconfident; they had no coordination and kept fighting amongst themselves till the last moment. Just over a year later, the MVA simply disintegrated.

It is obvious that the Congress-Uddhav alliance, which worked so well in the Lok Sabha polls, was just missing in the BMC polls. The Congress walked away from Uddhav because Uddhav aligned with

his estranged cousin Raj Thackeray and his Maharashtra Navnirman Sena, or MNS. The MNS has had a past of attacking migrants and verbally targeting the minority community over various issues. The Congress sensed that they would lose votes of the North Indians, Muslims and other minorities if they took Raj Thackeray along in the MVA. Results show that the Congress party's fears came true. The minority community in Mumbai, which constitutes 18% of votes, got split between Uddhav, Congress, and the Samajwadi party, as there was confusion about how they could vote for Raj Thackeray's MNS. Another factor that damaged Uddhav Thackeray's party was that the North Indian voters and South Indians, such as Tamilians, Telugu and other linguistic communities, got galvanised and backed the BJP, as the saffron party exhorted them to unite under the "umbrella of Hindutva". So clearly, the reunion of Thackeray cousins, instead of working as a force multiplier for the Thackerays, in fact ended up

damaging them!

Looking at the Pawar uncle and nephew, a similar thing seems to have happened in the Pune and Pimpri-Chinchwad Municipal Corporations (PCMC). In the last two years, both parties fought against each other, and this time the party activists as well as voters were confused about how they could suddenly join hands and how Deputy CM Ajit Pawar, who is part of the BJP-led Mahayuti alliance government in Maharashtra, could target the BJP in almost every election rally in Pune and the PCMC. This put many activists in a dilemma, and many crossed over to either the BJP or even to the Congress party. The NCP (SP) Pune city president, Prashant Jagtap, former mayor of Pune, resigned from the NCP overnight and joined the Congress party. He won from his constituency, which indicates that the voters in many parts of Pune rejected the Pawar family's policy of flip-flop and double-speak.

Many factors worked in these municipal polls: there were wide-

spread defections from some parties towards the BJP; there were allegations of large-scale distribution of money in the last few days before voting; there were factors like cash benefit transfer and other government schemes that were promoted in the media a lot; and there was pressure in many constituencies on rivals from the opposition to withdraw from the contest, which resulted in 66 candidates getting elected unopposed even before the elections happened.

But the biggest factor in Mumbai (the most watched polls) for the Thackerays was that their reunion went wrong. Raj Thackeray joining hands with Uddhav clearly resulted in damaging Uddhav rather than benefiting him, and a similar thing happened in the case of Sharad Pawar and Ajit Pawar in the Pune district!

Rohit Chandavarkar is a senior journalist who has worked for 31 years with various leading newspaper brands and television channels in Mumbai and Pune.



Ringside View

JAYANTA ROY CHOWDHURY

As US President Donald Trump's revived interpretation of the "Monroe Doctrine" accelerates American strategic retreat from its pre-eminent position as the global "Overlord", the global order is fragmenting into a more openly multipolar system.

In this emerging landscape, India, China, Russia, and Europe may increasingly be compelled to carve out autonomous spheres of influence and selectively cooperate with one another to safeguard their interests amid declining US engagement.

For Indian policymakers, this shift poses a fundamental question: How should India manage its immediate neighbourhood when external guarantees can no longer be taken for granted?

The answer contains both risk and opportunity. Strategic uncertainty heightens insecurity and opens up to facing multiple threats simultaneously in a fast-changing world. However, it also allows India far greater room to shape outcomes in South Asia and in the Indian Ocean arena on its own terms.

When India confronts China in the high Himalayas or counters Beijing's "string of pearls" strategy across the Indian Ocean, where commercial ports acquired by the northern neighbour can rapidly acquire military utility, it can no longer assume the Quad will function as a near-military alliance.

As Washington signals reluctance to underwrite regional security indefinitely, India must increasingly rely on its own capa-

bilities. This reality makes higher and sustained defence expenditure unavoidable, not as a prerequisite for strategic autonomy.

Equally important is the erosion of India's special relationship with the United States as a "principal ally", a belief which was borne out of the way the US and India came closer to each other in the first two decades of this century.

That belief has been steadily challenged, most sharply by Washington's response to the April 2025 terror attack in Pahalgam, Kashmir. The perceived US tilt toward Pakistan and its tendency to equate the aggressor and the victim generated deep unease in New Delhi.

For India, the episode reinforced a long-standing lesson: partnerships with great powers are transactional, not sentimental.

Yet, American retrenchment also carries a silver lining. The fear of intrusive Western political interests in South Asia appears to be receding.

The so-called "Gen Z revolts" in Bangladesh and Nepal, one chaotic and destabilising and the other managed and institutionalised, offer an insight into how the new global order may function with diminished Western involvement.

Bangladesh's street uprising, which toppled the Sheikh Hasina government, unfolded before Trump assumed office, but the aftermath revealed Washington's waning interest. Mohammad Yunus's desperate oscillation between Western capitals and Beijing, and even an outreach to Pakistan and Turkey, underlines a

deeper reality. The US possibly no longer sees Bangladesh as a strategic asset worth sustained political investment, particularly as it increasingly becomes an economic and governance liability.

Nepal, on the other hand, presents a striking contrast. There, a Gen Z-driven revolt removed a government but preserved institutional continuity through the appointment of former Chief Justice Sushila Karki as interim prime minister.

Her insistence that "Nepal will not be allowed to become another Bangladesh", that is descend into mobocracy and violence, marks a deliberate effort to restore order while maintaining democratic legitimacy.

The difference is more than evident in the electoral processes of the two countries. Bangladesh's elections, marred by the banning of the Awami League, arrests, and violence against candidates and minority communities, can scarcely be described as inclusive or free.

Nepal, by contrast, has allowed all political forces, including those recently ousted, to contest elections. The difference illustrates how domestic political culture, not foreign pressure alone, now determines outcomes.

This moment offers India renewed space to play the role it has historically aspired to, i.e., be the principal stabilising democratic anchor in South Asia.

By supporting credible elections and post-election economic and institutional recovery in neighbouring states, India can exercise

influence without coercion, something external powers often fail to achieve.

Elsewhere in the region, US interests appear narrowly transactional. In Myanmar, Washington's focus seems limited to the mineral-rich northern regions.

This reality lends pragmatic justification to India's policy of engaging the military junta while also interacting with emerging quasi-states in northern Burma. While morally uncomfortable, such engagement may be the least destabilising option for border security and regional calm.

Afghanistan further illustrates the contradictions of US strategy. After first backing, then overthrowing, and finally enabling the return of the Taliban, the country has been left devastated and largely ignored by the West.

India, by contrast, has quietly rebuilt channels of engagement, and Kabul has resumed its traditional tilt toward New Delhi within the South Asian balance. This reflects India's ability to operate patiently in strategic vacuums abandoned by larger powers.

The transition from a unipolar to a fragmented world order is no longer theoretical; it is visible and accelerating.

The United States is increasingly preoccupied with its near abroad in Latin America and the Arctic, while implicitly signalling that Europe must manage its own security challenges.

Even on Taiwan, Trump's rhetoric, limited to expressions of "unhappiness" rather than firm

commitments, suggests deterrence without assurance.

This raises a critical question—Are India, China, and Russia emerging as countervailing forces as the US retreats and Europe recalibrates? Many analysts argue that this realignment is already underway, even if none of these actors, except perhaps China, is eager to formally assume leadership of a new order or even of a sphere within the new order.

Ukraine has become primarily a European burden rather than an American one, and Russia appears positioned to consolidate its gains in any eventual settlement. Europe, meanwhile, is gradually decoupling its strategic outlook from Washington's, especially on China, the Middle East, and Africa.

Shared interests, such as African stability and economic engagement, may push Europe to deal with Beijing pragmatically rather than ideologically.

Trump's approach, intentionally or not, accelerates the emergence of a multipolar world defined by strategic autonomy rather than alliance discipline. India's evolving relationship with the United States exemplifies this reality.

Cooperation will persist, competition will also be unavoidable, and restraint will replace dependence. Possibly in the world of the future, no single power will be able to dictate outcomes, and for India, that may be both the defining challenge and the greatest opportunity of the coming decades.

The writer is former head of PTI's eastern region network.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear reader, we are eager to know your opinions, comments and suggestions. Write to editor.indore@fpj.co.in Using snail mail? Send your letters to Free Press, Free Press House, 3/54, Press Complex, AB Road, Indore 452008

Virat Still Hungry

Virat Kohli's 93 against New Zealand reaffirmed his insatiable hunger for runs, even after retiring from Tests and T20s. His fitness and form remain unmatched. India's recent red-ball struggles make his absence glaring. Kohli's return to Test cricket could revitalise the team's fortunes.

S. N. Kabra

Ratan Tata, Nation's Conscience

Ratan Tata deserves Bharat Ratna and even Nobel Peace for building industries in 100+ nations, providing livelihood, goods, education and charity. He created institutions, trusts and foundations for students, teachers, poor and needy, donating his vast property worth thousands of crores selflessly. A rare life where service defined legacy, not wealth.

Sreelekha PS, Secunderabad

Cinema and Politics

Delays in certifying actor Vijay's film and his summons by central agencies appear politically timed. Allegations of selective pressure raise concerns over misuse of institutions to shape Tamil Nadu politics. Voters are discerning and unlikely to miss such manipulation. Cinema should not become a tool for electoral manipulation.

Tharcus S. Fernando, Chennai

Investigation Yes, Invasion No

US pursuit of President Nicolás Maduro on drug charges and restrictions on a Nobel laureate have sparked accusations of neo-imperialist intervention. South American nations, Russia and Iran criticised the reported unilateral move, calling it a breach of diplomacy. Peace cannot stem from coercion or strategic ad-

India-China Dispute

China's territorial claims over the Shaksang Valley and India's firm rejection of it have triggered a sharp diplomatic reaction between India and China. China's expanding infrastructure footprint in the Shaksang Valley has evoked a strong and assertive reaction from India. The basis of China's territorial claims over the Shaksang region is the China-Pakistan Boundary Agreement (1963), which India rejects. One does not know whether the governments of India and China can bring this issue to the negotiating table.

Devendra Khurana, Bhopal



Sovereignty Needs Guardrails

US strikes and removal of Venezuela's president signals a turning point in the use of military force. Misuse allegations justify investigation, not shortcuts lacking transparent authority. Region shows applause born of exhaustion but protests

Democracy Turned 'Demo-Crazy'

From crony to penal interest, voters now give power but leaders often refuse duty. A councillor to 'mukya mantri' tale reflects fortunes shifting from sandals to Skethers, Scooty to Sumo, business to intervention, liquor, and blame of political raids. Bail, acquittal, and belief networks over-power law, while the common man votes again hoping life-cycle changes.

A.P. Thiruvadi, Chennai

reveal fracture. Accountability must be law-bound, multilateral, time-limited and sovereignty-respecting. Without oversight and civilian safeguards, power risks replacing principle.

K. Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru

Merit Ignored, Favouritism Suspected

Ruturaj Gaikwad's exclusion from India's ODI squad for the home New Zealand series shocks fans. His century against South Africa at Raipur, matching stroke for stroke with Virat Kohli, proved his technical class. Yet injury-doubtful Shreyas Iyer was chosen. Persisting selection inconsistencies suggest undue favour, undermining merit-based progression in national formats.

S.Sankaranarayanan, Chennai

Greater Kashmir

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25 years of India-Germany Strategic Partnership

With a population of around eighty four million Germany is the economic powerhouse of Europe



Policy Matters
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German Chancellor Friedrich Merz came on an official visit to India on January 12-13. The Joint Statement issued after Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his talks in Ahmedabad noted that the "visit followed the successful 7th India-Germany Inter-Governmental Consultations (IGC) held in New Delhi on 25 October 2024, and comes at a high point in the journey of bilateral ties between the two countries, with completion of 25 years of India-Germany Strategic Partnership in 2025, and commemoration of 75 years of diplomatic relations in 2026". Merz specially thanked Modi for arranging the meeting in Gujarat. He said that this was a signal of Modi's friendship towards him. He also called Ahmedabad "a cradle of modern India". There is no doubt that India and Germany want their bilateral ties to grow rapidly because their national interests coincide in a world in which, as Merz said in his media statement after his talks with Modi, "Rough winds are blowing and we have to brace ourselves". Merz prefaced this comment with the observation that he was meeting Modi "amidst profound geopolitical changes

and upheavals". He also mentioned that these changes in world order and great power politics was leading to "thinking of spheres of influence". Merz has captured what will be the inevitable global impact of the United States' policies and actions during the first year of Donald Trump's presidency. There is no indication that Trump will change course in the remaining years of his term of office. Hence, the powers that can increase their coercive influence in their regions will not hold back.

India and Germany are important players in their respective regions. Germany is the most important European country. With a population of around eighty four million it is the economic powerhouse of Europe; its GDP constitutes around 24% of the European Union's GDP. It has an enormous science and technological knowledge and is among the world's leading powers in engineering. It was able to successfully overcome the devastation brought about by two world wars. Its own record in bringing them about—especially the second—was as dubious as it was direct. However, since its defeat in the Second World War it has deliberately turned its attention against war. In this it was assisted by the European order which guaranteed the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states. Now that is under grave challenge by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

India is undeniably the leading country of South Asia and is a major Indo-Pacific power. Its economic strength is growing and it is among the fastest growing large economies. But unlike Germany, India has miles to go before it can achieve advanced status. It will have to make a real effort to become Viksit Bharat by 2047 as Prime Minister Narendra Modi desires. India can therefore

gain a great deal through its cooperation with Germany in a diverse range of areas stretching from education to industry and commerce to the establishment of a firm defence production base.

India and Germany are the leading countries of their respective regions. However, both face resistance to the acknowledgement of their leadership by other regional countries. Both have a rightful claim to permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council. However, here also there are countries which want to deny them this position. For over two decades India and Germany along with Japan and Brazil have been acting in G4 format to work towards the expansion of the UNSC and their permanent membership.

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With Trump's disruption of world order and Russia wounding the European order Germany has been adversely impacted. So has India by Trump's actions.

With Trump's disruption of world order and Russia wounding the European order Germany has been adversely impacted. So has India by Trump's actions, including the imposition of the 50% tariffs on Indian exports to the US. German exports of automobiles and chemicals to the US are also suffering through higher duties. In such a scenario both countries would realise that the expansion of the UNSC would take a back seat but bilateral cooperation has to be hastened. There are already around two



thousand German companies in India. An increase in their number would be helpful for the Indian economy because of their technical skills.

Germany is keen to attract Indian scientists to migrate to Germany through orderly migration. This is because Germany has a negative rate of population growth which is leading to an aging population. Merz mentioned the areas in which Germany would like skilled Indians to migrate: industry, trade, nursing, IT and engineering. To show Germany's seriousness Merz made it known that Germany will promote the teaching of German language in India. While this migration will be hastened, it is significant that there are around sixty thousand Indian students in Germany.

The one clear issue on which India and Germany have different perspectives is Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

For Merz Russia's "war of aggression against Ukraine" was "probably the most drastic expression" of the disruption of world order. India has not been happy with what Russia has done. It has advocated the path of negotiations to resolve the issue. But it has deep interests in its relationship with Russia which prevent it from openly criticising the Russian invasion. However, the Joint Statement makes India's emphasis on order and non-aggression clear. It states "The two leaders reiterated their concern over the ongoing war in Ukraine, which continues to cause immense human suffering and negative global consequences. They expressed support for efforts to achieve a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine in accordance with international law and the principles of the UN Charter". However, currently the prospects of peace in Ukraine are not promising.

Rethinking time, space, and human consciousness

An event that shattered conventional notions of time, space, and human limitation



Understanding
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The night of Isra and Mi'raj is not merely a miracle narrated in religious texts. It stands among the most profound events in the intellectual and spiritual history of mankind—an event that shattered conventional notions of time, space, and human limitation. It was not coincidence, but divine intervention at the darkest hour of the life of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, after the loss of Khadijah, after the death of Abu Talib, after the painful encounter at Ta'if, when grief, rejection, and isolation had reached their peak. At this moment of human vulnerability, Allah granted him not only consolation, but access to dimensions unknown to humanity.

In a single night, the Prophet traversed distances that modern astrophysics measures in billions of light-years. He journeyed beyond the physical universe, beyond visible galaxies, and beyond the constraints of time itself. This was not ordinary movement; it was a transformation in the very framework through which motion and existence are understood. What modern science cautiously imagines as time travel, wormholes, quantum tunnels, spacetime curvature, and inter-dimensional portals was experienced fourteen centuries ago, without machines, fuel, or instruments—only by the command of the Creator of time and space. This was not travel merely within the universe, but beyond the known structure of reality.

At Sidrat-ul-Muntaha, the Lote Tree at the furthest boundary of creation, Jibreel, the mightiest of angels and the carrier of revelation across the cosmos, declared his limit, stating that he could not proceed further. The Prophet alone continued into the Divine presence. No philosopher, scientist, ruler, or prophet before or after was granted such access. This single moment alone redefines the hierarchy of existence and the potential of human consciousness under divine will. A challenge to science, consciousness, and human knowledge. Isra and Mi'raj is not only a spiritual narrative; it is a direct challenge to human science and philosophy. It compels us to ask whether time is truly linear or a dimension that can be folded, whether distance is absolute or collapsible, whether galaxies are isolated islands or connected through unseen corridors, and whether consciousness is bound to the body or capable of transcending physical form.

“We speak of reward, but not of knowledge; of blessing, but not of discovery.”

Einstein spoke of time dilation. Modern physics speaks of wormholes. Quantum mechanics proposes parallel realities, and astrophysics explores cosmic bridges. Yet Mi'raj presents these ideas not as abstract theory, but as lived experience. It forces humanity to confront an uncomfortable truth: that our science has not uncovered reality, but has only begun to scratch its surface.

From cosmic event to forgotten intellectual mission. The tragedy lies not in the event itself, but in our response to

it. The greatest cosmic journey in human history has been reduced to a few speeches, brief gatherings, and a single night of emotional remembrance. We teach children that it was a miracle, yet fail to explain that it was also a declaration of human potential under divine command. We speak of reward, but not of knowledge; of blessing, but not of discovery. The Muslim world, which once led humanity in astronomy, mathematics, medicine, and philosophy, fell silent before its own greatest scientific invitation. Today, others search for portals, theorize time travel, and build instruments to touch the edges of the universe, while the inheritors of Mi'raj remain content with symbolism.

Mi'raj was not meant merely to be remembered; it was meant to be investigated. It was not meant to be ritualized, but studied. It was not meant to remain poetry, but to ignite civilizations of thought. It calls Muslims once again to lead in theoretical physics, cosmology, the study of consciousness, the philosophy of time, and the architecture of the universe. It invites the creation of institutions and intellectual movements dedicated to exploring intergalactic pathways, time dilation, dimensions beyond perception, and the origin and destiny of the human soul.

Isra and Mi'raj was not the end of a journey; it was the beginning of a question humanity still cannot answer: how small is our science before the One who created time itself? Until this question is reexamined, Mi'raj will remain remembered but not understood, celebrated but not explored, honored but not fulfilled. Perhaps this night deserves not one remembrance, but generations of research: not one sermon, but libraries; not one gathering, but a renaissance.

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A Silent Chillai Kalan

A vale holding its breath



Season
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In the collective memory of Kashmir, winter is not merely a season; it is a sacred, white-washed ritual of survival. It is a time when the world is supposed to turn monochromatic, and the rhythmic scraping of snow-shovels from rooftops provides the cadence to daily life. Yet, as we navigate the heart of the current seasonal cycle, an eerie, dusty silence has replaced the crunch of frost. While the towering peaks of the Pir Panjal stand draped in their usual heavy blankets of white, the plains of the Kashmir Vale—the verdant heart of our civilization—remain brown, brittle, and bare. This unsettling dichotomy is not a mere weather anomaly; it is a profound and penetrative manifestation of a climate in crisis, a silent alarm ringing across the Himalayas.

A calendar betrayed by the sky

Kashmiris traditionally map the winter through a linguistic hierarchy of cold, divided into three distinct phases of diminishing intensity. We begin with Chillai Kalan, the "Great Cold," a forty-day period starting December 21 characterized by bone-chilling temperatures and, historically, the heaviest snowfall. This is followed by Chillai Khurd (the Small Cold) and Chillai Bachha (the Baby Cold).

This year, however, the Chillai Kalan has arrived as a ghost in the plains. While the high-altitude resorts of Gulmarg and Sonamarg boast of their winter finery, the valley floor—the pulse of Kashmiri life beats—gasps for moisture. The mountains stand as mocking white sentinels over parched lowlands. For a valley that defines itself by the snow, this absence is a form of cultural and ecological erasure.

The hydrological artery runs dry
The lack of snow in the plains

is a hydrological catastrophe in the making. The sights across the valley are jarring to any local eye. The Jhelum, once a roaring artery of the region, has receded to a skeletal stream, its stony bed exposed like a ribcage under a pale sun. The ancient local springs, or Nags, which have provided crystal-clear water for centuries, are puffing dust. Snow in the plains acts as a "natural dam," a slow-release mechanism that recharges the immediate water table. Without this local frozen reservoir, the crisis of potable water in the coming summer will be unimaginable. We are hurtling toward a reality where the taps of our towns and the irrigation channels of our hinterlands may both run dry long before the first heat wave of June.

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The current crisis demands more than just prayer for precipitation; it requires a radical shift in regional policy.

An economic death knell in the orchards

This dry-cold spell serves a devastating blow to the horticulture sector, the very backbone of Kashmir's economy. Our apple orchards—the lifeblood of rural wealth—rely on a specific "chilling requirement." Apple trees need a sustained period of deep cold and soil saturation to ensure healthy dormancy. Without the insulating shroud of snow, soil temperatures fluctuate wildly. The unseasonably warm daytime sun, coupled with the lack of ground moisture, threatens to trigger "premature flowering." If the trees bloom too early, a single late-spring frost—a common occurrence in March—will incinerate the delicate blossoms, leading to a total crop failure. For the Kashmiri farmer, a snowless winter is not a relief from the cold; it is a financial death knell that will vibrate through the entire regional economy.

A defiant heritage

Yet, even as the landscape gasps, the indigenous spirit remains tethered to its roots. To walk through a Kashmiri home during these biting nights is to witness a master class in traditional thermal engineering. The Pheran

Oped

Greater Kashmir's Understanding the Law Initiative

Balancing the Scales

Offences, Penalties and Miscellaneous Provisions under the Code on Wages, 2019



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The Code on Wages, 2019 ("Code") consolidates and rationalises the legal framework governing wages, minimum wages, bonus and equal remuneration with the objective of ensuring timely and fair payment to employees. The provisions relating to offences, penalties, and miscellaneous matters form the backbone of enforcement under the Code, as they prescribe the consequences for non-compliance and lay down procedural safeguards. These provisions strike a balance between deterrence and facilitation by introducing graded penalties, opportunities for compliance, compounding of offences and protections for bona fide actions. Together, they aim to promote adherence to wage related obligations while reducing unnecessary litigation.

Who can initiate cognizance of an offence under the Code?
A court can take cognizance of an offence only on a complaint made by or under the authority of the appropriate Government, or by an authorized officer, or by an employee, or by a registered Trade Union or by an Inspector-cum-Facilitator.

Are there any restrictions on which courts can try offences under the Code?

Yes. No court inferior to a Metropolitan Magistrate or a Judicial Magistrate of the first class is competent to try offences under the Code.
Can penalties be imposed by officers of the Government instead of courts in certain cases?

Yes. For specified categories of offences, the appropriate Government may appoint an officer not below a prescribed rank to conduct an enquiry and impose penalties.
What powers does such an officer have while conducting an enquiry?

The officer may summon and enforce attendance of any person acquainted with the facts, require production of documents, and upon satisfaction that an offence has been committed, impose an appropriate penalty as permitted under the Code.
What penalty applies if an employer pays less than the amount due to an employee?

The employer may be punished with a fine extending up to fifty thousand rupees.
What is the punishment for repeated underpayment of wages?

If the employer commits a similar offence again within five years, the punishment may include imprisonment up to three months, or a fine up to one lakh rupees, or both.

What penalty applies for contravention of other provisions of the Code?

The employer may be punished with a fine extending up to twenty thousand rupees.

What happens if such contravention is repeated within five years?

The employer may be punished with imprisonment up to one month, or a fine up to forty thousand rupees, or both.

Is there a separate penalty for non-maintenance or improper maintenance of records?

Yes. Such offences are punishable with a fine extending up to ten thousand rupees.
Is prosecution mandatory for every contravention?

No. Before initiating prosecution for certain offences, the Inspector-cum-Facilitator must give the employer a written direction with a specified time for compliance.
What happens if the employer complies with the written direction?

If compliance is made within the specified period, no prosecution shall be initiated.

Is this opportunity available for repeated violations?

No. If a similar violation is repeated within five years, prosecution shall be initiated without giving such an opportunity.

Who is liable when an offence is committed by a company?

The company itself and every person in charge of and responsible for the conduct of its business at the time of the offence are deemed guilty.
Can such persons avoid liability?

Yes. They are not liable if they prove that the offence was committed without their knowledge or despite exercising due diligence.

What if the offence occurred due to consent, connivance, or neglect of company officers?

Such director, manager, secretary, or officer shall also be deemed guilty and liable for punishment.

Can offences under the Code be compounded?

Yes. Offences not punishable with imprisonment alone or with imprisonment and fine may be compounded on application by the accused.

Who is authorised to compound offences?

A Gazetted Officer specified by the appropriate Government may com-

ound such offences.
What amount is payable for compounding an offence?

Fifty per cent of the maximum fine prescribed for the offence.
Are repeat offenders eligible for compounding?

No. Compounding is not permitted if a similar offence is committed again within five years after earlier compounding or conviction.

What happens if an offence is compounded before prosecution?

No prosecution shall be instituted for that offence.

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The Code seeks to ensure effective enforcement without imposing undue hardship on employers.

What if compounding occurs after prosecution has begun?

The court shall be informed, and the accused shall be discharged.

What is the consequence of non-compliance with a compounding order?

The offender shall be liable to an additional sum equal to twenty per cent of the maximum fine, over and above the fine.

Can offences be compounded otherwise than as provided?

No. Compounding is permitted only in accordance with the prescribed provisions.

Are civil suits barred in certain wage-related matters?

Yes. Courts cannot entertain suits for recovery of wages, deductions, discrimination, or bonus where the matter falls within specified proceed-

ings or remedies under the Code.
Are Government actions protected if done in good faith?

Yes. No suit or legal proceeding shall lie for actions done or intended to be done in good faith under the Code.

On whom does the burden of proof lie in wage claims?

The employer must prove that wages or bonus have been duly paid.

Can an employee contract out of rights under this Code?

No. Any agreement relinquishing such rights is void to the extent it reduces or removes liability under the Code.

What is the effect of inconsistent laws or agreements?

The provisions of the Code prevail over any inconsistent law, award, settlement, or contract.

Can the Government delegate its powers?

Yes. The appropriate Government may delegate its powers to specified officers or authorities through notification.

Can an employer avoid liability by identifying the actual offender?

Yes. If the employer proves due diligence and absence of knowledge, consent, or connivance, the actual offender may be punished instead.

Are employer assets deposited with Government protected from attachment?

Yes, except for liabilities owed to employees engaged in the relevant contract.

Can the Central Government issue directions to State Governments?

Yes. The State Government is bound to comply with such directions.

Are certain enactments saved from the operation of this Code?

Yes. Specified employment and provident fund enactments and schemes remain unaffected.

Can rules be made to carry out the provisions of the Code?

Yes. The appropriate Government may make rules after prior publication.

What matters may such rules cover?

Rules may govern wage calculation, deductions, fines, registers, bonus computations, advisory boards, inspections, appeals, compounding of offences, and any other prescribed matter.

Can the Central Government remove difficulties in implementation?

Yes, by issuing orders within three years from commencement, provided they are consistent with the Code.

Are actions taken under repealed laws still valid?

Yes. Existing actions, notifications, and appointments continue insofar as they are not inconsistent with the Code.

Do general principles governing repeal apply?

Yes. The general law relating to repeal applies to the repealed enactments.

Therefore, the offences, penalties and miscellaneous provisions under the Code reflect a modern and compliance oriented approach to labour regulation. By clearly defining liabilities, streamlining prosecution mechanisms, enabling compounding of minor offences and safeguarding good faith actions, the Code seeks to ensure effective enforcement without imposing undue hardship on employers. At the same time, by placing the burden of proof on employers and invalidating contracts that dilute statutory rights, the Code reinforces employee protections. Overall, these provisions play a crucial role in strengthening wage justice, promoting transparency and fostering a fair and balanced industrial environment.

Muneeb Rashid Malik is an Advocate. He tweets at @muneebmalkish.

An event full of lessons

We need to learn the lessons taught to us by the messenger of Allah



Sacred Journey
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The greatest moment of Prophet's (SAW) life was when on the commands of Allah, he was accompanied by *Jibreel* (AS), the archangel, on a journey to the heavens. This miraculous incident happened before 1415 years before on 27th of the Islamic month of Rajab during night. The Holy Prophet was fifty two years of age at that time. It is this miraculous and amazing journey which is called as the *Al-Miraj*.

On 27th of Rajab when Gabriel, the archangel on the Commands of Allah visited Prophet (SAW) during night. At that time Prophet was taking rest in the small house of Hazrat Umm e Hani. During rest also our beloved Prophet was remembering Allah in his heart and was praying to Allah for our forgiveness. Allah had commanded the angels to postpone all their engagements and be ready to receive His beloved Prophet (SAW), the last Prophet. And the angel Rizwan, the custodian of heavens had been commanded to open the doors of all heavens in honor of His beloved Prophet (SAW).

The Messenger of Allah (SAW) was carried from the Sacred Mosque in Mecca to the distant Mosque in Jerusalem on a horse called *Al-Buraq* in the company of Gabriel. There he alighted and in the mosque led the prophets in prayer. After that Gabriel took him to the heavens on the same *Al-Buraq* and when they reached the first heaven, Prophet saw Adam, the father of mankind. The Prophet saluted him and Adam expressed his faith in his Prophethood. Then Gabriel took the Prophet to the second heaven and there

he saw John, the son of Zachariya (Yahya bin Zakariya) and Jesus son of Mary. The prophet saluted them and they returned the salutation. On reaching the third heaven, they saw Joseph or Yusuf and saluted him. On reaching the fourth heaven, they met the prophet Enoch or Idris. In the fifth heaven they met the prophet Aaron (Harun). In the sixth heaven the prophet met Moses or Musa.

On meeting Mohammad (SAW), Musa (AS) wept and our prophet asked the reason and Moses answered that he was weeping because he could not take his people to the heaven as he (SAW) has been able to do. On the seventh heaven, he met Abraham or Ibrahim (AS) and both saluted each other. After the visit of the heavens, he (SAW) was taken to *Sidrat al-Muntaha* (the remotest lot tree) and was shown *Al-Bait al-Ma'mur* (the much frequented house) which is like the Kaaba (Sacred House) encompassed daily by 70 thousand angels; who once encompass it, would not get a chance again till the day of judgment.

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We have the responsibility to abide by the sunnah of the prophet and we have the duty to love him more than our lives.

Gabriel (AS) stopped his journey at this point and told the prophet to travel alone onwards because he would not be able to endure the Divine Presence of Allah. According to the Prophet (SAW), from this point onwards, he went ahead alone and passed through many *Hijabs*, the distance of which could be traveled in 500 years. He was then presented to The Divine Presence of Allah and experienced the joy of The Divine Glory and Manifestation at the closest distance. In the Holy Quran, Allah says:

“Then he approached and came closer.” (Surah, An-Najm-- The Star)

The significance of the miraculous journey was that Allah will

to show the prophet all the signs which He had revealed to him through the Holy Quran so that His beloved prophet would have faith with certainty. Allah says in the Holy Quran:

“... In order that We might show him (SAW) of our signs - *Ayat*”

The miraculous journey was a test for all those people who had accepted Islam as their way of life and it is a test for us also that we believe what our prophet saw and revealed to us from the experience of the great journey during that night. We should be proud of the fact that our prophet was exalted in the greatest way of which there has been no example.

We have the responsibility to abide by the sunnah of the prophet and we have the duty to love him more than our lives. We need to learn a lesson from the signs revealed to us by the messenger of Allah during the night journey and remain warned that violation of Allah's commands is sure to harm us into the hell.

If we study our Quran, we can fully understand that Allah had already willed to establish the Islam and it has been impressed upon us that the principles on which it has been based should not be defied so that we do not become like those dwellers of hell whom our prophet saw suffering during this journey. Our style of living and behaving renders the test that we are estranged and affected by the real message of the Miraj. Allah emphasizes upon us to make Islam as our way of life and strive to replace barbarity, tyranny, inequality and injustice with honesty, equality, justice, and good in this world.

The Miraj teaches us that there is no power excepting the power of Allah in this world and before Him we should prostrate. The Prophet cautioned us about the future upheavals which would befall upon the Ummah mainly due to the love for wealth and prosperity. The Muslim nations have compromised their weaknesses, accepted slavery of the unjust power, and have to be repented for these weaknesses, and not to be pleased with the evil forces.

The journey of Miraj teaches us to be steadfast and resolute.

The clash of imaginations

Modern societies are not governed by a single imagination



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Societies do not function only through constitutions, markets, or institutions. At a deeper, structural level, they function through shared frameworks of imagination, through which people interpret reality, assign value, and regulate their aspirations. Imagination, in the sociological sense, is not fantasy or illusion. It is the collective understanding that enables societies to determine what is true, desirable, legitimate, and worth striving for. Social imagination often shapes how actions are understood, even before people decide what to do. These imaginations regulate aspiration by defining success and failure. A society guided primarily by scientific imagination encourages trust in evidence, expertise, and rational explanation. A society shaped by religious imagination orients aspiration toward faith, duty, and moral order. Where market imagination dominates, life is imagined through competition, choice, efficiency, and measurable achievement. People learn not only about their needs and lacks but also how to account for them.

Modern societies are not governed by a single imagination. They coexist with multiple imaginations—scientific, legal, moral, cultural, religious, and market-based—the same social space. What differentiates stable societies from unstable ones is not the presence of plurality but the existence of a relatively settled hierarchy of imaginations. Such a hierarchy does not eliminate diversity; rather, it organises it. It provides clarity about which imagination should dominate which sphere of life and which should remain secondary.

Most of the developed societies tend to assume this hierarchy rather than constantly contest it. While there is a presence of all major imaginations, i.e., moral, religious, and market imaginations, it is noticed that scientific imagination dominates their public reasoning. They anticipate that evidence, expert knowledge, and institutional procedures will underpin policy-making, healthcare, education, law, and governance. Science remains the primary reference point for legitimacy. Disputes predominantly occur within the context of scientific authority rather than in opposition to it. Market imagination also plays

a powerful role in developed societies, especially in economic and cultural life. However, it is often restricted by scientific expertise, legal regulation, and civic norms. Religious imagination is also socially present but largely confined to personal belief and community life. It rarely overlaps with institutional or scientific imagination in public decision-making. This relatively stable ordering allows multiple imaginations to coexist without producing constant social turbulence.

Indian society, too, participates in global processes of market expansion, digitalisation, and consumer aspiration. The market's imagination has expanded rapidly through urbanisation, platform economies, and the promise of upward mobility. Education is increasingly viewed as an investment, work as competition, and success as visibility. In this respect, India mirrors global trends. Yet the Indian context differs crucially. The hierarchy of imaginations in Indian society is observed to be unsettled and in flux. Scientific, religious, moral, market, and symbolic imaginations coexist, but none of them consistently occupies a defined position of authority across domains. Caste, customs, religion and market often interweave with the institutionally embedded scientific imagination. Evidence-based reasoning often competes with symbolic belief, moral sentiment, or ideological subordination. At the same time, religious imagination frequently moves beyond the realm of personal faith into public and institutional spaces. Scientific or legal reasoning re-frames questions as matters of belief, identity, or moral sentiment. Conversely, market imagination penetrates religious life itself, transforming faith into spectacle, devotion into consumption, and belief into branding. Religious practices are monetised, while spiritual authority is measured by visibility and popularity.

This absence of a clear hierarchy produces a further consequence that is often overlooked: experts and authorities from one domain increasingly intervene across all domains. Religious figures comment on science and public health, market experts pronounce on morality and culture, political actors override legal and institutional procedures, and social media influencers replace professional expertise. When no single imagination dominates people's minds, every imagination claims authority across all domains. This situation may create an imaginative blockage for the larger mass.

People encounter multiple, competing claims to reality without a clear framework for evaluating them. As a result, aspirations become confused, trust diminishes, and people struggle to decide which form of authority deserves more attention in different social spaces. Instead of empowerment, such plurality often turns into pathological social conditions. This constant movement of imaginations across domains produces a

condition of imaginative instability. Individuals are asked to operate within contradictory frameworks simultaneously. They are expected to be rational, evidence-oriented citizens while conforming to symbolic or faith-based claims. It created a situation where people compete in markets while upholding moral ideals of sacrifice and social obligation.

Consequently, aspirations became fragmented and are regulated by competing imaginations without a stable order. Through this perspective, we can understand India's contemporary social crisis in various domains. Education, science, religion, gender roles, law, and governance conflicts extend beyond mere ideological disagreements. There are continuous contradictions over which imagination has the authority to define reality in a given social space. Uncertain hierarchies lead to competing domains and fragile consensus. This instability leads to social contraction. Instead of expanding trust and cooperation, society retreats into defensive positions. Constant challenges to their authority make institutions struggle to command legitimacy. Expertise is questioned, procedures are customised, and symbolic claims gain disproportionate influence. The result is not pluralism in its productive sense but fragmentation without coordination, often expressed through recurring conflicts. A stable society does not require the dominance of a single imagination everywhere. Nor does it demand the suppression of cultural or religious meaning. What it requires is a negotiated hierarchy, one that establishes boundaries between domains. Scientific imagination must guide public reasoning without being reduced to ideology. Market imagination must be allowed to function without commodifying dignity or care. Religious imagination should enrich personal and cultural life without overruling institutional logic. India's challenge, therefore, is not its diversity of imagination. Plurality has always been its strength. The challenge lies in the absence of a widely accepted ordering among them. Without such an order, society oscillates between competing visions of reality—generating energy and aspiration, but also anxiety, blockage, and strain. Understanding India's present condition requires moving beyond surface-level debates and recognising a deeper struggle with imagination itself. Societies endure not only by producing wealth or enforcing law but also by sustaining shared frameworks of meaning. When imaginations compete without hierarchy, social life becomes noisy, unstable, and exhausting. The task ahead is not to eliminate imagination but to restore balance among them so that diversity remains a resource rather than a source of permanent unease.

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LOKMAT TIMES



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Nagpur, Saturday, 17.1.2026

OPINION

Momentous victory

Results of Maharashtra civic polls will reshape politics beyond the state

Even as counting of votes for the 29 municipal corporation elections in Maharashtra continued till late on Friday, the message from the electorate is clear. The BJP and its allies are set to conquer all key urban centres such as Mumbai, Pune, Thane, Nagpur, Pimpri-Chinchwad and Nashik. For the BJP, it is a rare historic moment. For the first time in the civic history of India's financial capital, it will have the final say on selection of Mumbai's Mayor. It has surpassed its previous high of 82 seats in 2017 and is comfortably past the majority mark with ally Shiv Sena led by Deputy CM Eknath Shinde. The last-minute reunion of long estranged Thackeray cousins to reclaim the Late Shiv Sena patriarch's legacy and stop the BJP's juggernaut, has failed.

For Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis, who meticulously planned and executed the election campaign from the front, the Mumbai victory is a sweet revenge. But the icing in the cake was the BJP unprecedented victory in traditional NCP bastions of Pune and Pimpri-Chinchwad. The rival factions—one led by NCP founder Sharad Pawar and the other by his nephew and Deputy CM Ajit Pawar—had formed a coalition of convenience to defeat the BJP. Ironically, the Shiv Sena (Shinde) had proved to be a friend-turned foe there. While the BJP almost maintained its 2017 show in its bastion Nagpur—home to CM Fadnis and Union Minister Nitin Gattkar—its overall performance established its dominance in Maharashtra's civic polity. The electoral landscape this time was unusually complex, leading to a web of overlapping alliances, sub-alliances and 'friendly' contests. While Shiv Sena managed to hold ground in Shinde's stronghold bastion Thane its best performance was Kalyan Dombivli. It did well in BMC, Navi Mumbai and Ulhasnagar, but its geographic spread is limited.

The Congress, the only party to go solo, could win only the Latur civic body as consolation for its attempted self-revival. It did improve its tally in Nagpur and some other places but the road to recovery appears bumpy just now. Political observers feel that these elections point to a subtle shift in Maharashtra politics. The future of regional state parties such as NCP and Shiv Sena, or their factions, which played an oversized role in national politics is uncertain. This creates space for the BJP to expand its footprint in Maharashtra in the times to come. But the immediate impact of the civic polls would be felt beyond state politics. As a ruling party, the BJP has established its will and capacity to deliver on the development front. How this pans out in coming electoral battles in West Bengal remains to be seen. It will certainly energise party cadres there.

IT reforms

Despite better collection and widening tax base, enforcement needs course correction

Latest data released by the Income Tax department up to January 11 in the current fiscal shows 8.82 per cent rise in collections over comparative figures a year ago. This does address the policymakers' concern over India's narrow tax base and collections not keeping up with economic growth. In fact, direct tax revenues have galloped despite muted nominal GDP growth, resulting in big gains. According to the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT), between FY20 and FY25, the Centre's direct tax collections expanded at a 16 per cent CAGR (Compound Annual Growth Rate) compared to 8.6 per cent CAGR in the previous five years. This works out to 1.7 times nominal GDP in the last five years. An equally important feature of the tax buoyancy is widening in the tax base also. The number of individual return filers has grown 36 per cent, while corporate filers have seen a 30 per cent increase.

Clearly, reforms seem to be bearing fruit. In the past, growth in returns filed often didn't translate into contributions to the tax kitty. The last five years have seen significant direct tax reforms, with the government taking a carrot and stick approach where taxpayers are offered much lower rates if they give up exemptions. In September 2019, domestic companies were offered a 22 per cent tax rate (against 33 per cent) if they opted for an exemption-free regime. Most companies have since migrated to this system. In April 2020, individual taxpayers were given the option of a similar exemption-free regime with lower rates. With the new regime sweetened further, many individuals have made the switch. At the same time, real-time data sharing arrangements between CBDT and Central Board of Indirect Taxes after GST have allowed them to identify discrepancies between reported incomes from business and personal sources and plug them. Tech-enabled data mining on high-value transactions and aggregated wealth data at the PAN level, has allowed CBDT to track down under-reported heads of income.

However, while the revenue and tax base is expanding, some issues remain unaddressed from the taxpayer point of view. Most taxpayers continue to grapple with voluminous return filings, unnecessary disclosures and frivolous demand notices, not to speak of rent-seeking by tax officials. Though there has been a five to six-fold expansion in the returns filed in the ₹50 lakh plus income bracket, the bottom of the pyramid is shrinking with 30 per cent of filers in the below ₹5 lakh category dropping out in five years. As they account for a third of taxpayers, this is a worrying trend. From making roughly equal contributions to the tax kitty five years ago, individual taxpayers now chip in with 25 per cent higher taxes than companies. A course correction is needed.

Understanding Parjanya & Srujanya

Harmony between two allows the world to persist without stagnation & to change without disintegration



Dr S S Mantha

Early morning skies of the new year opened up with rain gods obliging, as though bestowing a divine wish upon mankind. That it wasn't the season didn't matter. But that it drowned the overnight cacophony, bringing in memories galore, mattered more. That it sustains life mattered more. When rain falls upon fertile ground, it is not merely water meeting soil. It is order consenting to transformation, and creation bowing to law. In that meeting, the world does not simply survive, it evolves. Along with it, we evolve.

Divinity is not static personalities, but expressed through living principles that govern the rhythm of existence. That rhythm was in full flow that morning for a few minutes of ecstasy. While 'Parjanya,' is the Vedic deity of rain and fertility, 'Srujanya,' is the principle of creation and emergence. Both complementary forces were on view, for both preserve cosmic order and transformation, through conscious becoming. Their interaction dawns on us a profound insight, that reality is not sustained by permanence alone, nor by change alone, but by their continuous negotiation within 'Rutu' and 'Dharma.' While 'Rutu' is the universal principle that governs the structure, movement, and moral coherence of reality, 'Dharma' sustains, upholds, and harmonizes life. There are multiple wars raging today. Is it a misalignment between Parjanya and Srujanya that we are experiencing?

Parjanya is a deity in 'Rig Veda,' invoked as the giver of rain, the life sustainer of fields, and the upholder of nature's rhythm. Rain is not merely a meteorological event. It is a moral and metaphysical response to human sustainability. Parjanya rains when the world is aligned, when 'Yajna' or sacrifice, 'Dharma' and 'Rutu' are in harmony. His waters do not simply nourish crops. They reaffirm the intelligibility of the universe. Such order in Nature sustains Nature itself. Without such



Creation is not synonymous with benevolence. Decay, destruction, and dissolution are an integral part of Srujanya. Crops fail and civilizations collapse, not as punishments but as consequences of misalignment.

order, abundance becomes destructive, turning rain into flood and fertility into excess.

Contrasting it maybe, Srujanya is inseparable from Parjanya. It is not described as any single deity but is the entire creation itself. Srujanya is 'Icha Shakti' or 'will to create,' through which the unmanifest seeks form and through which the universe transforms. 'Anand avataam svadhaayaa tad ekam tasmaad dhaanyat na parah kim kanasa,' meaning 'That 'One' breathed, windless, by its own power. Other than 'That,' there was nothing at all.' It describes a pre-creation reality, a state beyond matter, air, time, and even duality. In Rig Veda, creation begins not with command but with desire. Srujanya tells us that 'many' is created from 'one' and not the other way round. Where Parjanya sustains what is, Srujanya insists on what could be.

Parjanya embodies restraint, cyclic rhythm, and adherence to law, while Srujanya embodies innovation, emergence, and transformation. At first glance, these forces appear to be pulling apart but they are not binary oppositions. Order without creation is stagnation. Creation without order is chaos. Thus, Parjanya and Srujanya are not adversaries but co-participants in Nature's dynamics.

Rutu is the cosmic order that predates moral law and social duty. It governs the movement of stars, the

return of seasons, and the moral architecture of the universe. Parjanya functions as its executor. His rains are not arbitrary gifts but responses to alignment. Hence, Parjanya reflects a worldview in which nature is cyclically responsive, where human action participates in maintaining the balance.

Srujanya, however, reminds us that Rutu is not static. Order is not rigidity but rhythm. Creation is not a one-time event but an ongoing process of revelation. Every era, every civilization, every individual life represents a fresh articulation of consciousness. It is an accommodation of creation 'srishiti,' preservation 'stithi' and dissolution 'pralaya.' Srujanya operates within this cycle, ensuring that existence remains responsive to truth rather than being trapped in form. Srujanya thus becomes creation.

Of course, desire plays a crucial role here. While our philosophical traditions often warn us against desire as a source of suffering, Vedas and Upanishads recognize a sacred dimension to desire when aligned with wisdom. Srujanya does not represent 'kama' but a creative will that propels consciousness outward. 'Brahma' creates because he wills. 'Vishnu' sustains because he cares. 'Shiva' destroys because he recognizes the end of creation. Thus, creation, preservation, and destruction are not moral opposites, but expres-

sions of nature's truth.

Parjanya is also related to sacrifice or 'Yajna.' It is a mechanism through which we communicate with nature's forces. Fire is the messenger, offerings are the symbols of surrender, and mantras are vibrational alignments. Parjanya responds to yajna because sacrifice was the original offering to Nature, or the self-sacrifice of 'Purusha,' from whose dismemberment the world arose. In that sense, creation becomes the first yajna and Srujanya becomes the foundation to it.

Creation is not synonymous with benevolence. Decay, destruction, and dissolution are an integral part of Srujanya. Crops fail, species vanish, and civilizations collapse, not as punishments but as consequences of misalignment or exhaustion of purpose. Parjanya's rain also erodes mountains to nourish plains, demonstrating that sustenance often requires destruction. Our scriptures reject sentimentalism. They are built on truth, not comfort. Thus, they govern reality.

Humankind occupies a unique position in this interplay. Unlike gods bound to function or animals bound to instinct, we possess reflective awareness. We can create technologies, institutions, and narratives, invoking Srujanya consciously. We also perform dharmic action, invoking Parjanya's order. When we create without dharma, innovation becomes exploitation. When we obey dharma without creativity, tradition fades into irrelevance. Bhagavad Gita tells us that action is guided by wisdom, not abstention nor compulsion. Therein lies our freedom.

Parjanya and Srujanya are not separate agents but live within a single reality. One ensures continuity, the other ensures relevance. One roots existence, the other renews it. Harmony between the two allows the world to persist without stagnation and to change without disintegration. Spirit of Parjanya and Srujanya alone can ensure a harmonious world order today.

The author is former chairman, AICTE and chancellor, RBU, Nagpur. Views expressed are personal.



Jawaharlal Nehru disliked religious ostentation



Sumit Paul

Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently said that the Somnath temple's survival over the past thousand years reflected the country's indomitable civilisational spirit. He said, Somnath temple continues to stand tall despite repeated attacks and immense adversity. In an Op-Ed marking the historic milestone of one thousand years since the first attack on the Somnath temple in the year 1026, the Prime Minister said, 'hearing the word Somnath instils a sense of pride in people's hearts and minds. He said, it is the eternal proclamation of the country's soul, and this majestic temple is situated on the western coast of the country in Gujarat, at a place called Prabhas Patan.

The Prime Minister said, Somnath's story is not merely about a temple, but about the unbreakable courage of countless children of Bharat Mata who safeguarded the nation's culture and civilisation. Recalling the period when the Somnath temple, revered by millions, was attacked by foreign invaders, Prime Minister Modi said

it was in January 1026 that Mahmud of Ghazni attacked this temple, seeking to destroy a great symbol of faith and civilisation through a violent and barbaric invasion. PM Modi said, after a thousand years, the temple still stands as glorious as ever because of the countless efforts to restore Somnath to its grandeur.

As is the want of the existing political dispensation to condemn Congress, Nehru and Gandhi. Nehru is being projected as anti-Hindu for his lukewarm response to the temple project at that time when most of today's BJP politicians and leaders were not even born or were toddlers. Nehru had valid reasons for staying away from the Somnath temple reconstruction project. He rightly believed that a state's job is to maintain an equal distance from all religions, with the thought of 'Na kaahoo se dosti, na kaahoo se baair.' It is not desirable for a secular state to promote a specific religion.

But his colleague, the President who is supposed to act on the advice of the PM, disregarded Nehru's advice to not participate in the temple inauguration activities as the state could not be seen promoting a specific religion, especially in a country which was home to so many diverse faiths and had a large



Muslim majority population.

Nehru did not in any way oppose the temple reconstruction activity. He stayed true to the idea that all religions should be respected. This is important. His own ministers, Sardar Patel and KM Munshi took a lot of interest in the project, and he did not do anything to stop them from doing so. Although the government did not directly provide financial help to the Somnath rebuilding project, an official advisory committee was constituted in 1949 to provide the technical support to the project. In fact, an autonomous endowment called the Somnath Temple Trust was formed to collect money for the construction.

Nehru was right to dissuade the then President Dr Rajendra Prasad from wholeheartedly participating in a specific religious event as India had just got independence and Nehru and others witnessed the

violence and bloodshed during the Partition and somewhere Nehru knew that the religion was the root cause of such unprecedented mayhem. He was a man of scientific temperament and was not myopic. Mind you, Jawaharlal Nehru was not an atheist. He was an agnostic who believed in egalitarianism in all spheres, be it social, political or religious. So, when some spokespersons of BJP condemn Nehru for staying away from the Somnath temple reconstruction project, they forget that Nehru was only discharging his political duties as the PM of a sovereign country with utmost diligence and without any prejudice. A nascent country like India with religious diversity, rejoicing in Somnath temple's reconstruction was not just stupidity. It was a sheer waste of money and an act of deliberate provocation. Being a sane and sensible leader, Nehru understood it well. In short, Nehru disliked religious ostentation and was against all sorts of religious bigotry. He was a visionary who believed in universal brotherhood, peace and non-violence just like his mentor MK Gandhi.

The author is an advanced research scholar of semitic languages, culture and civilization. Views expressed are personal.



YOUR LETTERS

Pittance for bright students

It is a disgrace that the Central and State governments continue to mock underprivileged brilliance with a measly ₹1,000 monthly pitance under the NMMS scheme. In an era of skyrocketing inflation, what exactly is a student expected to buy with ₹33 a day? It barely covers a single commute, let alone textbooks, uniforms, or digital essentials. By refusing to hike this amount to at least ₹2,000, the Ministry is effectively presiding over an increase in dropout rates among our most meritorious poor. Stop the empty rhetoric about "educational equity" while leaving students to starve for resources. This stagnant funding is not supported; it is an insult. The government must double the scholarship immediately or admit their commitment to education is a sham.

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Telangana Today
FOR LOCAL TO GLOBAL NEWS

06

VIEWPOINT

HYDERABAD, Saturday, January 17, 2026



SACHIN PILOT
Senior Congress leader

“Every political party wants representation. There is nothing wrong in the Congress cadres asking for it so that they can help the people of TN. ...BJP will never find a foothold in TN politics



STEPHEN FRY
British writer-actor

With the invention of artificial intelligence, humans are now in the same position as the gods, having created an entity that obeys our instructions... The gods are now crumbling statues



MIGUEL DÍAZ-CANEL
Cuban President

The US administration has opened the door to an era of barbarism, plunder and neo-fascism. No one here surrenders. Cuba does not have to make any political concessions

Challenges galore ahead of Union Budget

As the Budget Day draws closer, there are several challenges, both internal and external, that need to be addressed head-on to make the Indian economy truly resilient and robust. For Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, who is preparing to present the Union Budget for a record ninth consecutive time, it is a defining fiscal moment amid external headwinds and internal tests. The key challenge is to balance growth with fiscal discipline and provide momentum for fiscal, labour and tax reforms. Though India has been the fastest-growing major economy for several years now, it needs to step up further to escape the middle-income trap and become a developed nation by 2047. The Budget 2026-27 provides an opportunity to bring about greater ease of doing business in the economy. Reforms, especially in terms of eliminating the regulatory excesses in the system, need to be carried out much more quickly compared to the GST restructuring and implementation of the labour codes. Only then will it be possible to push growth to the levels needed to become a developed economy. On the one hand, India's real GDP growth is projected in the range of 7% to 7.5%, in contrast to a slowing global economy. On the other hand, the eroding value of the Indian rupee — predicted to touch the 100-mark against the US dollar in the months ahead — poses a complex policy trade-off. A stronger dollar, coupled with tariff-induced capital flows, would increase import bills, exert upward pressure on inflation and complicate the fiscal planning.

As Sitharaman prepares to present a record 9th consecutive Budget, she faces a defining fiscal moment amid global headwinds

The government will have to weigh exchange rate realities into Budget forecasts, potentially conservatively estimating both revenue and subsidy costs. Whether Sitharaman opts for a contingency buffer in the Budget to accommodate currency volatility, or leans on structural measures to stimulate exports, will be closely watched by markets and policymakers alike. Trade is the big issue on the horizon in a world with fast-changing alignments due to US President Donald Trump's maverick economic policies. Given the inordinate delay in finalising the trade pact with America, the Budget will now have to provide support for export-led industries, which could face tough times ahead. The manufacturing sector has not yet expanded sufficiently to absorb unskilled or skilled personnel available in the market. It is here that lessons can be learnt from other Asian economies that have managed to expand small and medium enterprises sufficiently to provide more labour-intensive employment. The Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) account for a large share of India's employment and exports, yet they remain vulnerable to credit constraints and volatility. There is a need for greater credit access, technology adoption incentives, and improved digital infrastructure for MSMEs. As India aspires to become a global supply chain hub, as an alternative to China, it needs to reduce the cost of doing business — from rationalising customs duties to reining in logistics costs.

By rejecting timelines for gubernatorial assent, the court has weakened prospects for stronger federalism



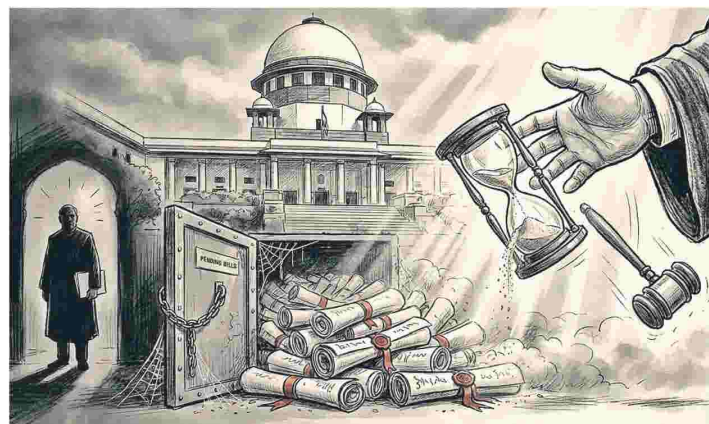
NAYAKARA VEERASHA

The relationship between the Legislature, Executive and Judiciary constitutes the heart and soul of a democratic form of government. Understanding and analysing the nuances among these organs is essential to assess the health of democracy. In 1950, India established itself as a republic with a parliamentary democratic system. The President of India is the highest constitutional authority of the union government, whereas the Governor occupies the highest constitutional position in a State.

The decisions of the President and Governor are exempt from judicial review, except when they breach the doctrine of the 'basic structure' of the Constitution. The office of the Governor is expected to function as the guardian of the Constitution in the State, while also acting as a link between the union and State governments. The President and Governors play a significant role in the overall framework of constitutional governance. It is only with their assent that Bills passed by Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies become law. Article 200 of the Indian Constitution outlines provisions regarding the assent of Bills by the Governor, while Article 111 deals with the assent of Bills by the President.

Rising Friction

In terms of presidential assent, the relationship between the union government and the office of the President has, by and large, remained smooth and frictionless. However, similar cordiality is often absent between elected State governments and Governors, largely due to the partisan conduct of some Governors. Since 1952, the misuse of the office of the Governor has been a continuing pattern, irrespective of the party in power at the Centre. Given



that Governors are appointed by the union government, many have tended to serve its political interests. Political intrusion into the functioning of the Governor has become a major concern over the last 10-12 years, particularly with respect to the withholding of Bills passed by the State Assemblies. This trend is especially visible in States governed by parties other than the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) or the National Democratic Alliance (NDA).

The deadlock between State governments and Governors reached its peak in Punjab, Karnataka, Kerala, Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu. To address this impasse, a division bench of the Supreme Court delivered its verdict in the case of *The State of Tamil Nadu Vs The Governor of Tamil Nadu & Anr.* on April 8, 2025. The court ruled that the inordinate delay and withholding of assent to the Bills are illegal and bad in law. It prescribed timelines for the Governor and the President to act on such Bills. The judgement has drawn mixed responses among the legal scholars, lawyers, democrats and other concerned citizens.

Major Arguments

Broadly, four major arguments have come up: judicial overreach by the court by setting timelines for gubernatorial authorities; judicial review — court as the final adjudicator of constitutional and legal provisions; federalism — as a deepening of democracy by strengthening Union-State relations; and the doctrine of separation of powers.

In May 2025, the President of India referred 14 questions to the Supreme Court, seeking an advisory opinion under Article 143(1) of the Constitution of India. The provision empowers the

President to seek the court's opinion on questions of law or constitutional importance. This provision has been invoked sparingly, and the 2025 Presidential Reference marked the 14th such instance in independent India.

On 20th November, 2025, then Chief Justice of India B.R. Gavai-led constitutional bench delivered its opinion on the Presidential Reference. The court held that the concept of deemed assent is alien to the Constitution and that fixing timelines for the Governor or President in granting or withholding assent is contrary to the Constitution, especially the basic structure doctrine.

It observed that imposing such timelines violates the doctrine of separation of powers. However, the top court clarified that Governors have to provide their assent to the Bills within a reasonable time. The advisory opinion further stated that Governors can withhold assent or return Bills only with proper reasoning; otherwise, such inactions would invite limited judicial review.

Through Legal Prism

While the court's opinion appears legally tenable, it seems to have interpreted the provisions of the Constitution purely from a legal prism while overlooking its implications on democ-

ocracy. The court missed out on a golden opportunity to clear up certain grey areas of the Constitution and strengthen the federal foundation of Indian democracy. Reinforcing the immunity and privilege of the President and Governors in matters of assent, without prescribing any time-bound framework, merely on the basis of their constitutional status, is antithetical to democratic governance. The court's reliance on the doctrine of separation of powers is misplaced in this verdict, as it construed its role as 'restrictivism' rather than 'reformism'.

The advisory opinion reflects a rigid interpretation of the separation of powers, akin to the American constitutional model, which is inconsistent with India's constitutional scheme. In *Asif Hameed v State of Jammu and Kashmir* (AIR 1989 SC 1899), the Supreme Court observed: *Although the doctrine of separation of powers has not been recognised under the Constitution in its absolute... the functioning of democracy depends upon the strength and independence of each of its organs...*

The advisory opinion comes at a time when the Union-State relations are already strained due to persistent conflict over legislative competence. Instead of reducing the tensions, the court had added another layer of constitutional friction. A significant opportunity to strengthen the federal character of Indian democracy and reinforce parliamentary accountability has been lost, thereby deepening the ongoing constitutional crisis.

(The author is Assistant Professor, Symbiosis Law School, Pune, Symbiosis International (Deemed University), Pune. Views are personal)

The advisory opinion on the Presidential Reference prioritises constitutional formalism over democratic accountability, raising concerns about the future of Union-State relations

Letters to the Editor

Common ground

Amid the geopolitical disruptions, India and Germany are finding a common ground. Germany is recalibrating its foreign policy under pressure from the protracted war in Ukraine, growing US-China rivalry and the increasing fragmentation of global supply chains. Meanwhile, India is establishing itself as a strong voice in the Global South and a major balancing power in the Indo-Pacific. Against this backdrop, Merz's decision to make India his first Asian destination as Chancellor sends an important message that Germany's strategy is no longer limited to Europe.

BAL GOVIND, Noida

Informal sector crucial

The article "Ignored, Sideline, Unheard" (January 12) rightly draws attention to the long-neglected issue of workplace well-being beyond the corporate sector. Recent data further underlines the urgency of the concerns raised. The Annual Survey of Unincorporated Sector Enterprises 2023-24 estimates that over 12 crore workers are employed across more than 7 crore informal, non-agricultural units — confirming that informality remains the backbone of India's employment landscape. While the e-Shram portal crossed 31 crore registrations by late 2025, this achievement has yet to translate into assured health, safety, or social security benefits for most workers. Equally concerning is the gender dimension. Latest PLFS findings show that a majority of women workers in non-agricultural employment continue to be concentrated in informal enterprises, making workplace safety, wage equity, and access to social protection critical. With the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code now operational, the onus lies on the States to ensure its effective implementation. Without extending well-being frameworks to the informal sector, India's growth story will remain fundamentally incomplete.

VIDYASAGAR REDDY KETHIRI, Hanamkonda

India-US ties

If the US Ambassador-designate to India sincerely wishes to strengthen trade with us, he should persuade Trump to withdraw tariffs. Will he be able to achieve this? India, on its part, is and will remain dependent on crude imports from Russia. Hence, the thaw and unease in the strategic relationships will continue.

NR RAGHURAM, Hyderabad

Power of Blue

Colour 'Blue' has been an integral part of the Indian cultural, political and social landscape over the years. The enduring popularity of 'Blue' is reflected in Dr B.R. Ambedkar's iconic suit, Doordarshan's logo, legendary vocalist MS Subbulakshmi's kanjeevaram sarees, former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's turbans, Indian cricket team's jerseys and more. However, the blue symbolism has its most potent expression in the Ashoka Chakra of our Tricolour, representing law, movement and moral order. It also quietly echoes the traditions of civil disobedience and social justice that shaped the Republic. For decades, blue resonated greatly with Dalits and Babasheb Ambedkar as a whole. For Dr Ambedkar, it was crucial to pick a colour that did not have any other overt political association. Maybe that's the reason Dr Ambedkar chose blue as the flag of the Scheduled Caste Federation in 1942. To recall, during the last parliamentary session, Opposition leaders were blue to protest Home Minister Amit Shah's alleged insult to Dr Ambedkar.

RANGANATHAN SIVAKUMAR, Chennai

India in the hotspot

The Economist

To power up growth, India must be rewired

Keeping the power on in India is a tricky business. All across the country, grids are creaking as demand soars. Distribution companies are struggling to invest. "People in urban areas are smart, they'll tamper with the meter," says Arvind Singh, a power executive in the eastern state of Odisha.

BBC

India's quest for magnets made of rare earths

In November 2025, India approved a 73bn-rupee (\$800m; £600m) plan that could help it to cut its dependence on China in one of the most strategic corners of the global supply chain: rare earth magnets. These small but powerful components sit at the heart of modern life.

The Guardian

End of line for one of India's distinctive garments?

It is one India's most ubiquitous garments, with origins in the Mughal courts and Rajasthani kingdoms of times past. But this week, the distinctive high-collared bandhgala jacket found itself at the centre of a lively debate after it was denounced by the Indian railways minister as a symbol of a "colonial mindset".



THE GOAN EVERYDAY

Know thy self, know thy enemy. A thousand battles,
a thousand victories
Sun Tzu

Flames of Birch, sea of illegalities & the many gaps

The government came under fire on the concluding day of the winter session of the Legislative Assembly over the much-awaited Birch issue. The opposition termed it a collapse of governance and had a few demands — making the magisterial inquiry report public, fixing political accountability, and initiating a CBI inquiry. There were pointed references made to systemic corruption and flawed permissions, even as Chief Minister Pramod Sawant stood his ground, saying that penal action has been initiated.

Sawant spoke of nightclubs that have been sealed, officials suspended and dismissed, systemic changes that have been implemented, and new audit protocols that have been introduced. While there is no denying that action has been initiated, the larger question is whether enough is being done. Is the government paying lip service, or is it genuinely interested in cleansing the system? Are illegalities detected selectively, or does punitive action depend on the choices of those in power? Can establishments that do not comply with the requisite permissions be allowed to continue business? If not, why are they not sealed yet?

Now picture this: Data placed before the Legislative Assembly shows that only 232 beach shacks had fire NOCs out of the total 365 units in the last calendar year. When it comes to hotels, only 291 were compliant, along with 1479 guest houses. None of the resorts and homestays had complied with fire safety permissions in 2025. Laws mandate all occupancies to obtain and maintain a Fire No Objection Certificate as required under the Goa Fire Force Act 1986 & Rules 1997.

The government will have to reboot the system with sweeping changes, bring in policy reforms, and fix responsibility across the board — from the Panch to officers and ministers

The government swiftly dismissed the Secretary of the Village Panchayat of Arpora-Nagoa, Raghuvir Bagkar, holding him responsible for grave dereliction of duty and subsequently arrested him on Friday. Arpora Sarpanch Roshan Redkar was disqualified for what was seen as misuse and abuse of power in the Birch case. The inquiry report held that Bagkar's actions and inaction directly facilitated the unlawful functioning of the establishment. The question is, similar action should have been initiated against all those involved in granting permissions from other departments. Basically, Form I & XIV forms the basis on which departments proceed with the formalities of licensing. How did departments grant permissions when the area was not classified as a settlement?

Going ahead, a bigger concern has emerged about illegalities on khazan land. Fatorada legislator Vijai Sardesai pointed out that nearly eight lakh square metres of khazan land was not reflected in the Coastal Zone Management Plan (CZMP) 2011 and sought a freeze on such land till it is shown in the subsequent plan. While CZMP 2019 may take time beyond the assurances of the CM of a year, there is no harm in freezing such land till then. In the meantime, the government should identify how the omission happened. Last we forget, 46 lakh square metres of sand dunes were missing from the draft CZMP 2011 maps prepared by the National Centre for Sustainable Coastal Management (NCSCM).

Lastly, given the gravity of the situation and the tragedy in the background, the actions undertaken so far appear to be far from convincing. Piecemeal action will not help clear the mess that Goa finds itself in. The government will have to reboot the system with sweeping changes, bring in policy reforms, and fix responsibility across the board — from the Panch to officers and ministers. Political leaders, no matter how tall they are, can't escape accountability.

OPEN SPACE >>

Assurances made, but will they translate into action?

A few years ago, during the protests against the coal corridor, coal hub and railway double tracking, the Goa Chief Minister agreed to hold discussions with the activists involved. At the meeting, he appeared to show understanding and assured them that he would respond after considering the issues raised. However, no follow-up ever came. Instead, in the months and years that followed, actions were taken that went against what the protesters had asked for. Railway works went ahead, including works that were questioned by locals, and complaints made to the police did not appear to receive attention. Now, with protests over the Unity Mall and the proposed tower, the CM has asked protesters that the Unity Mall project will be reconsidered. Based on past experience, there is reason for protesters to remain cautious.

ARWIN MESQUITA, Calva

Faces of a prolonged trial

Does perceived centrality of an accused's role as "ideological driver of the alleged conspiracy" justify his prolonged custody without adjudication?



ALI CHOUGULE

>The writer is a senior independent Mumbai-based journalist

The long shadow of the anti-CAA protests and subsequent riots in northeast Delhi in 2020 continues to loom large over the bail pleas of Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam. Charged under the UAPA for violence and rioting in the national capital, the disproportionate and prolonged spell of suspicion on their alleged involvement in the riots, which according to fact-finding reports by statutory commissions, civil society organisations, and independent journalists, were not spontaneous but organised to crush the anti-CAA agitation, and the denial of bail to Umar and Sharjeel by the Supreme Court (SC) last week raise serious questions about liberty, delivery of justice, and pre-trial detention.

The duo has been accused of conspiring to destabilise the government through violence and rioting. However, the narrative and allegations of their involvement in a "larger conspiracy" again sidestep one basic fact: in the criminal justice system, pre-trial guilt contravenes the fundamental human rights principle of the presumption of innocence until the prosecution proves it beyond a reasonable doubt. The binary view of the Delhi riots — one of the Delhi police and the other of civil society organisations, legal experts, and intellectuals — makes it vital to understand why and how Umar and Sharjeel have been behind the targeting of homes, shops, business establishments, and places of worship of a particular community.

This requires an impartial and complete investigation, followed by a charge sheet and judicial trial, conviction, and punishment if found guilty. Instead, what we have had in the last six years is the long incarceration of young and highly educated people like Umar and Sharjeel on terror charges that seems like an attempt to fix responsibility for the riots that followed months of protests over the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019, and the proposed National Register of Citizens. The anti-CAA protests were widespread and multi-site. But Delhi's Shaheen Bagh was the epicentre of the agitation that stood like an uncomfortable site for the proponents of the CAA and NRC.

The protests that spiralled into violence and rioting were preceded by a series of hate speeches and provocative statements by leaders and supporters of the conten-

The denial of bail highlights deeper questions about liberty, prolonged pre-trial detention and the scope of anti-terror laws. It raises concern over whether alleged ideological roles can justify years in custody without trial or final adjudication by courts and prosecutors



tious citizenship law. The distrust was fomented and horrible housing led to horrific violence. These facts seem to have been ignored by the police while filing charges against the accused of conspiracy and terrorism to weaken India's territorial unity and integrity.

The long incarceration of Umar and Sharjeel on terror charges, making the process a punishment while disregarding the narrative and climate of division and polarisation that was reportedly responsible for fomenting communal violence, raises questions over the police effort to fix accountability for the riots on the accused.

The anti-CAA protests were led by women from the Muslim community. But there was wider support and solidarity with the agitation from several sections of society, making it a secular movement against a discriminatory law which offers a fast-tracked path to Indian citizenship to members of persecuted minority communities from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. The agitation symbolised a collective dissent which was too broad to have been hijacked by a few educated young men and women with the intent of provoking violence and engineering riots.

A peaceful protest is a democratic right, not a crime. A violent protest or a riot is a crime. But the question is whether every riot is a UAPA crime.

If one understands this distinction, then it becomes easier to comprehend why Umar and Sharjeel have been denied bail six times, starting from the trial court, the High Court and now the Supreme Court. It is pertinent to keep in mind the background of the case and the prosecution's narrative chronologically. It starts, according to some legal experts, with the 2016 JNU controversy and moves to the anti-CAA protests and ends with the communal violence. According to the prosecution, protests, speeches, and political messages created the conditions that ultimately culminated in violence. Based on this narrative, several individuals were arrested under the UAPA, not for their direct participation in violence but on the theory of conspiracy.

However, during the bail decision at

the trial and High Court stages, in some cases the court found the prosecution's evidential material too vague, inferential, or thin to establish even a prima facie case of terrorist activity and granted bail. In the case of Umar and Sharjeel, it has not reached a stage where detention has become unconstitutional. This distinction carved by accepting the prosecution's argument that the duo played a "formative" role, while five others had "merely conspiratorial association" and were given bail.

Constitutionally, this is a part of the role of the courts as sentinels of liberty when the seriousness of the allegations alone sustains incarceration for years without a trial in sight. By accepting the prosecution's reasoning that both accused were part of the "larger conspiracy" and provided "intellectual architecture" to violence and riots, the court created a "hierarchy of participation" distinction, a new ground for denial of bail to the accused, which makes it even more difficult to obtain bail under the UAPA. Equally surprising is the court's expansion of the definition of "terrorism" — said Section 15 of the UAPA Act cannot be "interpreted narrowly to include only acts of blatant violence" but would also include acts that "disrupt services and threaten the economy".

This judicial wisdom goes beyond the text and normal understanding of law. Past SC judgements have explicitly held that on the ground of delay in trial, a constitutional court cannot grant bail under the UAPA, notwithstanding the rigours of the statute. Ironically, a day after denying bail to Umar and Sharjeel, in another case, another bench of the SC granted bail to a PMLA accused, citing prolonged pre-trial detention. This dichotomy is not only concerning but also raises a question — does the perceived centrality of the accused's role as "ideological drivers of the alleged conspiracy" justify their prolonged custody without adjudication?

— FPI

THE INBOX >>

A shadow over Goa's tourism industry

Goa, a popular tourist destination, is increasingly making headlines for the wrong reasons. Recently, more than 9 kg of hydroponic cannabis worth around Rs 3.20 crore was seized at Manohar International Airport. In April 2025, another 11.67 kg valued at Rs 11.67 crore was recovered. Earlier, in 2024, a hydroponic cannabis unit in Ponda was sealed by authorities. Cannabis is illegal in India, even though it is permitted for medicinal or recreational use in some countries. Hydroponic cannabis is grown without soil using sunlight and nutrient-rich water. While this method is useful for growing vegetables like lettuce and basil, its use for cannabis cultivation is banned. Goa's tourism and nightlife make it an easy route for smugglers, who hide drugs in luggage. Even quiet areas in Canacona are reportedly being used as transit points. Such incidents damage Goa's image and can affect tourism. Hydroponic farming should promote health and food security, not illegal activity and social harm.

ASHLEY NORONHA, Fatorada

Bloated bureaucracy and low morale

Many people believe that government employees are lazy. However, when some government staff appear inefficient, it is often due to the system they work in, not because they lack a work ethic. Earlier, government jobs offered strong job security and a lifelong pension. Over time, expectations and needs have changed. Pay levels, the work environment, and the way employees are treated by both the government and the public have also changed. These factors can make some employees lose motivation and interest in their work. Some government workers do take their

Helmet for pillion riders too

The Transport Department is likely to implement a rule making helmets compulsory for pillion riders as well, along with the rider. At present, only the rider is required to wear a helmet while riding a scooter or motorcycle, with or without gear. Helmets are meant purely for safety. Many lives have been lost in road accidents, and not wearing a helmet has often been a major reason. It is commonly seen that many two-wheeler riders carry helmets but do not wear them. Some riders put on the helmet only when they spot RTTO officials from a distance, just to avoid a fine, and remove it after crossing the checkpoint. Although wearing a helmet is mandatory once seated on the vehicle, the rule is rarely followed in practice.

The new rule making helmets compulsory for both riders and pillion riders is a welcome step, as it can help prevent serious head injuries. However, it is now up to two-wheeler owners to follow the rule sincerely. Helmets should be worn to save lives, not just to escape fines. Rules should be enforced strictly, and people should support such safety measures instead of blaming the government for every road accident.

RAJU RAMAMURTHY, Vasco

and absence of road direction signboards at several important locations, which is causing confusion among road users and affecting road safety. The signboard on the road towards Dabolim shows incorrect directions for Chandor and Sanvordem, with wrong arrows displayed. This has been misleading motorists, especially those unfamiliar with the area. At the Chandor Church Circle, the direction board showing village names has been washed away and is lying on the ground, leaving commuters without proper guidance.

Further, the signboard near the Hill View Restaurant, below the Mount Hill Chapel, is completely missing and needs immediate replacement. Due to the absence of these essential signboards, road users are often confused about which direction to take, leading to inconvenience and possible accidents. I request the Traffic Cell and the PWD Roads Department to take urgent action in the interest of public safety.

RONNIE D'SOUZA, Chandor

Unsafe transformer setup raises concern in Siolim

I wish to draw the attention of the Electricity Department, Siolim Section, to a serious safety concern. A transformer installed at Tarchi Bhat Old Theatre junction has been erected on a low concrete pedestal. Unlike the usual transformers fixed on two-pole structures at a safe height, this one is easily accessible. The LT and HT connections are exposed, which can be dangerous, especially to the public. In addition, unauthorised metallic advertisement boards have been placed close to the transformer. This could increase the risk of electric shock and may lead to serious accidents. I request the Electricity Department to inspect the site immediately and take necessary steps to ensure public safety.

GREGORY E D'SOUZA, Siolim



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

KG VILOP, Chaoa

Missing signboards cause confusion

I wish to draw the attention of the concerned authorities to the poor condition

Cyber Insecurity the Biggest Threat in India: World Economic Forum

The World Economic Forum has released its Global Risks Report ahead of its annual meeting in Davos. Among global risks, geo-economic confrontation has climbed 8 places to become the biggest risk. This is followed by misinformation, disinformation, social polarization, and interstate conflict, which are also considered major threats. According to the report, the biggest threat to the world is undoubtedly environmental pollution. But for India, the biggest threat is cyber insecurity. The top five risks identified for India are: cyber insecurity, income inequality, inadequate public services and public safety, economic slowdown, and state-based armed conflict, such as the long-running conflicts in Manipur and Nagaland. In addition, water scarcity is also emerging as a major problem for the world. This threat is most pronounced in India because, firstly, the water supply is decreasing, and secondly, toxic elements in the water are increasing. The tragic incident in Indore due to contaminated water is one example. There are also concerns about other states where the water is becoming increasingly polluted. According to new research, the mixture of toxic elements in water is increasing. According to the World Economic Forum, above all this is the cyber insecurity crisis.

As India becomes a digital power, aiming to reach the pinnacle of internet power with 5G and 6G, along with the useful expansion of digital power across the country, hackers and unscrupulous individuals have also started misusing this power. In no time, cybercrime has taken root in India. Today, the situation is such that these cybercrimes have an international dimension. External forces orchestrate cybercrimes, and money is siphoned off from the accounts of well-educated people. It is said that in a digitally powerful India like this, online trading should have increased significantly. UPI payments should have increased, but they haven't because there's no effective way to counter the fraudsters' attacks. Even more importantly, while there are laws to stop cyber fraudsters, and reports are filed, no action is taken. The law enforcement agencies are unable to recover even a fraction of the money lost to cyber fraud in India each year. As far as cybercriminals are concerned, they operate openly, and the police are unable to apprehend them. The way environmental pollution has shown its deadly effects in India, last year saw unprecedented rainfall, and now there is unprecedented cold. Before that, the summer was also unusually hot. This is called extreme weather. People affected by it are unable to work or be enthusiastic about new ventures. Transportation comes to a standstill, and roads are blocked. In such a situation, how can new schemes be implemented? This is a matter of concern, but if cybercrime has become an even bigger crisis, then imagine the extent to which cybercrimes have troubled ordinary people. Not only ordinary people, but high-ranking officials and educated individuals are also falling victim to it and losing their money. Recently, a senior police officer in Punjab lost crores of rupees to these fraudsters. Such examples are not uncommon, but the need is to control this crisis. Why is it considered the biggest threat? Because if cybercrimes, due to their constantly changing nature, continue to deceive everyone from ordinary people to prominent individuals, it will create economic insecurity throughout the entire environment. In such an economically insecure environment, neither will new investments be generated, nor will traders be able to expand their businesses and reach the top position in the world. Therefore, cyber insecurity has been identified as the biggest threat, as it is the reason for the increasing feeling of economic insecurity.

—Abhishek Vij

Punjab Police grappling with criminal elements

It is commonly said that with changing times, due to a lack of education and employment, gun culture has become prevalent not only in the country's metropolitan cities but also in towns, and incidents of extortion have increased. The situation has escalated to the point where people are shooting each other out of revenge. A vivid example of this vengeful and violent atmosphere was seen in Amritsar district of Punjab. The Punjab Police is constantly confronting gangsters and mafia, which is a testament to their bravery. A few days ago, gangsters murdered Jarnal Singh, a Sarpanch associated with the Aam Aadmi Party. The accused fled, but due to the vigilance of the police, they were apprehended. Notably, the main shooter in Sarpanch Jarnal Singh's murder, Sukhraj Singh, was arrested. The police took him to Valla to recover the weapon used in the murder. According to a conspiracy, two attackers on motorcycles were following the police party. On the way, the attackers fired six shots at the police to free their accomplice. One police officer was seriously injured. In response, the police also fired at the attackers. Seeing this, the murder accused Sukhraj Singh got out of the police van and tried to snatch a weapon from the police to escape. However, a scuffle ensued between the police and the accused. During the scuffle, the accused Sukhraj Singh was injured by a gunshot. The police took him to the hospital in an injured condition, but he had already died. Doctors declared him dead. The accused who escaped are being searched for. This situation is certainly a cause for concern. The criminals have become so emboldened that they did not hesitate to attack the police team to free their accomplice.

Building National Environmental Consciousness: Beyond Cleaning, Towards Caring



Dr Tanu Jain
Chief executive officer Bareilly cantonment board Ministry of defence

In 2014, when the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) was officially launched on 2nd October by Hon-ourable Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the occasion of Mahatma Gandhi's birth anniversary the depth of its vision was yet to be absorbed by the nation. It was not just about sweeping streets or installing dustbins. It was envisioned as a nationwide movement to achieve the dream of a "Clean India" by Gandhi's 150th birth anniversary in 2019. More than an administrative programme, it was an effort to build national consciousness, to awaken the collective spirit of cleanliness and responsibility towards the environment. The mission was about shaping citizens into custodians of their surroundings. Yet, ideals often clash with reality. Recently, while walking across the Mumbai oceanfront in the quiet of an early morning, I was struck by two worlds coexisting side by side. On one hand, there was the eternal beauty of nature rocky islands rising like guardians of the sea, flocks of chirping birds filling the air with music, and the vast ocean stretching endlessly into the horizon. Sitting there, one could feel the heartbeat of creation itself soothing, nurturing, infinite. But this vision of serenity was shattered by the path I had to

take to reach it. A stretch of filth lay in between: heaps of plastic bottles, torn polythene wrappers, foul-smelling waste, and a landfill spilling into the ocean. The smell was nauseating, the sight disheartening. And then, the most disturbing moment my eyes caught a man carrying a sack of garbage and without hesitation, throwing it straight into the sea.

I instinctively raised my voice in anger, but by then the damage was done. The ocean had swallowed yet ano-

ther wound. What pierced me more than his action was the casualness with which it was done like it was the most natural thing in the world to dump filth into nature. At that moment, a truth struck me with great force: cleaning every day will never be enough if polluting every day continues. We often believe that the solution to filth is

more cleaning. But the real solution is less littering. If our rivers, oceans, streets, and hills continue to be treated as dumping grounds, no amount of government machinery, NGOs, or volunteers can keep pace. The cycle of cleaning and re-polluting is endless unless the mindset is changed. The true challenge is not waste management, but consciousness management. People need to understand that their small act throwing a bottle, tossing a wrapper, burning plastic has immense collective consequences.

And yet, the reverse is also true. One person refusing to use plastic, one family composting at home, one community adopting a lake, one school teaching its children to segregate waste these are sparks that can ignite a movement. The path forward lies in combining systems with sensitivity, education with emotion, and enforcement with empowerment.

Community awareness drives must move beyond statistics and touch the heart. Citizen ownership of local spaces must turn duty into pride. Schools must raise a generation that treats sustainability as second nature. Instead of only punishing offenders, society must celebrate role models households that go plastic-free, businesses that shift to green practices. Enforcement must go hand in hand with alternatives biodegradable packaging, waste-to-art projects, and plastic-free zones. And most importantly, we must connect culture with cleanliness: if we revere Ganga as Mother, how can we pollute her waters? When spirituality aligns with sustainability, the message penetrates deeper. That morning by the ocean

made me reflect: nature is infinitely forgiving, but it is not infinitely resilient. For centuries, rivers have absorbed our waste, air has absorbed our smoke, and land has absorbed our toxins. But today, we are reaching a tipping point. Climate change, rising pollution, dying species all are signals that Earth is no longer able to heal herself alone. What we need is not just cleaning, but caring. To care is to treat the Earth as we treat our own home, our own body. We do not litter in our bedroom; why do we litter in our rivers? We do not dump garbage in our dining room; why do we dump it in the oceans that feed us? When caring becomes the norm, cleanliness becomes effortless. The Bhagavad Gita teaches us: "One who sees all beings in the Self and the Self in all beings, never turns away from it." If we truly see ourselves in the fish that die from plastic, in the birds that choke on waste, in the children who fall ill from pollution then to pollute becomes impossible. Osho beautifully said that cleanliness is not only an outer act but an inner discipline. When the mind is cluttered, the world is dirty. When the mind is pure, the world naturally shines. To keep our environment clean is not a favour we do to the Earth it is a favour we do to ourselves, our children, and our future. It is not charity; it is dharma. The Earth is not ours to exploit and discard. The Earth is ours to love, nurture, and protect. And in that protection lies not just survival, but the blossoming of human dignity and spiritual harmony. Let us go beyond the act of cleaning. Let us awaken the art of caring. For when consciousness changes, the world itself becomes clean.

THOUGHT OF THE DAY

In the depth of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer.
—Albert Camus

How personal information became the world's most valuable resource

In the digital age, oil is no longer the world's most valuable resource. Data has taken its place. Every message sent, location tracked, purchase made, and search conducted feeds a global economy built on personal information. What was once private has become a commodity, traded at a scale few fully understand. Modern digital services appear free, but users pay with data. Social media platforms, search engines, and mobile applications collect detailed behavioural information, which is analysed, sold, or leveraged for targeted advertising and influence. The true cost of convenience is ongoing surveillance. The scale of data extraction is unprecedented. Smartphones alone generate constant streams of location, biometric, and behavioural data. When combined with financial records, browsing history, and social networks, these datasets allow companies to predict preferences, habits, and vulnerabilities with remarkable accuracy. Governments are major data actors as well. Digital identity systems, biometric databases, and centralised records promise efficiency and inclusion. However, they also concentrate power. When vast amounts of personal information are held by the state without strong legal safeguards, the risk of misuse grows. Data breaches have exposed the fragility of this system. Personal information—addresses, identification numbers, health records—regularly leaks due to weak security or internal misuse. Once exposed, data cannot be recalled. The harm is permanent, long-lasting, and often irreversible. Consent, the cornerstone of data protection, is largely symbolic. Privacy policies are lengthy, opaque, and rarely read. Users technically agree to data collection, but without meaningful choice or understanding. Opting out often means exclusion from essential services. The data economy also deepens inequality.

Why growth without dignity is a dead end

Development has become one of the most overused and least questioned words in public life. Governments invoke it to justify sweeping policies, corporations brandish it to polish their image, and critics are often silenced with a simple retort: this is necessary for development. But as the gap between glittering economic indicators and everyday lived realities widens, it is worth asking a basic question—development for whom, and at what cost?

For decades, growth has been treated as a proxy for progress. Rising GDP, expanding infrastructure, and increasing foreign investment are presented as evidence that a society is moving forward. Yet these numbers often conceal more than they reveal. Highways can coexist with hunger, smart cities with informal settlements, and record profits with mass unemployment. When development is measured only in monetary terms, human dignity becomes an afterthought. One of the clearest failures of the growth-first model is its indifference to inequality. Economic expansion does not automatically translate into shared prosperity. In many countries, wealth generated by development projects accumulates at the top while the costs—displacement, environmental damage, loss of livelihoods—are borne by those with the least power to resist. Farmers lose land for industrial corridors, forest communities are evicted for mining projects, and urban poor are pushed to the margins in the name of "beautification." These are not unfortunate side effects; they are built into a model that prioritises speed and scale over justice. The language of



development is also deeply political. Once a project is labeled "national interest," dissent becomes suspect. Those who raise concerns about environmental impact, labour rights, or social disruption are portrayed as obstacles to progress. This framing reduces complex debates into false binaries: development versus stagnation, patriotism versus obstruction. In reality, questioning the terms of development is not anti-progress; it is essential to ensuring progress is meaningful. Environmental degradation exposes another flaw in the development myth. Rapid industrialisation and unchecked extraction have delivered short-term gains at the cost of long-term survival. Rivers are polluted beyond repair, air quality deteriorates, and climate vulnerabilities deepen—often in regions least responsible for emissions. The irony is stark: development projects meant to improve lives frequently undermine the ecological foundations those lives depend on. Growth that destroys the conditions for future generations is not progress; it is deferred crisis. There is also a psychological dimension to development that is rarely discussed. When success is defined narrowly—through consumption, productivity, and competition—it reshapes social values.

The expanding reach of surveillance in everyday life

Surveillance is no longer confined to intelligence agencies or high-security zones. It has quietly entered everyday life—through cameras on street corners, biometric databases, smartphone apps, and digital transactions. While often justified in the name of security and efficiency, the expanding reach of surveillance raises urgent questions about privacy, consent, and power.

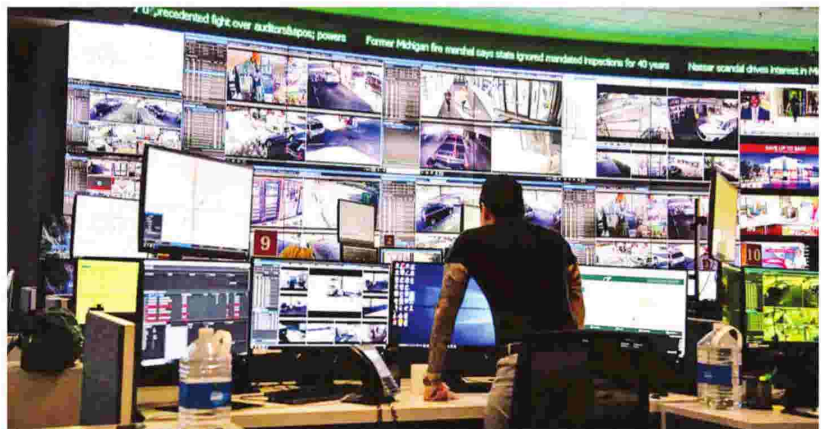
In cities and towns alike, closed-circuit television cameras have multiplied rapidly. Markets, schools, public transport, and even residential neighbourhoods are monitored around the clock. Facial recognition systems, once the stuff of science fiction, are increasingly being tested or deployed. Citizens are being watched, often without clear knowledge of how data is stored, used, or shared.

Governments argue that surveillance deters crime, improves law enforcement response, and enhances public safety. In some cases, it does. Cameras have helped identify suspects and reconstruct events after crimes. However, effectiveness is rarely matched with accountability. Oversight mechanisms remain weak, and misuse often goes unchecked. Digital surveillance extends far beyond physical cameras. Smartphones generate continuous streams of location

data. Apps collect personal information, sometimes unrelated to their stated purpose. Social media platforms track behaviour, preferences, and networks. When combined, these data points create detailed profiles that can reveal far more than individuals realise. The concern is not surveillance alone, but who controls it. In the absence of strong data protection laws, personal information can be accessed by

In cities and towns alike, closed-circuit television cameras have multiplied rapidly. Markets, schools, public transport, and even residential neighbourhoods are monitored around the clock.

state agencies, private companies, or third parties without



meaningful safeguards. Marginalised communities often face disproportionate scrutiny, reinforcing existing inequalities. Chilling effects on freedom are already visible. When people believe they are constantly monitored, they self-censor. Dissent becomes risky, assembly feels unsafe, and expression is restrained. Surveillance reshapes behaviour not through force, but through fear of being watched.

There is also the issue of consent. Most surveillance systems operate without explicit

approval from those being monitored. Citizens rarely have the option to opt out. Transparency reports, if they exist at all, are inaccessible or vague. The result is a democratic deficit where surveillance expands faster than public debate. Technology itself is not neutral. Algorithms used in surveillance systems can reflect biases present in their design or data. Facial recognition tools have been shown globally to misidentify women and minority groups at higher rates. Errors can lead to wrongful suspicion,

harassment, or even detention. Yet surveillance is often framed as inevitable—a price to be paid for modern living. This framing obscures alternatives. Privacy-conscious design, limited data retention, independent oversight bodies, and clear legal frameworks can balance security with civil liberties. The question is not whether surveillance should exist, but how much, for what purpose, and under whose control. Public awareness remains limited. Surveillance is invisible when it works smoothly,

and its consequences are often abstract until something goes wrong. By then, damage to trust and rights may be difficult to reverse.

As societies become more digitised, the struggle over surveillance will define the future of democracy. A system that watches everyone but answers to no one risks turning citizens into subjects. Protecting privacy is not about hiding wrongdoing—it is about preserving the space to live freely, think independently, and dissent without fear.

Contradictions in Life



K SIVA PRASAD
Retired senior IAS officer in the Punjab Government.

Just as it is said, 'All roads lead to Rome', all paths given in the Gita lead us to the eternal state of our inner self. Some of the paths seem to contradict each other. However, this is like a circle where a journey on either side would take us to the same destination. The Gita operates on multiple levels. Sometimes Krishna comes to the level of Arjuna and sometimes He comes as the Super-soul (Paramatma). This creates difficulties in

comprehension at the initial stage as both levels appear to be different.

For example, at the beginning of the last century scientists faced difficulties while understanding light. Initially, it was proved that light is a wave, subsequently it was realized that it also behaves like a particle. Both theories appear to be opposing each other. But light, with which we are so familiar, is a combination of apparent contradictions. Similar is the life and this fact needs to be kept in mind while understanding the Gita. Another example is of blind men and an elephant. Once an elephant entered a village and a group of blind men attempted to identify or understand it. Depending on which part of the elephant they touched, they imagined what an elephant might

be like. The one who touched the trunk said that the elephant is like a long and rough creature. The one who touched the tusk said that this animal is as hard as a rock. Another who touched the stomach said that it is huge and soft. Thus, each one of them made their deductions unaware that their perceptions were just a fragment of the whole. Different perceptions of one reality are the reason for all the differences we see in the world today. Our state of mind is similar to theirs while perceiving the people and things around us. This partial understanding leads us to misery.

The Bhagavad Gita is a journey from a partial understanding to a complete one. Krishna assures that even a few steps by us in this journey can bring big gains.

How extreme temperatures are redefining daily life

Heat is no longer a seasonal inconvenience. Across large parts of the world, rising temperatures are becoming a permanent condition that reshapes how people live, work, and survive. From early summer heatwaves to record-breaking nighttime temperatures, extreme heat is emerging as one of the most dangerous—and least acknowledged—effects of climate change.

In many regions, summers are arriving earlier and lasting longer. Heatwaves that once occurred once in a decade now appear almost annually. What makes today's heat particularly lethal is not just the daytime highs but the absence of cooling at night. When temperatures remain elevated after sunset, the human body loses its ability to recover, increasing the risk of heat-related illness and death. The impact is most visible among outdoor workers. Construction labourers, street vendors, sanitation workers, and



farmers are forced to work under punishing conditions. For daily wage earners, staying home is not an option. Productivity declines, health deteriorates, and incomes shrink. Heat becomes both a physical and economic burden. Urban areas experience the worst effects due to the heat island phenomenon. Concrete, asphalt, and glass trap heat, while shrinking green spaces limit natural cooling. Informal settlements with poor ventilation and limited access to electricity become heat traps. For millions, cooling devices like air conditioners remain unaffordable or unreliable due to power shortages. Public health systems are

ill-prepared. Heat-related illnesses are often underreported, misdiagnosed, or treated as isolated incidents rather than a systemic crisis. Dehydration, heatstroke, cardiovascular stress, and kidney failure spike during extreme heat periods, placing immense strain on hospitals already operating at capacity.

Children and the elderly are especially vulnerable. Schools without adequate ventilation or drinking water become unsafe during heatwaves. Older adults living alone face increased risk, particularly when social support systems are weak. Heat quietly claims lives, often without the attention given to floods or earthquakes. Extreme heat also disrupts education and productivity. Learning outcomes decline as classrooms become unbearable. Work hours are reduced or shifted, affecting economic output. In agriculture, heat stress damages crops, reduces yields, and increases reliance on irrigation, further straining water resources.

How algorithms are rewriting authority

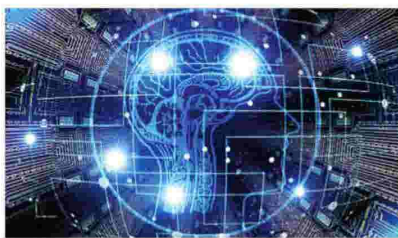
Power once flowed through visible institutions: governments, courts, media houses, and corporations with identifiable leadership. Today, authority is increasingly exercised through algorithms—systems that rank, recommend, approve, deny, and predict, often without transparency or accountability. This shift is subtle but transformative, reshaping how decisions are made and who gets to make them.

Algorithms determine what news people see, which job applications are shortlisted, whether a loan is approved, and which posts gain visibility on social media. In policing and governance, algorithmic tools are used for predictive surveillance, risk assessment, and resource allocation. While marketed as neutral and efficient,

these systems embed assumptions, values, and priorities that are rarely scrutinised.

The appeal of algorithmic decision-making lies in scale. Governments and corporations argue that human judgment is slow, inconsistent, and biased, while algorithms can process vast datasets quickly. Yet automation does not eliminate bias—it redistributes it. Bias enters through training data, model design, and the goals defined by those in power. One major concern is opacity.

Many algorithmic systems function as "black boxes," where even developers cannot fully explain how outputs are generated. When an individual is denied welfare benefits or flagged as high-risk, there is often no clear explanation or mechanism for appeal. Accountability becomes diffuse, making responsibility



difficult to assign. This erosion of accountability has legal and ethical consequences. Traditional systems allow decisions to be challenged through courts or administrative review. Algorithmic governance complicates this process. If an automated system produces a harmful outcome, who is responsible—the programmer, the

institution using it, or the data itself? The impact is not evenly distributed. Marginalised communities are more likely to be subject to algorithmic scrutiny, particularly in areas like policing, immigration, and welfare distribution. Predictive systems trained on historical data often replicate past discrimination, reinforcing existing

inequalities under the guise of objectivity.

In the workplace, algorithms increasingly manage labour. From gig platforms that assign tasks and determine pay to corporate software that monitors productivity, workers are subject to constant evaluation by systems they cannot see or contest. This shifts power away from human managers toward automated metrics, reducing autonomy and job security. Public awareness of algorithmic power remains limited. Unlike laws or executive orders, algorithms operate quietly. Their decisions appear technical rather than political, discouraging public debate. This invisibility allows significant shifts in authority to occur without democratic oversight. Some governments are beginning to respond through regulation, mandating transpa-

rency, audits, and human oversight. However, regulatory frameworks often lag behind technological adoption. Meanwhile, private companies continue to deploy increasingly complex systems at speed. The central question is not whether algorithms should be used, but how. Technology can support decision-making without replacing human judgment. Transparency, explainability, and the right to appeal must be treated as fundamental safeguards, not optional features.

As algorithms continue to mediate access to rights, resources, and opportunities, they become de facto governing instruments. Recognising this shift is the first step toward ensuring that technological efficiency does not come at the cost of justice and democratic control.

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Maha success

BJP-led Mahayuti shines in local body polls

JUST over a year after the BJP-led Mahayuti routed the Opposition in the Maharashtra Assembly elections, the ruling alliance has asserted its dominance in the statewide local body polls as well. The BJP has emerged as the single largest party in the high-stakes Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) polls. The outcome marks a decisive shift in Mumbai's pecking order, as an undivided party, the Bhai Thackeray-founded Shiv Sena ruled India's financial capital for decades. Now, the Sena faction led by Deputy CM Eknath Shinde will play second fiddle to the saffron party in the BMC, as is the case in the state government. Even the reunion of the Thackeray cousins after two decades failed to stop the Mahayuti juggernaut. Former CM Uddhav Thackeray's Shiv Sena and Raj Thackeray's Maharashtra Navnirman Sena found it very hard to translate symbolic unity into electoral success. The desperate alliance between the Nationalist Congress Party factions led by Sharad Pawar and his nephew Ajit Pawar came a cropper in Pune.

The BMC matters enormously as it is India's richest civic body; its budget for 2025-26 is a whopping Rs 74,427 crore, higher even than that of states such as Himachal Pradesh and Goa. The local body's new composition will have far-reaching implications for Mumbai's governance, policy priorities and the political dynamics in Maharashtra. The poll verdict is an endorsement of Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis' mega development pitch, even as the Thackerays' "Marathi mannos" card did not find many voters. The Congress, too, was relegated to the sidelines in the big battles, but it did cause a flutter with its allegation that the "indelible" ink used in the polls could be easily erased.

The results have put a question mark over the future of the Opposition's Maha Vikas Aghadi alliance, with its constituents struggling to stay relevant. Maharashtra's most prominent political families — the Thackerays and the Pawars — are now a pale shadow of their former selves. The BJP has overwhelmingly eclipsed not only its rivals but also its allies.

Students' well-being

SC spells out institutional responsibility

THE wide-ranging directions issued by the Supreme Court to address the issue of student distress are a much-needed intervention. These follow submission of an interim report by the National Task Force constituted last year to attend to the mental health concerns of students. The apex court has rightly imposed the accountability clause on higher education institutions (HEIs), both public and private. They cannot shirk away from their fundamental duty to ensure safe, equitable, inclusive and conducive spaces of learning, it has said. A terse reminder highlights how the mental well-being of students is as important as ensuring academic excellence. Any incident of suicide or unnatural death of a student will have to be reported, and an annual report submitted to regulatory bodies. The ruling chalks out a broad framework of institutional responsibility. It's a commendable step forward.

The significance of prescribing a new way of functioning cannot be overstated in an ecosystem that prioritises profit over student well-being in case of private institutions, and chooses amnesia for government-run colleges and universities. It's in ordering the filling of key teaching and non-teaching vacancies, including of Vice Chancellors, within four months that the ruling can be truly impactful. The backlog of pending scholarship disbursements, too, has to be cleared within the same period. HEIs have been asked to ensure that positions are filled within a month from the date on which the vacancy arises. Considering the sizeable number of vacancies across the country, how this plays out is unclear, especially when both the Central and state governments have been equally inept.

An overhaul of a flawed system within months is too much to expect. From now on, though, the governments and higher education institutions will find it difficult to seek cover behind lame excuses. Inaction must invite censure.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SUNDAY, JANUARY 17, 1926

Whyte's monograph on India

SIR Frederick Whyte's monograph, "India, a Federation?", scarcely fulfils the expectation which the announcement by the Government of India some months ago of the mission entrusted to the late President of the Legislative Assembly had led the public to form. The bulk of the book is a merely theoretical contribution, based upon the study of the seven representative federal constitutions in the world, to the discussion of a subject which is essentially practical, without even a serious attempt to show whether and to what extent the lessons that can be derived from the working of those constitutions are applicable to the present case. Only a few pages are devoted to the actual problem of India, and the only thing of value in those pages is certain general conclusions which must clearly be particularised before they can prove useful to those to whom it will fall to evolve India's future Constitution. With the most important of these conclusions no one need quarrel. It cannot be denied, for instance, that "the Indian Constitution, embodied in the Government of India Act, is essentially that of a unitary State," and that such provincial autonomy, using that phrase in the author's own sense, that of the autonomy of the Governor's province in relation to the Government of India and ultimately to the Crown itself, is "in an embryonic state." Nor will anyone deny that if India is ever to be a federal State, certain essential conditions must be fulfilled. According to him, not only must the division of functions be clearly laid down in the Constitution but there must be as little doubt as possible where the residuary powers of sovereignty actually lie.

THE GREAT GAME

JYOTI MALHOTRA

INDIA may be in the throes of a political spat with its most important foreign partner, the US, while the economy, as noted financial journalist TN Ninan pointed out in these columns earlier this week, is more shy than sociable — but the government's never-say-die ambition to scale the high cultural heights remains. The first gallery of what's expected to be the world's largest museum, the Yuge Yugeen Bharat, will open by the end of the year.

The scale is certainly formidable. As many as 100,000 artefacts telling the story of India, from the Indus Valley civilisation to the present day, will be showcased across 30 galleries in the North Block and South Block, British Raj buildings that have housed the bureaucratic elite in the heart of Lutyens' Delhi over the last hundred years.

There's something about a museum that appeals to the Modi government. Perhaps, like the Bahujan Samaj Party's Dalit leader Mayawati — whose monuments to herself and her mentors, Kanshi Ram and Babasaheb Ambedkar, are littered around Lucknow and the outskirts of Delhi — Modi understands that you may hate them or love them, but monuments are always going to stand the test of time. (That's why statues of Lenin and Marx were first attacked by counter-revolutionaries when it was clear the Soviet Union was falling in end-1991.) And that's why, New Delhi has been slowly rebuilt and reshaped in the last 11 years since Modi became PM.

From the Pradhan Mantri Sangrahalaya, or the Prime Ministers' Museum, where there are galleries to every PM, including Modi — which gets a mention on the public address system of the



HOME COMING : It was surprising to see the scarce attention to detail at the exhibition showcasing the Piprahwa Buddha relics recently inaugurated by the PM in New Delhi. PHOTO COURTESY MINISTRY OF CULTURE

Shatabdi trains coming into Delhi — to Yuge Yugeen Bharat, the demonstration of the RSS and BJP's ambition to carve out a special memory in the heart of India is unparalleled.

The impressive fact is that nothing is too small for the BJP. At the Harivallabh music festival in Jalandhar which celebrated its 150th anniversary in the last week of December, Culture Minister Gajendra Shekhawat was unable to show up — so he sent a video message saying the government would be happy to build an auditorium for India's oldest music festival. The unspoken message that accompanied the loud claps to the video message was that the BJP would do anything to help Punjab recover its diminished heritage — and that it would certainly help if the people of Punjab were to return the favour, by voting them in.

That's why it was surprising to see the scarce attention to detail at the exhibition showcasing the Piprahwa Buddha relics recently inaugurated by the PM in Delhi. For those who came late to the story, five small caskets containing jewel stones, bone fragments and ashes of Gautam Buddha were discovered in 1898 by William Claxton Peppé, a British colonial engineer who managed several estates south of the Nepal border, including the Birdpur Estate in a

The first gallery of what's expected to be the world's largest museum, the Yuge Yugeen Bharat, will open by the end of the year.

village called Piprahwa. Fast-forward to 2025, when the Peppé descendants decided to auction the Buddha relics in their keep in Hong Kong, leading to a nationwide furore, which in turn pushed the Centre to partner with the Godrej Industries Group to buy the jewel relics and bring them back to the motherland.

"It would make every Indian proud that the sacred Piprahwa relics of Bhagwan Buddha have come home (to India) after 127 long years..." the PM said at the time. Certainly, the ambition to position India as the rightful inheritor of one ancient civilisation, the Indus Valley, and one ancient school of thought, Buddhism, is striking to see.

There they are, the magnificent jewels, in a bulletproof case in front of you. Gaze, then, upon the "stars in silver and gold, discs of

gold leaf embossed with Buddhist symbols, and numerous pearls of many sizes... drilled beads, stars and flowers cut from red or white cornelian, amethyst, topaz, garnet, coral and crystal" — all this information gleaned from www.piprahwa.com, because it isn't available at the exhibition, neither regurgitated by the young, blissfully ignorant volunteers present nor offered by Design Factory India (DFI), the company that has put together the show. It may be mentioned here that the DFI's claim to fame is that it has built a museum in Vadnagar on the town's Buddhist connection as well as one in Bhuj, memorialising the 2001 earthquake.

The exhibition also contains stunning sculptures manifesting the Buddha, sourced from collections in the Indian Museum in Kolkata, the National Museum in Delhi and museums elsewhere in the country. Many of these sculptures once came from parts of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, now in Pakistan, except the word "Pakistan" on the placard has been replaced by "Undivided India." Some paintings have been "recreated" — meaning, they were in such poor shape in the museum in which they were kept that it was not possible to relocate them.

Look closely now at the thousand-year-old sculptures. You know they've been cleaned —

they have that shiny, polished look, stripped of the accumulated decades of dust and grime. The DFI confirms your hypothesis. You hope the cleaners used good cleaning liquid that does not eat schist — it would be good to know what the process was.

This public-private partnership between Godrej Industries and the government is clearly a model for the future. It's not clear, though, whether the Godrej folks have donated the jewel relics to the country or the government has bought them off. Whatever it is, they are home.

And so, as the Yuge Yugeen Bharat museum takes shape in the heart of Delhi, a stone's throw away from the PM's new home that is being completed, cast your eyes to Ayodhya, where a museum of Indian temple architecture is being built in the shadow of the Ram Mandir. This is an out-and-out private partnership, but it's also clear that the government is watching closely. The outstanding design is a brainchild of the Zaha Hadid architectural concern — which lost the contract to build Yuge Yugeen to Debashish Guha's Arcop consortium and the Los Angeles-based Kulapat Yantarasat — while the funding is being provided by a 'Tatas' subsidiary called Ecofirst.

But you are now back home in Chandigarh and so another visit to the Government Museum in Sector 10, which also houses the Buddha Gandhara sculptures — split half-half with the Lahore Museum when India became independent — is essential, if only to see if the spirit of change has travelled to this part of the country. You still inscribe your name in a register, just like if you were visiting an important bureaucrat at the Secretariat — just the museum ticket is not enough. The museum is still desolate. Some exhibits in the miniature gallery have been moved because the roof is being repaired, but work has come to a standstill because funds, seemingly, have run out. 'Le Plus ça change...' The more some things change, the more some others remain the same.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Those only deserve a monument who do not need one. — William Hazlitt

Cockroaches and conscience

CVR JOGA RAO

OLD-TIMERS may recall a scene from the classic Hindi film *Shri 420*. A newly employed restaurant waiter, Raju (Raj Kapoor), runs out of the kitchen in panic, crying, "Dal mein cockroach hai!" Several customers promptly vomit in disgust. Poor Raju is fired on the spot for his naivety.

No kitchen, however spotless, is truly complete without a cockroach lurking behind a pipe or hiding in a crack in the wall or woodwork. These resilient creatures lie low during the day and emerge at night when the lights go out. They scuttle across floors in search of stray crumbs, gnaw at leftovers in the sink and mostly vanish before dawn.

We face a special challenge at home: my wife is allergic to, and simply cannot tolerate, even the faintest smell of pesticide sprays. She keeps our kitchen immaculately clean, wiping the slab and floor daily with Dettol, its sharp antiseptic scent filling the air. Yet the cockroaches seem utterly unfazed; they treat it as a welcoming background aroma. Whenever she spots one, she springs into action, despatching it swiftly with a broom, a wooden bat — or, if nothing else is handy, her slippers — muttering all the while, "Siree Siree, Siree Siree, Khamosa, Khamosa!" (O God, please forgive). It is a sight I find hard to watch: her determination clashing with my queasy heart.

My squeamish nature and (perhaps misplaced) compassion push me towards a gentler, if rather cumbersome, method: catching them alive with a wad of kitchen roll and tossing them into the dustbin. But this is easier said than done, as anyone who has tried to catch a cockroach will attest. Cockroaches are perpetually alert, and at the first hint of danger, they dart into a crevice or vanish behind a pipe where you cannot reach.

Watching my wife deal with these pests reminds me of Thomas Gisborne's poem *The Worm*: "Turn, turn thy hasty foot aside! Nor crush that helpless worm!... O do not lightly take away! The life thou canst not give." The poet may have written these lines after seeing someone step on a worm in his garden. We have no way of knowing whether he showed the same tenderness towards a cockroach in his kitchen.

Amidst all this, a nagging doubt persists: is it morally wrong to kill a cockroach invading our kitchen? We do not hesitate to kill a snake that slithers into our home or swat a mosquito alighting on our arm. In each case, the act is driven not by cruelty but by self-preservation. Is it any different with cockroaches that contaminate food and pose a health risk?

Beauty, as the saying goes, lies in the eye of the beholder. Perhaps morality, too, lies less in the act itself than in the intention behind it. As my wife and I continue to deal with our unwelcome kitchen guests — she decisive, I dithering — it is quite possible that her swift slippers deliver a cleaner moral verdict than my clumsy attempts at misplaced mercy.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Budget as a catalyst for reform

Refer to 'Budget must spur deeper reforms'; the upcoming Budget must go beyond incremental adjustments and act as a catalyst for deeper, faster reforms. Sustaining high growth and escaping the middle-income trap will require a renewed focus on manufacturing, job creation and regulatory simplification. Infrastructure investment alone is no longer sufficient; India must now address structural rigidities that constrain enterprise and employment. If the Budget succeeds in accelerating reforms and fostering an environment conducive to inclusive growth, it can help place India firmly on the path towards becoming a developed economy by 2047.

GAURAV BADHWAR, ROHTAK

Left to fend for themselves

With reference to 'Farmers wait assured returns to diversity', the farmer is stuck in the wheat-paddy loop because those are the only crops that the government buys and thus MSP is assured to the farmer. Growing any other crop will leave him/her to the vagaries of the market. Since there is no legal guarantee on MSP the farmer can take no action against any private party who pays less than the MSP. In the absence of a law, cheating the farmer by paying less than the rate fixed by the government is neither a civil nor a criminal offence. To encourage crop diversification, the government can begin by starting procurement of grams and soybean for the government's mid-day meal scheme.

GURNOOR GREWAL, CHANDIGARH

Philanthropist with foresight

Refer to 'Dyal Singh's legacy: a bid to rename Delhi University's Dyal Singh College is an attempt to tamper with an identity and history that has guided us through generations. Institutions are not just buildings; they depict the values of a bygone era. Sardar Dyal Singh Majithia was a philanthropist whose legacy is an embodiment of social service. The heritage of public-serving individuals who have been pioneers in the development of a progressive society must be preserved at any cost.

AMANDEEP BAINS, RISRA

Gradual but meaningful progress

Refer to 'US trade pact very near, working on pending issues, says commerce secretary'; the statement indicating that the first phase of the India-US Bilateral Trade Agreement is close to finalisation reflects gradual but meaningful progress. Both sides are working patiently towards a mutually acceptable agreement. Concerns that higher US tariffs might dent Indian exports have so far proved unfounded, with exports to the US continuing on a positive path. This sustained performance underlines the adaptability of Indian exporters and the strength of domestic supply chains in navigating uncertain global trade conditions. As India presses ahead with trade negotiations with several countries, including Canada, the outcomes of these talks will shape its future economic trajectory.

RUKMA SHARMA, JALANDHAR

Export spurt despite headwinds

Much credit goes to the Ministry of Commerce and Industry for maintaining high rate of exports in spite of heavy imposition of US tariffs, it is indeed a commendable job. Earlier India was known for exports of raw materials and handicrafts. Now there is a big shift in the basket of exports, like pharma products, electronics, engineering goods, petroleum products and readymade garments. The exports have also increased due to the government exploring new markets like New Zealand, UK, Saudi Arabia, Italy and Germany.

NPS SOHAL, CHANDIGARH

CM's political gimmick

During his meeting with the Akal Takht Jathedar, Punjab CM Bhagwant Mann handed 25,000 to 30,000 pages of complaints against the SGPC. It is indeed questionable in which capacity were the complaints addressed to him for remedial action as he is heading a secular government not a religious redressal authority. Even, after receiving so many complaints, what prevented him to promptly sending them to the Jathedar, rather than collecting them and waiting for this opportunity. The episode seems to be motivated to derive political mileage.

BAKHSHI GURPREET SINGH, JALANDHAR

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@tribuneonline.com

Our universities are losing their creative vitality



AVIJIT PATHAK
SOCIOLOGIST

A university, I have always felt, has a higher purpose — something beyond the otherwise talked-about act of equipping the young generation with appropriate academic knowledge and skills needed for joining the specialised workforce. In fact, a good university is one that nurtures the spirit of dialogue, the power of critical enquiry and the elasticity of consciousness that accommodates plurality, diversities and differences. Moreover, a university ought to be a place where the role of the administration is minimal; its primary function is to protect a dialogic learning milieu inside the campus so that students, researchers and professors can work freely and responsibly, and unfold their hidden potential. However, it is sad to see the way Indian universities are fast losing this ideal, and instead, becoming more like conflict-ridden zones filled with fear, mistrust and surveillance. Move around some of our public universities, and you are bound to come across

unhappy students, fearful teachers and terribly arrogant administrators continually 'disciplining', punishing and suspending all those who are branded as 'deviants'. In order to understand the gravity of this crisis, let me refer to three recent incidents.

First, imagine the state of a university that does not trust its faculty, and even censors the kind of questions she/he wants the students to reflect on. Jamia Millia Islamia — a leading public university with rich heritage — suspended a professor who, as the paper-setter, included a question on 'atrocities against Muslims' in a BA (Hons) semester exam.

Why should a professor be suspended for this? If you truly open your eyes, you can clearly see that there are many incidents of atrocities against minorities. A report by the Association for Protection of Civil Rights and the Quill Foundation documented 947 hate-related incidents between June 2024 and June 2025. And the Muslims, as the report reveals, were the primary targets.

Who will deny that young students studying a discipline like social work ought to reflect on this violence, or the growing erosion of secular and democratic value? Yes, it is the power of critical pedagogy that enables a teacher/student to raise the kind of questions the status quo loves to hide. In fact, the Jamia incident reveals a dan-



DRAWBACK: A university without academic freedom fails to promote intellectual rigour. PH

gerous trend: the castigation of critical thinking as an 'anti-national' endeavour. It also conveys a message to the teaching community: "You are under observation. Know your limits."

Second, see the fate of the "Walls of Democracy" that once used to characterise the vibrant culture of political debate, posters and pamphlets at Delhi University. In a way, these walls used to reveal what young students were reflecting on — nationalism, religion, social movements, secularism and justice. But then, it is sad that the university administration has chosen to 'denotify' this democratic space. Recently, some students were not allowed to

It is sad to see how Indian universities are becoming more like conflict-ridden zones filled with fear, mistrust and surveillance.

paste posters opposing the Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Bill. Who would tell the university authorities that thinking/reflexive young minds are the real assets of the country, and whatever prevents them from articulating their world view or voicing their concerns invariably damages the moral and intellectual growth of the nation?

And finally, think of the much-talked-about Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) that seems to be at war with its own students. Recently, the JNU administration filed a complaint with the Delhi Police for lodging an FIR against three students who are associated with the students' union.

According to the administration, these students have violated the university's code of conduct by raising "objectionable and provocative" slogans. Moreover, the students involved in this incident, as the administration has stated, will face disciplinary measures like "immediate suspension, expulsion and permanent debarment from the university".

Well, these students, as reports indicate, were opposing the Supreme Court's recent verdict denying bail to former students Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam. Well, it is quite natural on the part of many — particularly, civil rights activists, legal experts and even politically awakened young students — to feel somewhat disillusioned and sad when even after five years the duo could not get bail.

Possibly, this disillusionment is further intensified because we live in a society in which, as the findings of the Association for Democratic Reforms reveal, 46 per cent of the 543 MPs have criminal cases registered against them. Moreover, 39 per cent of the ministers that are part of the present Union Cabinet have declared criminal cases against them.

Is it, therefore, surprising that some of our leading political figures are not particularly known for the kind of behaviour that promotes the ethos of secularism, religious harmony and cross-cultural dialogue?

I have no hesitation in saying that inflammatory speeches or slogans should always be condemned. However, it is equally important to realise that young/idealistic students have always raised anti-establishment slogans all over the world.

Hence, the JNU administration's decision to file an FIR against these students shows the complete breakdown of communication. Possibly, with empathy, art of listening and proper guidance, the university could have handled this situation with grace and maturity.

These three incidents indicate that our universities are fast losing their creative vitality. Hence, we ought to recall the forgotten truth — something we are missing in this neurotically polarised world.

A university without compassion loses its soul. A university without academic/intellectual freedom fails to promote intellectual rigour, meaningful research and critical enquiry. A university that forgets the spirit of dialogue, and relies more and more on punitive measures loses the art of non-violent mode of conflict resolution.

Above all, a university whose administrators behave like autocrats rather than co-travellers walking with students and teachers, and blooming as the seekers of truth, fails to nurture intellectually awakened, socially responsible and democratic citizens.

China's renewed interest in Shaksgam valley



P STOB DAN
SENIOR FELLOW,
DELHI POLICY GROUP

THE Indian media recently observed the swift development of China's road network in the Shaksgam valley, which is backed by numerous construction sites, utilising Landsat satellite data from the global land imaging body USGS EROS Center.

The abrupt attention directed towards the Shaksgam valley coincides unexpectedly with the Chinese Communist Party delegation's meeting with the BJP and RSS in New Delhi. Such underhand manoeuvres are not new, having taken place multiple times alongside major occurrences. This represents a shrewd strategy utilised by a group that persistently normalises to hinder a positive normalisation process. Consequently, this is the reason India lacks trust.

Chinese construction endeavours in Shaksgam are not a recent phenomenon. The People's Liberation Army has been monitoring the Shaksgam valley in West Karakoram since its influence expanded in Depsang

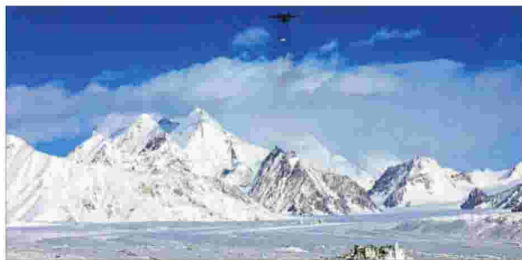
(East Karakoram) in 2013. India was undoubtedly not informed regarding the development of a new road in the Shaksgam valley triumph. The past satellite imagery has shown that China's activities in this area began immediately after the 2017 Doklam truce standoff.

Since 2018, China has improved its connectivity to the Agail Pass. Open-source intelligence satellite images have revealed that China has built a 70-km road in the Agail Pass area.

China's main objective regarding Shaksgam has been to shorten the travel from Kashgar to Skardu and Hunza via the G-219 highway, which traverses the Karakoram and the Agail Pass. The present road is part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

In 1963, Pakistan formally ceded over 5,400 sq km of the Shaksgam region through a boundary agreement. However, the actual territories transferred to China encompassed the entire Karakoram-Track, totalling 20,000 sq km in return for approximately 750 sq km.

However, according to Article VI of the 1963 Sino-Pak Boundary Agreement, it is stipulated that "The two parties agreed that after the resolution of the Kashmir dispute between Pakistan and India, the relevant sovereign authority will reopen negotiations with the Chinese government regarding the boundary as out-



LOST OPPORTUNITY: A decisive military operation in 1972 could have enabled India to reclaim Siachen Glacier and the Indian territory in Shaksgam and Karakoram Tract. AN

lined in Article Two of the current Agreement, to sign a formal Boundary Treaty to replace the existing agreement." Since 1963, China has regarded the Shaksgam-Karakoram tract as provisional, with sovereignty subject to renegotiation, which should ultimately be resolved between India and Pakistan.

India had the chance to resolve the issue during the conflict in 1972; however, the Simla Agreement, signed afterward left the disputes regarding the Siachen Glacier and the Karakoram Tract unresolved. The Simla Treaty did not clarify the final 100 km of the ceasefire line that runs from the end of the Line of Control to the border with China.

A decisive military operation in 1972 could have enabled India to reclaim not only the entire Shaksgam

The abrupt attention directed towards the Shaksgam valley coincides with a Chinese delegation's meeting with the BJP and RSS in Delhi.

er but also 5,400 sq km of Indian territory in Shaksgam and Karakoram Tract. The second opportunity for India to address the issue arose after the 1999 Kargil war.

The theoretical truce point of India, Pakistan, and China is presently situated near Indira Col, extending from Sia Kangri Point 7422 to Point 6599, covering a distance of 59 km, where the Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL) between Indian and Pakistani forces intersects with the Chinese border.

From NJ 9842, the AGPL delimitation line follows the Saltoro Ridge, which is under Indian control, although Pakistan disputes this and aims to extend the delimitation line eastward from NJ 9842 to connect with the Karakoram Pass.

At present, 75 per cent of the territory of India that was

transferred by Pakistan to China is incorporated into the Tashkurgan

Tajik Autonomous County in Xinjiang, while the remaining 25 per cent is situated in Yarkand Yecheng (Kargilik) County.

China continues to refer to the Indian Consulate building at Chini Bagh as the Pakistan-India Consulate. Since then, China has been actively engaged in the extraction of significant quantities of precious metals, gemstones, uranium, gold and copper from the Shaksgam Valley.

India has persistently expressed its formal objections to both Chinese and Pakistani officials concerning illegal efforts to change the status quo at the Daulat Beg Oldie-Karakoram Pass. The decision not to open the Karakoram Pass for trade has proven to be a poor strategy, even though the region is not contested and is regarded as an Internal Boundary (IB), rather than the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

The conflict has emerged in recent years as the PLA endeavours to construct a second road through the southern Karakoram range providing the PLA with access to the truce point near Siachen.

Former Army Chief General Bipin Rawat then dismissed allegations of any Chinese construction in the Shaksgam Valley, claiming that such an endeavour is nearly "impossible" and therefore "not a threat."

It is also accurate to state that

the Indian authorities have been overly preoccupied with perceived threats from the Tibetan front, neglecting the significance of the Eastern Karakoram sector.

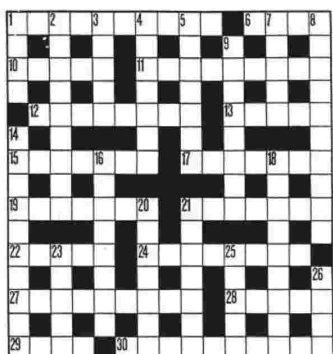
Nonetheless, the strategic placement of the road along the Teram Sher axis could have profound operational consequences for India in the Siachen, Karakoram Pass, Daulat Beg Oldie, and Depsang regions, potentially escalating tensions with Pakistan.

Pakistani military forces, which previously did not have direct access to the Teram Sher glacier, may now be positioned to cooperate with the Chinese at the truce point, thereby posing a threat to Indian supply routes to the Siachen Glacier.

One possible approach for India might entail military intervention to secure the Teram Sher glacier. Nevertheless, such a course of action could escalate into a three-front conflict, leading China to initiate additional confrontations in eastern Ladakh.

Over the years, India has significantly enhanced its infrastructure in the Karakoram region. Another alternative for the Indian military is to push beyond the Turtuk Sector to seize the Chhorbat Lungpa Valley across the Shyok River and gain control over adjoining valleys. This offers a distinctive opportunity to acquire land in Gilgit-Baltistan with minimal demographic impact.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1 Inconspicuous position (10)
- 6 Accept as adequate (4)
- 10 Sophisticated (5)
- 11 Watchfulness (9)
- 12 To flip (8)
- 13 Worth as estimated (5)
- 15 Set in motion (7)
- 17 Prove to be in the end (4,3)
- 19 Inconsistently variable (7)
- 21 Nervously excited (5,2)
- 22 Power (5)
- 24 Field of activity (8)
- 27 Place of final desperate defence (4,5)
- 28 Roam in search of prey (5)
- 29 Inert gas used in lamps (4)
- 30 Minutely detailed (4-2-4)

Yesterday's Solution

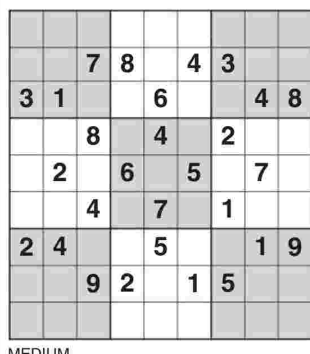
Across: 1 Finland, 5 Match, 8 Entertain, 9 Ear, 10 Dais, 12 Slapdash, 14 Weevil, 15 Piliat, 17 Nosedive, 18 Anew, 21 Ban, 22 Obnoxious, 24 Great, 25 Entente.

Down: 1 Field, 2 Net, 3 Airy, 4 Deadly, 5 Monopoly, 6 Then again, 7 Hard hit, 11 In essence, 13 Hindmost, 14 Windbag, 16 Avenue, 19 Waste, 20 Exit, 23 Own.

DOWN

- 1 Despicable (4)
- 2 Moral strength (9)
- 3 Large web-footed waterbirds (5)
- 4 Anticipate and prevent (7)
- 5 Fail to care for (7)
- 7 Cancel (5)
- 8 A fixed stock image (10)
- 9 In an ingenious way (8)
- 14 A large edible gourd (10)
- 16 Mental disposition (8)
- 18 Traditionalists (3,6)
- 20 Country's principal city (7)
- 21 Expertise (4-3)
- 23 A plaster surface for painting (5)
- 25 Suggest (5)
- 26 Not understanding readily (4)

SU DO KU



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

5	6	3	9	4	2	8	7	1
8	9	7	3	1	6	2	4	5
1	4	2	8	5	7	9	6	3
6	8	1	4	2	3	5	9	7
9	3	4	1	7	5	6	2	8
2	7	5	6	8	9	3	1	4
4	1	6	2	3	8	7	5	9
7	2	8	5	9	1	4	3	6
3	5	9	7	6	4	1	8	2

CALENDAR

JANUARY 17, 2026, SATURDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1947
- Posh Shaka 27
- Margashirsh Parvash 4
- Hiji 1447
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 14, up to 12:04 am
- Vyagatha Yoga up to 9:18 pm
- Moola Nakshatra up to 8:12 am
- Moon in Sagittarius sign
- Gandmoola up to 8:12 am

FORECAST

SUNSET: SUNRISE:	SATURDAY SUNDAY	12-45 HRS 07-18 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	16	09
New Delhi	22	07
Amritsar	13	05
Bathinda	14	05
Jalandhar	13	05
Ludhiana	15	06
Bhiwani	17	05
Hisar	16	05
Sirsa	18	05
Dharamsala	—	—
Manali	—	—
Shimla	16	06
Srinagar	10	00
Jammu	14	05
Kargil	04	-08
Leh	03	-10
Dehradun	21	06
Mussoorie	20	11

TEMPERATURE IN °C

THE DAILY GUARDIAN SURVEY ON NIPAH VIRUS OUTBREAK

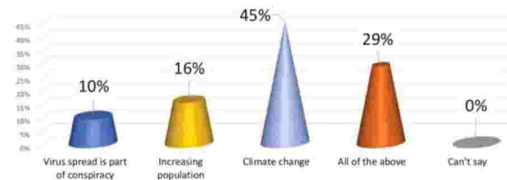
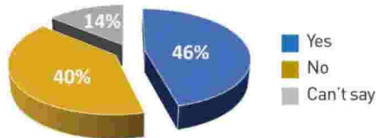
46% see Nipah as a global threat, 40% disagree.

The Survey reveals growing public concern over the Nipah virus outbreak. According to the survey, a majority fear that rising Nipah cases could trigger COVID-like conditions

globally. Climate change and population growth are seen as major reasons for increasing viral diseases, while many also suspect possible misuse as a biological weapon.

Q1.

Do you think Nipah virus in 2026 signals global catastrophe?

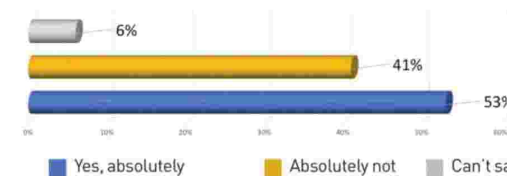
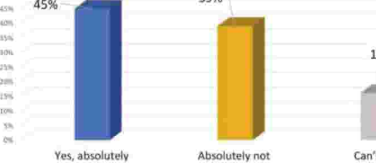


Q2.

In recent years, why are diseases from various viruses increasing worldwide?

Q3.

Some claim coronavirus was a Chinese conspiracy. Could Nipah virus also be deliberate?



Q4.

Could rising Nipah cases create a situation like the COVID-19 pandemic?

THE DAILY GUARDIAN SURVEY ON THACKERAY BROTHERS VS BJP

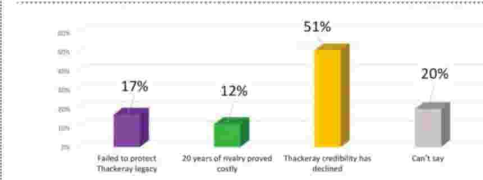
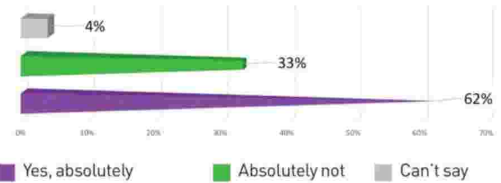
62% believe Maharashtra has rejected the Thackeray family

India News Survey indicates a strong public perception that the Thackeray family has lost ground in Maharashtra. A majority believe BJP and Devendra Fadnis out-

manoeuvred the Thackeray's, while many feel declining credibility and internal rivalries weakened their political impact.

Q1.

Do you think no one can stop the Third World War now?

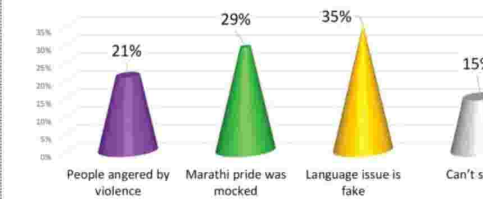
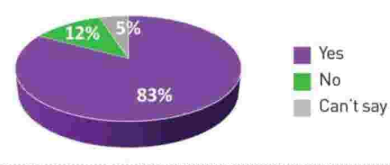


Q2.

Will Raj and Uddhav Thackeray coming together make no difference now?

Q3.

Did BJP and Devendra Fadnis' strategy overpower the Thackerays?



Q4.

Is the language controversy and "Marathi Manos" no longer central to Maharashtra politics?

Nitin Nabin to replace Nadda on January 20 as BJP president

CONTINUED FROM P1

civic elections, including the Mumbai Municipal Corporation.

After taking charge as acting president, Nitin Nabin signalled an active approach through extensive state tours, focusing on strengthening coordina-

tion between the government and the organisation and deepening ties with the RSS. Following his election on January 20, Prime Minister Modi will address party members, after which two days of meetings are scheduled.

Nitin Nabin is expected to move swiftly, holding

meetings with Chief Ministers, state presidents and party leaders from across the country. The upcoming elections in Kerala, Assam, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and Puducherry will be his first major challenge, followed by a tougher electoral cycle leading up to the 2029 general elections.

MEA urges Indians in Iran to exit as protests intensify

CONTINUED FROM P1

spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said. "Approximately 9,000 of our citizens are currently residing in Iran. The majority of them are students. In light of recent developments, we have issued two or three advisories." He was speaking at the weekly press briefing in the national capital.

Elaborating on the advisories, Jaiswal said, "We have advised our citizens in India not to travel to Iran at this time, and Indian citizens residing in Iran to leave the country by whatever means are available." He added that the government was keeping a close watch on the situation and remained committed to ensuring the well-being of Indian nationals.

The remarks come amid rising regional tensions linked to Tehran's crackdown on nationwide protests, which have reportedly killed hundreds, and concerns over possible US intervention.

An advisory issued by the Indian Embassy in Tehran asked Indian nationals, including students, businesspeople, pilgrims and tourists, to depart Iran through available means of transport, including commercial flights, citing the "evolving

situation". Another advisory issued by the MEA in New Delhi strongly urged Indians to avoid travel to Iran until further notice. It reiterated an earlier advisory issued on January 5, asking Indians in Iran to remain cautious and avoid participating in protests or demonstrations.

The advisories were is-

sued against the backdrop of repeated warnings by US President Donald Trump, who has threatened military intervention if Iranian security forces kill protesters. Trump has also encouraged "help is on the way", and warned of "very strong action" if detained protesters are executed.

India has also come under renewed focus over its longstanding ties with Iran following Trump's announcement of a 25 per cent tariff

tion documents, including passports, readily available. Indians residing in Iran on long-term visas were advised to register with the Embassy.

The protests began at Tehran's Grand Bazaar on December 28 over the Iranian rial's record fall in value and later spread nationwide. The currency's decline followed multiple crises, including unprecedented water shortages, power outages, rising unemployment and surging inflation.



People fly kites during the 3rd International Kite Festival at Baansera Park, in New Delhi on Friday. ANI

Women, risk-takers power India's startup surge: PM Modi

CONTINUED FROM P1

profound change in mindset towards innovation and risk-taking. Ideas once viewed as risky or fringe are now mainstream and respected, he observed, underlining that confidence and ambition matter as much as headline numbers.

Highlighting growth metrics, the Prime Minister said India had fewer than 500 startups a decade ago, compared with more than 2,00,000 today. The number of unicorns has risen from four in 2014 to around 125 active unicorns at present. In 2025 alone, nearly 44,000 new startups were registered, the highest single-year increase since the programme began.

He noted that the startup

movement has expanded beyond major cities to tier-2 and tier-3 towns, creating opportunities for young innovators nationwide. Calling on startups to focus more on manufacturing and world-class products, Mr Modi said the government would continue to back entrepreneurs through regulatory reforms, including decriminalisation of laws, self-certification and simplified mergers and acquisitions.

Launched on January 16, 2016, Startup India has become a cornerstone of India's innovation and economic architecture, the Prime Minister's Office said, driving employment, innovation-led growth and stronger domestic value chains across sectors.

India completes Chabahar investment, executes strategic...

CONTINUED FROM P1

ing Pakistan. The port is a key node in India's International North-South Transport Corridor, enabling faster trade links with Central Asia, Russia, and Europe. Under a long-term bilateral contract signed in May 2024, India Ports Global Limited (IPGL) was granted the right to operate the Shahid Beheshti terminal for a 10-year period, reinforcing India's role in the port's commercial and logistical development.

Corporate filings point to a parallel and deliberate recalibration of governance at IPGL, the entity mandated to operate the port on India's behalf. IPGL continues to exist as an active and compliant company, with an authorized and paid-up capital of Rs 10 crore, but its lead-

ership structure has been pared back significantly. In late September 2025, multiple government-appointed directors stepped down, including Managing Director Sunil Mukundan and Director Unmesh Sharad Wagh, as part of an effort to insulate Indian officials from the risk of personal exposure to secondary sanctions.

Subsequent appointments were designed to maintain statutory continuity while minimizing visibility. Ghanisham Sharma, appointed Chief Financial Officer in June 2025, assumed a directorial role in December 2025. The company held its most recent Annual General Meeting in December 2025, with its latest balance sheet dated 31 March 2025.

These internal adjustments coincided with a

narrowing legal window created by a six-month wind-down waiver issued by the United States Treasury, allowing India to scale back its exposure to Iran-linked operations without triggering immediate sanctions. That waiver is set to expire in April 2026. The pressure has been further amplified by Washington's announcement of a 25 per cent trade tariff on countries continuing commercial engagement with Iran, raising the economic cost of visible involvement for New Delhi and sharpening the need for risk containment.

As part of this de-risking strategy, operational responsibility at Chabahar is being handled by Iranian manpower to ensure continuity of port activity while sharply reducing attribu-

tion risk for Indian state entities. The move allows the facility to remain functional without undermining India's far larger trade relationship with the United States, estimated at approximately USD 86 billion.

Taken together, the developments indicate not a retreat from Chabahar, but a strategic withdrawal from exposure. India has completed its financial obligations, capped its downside risk, and temporarily stepped back from operational control to navigate an increasingly restrictive sanctions environment that the Trump administration is pushing. The underlying strategic value of the port, as a maritime gateway that bypasses Pakistan and connects India to Afghanistan and Central Asia, re-

mains unchanged. Once geopolitical and sanctions conditions normalize, India's posture at Chabahar is structured for rapid reactivation rather than reinvention.

With capital already deployed, infrastructure operational, and contractual rights preserved, New Delhi would not be required to commit fresh investment to resume its role at the port. Operational control could be restored at marginal cost through management contracts and technical oversight using existing institutional frameworks.

In effect, the current drawdown represents a reversible pause in visibility, not a loss of position, leaving India positioned to reassert its presence swiftly once external constraints recede.

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CONVERGENCE IS NOT A BUREAUCRATIC EXERCISE, IT IS INDIA'S MSME COMPETITIVENESS STRATEGY

OPINION

DR KAVIRAJ SINGH



India's MSME sector does not lack schemes, intent, or institutional attention. What it lacks is coherence. Over the years, well-meaning programmes have proliferated across ministries, states, and agencies, creating a maze that small enterprises must navigate even before they can begin to grow. The NITI Aayog's recent emphasis on convergence is therefore timely, but its true value will be realised only if convergence is treated not as an administrative clean-up, but as a strategic economic reform.

For MSMEs, fragmentation is not a procedural inconvenience. It is a pro-

ductivity tax. When credit support is disconnected from skill development, when technology upgradation is divorced from market access, and when sustainability is treated as a compliance afterthought rather than a growth enabler, enterprises remain small, informal, and vulnerable. Convergence must correct this structural imbalance.

FROM SCHEME ALIGNMENT TO ENTERPRISE OUTCOMES

At its core, convergence should be outcome-led, not scheme-led. The relevant question is not how many programmes exist, but whether an MSME can seamlessly move from capability-building to capital access, from production to markets, and from compliance to competitiveness.

This is where information convergence becomes critical. India already generates vast amounts of MSME-related data, including GST filings, Udyam registrations, credit histories, skill

ing records, and cluster performance metrics. Yet these data streams remain siloed. Integrating them can transform governance from reactive to predictive, allowing policymakers to identify stress points early, target interventions better, and measure real economic impact rather than scheme-level outputs.

However, data integration alone will not suffice. Process convergence must ensure that MSMEs experience government support as a single, intuitive journey rather than a series of disconnected touchpoints. A centralised digital interface can help, but only if it is designed around enterprise needs rather than departmental boundaries.

SUSTAINABILITY MUST MOVE FROM THE MARGINS TO THE MAINSTREAM

One of the most underleveraged opportunities in MSME convergence lies in embedding sustainability into the growth architecture. Today, sustainability support, whether related to energy efficiency, emissions reduction, resource optimisation, or ESG readiness, is often fragmented, pilot-driven, or treated as optional. This is a strategic misstep.

Global supply chains are rapidly tightening sustainability expectations.



Integrating them can transform governance from reactive to predictive, allowing policymakers to identify stress points early, target interventions better, and measure real economic impact rather than scheme-level outputs.

Export-oriented MSMEs are increasingly required to demonstrate carbon transparency, resource efficiency, and responsible sourcing. Domestic markets are also

beginning to reward sustainable practices through better access to finance and procurement preferences. Convergence offers a chance to mainstream

sustainability by aligning technology upgradation, finance, skilling, and market access around measurable environmental outcomes.

For instance, cluster development programmes can integrate clean technology adoption and shared sustainability infrastructure. Skill initiatives can incorporate carbon literacy and green operations. Innovation schemes can prioritise solutions that improve productivity while reducing environmental intensity. When sustainability is inte-

grated rather than appended, it becomes a competitiveness multiplier.

THE REAL TEST EXECUTION AT THE LAST MILE

The success of convergence will ultimately depend on execution discipline. Merging schemes on paper without harmonising incentives, capacities, and accountability frameworks risks creating larger but equally fragmented systems. Frontline administrators must be empowered with shared

tools, common metrics, and outcome-linked incentives. MSMEs, in turn, must see tangible reductions in compliance burden and time to benefit.

Equally important is preserving focus where it matters. Targeted initiatives for women entrepreneurs, traditional industries, agro-rural enterprises, and enterprises in the North Eastern Region should not be diluted in the name of efficiency. Strategic convergence is about intelligent integration, not uniformity.

A ONCE IN A DECADE OPPORTUNITY

India stands at a critical inflection point. As MSMEs are expected to power manufacturing growth, job creation, exports, and the green transition, policy design must evolve from scheme proliferation to system optimisation. Convergence, done right, can transform the MSME ecosystem from a patchwork of interventions into a platform for scale, resilience, and global relevance.

The opportunity before us is not merely to make schemes work better, but to make enterprises future-ready. That is the true promise of convergence, and it is a promise India cannot afford to miss.

Dr Kaviraj Singh, CEO, Eart-hood

Mausam Noor's Congress return and reckoning: Comeback, legacy politics, and Malda's uncertain future

OPINION

RASHEED KIDWAI



Mausam Benazir Noor's recent return to the Congress from the Trinamul Congress (TMC) has caused ripples in West Bengal's politics. Before she changed sides, Noor was a TMC-backed member of the Rajya Sabha whose term was going to end in April 2026. Those opposed to the TMC — a perceptively growing tribe — see this move, ahead of the state elections in West Bengal, as the metaphorical sailor jumping from a drowning ship. More than a Congress resurgence, Mausam Noor's decision, they say, portends the TMC's electoral fortunes tanking out in the key battleground of Malda district.

The legacy Noor refers to pertains to being the niece of the Congress stalwart A.B.A. Ghani Khan Choudhury (popularly called 'Barkat-da') who served eight terms as the MP from Malda and was a minister in Indira

and Rajiv Gandhi's cabinets. Noor became an MLA in 2008 from the family's pocket borough of Sujapur constituency after her mother Rubi

Noor — married to A.B.A. Ghani Khan Choudhury's brother — died. Next year, she was elected to the Lok Sabha from Malda North and retained the seat in 2014. Noor's cousin Isha Khan Choudhury is currently serving as a Congress MP from Malda South.

Noor, however, needs to remember how her return to the Congress may seal her options. A.B.A. Ghani Khan Choudhury had himself got a taste of "political Sonia" months before Bengal assembly polls of 2001. Choudhury, holding charge of WBPC, had raised the bogey of 'mahajot' envisaging BJP becoming part of the grand alliance against the Left League.

However, closer to the 2001 assembly polls, Choudhury became lukewarm to the idea of mahajot even though it was without the BJP. One evening, the veteran leader called on Sonia highlighting virtues of going alone in Bengal. As Choudhury finished speaking and gulped a noisy sip of tea, Sonia said, "but Barkat-da, a few weeks back, you were

saying something different. I have all your statements, press clippings in a folder," she said. The old man shuffled uncomfortably and then sought permission to leave. The moment he was out of 10, Janpath, he told a close aide, 'tini metri hoye guchhen!' (she has become a leader).

Coming back to Noor's political journey in 2019, Noor left the Congress and joined the TMC after the West Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee turned down her proposal for an electoral alliance with the party for the general elections. The CPM is believed to have put a spanner in the works. The TMC rehabilitated Noor by sending her to the Rajya Sabha. And now, her return to the Congress is an admission that, in the party's current thinking, the Gani Khan Choudhury legacy can unify a faction-ridden Congress in Malda.

The buzz in Delhi is that since Noor's political identity has largely been tied to the family legacy, the party may get a tailwind advantage of the Ghani Khan Choudhury brand if she is fielded from the family pocket borough of Sujapur in the upcoming assembly elections.

Not everyone, however, buys this line. In fact, a significant section in the Pradesh Congress sees no advantage in getting Noor on board. Faced with no possibility of renomination to the Rajya Sabha, joining the Congress is her only way to stay relevant in state politics, they argue. Pointing at the Delhi-oriented Congress



Rajya Sabha MP Mausam Noor joins Congress Party in the presence of Congress General Secretary Ghulam Ahmad Mir. (File photo)

The buzz in Delhi is that since Noor's political identity has largely been tied to the family legacy, the party may get a tailwind advantage of the Ghani Khan Choudhury brand if she is fielded from the family pocket borough of Sujapur in the upcoming assembly elections.

think tank's naivety about Bengal politics and the waning influence of Ghani Khan Choudhury's legacy, they believe foisting Noor and her possible assembly nomination may, in fact, frustrate district-level Congress workers who stuck with the party all these years in fac-

ing both the TMC and the BJP onslaught.

This is not the first time Noor has catalysed political drama. In 2019, her family's hold over Malda's two Lok Sabha seats appeared loose as she defected to the TMC and fought against Isha Khan Choudhury in Malda

North, resulting in the defeat of both Noor and Khan to the BJP candidate, Khagen Murnu, due to the splitting of votes. Just before the 2024 Lok Sabha elections — Noor was a Rajya Sabha MP from the TMC by then — she could not be traced in Malda. She had not been campaigning, as the TMC had not fielded her in either of the two Parliamentary seats. There was serious discomfort in the TMC about an unhappy Noor switching over to another party as she hadn't received a ticket.

Tongues wagged when she was spotted in Delhi. One day, ending all speculation, Noor returned to Malda and blamed viral fever for her disappearance.

Though there were party workers disappointed with Noor's decision to jump ship — leading to a political split in the first family of Malda — others were more sympathetic towards her decision. One of her associates, who worked closely with Noor when she was in the Congress, said that she couldn't be blamed; she simply wanted to serve her constituency better by aligning with Bengal's ruling party.

This reasoning bears credence as a large section of the traditional Congress voters in Malda, mostly Muslims, were shifting to the TMC as revealed in the 2018 Zila Parishad and Panchayat Samiti elections. During her stint as a Congress MP, Noor alleged a lack of cooperation from the TMC-led state government in the implementation of development projects in Malda. Hence, her association with the TMC by deviating from her family's long-held glorious association with the Congress, could be seen as an act of political expediency in light of the rapidly changing political dynamics in Malda, as well as in the larger context of West Bengal.

Despite her uneasy relationship with her own political parties, Noor's work as a Parliamentarian cannot be ignored. As I and Ambar Kumar Ghosh have documented in the book titled, "Missing from the House — Muslim Women MPs in Lok Sabha [Juggernaut 2025]" during her first stint as a Lok Sabha MP, 1,500 kms of roads were built in her constituency

under the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana. During the Rajiv Gandhi Gramin Vidyutikaran Yojana, she got funds allotted for Malda North. She also got impressive developmental funds sanctioned for National Highway 81 (running from Gajole to Harishchandrapur), for building the Ratua-Nakatti Bridge, and she was allotted the Backward Regions Grant Funds to address erosion caused by the Mahananda River and for the construction of the Samsi railway overbridge.

In July 2024, Noor strongly raised the issue of river-bank erosion in Malda due to the merger of the Ganga and Fulhar rivers, leading to huge loss of human lives and livestock and damage to crops every year, in the Rajya Sabha. She also took on the Central government for not allocating funds for tackling this perennial devastation caused by floods in the riverbanks of Malda. She informed the upper house with visible anguish that "a huge area will be engulfed by the rivers causing loss of land, farms, and mango orchards, rendering lakhs of people homeless".

All this reflects Noor's involvement, sincerity, and vision, which is not only confined to the challenges of her own region but also addresses the broader concerns of society. With political capital, age, family legacy, and a developmental vision on her side, Noor can leverage herself as a key political figure not only in Malda but in the larger landscape of West Bengal.

THE MIND AND AGE: NAVIGATING LIFE'S LATER STAGES

DR. SHOBHITA JAIN
JAIPUR

Aging is an inevitable part of life, yet how we perceive and experience it can make all the difference. Accepting the passage of time and aging gracefully is less about resisting change and more about embracing it with awareness, gratitude, and self-care.

Aging is a natural process that affects not only the body but also the mind. While physical changes are visible, the psychological aspects of aging are equally important and can significantly influence quality of life. As people age, they may face challenges such as memory decline, slower cognitive processing, and shifting social roles. These changes can sometimes lead to feelings of anxiety, loneliness, or depression if not addressed with care and awareness.

AGING AND ITS PSYCHOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS

Aging also brings psychological benefits, including greater emotional regulation, wisdom, and perspective. Older adults often develop better coping strategies, patience, and resilience, which help them navigate life's complexities



more effectively. Maintaining mental health is crucial, and strategies such as engaging in intellectually stimulating activities, maintaining social connections, practicing mindfulness, and pursuing hobbies can enhance cognitive functioning and emotional well-being.

Acceptance and a positive mindset play a key role in psychological adjustment during aging. Viewing aging as a phase of growth rather than decline promotes self-esteem and life satisfaction. By nurturing both mind and body, individuals can embrace aging with dignity.



purpose, and psychological resilience, making the later years of life meaningful and fulfilling.

SHIFT YOUR PERSPECTIVE ON AGING

One of the first steps toward

graceful aging is adjusting your mindset. Society often glorifies youth, but aging brings wisdom, experience,

and depth of character. Instead of focusing on wrinkles or gray hair, celebrate the knowledge, resilience, and life lessons you have gained. Practicing gratitude daily for your health, relationships, and achievements fosters a positive outlook, making the aging process feel less like a loss and more like an enrichment.

PRIORITIZE PHYSICAL HEALTH

Maintaining a healthy

As people age, they may face challenges such as memory decline, slower cognitive processing, and shifting social roles. These changes can sometimes lead to feelings of anxiety, loneliness, or depression if not addressed with care and awareness.

body is crucial for aging well. Regular exercise, such as walking, yoga, or swimming, helps maintain strength, flexibility, and balance. A balanced diet rich in fruits, vegetables, lean proteins, and whole grains supports energy and longevity. Staying hydrated and getting adequate sleep also play key roles in keeping both body and mind functioning optimally. Routine medical check-ups help detect and manage age-related condi-

tions early.

NURTURE YOUR MENTAL WELL-BEING

Aging gracefully is not just about physical health—it's equally about mental and emotional wellness. Engaging in lifelong learning, reading, or exploring hobbies stimulates the mind and keeps it sharp. Mindfulness, meditation, and journaling can reduce stress, foster emotional resilience, and cultivate inner peace.

wear your gray hair or lines with pride. Self-acceptance radiates beauty far beyond external appearances.

CULTIVATE PURPOSE AND CONNECTION

Having a sense of purpose fuels motivation and joy at any age. Volunteer, mentor, pursue passions, or connect with your community. Meaningful relationships and acts of giving create emotional fulfillment and remind us that aging can bring new opportunities for growth and contribution.

PRACTICE PATIENCE AND COMPASSION FOR YOURSELF

Finally, aging gracefully requires patience. Bodies and abilities change over time, and accepting limitations with compassion allows for dignity and peace. Celebrate small victories, adapt routines as needed, and focus on what you can do rather than what you cannot. Aging gracefully is a holistic journey encompassing body, mind, and spirit. By cultivating a positive mindset, nurturing health, embracing appearance, finding purpose, and practicing self-compassion, you can navigate the years with dignity, joy, and confidence. Life is not about stopping the clock; it's about making the moments count.

EMPTY NEST SYNDROME - COPING WITH CHANGE

MANSI SONI
JAIPUR

As children grow up and leave home, parents often experience a profound emotional shift known as Empty Nest Syndrome (ENS). This psychological phenomenon is characterized by feelings of sadness, loss, or anxiety when children move out to pursue higher education, careers, or independent lives. While it is a natural stage in the parenting journey, the transition can be emotionally challenging, affecting mental health and family dynamics.

WHAT IS EMPTY NEST SYNDROME?

Empty Nest Syndrome is not a clinical disorder but rather a normal reaction to a major life change. Parents may feel a sense of purposelessness, loneliness, or grief as their daily routines and family roles change. It can manifest as mood swings, irritability, or even physical symptoms like fatigue or sleep disturbances. While traditionally associated with mothers, fathers can also experience ENS, sometimes with feelings of anxiety or disconnection from their partner.

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EMOTIONAL IMPACT

The psychological impact of ENS varies depending on individual circumstances and coping mechanisms. Some parents feel a temporary sadness that gradually diminishes, while others may experience prolonged depression or anxiety. The sense of loss can be amplified if parents have heavily invested their identity in raising children or if their social networks are limited. ENS may also trigger self-reflection, leading some parents to question their life choices or career goals, which can either be constructive or stressful.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO ENS

Several factors can intensify

feelings of empty nest:

- Strong parental identity: Parents whose primary focus has been childcare may struggle more with the transition.
- Sudden life changes: Children moving far away or experiencing major milestones abruptly can create a sense of shock.
- Relationship dynamics: Parents with less developed social or marital support may feel increased isolation.



• Cultural expectations: Societies emphasizing close-knit families may amplify the emotional impact.

COPING STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS

While ENS is challenging, it also offers an opportunity for personal growth, rediscovery, and relationship strengthening. Effective coping strategies include:

1. Rediscovering personal interests: Pursuing hobbies, learning new skills, or revisiting passions can provide fulfillment beyond parenthood.
2. Strengthening social connections: Reconnecting with friends, neighbors, or joining community groups reduces feelings of isolation.
3. Focusing on relationships: Couples can use this

transition to invest in their marital relationship or improve communication.

4. Professional support: Counseling or therapy can help parents navigate feelings of grief, anxiety, or depression.

5. Maintaining contact with children: Regular but balanced communication through calls, messages, or visits reassures parents while respecting the child's independence.



TURNING THE EMPTY NEST INTO AN OPPORTUNITY

Though ENS can be emotionally taxing, many parents find this stage liberating. Without daily childcare responsibilities, parents have time for self-improvement, travel, fitness, or community engagement. Embracing new routines and personal goals can transform the empty nest into a period of growth, self-discovery, and renewed purpose.

Empty Nest Syndrome is a natural part of life's cycle, reflecting the deep bonds between parents and children. Acknowledging and understanding the emotional responses associated with this transition allows parents to adapt positively. By focusing on self-care, nurturing relationships, and embracing new opportunities, parents can move beyond sadness and find joy in the next phase of life. Aging, growth, and change are inevitable, but with resilience and perspective, the empty nest can become a fulfilling chapter filled with personal achievements and renewed emotional well-being.

Workplace well-being: From stress to strength

TOG NETWORK
JAIPUR

The modern workplace is a dynamic environment that often demands high performance, adaptability, and constant competition. While this environment can stimulate growth, it can also contribute to psychological stress, manifesting as anxiety, insecurity, and jealousy. These emotions, if persistent, may evolve into mental health disorders, impacting both professional performance and personal well-being. Understanding their causes, effects, and management strategies is essential for fostering a healthier workplace.

WORKPLACE ANXIETY

Workplace anxiety is a common response to high demands, unclear expectations, or fear of failure. Individuals may experience persistent worry, restlessness, irritability, or difficulty concentrating, which can reduce productivity and affect decision-making. Chronic workplace anxiety can contribute to physical symptoms, such as headaches, muscle tension, insomnia, and gastrointestinal issues. Medical studies indicate that workplace-related anxiety can increase the risk of generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) if left unaddressed.

INSECURITY AND IMPOSTOR SYNDROME

Insecurity often stems from self-doubt, lack of confidence, or perceived inadequacy compared to colleagues. It may manifest as hesitation to voice ideas, reluctance to take initiative, or constant need for validation. A common related phenomenon is Impostor Syndrome, where individuals feel they do not deserve their success and fear being "exposed" as incompetent. Persistent insecurity can lead to depression, low self-

esteem, and burnout.

JEALOUSY AND ENVY IN THE WORKPLACE

Jealousy and envy occur when employees compare themselves with peers, often regarding promotions, recognition, or skill levels. This can lead to interpersonal conflict, resentment, and decreased collaboration, damaging team cohesion. Extreme or prolonged jealousy may contribute to

catastrophizing, overgeneralization, or negative self-assessment, can exacerbate emotional distress. Personality traits, including perfectionism or high neuroticism, increase vulnerability. Organizational factors, such as unclear roles, excessive competition, or poor leadership, can amplify these emotions, creating a cycle of stress and dysfunction.

patterns that underlie insecurity and jealousy. Mindfulness-based interventions, including meditation and stress reduction exercises, improve emotional regulation and resilience.

Pharmacological treatment may be considered for severe cases of anxiety or depression under professional supervision. Antidepressants, anxiolytics, or beta-blockers can help manage symptoms, but

Goal-setting and skill development: Focus on personal growth rather than constant comparison with colleagues.

Healthy communication: Express concerns constructively and seek feedback from mentors or supervisors.

Work-life balance: Engage in hobbies, exercise, and social activities to reduce chronic stress.

Peer support and counseling: Discuss experiences with trusted colleagues, support groups, or mental health professionals.

Organizational interventions: Companies can provide stress management workshops, mentorship programs, and clear performance criteria to mitigate anxiety and jealousy.

Workplace anxiety, insecurity, and jealousy are natural human responses to competitive environments. When persistent, however, they may evolve into clinically significant disorders affecting mental and physical health. Early recognition, self-care, professional therapy, and supportive organizational practices are key to overcoming these challenges. By fostering self-awareness, resilience, and constructive coping strategies, individuals can navigate workplace pressures effectively, enhance professional performance, and maintain psychological well-being.

Medical Disclaimer:

The information provided in these articles is for educational and informational purposes only and is not intended as medical advice. It should not replace professional consultation, diagnosis, or treatment by a qualified healthcare provider. Always seek the guidance of a doctor, psychologist, or other licensed medical professional regarding any medical condition, mental health concern, or treatment options. Reliance on the information in this article is at your own risk.



mood disorders or chronic stress, further impairing both mental and physical health.

UNDERLYING PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS

Workplace anxiety, insecurity, and jealousy often share common psychological mechanisms. Cognitive distortions, such as

MEDICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERVENTIONS

Addressing these issues involves a combination of self-management, therapeutic interventions, and organizational strategies. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) has been shown to be effective in reducing workplace anxiety and correcting distorted thinking

they should be integrated with psychotherapy for long-term benefit.

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

Self-awareness and reflection: Regularly evaluate your thoughts and emotional responses to identify triggers.

SC DISMISSES JUSTICE VARMA'S PLEA AGAINST PARLIAMENTARY PROBE INTO CORRUPTION CHARGES

TDG NETWORK
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Friday dismissed a plea by Allahabad High Court judge Yashwant Varma challenging the Lok Sabha Speaker's decision to admit a motion seeking his removal and legality of the parliamentary panel probing corruption charges against him.

A bench of Justices Dipankar Datta and SC Sharma, which had reserved its decision on January 8 on Varma's plea, pronounced the verdict.

On January 8, the top court said if the vice president can exercise the func-

tions of the president in the absence of the president, then why cannot the Rajya Sabha deputy chairman exercise the functions of the chairman in the absence of the chairman.

The remarks were made by the bench which refused to agree with the submission made on behalf of Justice Varma that the deputy chairman of Rajya Sabha had no power to reject a motion and, under the Judges (Inquiry) Act of 1968, only the Speaker and the chairman have the power to accept or reject a motion against a judge.

Justice Varma was repatriated from the Delhi High Court to the Allahabad



The Supreme Court of India, High Court judge Yashwant Varma

High Court after burnt wads of currency notes were found at his official residence in New Delhi on March 14.

The top court had earlier orally observed that there was no bar under the Judges Inquiry Act on Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla setting



up an inquiry committee to probe corruption charges against Varma after a similar motion was rejected in the Rajya Sabha.

The then chief justice of India Sanjay Khanna had initiated an in-house inquiry and constituted a three-member committee comprising Punjab and Haryana High Court Chief

man.

The committee submitted its report on May 4, finding Justice Varma guilty of misconduct.

After Justice Varma declined to resign, the then

Justice Varma was repatriated from the Delhi High Court to the Allahabad High Court after burnt wads of currency notes were found at his official residence in New Delhi on March 14.

Justice Sheel Nagu, Himachal Pradesh High Court Chief Justice G S Sandhwal and Karnataka High Court Justice Anu Sivara-

CJI forwarded the report and the judge's response to the President and the prime minister, setting the stage for impeachment proceedings.

ings.

Subsequently, Birla admitted a multi-party motion for Justice Varma's removal on August 12 and constituted a three-member inquiry committee comprising Supreme Court judge Justice Aravind Kumar, Madras High Court Chief Justice Manindra Mohan Shrivastava, and senior advocate B V Acharya.

Justice Varma has sought quashing of the Speaker's action, the admission of the motion, and all consequential notices issued by the inquiry committee, contending that the entire process is unconstitutional and contrary to the Judges (Inquiry) Act.

Sujoy Paul takes oath as Chief Justice of Calcutta High Court

TDG NETWORK
KOLKATA

Sujoy Paul was sworn in as the chief justice of Calcutta High Court on Friday (January 16, 2026).

West Bengal Governor C.V. Ananda Bose administered the oath of office to Justice Paul at a function in court number one, the Chief Justice's court room.

Justice Paul was appointed as a Judge of the High Court on July 18, 2025.

He was officiating as the Acting Chief Justice of the High Court since the retirement of former Chief Justice TS. Sivagnanam.

Justice Sujoy Paul was formally appointed the 44th Chief Justice of the Calcutta High Court with effect from 16 January 2026, following the recommendation of the Supreme Court Collegium and notification by the Government of India.

Prior to this appointment, he served as a Judge of the Calcutta High Court since 18 July 2025, and as Acting Chief Justice from 8 October 2025 to 15 January 2026; and earlier as a Judge and then Acting Chief Justice of



West Bengal Governor C.V. Ananda Bose (L) administered the oath of office to Justice Paul at a function in court number one, the Chief Justice's court room.

Justice Sujoy Paul was formally appointed the 44th Chief Justice of the Calcutta High Court with effect from 16 January 2026, following the recommendation of the Supreme Court Collegium and notification by the Government of India.

the Telangana High Court.

The ceremony was presided over by the Governor of West Bengal, CV Ananda Bose, and was attended by former and present judges, Chief Justices, state ministers and senior judicial officers. In his speech, Justice

Paul highlighted his legal journey and acknowledged the contribution of his mother, who raised him as a single parent after the loss of his father during his infancy.

He further stated that though he had joined the

Calcutta High Court in the 'December' of his career, after having worked as Acting Chief Justice since the retirement of former Chief Justice TS Sivagnanam, he would endeavour to maintain the purity and efficiency of the institution to the best of his efforts. He also quoted the Naradh-Smriti, an ancient scripture, "A court is not a court if there are no elders, elders are not elders unless they promote dharma, dharma is not dharma unless it promotes truth and truth is not truth if it is mixed with sophistry."

SC orders 30% representation to women in Punjab and Haryana Bar Council elections

TDG NETWORK
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Friday ordered giving 30 per cent representation to women advocates in the upcoming Bar Council elections of Punjab and Haryana. A bench comprising Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justice Joydip Bagchi also sought Attorney General R Venkataramani and Additional Solicitor General Aishwarya Bhat's assistance in dealing with a submission seeking a direction to raise the number of elected members of state bar councils keeping in mind the rise in total numbers of advocates.

It passed the direction while hearing an application in a pending petition seeking measures to ensure adequate representation of women advocates in state bar councils across the country. The bench clarified that all state bar councils where elections are yet to be notified must ensure that 30 per cent of their seats are represented by women advocates. In the case of Punjab and

Haryana, it said that the election process had not commenced and that only the final voter list had been published, making it appropriate to apply the reservation requirement. "We are satisfied that our direction in paragraph 4 of the order dated 8 December 2025, to the extent of the words 'Punjab & Haryana', is liable to be deleted, as the election process is yet to commence and only the voter list has been finalised," it said.

The bench also ordered that the 30 per cent representation of women members, as contemplated in paragraph 6 of the earlier order, would apply "mutatis mutandis" (making necessary alterations while not affecting the main point at issue) to the ensuing elections of the Bar Council of the Punjab and Haryana High Court.

In its December 8, 2025 order, the top court had observed that elections of four state bar councils had already been notified and that earmarking seats for women at that advanced stage would not be prudent. The bench had specifically

exempted Andhra Pradesh and Punjab & Haryana from the mandatory reservation on the ground that the election process had commenced.

However, upon reconsideration, the bench found that Punjab and Haryana stood on a different footing as elections were yet to begin.

According to the earlier directions, the bench had ordered that, for the present year, 20 per cent of the seats in the state bar councils be filled through election of women members, while an additional 10 per cent be filled through co-option.

The bench had also directed that proposals for co-option be placed before it in cases where elected women representatives fell short of the mandated percentage.

During the hearing, senior advocates Manan Kumar Mishra, Chairman of the Bar Council of India, and Shobha Gupta appeared in the matter.

Senior advocate Meenakshi Arora, representing the Maharashtra Bar Council, urged the court to consider increasing women's representation for

Maharashtra in view of its large membership base of approximately 2.7 lakh advocates.

She submitted that proportionate representation would translate to 35 women members for the State Bar Council, with 20 per cent coming through reservation and 10 per cent through co-option for the current elections.

Arora further suggested that the court could subsequently examine whether reservations should be proportionate to the strength of Bar Council memberships across states.

However, the bench cautioned against judicial overreach, observing that the court could not step into the domain of policy-making.

"Any blanket order in perceived exercise of power under Article 142 will have very, very chilling effects," the CJI said, while agreeing to seek a response from the Centre on the broader issue.

It then requested the Attorney General to assist the court on the next date of hearing, noting that certain observations concerning state bar councils had already been made.

Liberty on trial: What the Delhi Riots bail ruling says about dissent and UAPA

TDG NETWORK
NEW DELHI

In a constitutional democracy, bail is meant to be the rule and jail the exception. Pre-trial liberty is not a procedural concession but a moral and constitutional presumption: punishment follows proof, not accusation. Yet, the recent bail judgment in the Delhi Riots conspiracy case under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) sits uneasily with this foundational idea. It reflects a deeper shift in how courts are increasingly reconciling national security laws with personal liberty—and not always in favour of the latter.

At the heart of the judgment lies a familiar but troubling framework. The UAPA's bail provision under Section 43D(5) reverses the ordinary logic of criminal law. Once the court finds the accusations to be "prima facie true", bail is virtually foreclosed. In practice, this has meant that undertrials spend years in prison while trials crawl forward, with liberty postponed indefinitely in the name of statutory rigour.

WHEN DELAY STOPS BEING A CONSTITUTIONAL WRONG
The Supreme Court has pre-

viously attempted to soften this harshness. In K.A. Najeeb v. Union of India, it held that even the strictest statutory embargo cannot override Article 21 when trials stagnate and incarceration becomes prolonged. Delay, the Court said, can itself be a constitutional injury.

But in the Delhi Riots bail ruling, this right-bent insight appears significantly diluted. Delay is no longer treated as a constitutional wrong demanding remedy. Instead, it is "contextualised", weighed, and often neutralised. The Court draws a distinction between "delay simpliciter" and "unconscionable delay", insisting that only the latter can justify overriding Section 43D(5). Yet, it offers little guidance on what legitimate purpose is served by continuing incarceration after several years of completed investigation and pre-trial custody.

What is missing from the analysis is the most basic bail question: why is custody still necessary today? Is detection required to prevent the investigation, prevent flight, or safeguard the trial process? These questions, central to bail jurisprudence, are pushed aside. Instead, the reasoning begins with the gravity of the offence, the



Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam

statutory label, and the prosecution's narrative—quietly shifting the burden from the State justifying detention to the accused pleading for freedom.

FROM LIBERTY AS A RIGHT TO LIBERTY AS AN EXCEPTION

The Court has, in earlier cases, recognised that prolonged incarceration can itself violate constitutional guarantees, regardless of whether the allegations are eventually proven. In the present judgment, however, that vision is narrowed. Delay becomes a trigger for "heightened scrutiny" that rarely translates into actual relief. Constitutional liberty survives more as a rhetorical concern than as a decisive principle.

This approach becomes especially troubling when viewed against the broader context of the Delhi riots case. The alleged conspiracy

unfolded during nationwide protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act—one of the most significant democratic mobilisations in recent years. Speech, assembly, meetings, pamphlets, WhatsApp groups, and calls for road blockades formed the backbone of that movement.

International standards such as the Rabat Plan of Action draw a clear line: only expression intended and likely to incite imminent violence can be criminalised as incitement. Yet, the Court's reasoning appears to collapse this distinction. Once violence occurs somewhere downstream, the architecture of protest itself is retroactively framed as evidence of "terrorist activity".

This interpretive move is sharpened by the UAPA's own vagueness. The law defines "terrorist activity" in broad, open-textured



terms, without a precise boundary separating democratic dissent from genuine threat. When such a vague definition is combined with the low threshold of "prima facie truth", the scales inevitably tip in favour of the prosecution's sweeping narrative. Protest becomes evidence. Dissent becomes suspicious. Liberty becomes fragile.

REWRITING NAJEEB: FROM GUARANTEE TO SAFETY VALVE

K.A. Najeeb was once seen as a constitutional turning point—a recognition that personal liberty cannot be held hostage to endlessly delayed trials. In the Delhi Riots judgment, however, Najeeb is reread narrowly, as an exceptional safety valve rather than an independent guarantee. The statutory philosophy of Section 43D(5) is allowed to dominate, while Article 21 is

subordinated to it.

Most concerning is the suggestion, implicit if not explicit, that constitutional guarantees cannot be given full effect once the statutory bar is attracted. This collapses the constitutional enquiry back into the very statutory test that courts are meant to scrutinise. Instead of asking whether continued incarceration is proportionate, necessary, and justifiable, the judgment repeatedly returns to the seriousness of the allegation and the existence of a prima facie case.

THE ILLUSION OF BALANCING

The Court frequently speaks of balancing personal liberty against national security, public order, and trial integrity. But this balancing exercise remains abstract. There is little concrete analysis of how releasing a particular accused—after years of cus-

tody and a completed investigation—would pose a real, present danger to national security or derail the trial. Community risk is assumed from the offence label and the conspiracy narrative, not demonstrated through specific facts.

Balancing thus becomes rhetorical rather than real. The statutory severity of the UAPA does the decisive work, while liberty appears as a conceptual concern—acknowledged, but rarely vindicated.

A CHILLING MESSAGE FOR DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of the judgment is the vision of democracy it reflects. The closer one stands to the heart of political mobilisation, the more distant pre-trial liberty becomes. Organising protests, mobilising people, shaping political narratives—activities at the core of democratic participation—are repeatedly reframed as "foundational" elements of a criminal conspiracy.

For citizens who participated in or witnessed the anti-CAA protests, the message is unmistakable: dissent carries legal peril long after the slogans fade, and years in prison may precede

any finding of guilt.

When terms like "national security" and "terrorism" dominate judicial reasoning, constitutional liberty risks being pushed to the margins—involed as a language of concern, future review, or calibrated oversight, while the immediate reality remains prolonged incarceration based on accusation alone.

RECLAIMING BAIL AS A CONSTITUTIONAL QUESTION

Every bail decision, even under special laws like the UAPA, should begin with a simple but profound question: Why must this person remain in custody today? Gravity of offence and statutory context matter, but they cannot substitute for a concrete justification of continued detention.

In a democracy worthy of its name, bail under exceptional laws should be the site of the most intense constitutional scrutiny, not where rights are at their weakest. Until courts are willing to demand principled, rights-consistent answers from the State in every bail case, pre-trial liberty will remain not an inherent guarantee, but a conditional grace—granted sparingly, and often too late.

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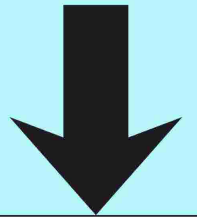
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OPINION

EDITORIAL

Resettling fire victims calls for compassion and fiscal prudence

In the aftermath of Hong Kong's deadliest high-rise blaze at Tai Po in November, the hardest task is to provide permanent homes for the thousands of people displaced. This has become even more challenging as the circumstances and preferences of individual households vary. While the authorities should strive to accommodate their different needs, a balance must be struck so the resettlement can be resolved in a compassionate, pragmatic and fiscally prudent way.

Addressing the Legislative Council ahead of a motion debate on post-fire support and rebuilding on Wednesday, Chief Executive John Lee Ka-chiu pledged to finalise the long-term accommodation for displaced residents as soon as possible, along with an array of building management and fire safety revamp proposals.

With as many as nine choices outlined in a government survey on rehousing preferences, there appears to be a good range of options for Wang Fuk Court residents to consider. Among them are a flat-for-flat exchange, a cash buyout and on-site reconstruction. But the exercise soon drew criticism as the official in charge of resettlement said redevelopment was "not practical".

Deputy Financial Secretary Michael Wong Wai-hun later promised to take the wishes of residents into account and ensure proper use of resources and public funds. The task would be handled with "compassion, reason and in accordance with the law", he said.

If a petition by residents calling for on-site redevelopment that drew 800-plus signatures is any evidence, the option is apparently not backed by the majority. Even if the survey eventually shows more households opting for rebuilding on the original site, the option looks infeasible and perhaps impractical. While some residents might be eager to see their home rebuilt on the same site, others could be wary of returning because of the trauma.

It is estimated that redevelopment will take up to a decade to commission. It also means the government might have to dig deep into the public coffers to finance the project, raising questions over the use of taxpayers' money.

No single option will satisfy everyone. Wong was being frank when he cast doubt over redevelopment. We trust that officials will seriously assess the preferences of the residents and come up with some pragmatic choices. The residents should also be reasonable and realistic. This is especially important if extra public funds are involved. It is good that the donations in the wake of the tragedy remain in a healthy state, meaning there should be considerable leeway and flexibility for suitable resettlement. The authorities should make good use of the money available and strive to balance the interests of the residents and society at large.

Shark fin ban in need of stronger oversight

The global trade in shark fin has been more strictly regulated in recent years, an essential step in the battle to save endangered species from extinction. However, this has not prevented the highly lucrative illegal trade from flourishing. Despite some eye-catching seizures, Hong Kong remains a major hub. A comprehensive study published in Science Advances highlighted the alarming level of shark fin from protected species reaching the city's markets.

The research was led by Mote Marine Laboratory in collaboration with Florida International University and Hong Kong's Kadoorie Farm and Botanic Garden. About 16,000 shark fin samples were taken from the city's retail markets between 2014 and 2021. DNA analysis showed 6.5 per cent of them to be from species listed and protected by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). The findings demonstrate the legal trade in protected species, recorded in CITES databases, to be dwarfed by illicit imports. An estimated 95 per cent of trade in the critically endangered oceanic whitetip shark is unlawful.

Hong Kong's imports of shark fin fell from 6,000 to 2,000 tons between 2015 and 2021. It has become less popular among diners as people's awareness of ecological damage has grown, but the study shows a need to step up enforcement here and around the world.

Steps are needed to ensure greater compliance with CITES. The trade in some species is subject to quotas and permits, while for others it is banned. Regulation has been tightened, with the oceanic whitetip shark placed in the top category in which trade is banned.

The protection is welcome, but it will only be effective if rigorously enforced with more inspections, frequent DNA testing, greater supply chain transparency and better intelligence. There is a need for close collaboration between governments, conservation groups and other parties involved. The private sector must also play a part.

Hong Kong has made some progress in combating the broader illegal trade in wildlife. The city won a UN "Impact" award last year for cracking a major money-laundering case involving live corals. Such efforts must be accelerated if the city is to shed its reputation as a centre for the trade.

HARRY'S VIEW ON IMPROVING SERVICES FOR THE ELDERLY > A5



Free pass to chaos

Nicholas Spiro says markets, especially bond markets, are meant to be a disciplining force. Inaction will embolden Trump to act more recklessly

One acronym has epitomised investors' perception of US President Donald Trump's resolve in following through on his threats to impose sky-high tariffs on America's trading partners.

On May 2 last year, Financial Times commentator Robert Armstrong came up with "Taco", which stands for "Trump always chickens out". This was meant to describe the sharp rally in stock markets following Trump's decision in April to suspend his "reciprocal" tariffs.

Further climbdowns, albeit partial ones, convinced many investors that Trump's bark was worse than his bite. While other factors contributed to the strong gains in equity markets last year – the hype surrounding artificial intelligence being the most important one – Trump's trade policies ceased to be the main determinant of sentiment by mid-2025.

In a report on May 14, Barclays went so far as to say "the US – and the world – seems to have turned the page on tariffs". While the "Taco" narrative quickly took hold and reinforced markets' belief that Trump's presidency was transactional and non-ideological, it was deeply flawed.

For starters, the pressure on Trump from bond markets was negligible. The yield on the benchmark 10-year US Treasury bond fell from 4.7 per cent just before Trump's second inauguration to 4 per cent in early September. It currently stands at 4.1 per cent.

The most important force constraining Trump on tariffs was China. Beijing's decision to impose curbs on the export of rare earth elements – more than 85 per cent of which are produced in China and used in the manufacturing of everything from weapons systems to iPhones – revealed the strength of China's leverage, forcing Trump to back down.

Even so, there was plenty of evidence that Trump was willing to inflict severe damage on US democracy

and the economy. His evisceration of the rule of law, draconian measures to deport immigrants, cuts to the federal government workforce and, crucially, the unprecedented level of policy uncertainty undermined consumer and business confidence. The labour market, previously a source of resilience, came under more strain last year.

There was also sufficient proof that Trump was willing to risk causing a global recession by putting an end to predictable, rules-based trading relationships with the world's largest economy. Furthermore, his decision in June to launch strikes on Iran's key nuclear facilities showed he had a bigger appetite for military adventures than supporters of isolationism in his MAGA movement expected.

However, Trump's latest assaults take his authoritarianism and recklessness to a whole new level. He has ordered the capture of Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro, flying him out of the country as part of a strategy of establishing US hegemony in the western hemisphere. He is also allowing the Justice Department to launch a criminal investigation into Federal Reserve chair Jerome Powell over the US\$2.5 billion renovation of the central bank's headquarters.

Regime change in a country with the world's largest proven oil reserves is a Rubicon-crossing moment in US foreign policy. This should serve as a sharp reality check for investors who underestimate and under-price geopolitical risk.

In its report on the top risks for 2026 earlier this month, Eurasia Group said the "Donroe Doctrine" was meant to "actively assert American primacy through a mix of military pressure, economic coercion, selective alliance-building and Trump's personal score-settling. In 2026, this posture will heighten the risk of policy overreach and unintended consequences".

Iran appears to be the next foreign target of the Trump administration. This is despite the White

House having no plan to deal with the aftermath of a change in regime and its struggles to convince US oil companies to invest in Venezuela given the risks.

However, it is the weaponisation of the Justice Department against Powell that marks a more dangerous phase of Trump's second term. While the criminal inquiry into the Fed chair has fanned fears about the independence of the world's most influential central bank, the reasons for the attack run deeper.

Trump is trying to punish Powell for not lowering interest rates more sharply. That Powell himself deemed it necessary to call Trump out by pointing out that the threat of a criminal indictment was about whether "monetary policy will be directed by political pressure or intimidation" speaks volumes about the gravity of the threat to America's institutions.

The attack on the Fed is counterproductive, mainly because it makes it more difficult for Trump's nominee for Fed chair to be confirmed by the Senate. Moreover, it is hard to see how a new Trump-friendly chair could be seen as credible by other Fed policymakers. However, Trump does not care since "he is less interested in achieving policy results than he is punishing anyone who crosses him", Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Krugman wrote in his newsletter.

This is why investors' lack of concern is so troubling. While global fund managers claim that inflation and a disorderly rise in bond yields are among the biggest risks in markets, US stocks are at record highs while Treasury yields have barely budged.

Investors are not putting their money where their mouth is. Complacency and the fear of missing out on further gains in asset prices are plausible explanations. A more troubling one is that Wall Street is afraid of Trump given his propensity for retribution.

Taco should stand for "traders always chicken out". Markets, especially bond markets, are supposed to be a disciplining force. The longer investors give Trump a free pass, the more emboldened he will be to act recklessly at home and abroad.

Nicholas Spiro is a partner at Laurens Advisory

Return of the middleman is reshaping China trade

Jun Yu Chan says the old Canton system is re-emerging in a new guise as the likes of TikTok look to intermediaries to navigate a divided global economy

As US-China tensions reshape global business, an old dynamic is re-emerging with the return of the middleman. Multinational firms that once prized direct control are again turning to local partners to navigate political rifts and commercial barriers. The pattern echoes an older era: the same reliance on middlemen that once moved tea, porcelain and silk through old Canton now underpins how TikTok, McDonald's and Starbucks navigate a divided global economy.

Under the Canton system, overseas traders were confined to narrow "factories" outside the walled city of Canton, barred from negotiating directly with Chinese officials or markets. Instead, merchants relied on the Cohong, a guild of 13 Hong or merchant houses, to reach the empire's coveted exports. These intermediaries handled permits, finance and delivery.

The opium was transformed Sino-Western trade by opening multiple treaty ports, distributing commerce across China's coast rather than funneling it solely through Canton. Hong Kong emerged as a premier entrepot alongside Shanghai's rapid rise, creating a network that eclipsed the old Canton monopoly. But even despite this direct market access, some Western firms still depended on Chinese agents to bridge global commerce with local networks.

In the digital age, this approach has become more prominent for different reasons. TikTok's success has turned into a liability. The controversy erupted in 2020 with the Trump administration's executive order to ban the app over its Chinese ownership and presumed

national security risks. In the end, TikTok's parent company ByteDance sought survival through structural insulation. It agreed to form a US-controlled joint venture led by Oracle, Silver Lake and other investors, structuring TikTok's US operations behind a locally governed firewall while preserving ByteDance's algorithmic core in China.

Oracle will serve as a compliance broker, a custodian of proprietary data systems that prevent Beijing from accessing user behavioural data housed on US servers. This represents a new kind of intermediation, allowing ByteDance to retain the algorithmic innovations while ceding control over the user data that governments now view as a strategic asset.

This arrangement could offer a template for Chinese tech firms seeking to remain and expand in Western markets. By turning over majority ownership and placing data oversight under local control while retaining core technology in China, these companies can sustain global growth within political constraints.

If TikTok's intermediaries serve to contain risk, those of McDonald's and Starbucks exist to pursue growth. For these Western consumer brands, the challenge was not geopolitical hostility but competitive exhaustion within an evolving Chinese marketplace.

In 2017, McDonald's sold a majority stake in its mainland and Hong Kong operations to Citic and Carlyle, keeping only a minority share. Local partners brought deep local networks and cultural fluency, growing its mainland outlets from about 2,500 to more than 6,800 by late 2024. McDonald's later

signalled confidence by buying back Carlyle's stake in 2023 while keeping Citic as majority controller.

Starbucks faced similar competitive erosion from Luckin Coffee, which has surged past 29,000 stores. In response, Starbucks sold 60 per cent of its Greater China unit to Boyu Capital in 2025, a move designed to regain speed, localisation and cultural intuition.

This dual logic of defensive divestment and opportunistic adaptation now maps a new economic geography. Hong Kong remains the quintessential financial intermediary, channelling more than two-thirds of offshore yuan and cross-border investment flows. However, new "bridge economies" are rising. Abu Dhabi's MGX, a co-investor in TikTok's US entity, reflects how Gulf capital increasingly positions itself as a neutral ground between East and West.

Across three centuries, from the 13th Hong of Canton to the joint ventures of the digital era, these cases reveal how intermediation has evolved from an imperial constraint into a corporate strategy. Once feared as a loss of direct control, the middleman has become the instrument through which firms preserve continuity in markets divided by politics and culture.

Hong Kong has long thrived by translating between worlds, from shipping and trading to global finance. Today's new business reality demands fresh conduits and middleman models. Hong Kong's continuing relevance will hinge on its ability to update this intermediary role, translating not only between East and West, but also between political systems and technological regimes that increasingly diverge.

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Conflicting identities

Li Xing says an internally split Europe can never fully engage China and the Global South

When contemporary Europe engages with the world, it increasingly presents as two distinct Europes operating within the same institutional framework. This duality – a Europe of strategic dependence versus a Europe of normative assertion – creates a contradiction.

For partners, particularly in China and across Asia, this is not merely an abstract identity crisis but a geopolitical puzzle that complicates engagement and challenges assumptions about Europe's global role.

One Europe, embedded within Nato and the US-led transatlantic security architecture, anchors its survival to American military power and strategic priorities. This "Nato Europe" has internalised a position of security dependence, solidified through decades of integrated defence planning tied to Washington. Its strategic subordination means its positions on critical issues – from technological competition, trade and tariff issues to the Taiwan question – are often pre-aligned with US objectives.

The other "sociopolitical" Europe sees itself as a post-multilateralist, normative power. It projects influence through regulatory standards, values-based diplomatic and regulated capitalism, positioning itself as a moral and civilisational counterpart to American unilateralism and other global models.

From the vantage point of China and Asia, Europe's internal split translates into tangible challenges for cooperation. First, it creates a credibility deficit. When "sociopolitical Europe" advocates for a rules-based international order, champions multilateralism or criticises other powers' internal affairs, its moral authority is undercut by the reality of "Nato Europe".

The credibility of advocating for strategic autonomy or principled engagement is significantly undermined when final security sovereignty is entrusted to the United States, whose strategic objectives, especially towards China, are confrontational.

For China and Asia, this renders European normative rhetoric selective. Europe's tendency to lecture the world on values while outsourcing its security erodes its stature as an independent pole.

Second, this duality frustrates strategic and economic engagement with China. China-Europe relations are pulled in opposing directions. On one hand, the economic logic of deep interdependence and normative Europe's interest in global governance encourage partnership. On the other, the security logic of "Nato Europe" injects suspicion and imposes alignment on containment policies.

This results in inconsistent, fragmented policies, where economic cooperation in green technology or infrastructure is undermined by political pressure on supply chain "de-risking" or hi-tech sanctions. For China, it raises a critical question: is it dealing with a sovereign Europe pursuing its interests, or a subordinate actor executing a strategy scripted elsewhere?

Third, for Asia and the Global South, Europe's predicament highlights the risks of over-reliance on an external security guarantor. Many Asian nations carefully navigate between major powers, valuing strategic autonomy and refusing to choose sides. Europe serves as a cautionary example of how deep security integration can erode policy independence.

Furthermore, as Europe redirects resources to meet US demands for higher defence spending, its capacity for developmental investment, infrastructure partner-

ships and economic engagement in Asia – key pillars of its promised Indo-Pacific strategy – weakens. Europe risks becoming a less relevant economic partner for Asia, even as it seeks a greater geopolitical role.

Sociopolitical Europe's self-image as a "third force" is, from an Asian and Chinese perspective, an illusion. It is, in practice, a normative-economic power operating within a security and geopolitical order defined and guaranteed by the US.

Its regulatory power, exemplified by the "Brussels effect", is real but exists in a separate domain from hard security. This separation is unsustainable; normative influence untethered from strategic autonomy lacks ultimate weight.

The goal is not to push Europe to choose sides but to engage constructively where interests align

Therefore, China and Asian partners adopt a pragmatic, composite approach to Europe. Engagement is becoming issue-specific and segmented. Cooperation may proceed robustly on climate change, digital governance or multilateral trade issues where normative Europe has agency.

However, on matters touching core US strategic interests – security architecture or technology containment – engagement is cautious, anticipating the overwhelming pull of "Nato Europe". This compartmentalisation reflects a rational adaptation.

For example, Europe responded with caution to the recent US military action in Venezuela, opting for "diplomatic" statements over explicit condemnation, while simultaneously responding more assertively towards the US talk of "annexing" Greenland for security.

The gap between Europe's normative emphasis on Ukraine's sovereignty and its reluctance to challenge a dominant ally highlights the divide between Europe's security-dependent and norms-assertive faces. This duality undermines Europe's credibility and strategic autonomy, especially in the eyes of China and Asia, who see inconsistent application of principles when great power interests are at stake.

Europe's future as a global actor hinges on its ability to reconcile its two selves. It must choose between remaining a strategically dependent entity whose normative voice rings hollow or undertaking the arduous journey towards genuine strategic sovereignty that would give weight to its civilisational ambitions.

For China and Asia, this means managing relations with Europe with clear-eyed pragmatism. Europe will not be treated as a monolithic third force but as a complex, sometimes contradictory, composite actor.

The goal is not to push Europe to choose sides but to engage constructively where interests align, while hedging against the constraints imposed by its transatlantic security bondage. The responsibility for resolving its dilemma lies in Europe. Until it does, its partners in the East and Global South will continue to navigate the two Europes with calibrated and realistic expectations.

Li Xing is a Yunshan leading scholar and a distinguished professor at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, and an adjunct professor of international relations at Aalborg University, Denmark.

LETTERS

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HK has what it takes to run a bigger tennis tournament



Victoria Park soaks up world-class tennis in front of polite fans praised for their passion. Photo: Karma Lo

I refer to your reporting on the Bank of China Hong Kong Tennis Open, including "Bubik overwhelmed" after claiming title, making week-end "top 10" (January 11). Last week, I was lucky to experience world-class tennis at Victoria Park, witnessing not only elite performances on court but also an exceptionally well-run tournament off it. From the efficiency of the operations to the warmth of the staff and volunteers, the tournament lived up to international standards while retaining a distinctly human touch. Victoria Park itself is a landmark in Hong Kong tennis. Watching matches here feels less like attending a distant mega-event and more like joining a neighbourhood carnival. Fan engagement was outstanding, from interactive games at the tournament village to a Hong Kong-themed market. What impressed me most, however, was the quality of the city's tennis fans. They understand the game, know when to stay silent and when to erupt, their witty chants often drawing smiles from those around them. Even when fans backed opposing players, there was a shared respect in the stands – passionate support without hostility.

Like last October's Prudential Hong Kong Open, this ATP tournament was also an "M" Mark event and a strong calling card for Hong Kong sports. Given the shared DNA of both tournaments, Hong Kong should seriously explore combining the ATP 250 and WTA 250 tournaments into a unified Hong Kong Open. While calendar coordination with the men's Association of Tennis Professionals and the Women's Tennis Association would require effort, a joint men's and women's event would significantly elevate Hong Kong's global sporting profile, without sacrificing the community spirit that makes Victoria Park special.

Beck Wu, To Kwa Wan

Eliminate bottlenecks at West Kowloon station

Your correspondent celebrates the high-speed rail ("High-speed rail link is a resounding success", January 13) and we share his enthusiasm as frequent users. But the co-location arrangement could still be improved. Departing passengers face two security screenings. Those arriving must tap out at exit gates after already clearing two immigration checkpoints, creating crowding at this final bottleneck. Since travel documents now contain ticket data, station checkout should merge with immigration. Security screenings should also be consolidated. Macau's joint checkpoint with Zhuhai uses the same machine for both sides – a model West Kowloon should eventually adopt.

Talia Wu and Simon Wang, Kowloon Tong

City will benefit economically from being more inclusive

It has been nearly one year since Thailand implemented marriage equality. But in Hong Kong, the government has yet to articulate a clear road map for recognising same-sex relationships following the legislative setback of September.

Data from an Open for Business report suggests this policy issue is not merely a social issue but also a material economic liability. For a city that prides itself on being business-savvy, it is puzzling that policymakers continue to overlook a demographic that could generate up to HK\$2.2 billion annually for Hong Kong's vital tourism sector. At a time when travellers increasingly favour inclusive destinations, the city is voluntarily ceding market share to regional and international competitors.

Even more concerning is the impact on human capital. The report identifies the lack of legal protections for LGBTQ+ persons as a driver of brain drain, with talent flight estimated to cost Hong Kong up to HK\$22.6 billion annually in lost economic value and diminished innovation capacity. As the city seeks to attract global talent, it makes no sense to alienate high-skilled, high-performing professionals who prioritise inclusivity when deciding where to build their lives and careers. If Hong Kong wishes to maintain its position as a leading international financial centre, it must not rest on its laurels. Pragmatism, not ideology, should guide the way forward. As an immediate step, the government should announce, as soon as practicable, the administrative measures it intends to adopt to protect same-sex relationships. In parallel, it should engage key stakeholders to chart a clear path towards comprehensive legal recognition and protection.

Embracing marriage equality is not only a matter of fairness, but a strategic economic imperative.

Jerome Yau, co-founder, Hong Kong Marriage Equality



Next development priority for China must be education

Anthony W.D. Anastasi says Beijing has to ensure enough students graduate from high school

If you were asked which middle-income country has one of the lowest levels of educational attainment, very few would say China. We continually hear stories about mass university expansion, record numbers of annual graduates and elite institutions that rank among the world's best. Despite these impressive strides, gaps in education remain a large roadblock for China's further economic development.

The country remains largely undereducated for its level of economic development: only about 31 per cent of the Chinese population attained a high school degree or higher, based on the country's last census. Even in relatively rich Shanghai, the share is only slightly above 50 per cent. These figures put China near the bottom when compared with other middle-income countries.

In contrast, China's investments in physical capital, such as factories, transport and infrastructure, have produced awe abroad and pride at home. China is filled with glimmering skyscrapers, high-speed rail and monumental infrastructure projects. Decades of investment in this physical capital have turned China into the world's second-largest economy.

However, as China grows rich and faces new economic hurdles, it must realise that economic upgrading has raced ahead of mass educational attainment. Addressing this imbalance, even though it could take decades, is a must if China wants to join and remain in the ranks of the developed world.

China has a long history of physical capital development. The national founda-

tion myth includes Yu the Great using infrastructure for flood control. However, the disconnect between physical and human capital was not always present.

Before the reform and opening-up, China's human capital, when compared to its level of development, was quite high. Mass literacy campaigns, universal primary education and public health initiatives, such as the barefoot doctors, meant that by the 1970s, China had a relatively healthy and basically literate population despite its low per capita income, giving it unusually strong human capital foundations for a country at its development level. This was key to China's later economic take-off.

However, China's investment needs for its development level were vast. The country followed a development model that prioritised savings and investment over consumption.

One feature of China's growth model is that the emphasis was not on measuring gross domestic product, but targeting it. Cadres have goals to hit and are evaluated on their ability to deliver rapid growth, with

GDP performance serving as a key metric in promotions.

As cadres rotate frequently rather than remain in one post for long, such incentives favour projects with immediate payoffs over investments whose returns would materialise years or decades later, regardless of the economic needs of the locality.

Physical infrastructure investments fit this logic perfectly: a bridge or highway can boost GDP as soon as construction starts. In contrast, investments in secondary education, whose economic benefits may not appear for a generation, offer little political reward to the officials who initiate them. In this incentive structure, prioritising concrete over classrooms is a rational choice.

Decades after the reform and opening-up, China has fast trains zipping around the country, tall buildings piercing the clouds and clean transport systems that drive themselves. Yet, almost 70 per cent of the country does not have a high school education, something that may not have been seen as a roadblock to economic development before, but soon will.

China faces new constraints. In the early stages of development, rapid growth can be driven by capital accumulation and moving labour from the countryside to cities. However, as countries approach high-income status, growth depends on productivity gains, skill-intensive services and rising household incomes. Without broad-based educational attainment, these transitions stall, and countries fall victim to the so-called middle-income trap.

China must first solve its educational inequality before it can tackle its income and wealth inequality

The FT View



FINANCIAL TIMES

"Without fear and without favour"

ft.com/opinion

Britain's business rates system is not fit for purpose

Temporary reliefs are a sticking plaster for a tax that needs reform

Policy reversals are becoming a trademark of the UK's Labour government. The last week has brought two more: scrapping the planned mandatory element of digital IDs and softening the impact of measures announced on business rates at the autumn Budget. The latter is a welcome relief for Britain's ailing bars, cafés and hotels. Hospitality is the country's third-largest employing sector, but it has been saddled by a range of rising policy-driven costs under Labour. An increase in employers' national insurance contributions last April and pressure from a rising minimum wage have already squeezed the tight margins the sector operates on. One pub closed every day in England and Wales last year.

In November, chancellor Rachel

Reeves reduced the tax rate on retail, hospitality and leisure premises. But the planned removal of pandemic-era support and a revaluation of properties alongside it mean many enterprises are still facing substantially higher business rates bills this April, even with transitional reliefs for some organisations.

Reeves has caved into the growing anger, which included a campaign to ban Labour MPs from pubs. Communities loathe the loss of local inns and other high-street businesses already struggling against online competition. On Wednesday, she signalled business rates support for the wider hospitality industry, after initial plans to limit relief to pubs.

The mess reiterates just how unwieldy the £30bn business rates system has become. Successive governments have promised overhauls, but countless consultations have yielded only quick fixes that have added complexity. Pandemic-era reliefs took some heat out of concerns over the tax,

but were only a sticking plaster. Labour did pledge to reform the system in its manifesto, but is still working out what that might look like.

Business rates are not the only cost straining UK firms. High energy prices also weigh heavily. Still, reforming the system would go a long way to improving competitiveness and supporting growth. British companies face among the highest property levies in the OECD. As business rates are levied on the value of premises, regardless of the profitability of a business, it can inhibit expansion and building improvements. Higher tax rates are charged on the entire rateable property value based on certain thresholds, leading to sharp cliff edges in bills.

Britain should ultimately shift to taxing land instead of property, which would not penalise investment as much. Economists have long called for this, but it would take time to implement. In the interim, there are ways to improve the existing system without necessarily sacrificing

The country ought to ultimately shift to levies on land instead of property, which would not penalise investment as much

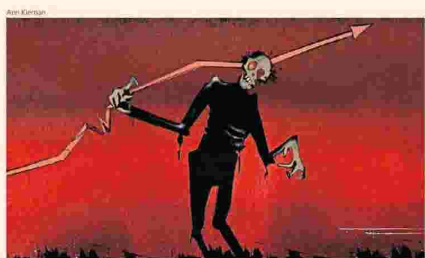
the significant revenue it generates.

The system could be made more progressive by banding rates like income tax, so higher tax rates apply only to the rateable value above a given threshold, as recommended by the CBI. This would reduce cliff edges and the need for costly reliefs. Applying the tax on a per-site basis would also remove disincentives to open new premises. A one-year relief on property valuation increases linked to improvements ought to be extended to encourage capital spending. Finally, more frequent revaluations, rather than three-yearly ones, might prevent sudden bill shocks and better align taxes with the economic cycle.

Britain's business rates system is not fit for purpose. Reaching for short-term reliefs alone will store up more pain for companies and taxpayers in the future. The case for reforming a tax that penalises investment and small businesses is not just about nostalgia for country pubs and local cafés, it is a prerequisite for Britain's growth and renewal.

Opinion Economy

Should we welcome a 'mild zombie apocalypse'?



Soumaya Keynes

A mild zombie apocalypse doesn't sound good. But in its 2026 outlook, the Resolution Foundation think-tank noted "early and encouraging" signs of one. Its vision involved killing old jobs (the living dead) to make room for more productive ones elsewhere (the living).

Although the process would be nasty – job losses can be devastating, and their victims deserve help – a bit of gore could be tolerable, if it could deliver what the UK economy so desperately needs: productivity growth.

To see how, note the enormous differences in measured productivity between companies and sectors. Turnover per employee is around 17 times higher in the top decile of construction companies than in the bottom decile, for example. While some productivity growth has historically

only just. On average, dying companies do tend to be less productive than survivors. But a massacre could hit some healthy companies too.

There's also no guarantee that employment shifts across sectors move people towards higher productivity work, and indeed over the 2000s one of the fastest falling areas of employment was manufacturing, a relatively high-productivity sector. Changes in employment patterns could be because of efficiency gains making some jobs redundant, or a response to changing demand.

I tried to work out whether the recent shifts in UK employment were towards particularly productive sectors. But it looks like over the year up to the second quarter of 2025, moves in either direction roughly cancelled each other out. The Resolution Foundation's Gregory Thwaites did share some analysis with me suggesting that, on average, employment has been shifting towards better paid areas (not quite productivity, but I'll take it).

If employment hasn't been shifting towards sectors of the economy with higher measured productivity, it's not unusual. Historically, it doesn't look like job reallocation between sectors has contributed very much to overall productivity growth at all. In the US, the EU and the UK, most of the productivity slowdown in the 2010s was because of declining productivity within industries. The pandemic did provide a (temporary) boost to productivity, as lower value-added service sectors shut down. Remind me... was that fun?

If the gains from rising reallocation between sectors are hard to find, what about the benefits associated with (hopefully bad) jobs being destroyed? Eyeballing the numbers, I would probably emphasise the "early" part of the Resolution Foundation's assessment. The rate of jobs destroyed by shrinking businesses – a component of churn – hasn't reversed its downward trend. (In the mid-2000s job reallocation from shrinking to growing companies was a more important contributor to UK labour productivity growth than companies going bust.)

And as the Resolution Foundation cautioned, we don't see signs of flourishing job creation – yet. In the short-term, the think-tank shared that its own internal measures of recent productivity were rising, but largely because fewer people were producing the same amount of stuff. I am a wimp, and last watched a zombie film in 2007. (For the record, the "comedy" *Shaun of the Dead* is terrifying.) Still, my understanding is that for a truly happy ending, the cleared-out zombies need to be replaced by healthier humans.

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Letters

Central banks must confront the original sin of monetary easing

Two articles recently published in the FT need to be linked to fully appreciate their importance: John Plender's "The Long View" column "Have we reached a tipping point on public debt?" (December 20) and Chris Giles' article on "The next Fed chair shouldn't party like it's 1999" (Opinion, January 8).

The former rightly suggests that the build-up of public debt has now reached the point where monetary tightening to fight inflation might actually lead to more inflation. This is sometimes called the problem of "fiscal dominance" where a government forces the central bank to finance the government cheaply.

As debt service obligations rise, governments are tempted to turn to cheaper short-term Treasury issues and even cheaper recourse to the central bank through a renewal of quantitative easing. We are already seeing this happen. Giles is also right when he suggests that central banks should not ease monetary policy today on the assumption that AI is sure to replicate the many positive (disinflationary and growth-enhancing) supply-side shocks of the 1990s. Not only is it far too early to draw this conclusion but, as Giles notes, many of the earlier positive supply shocks (like demographics and

globalisation) are now going into reverse, which should put a further constraint on monetary easing.

The link between the two articles is that Plender draws attention to a crucial element that Giles simply fails to mention. The decision of the Fed and other central banks to focus policy decisions primarily on near-term inflation prospects meant that interest rates in the 1990s were kept low enough to spark a virtual explosion of debt, both public and private. This was the period of "original sin", forcing central banks to ease dramatically in subsequent cycles to forestall the bursting of the debt bubble that they

themselves had created. These considerations strongly reinforce Giles' argument that "the Fed would be reckless to bet the house" on the yet-to-be-proved benefits of AI.

It would aggravate the debt problem. That said, how to deal with the dangerous overhang of existing debt, both public and private, remains an issue of critical importance in many countries.

William White
Former Economic Adviser (1994-2008) at the Bank for International Settlements, Basel, Switzerland; Former Chair of the OECD's Economic and Development Review Committee, Paris, France

The economic case for coalition government

Your leader "Britain's prime ministerial carousel" (The FT View, January 6) notes: "It is hard to argue that this era of politics as blood sport serves the electorate. It can only deter investment and hiring as businesses wait to see what economic policies the next change will bring. It acts against long-term planning and implementation."

We believe that it is not so much the "carousel" of prime ministers that is the problem, as the see-saw of policies, which is supported by our out of date and profoundly inequitable voting system. We consider that the electoral system no longer serves the interests of UK business in generating growth.

In today's challenging world, economic success requires a positive partnership between government and business. And it is business that provides the basis for the prosperity of the country and of its citizens.

In the next general election we face the prospect of up to six parties fielding candidates, each party with wildly different ideologies, many ignoring long-term practical solutions, each striving to pass the post first. Whoever wins a majority of parliamentary seats, from perhaps fewer than 30 per cent of votes cast, and therefore the support of only a minority of the eligible electorate, in effect gains 100 per cent of the power and will probably force another ideological swing.

The UK's consequent short-termist and unpredictable policies actively damage business confidence, creating the hesitancy to invest and discouraging the long-term planning your leader describes. Almost all of the countries with which the UK directly competes for inward investment (many with a higher GDP per capita) have stable consensus politics whose governments are formed by a coalition: as a British business leader recently noted, coalition governments foster a greater sense of cross-party agreement around big issues, "which means business can plan in budget cycles of five years and beyond".

An electoral system that truly represents the electorate will be good for business, good for politics, and good for the British people, whether employed or not, and whether working in the public sector or dealing with the demands of commerce.

Peter Norris
Chairman, Virgin Group
Hugh Lenon
Senior Adviser, Phoenix Equity Partners
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For a full list of signatories, go to www.ft.com/letters



Claims made for UK trade deals are delusional

In "Implementation of Brexit became a business fiasco" (Markets Insight, December 19) Paul Marshall, a keen Brexit, concedes that polls suggest leaving the EU has been an economic failure but claims that he foresaw this at the time of the referendum and believed then that the "longer-term political benefits of regaining national sovereignty" would outweigh the economic impact. He is now convinced that this has indeed been the case.

His justification is that the trade deals struck by the UK – with the US, with India and with the member nations of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership – offer "substantial long-term opportunities", especially, given his opinion that the EU is "overburdened by regulation [and] has become a zone where innovation is clearly insufficient". He does not mention the deal with South Korea, presumably because that deal was already there when the UK was still with the EU!

To state that the deals he mentions offer a very bright future for the UK is delusional, not only because they are expected to make but a marginal contribution to the UK economy, but, vitally, because staying in the EU would have generated even better deals, given the EU's record in this respect coupled with the fact the EU is the UK's largest market. Moreover, he ignores the influential reports by Mario Draghi and Enrico Letta on how to improve EU competitiveness, with a number of the Draghi report's recommendations already implemented. So why would the UK do better in this regard by being outside the EU?

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Digital bookkeeping is a chore, SME leaders say

Awareness is only one part of the Making Tax Digital (MTD) puzzle. As Emma Agemang notes ("Self-employed and landlords 'not ready for new tax rules'", Report, January 10), low familiarity is a hurdle, but a financial confidence gap is equally as significant.

Our research showed that 28 per cent of small business leaders do not consider themselves "numbers people," and half (49 per cent) find official MTD information confusing. For those who are uneasy with numbers, a lack of enjoyment, anxiety and time often leads to financial avoidance and the shift to more frequent digital bookkeeping is likely to feel like added pressure.

If the shake-up is to succeed, it must be accompanied by practical support and guidance that builds financial knowledge. It also needs to demonstrate the value of digital tax records, from reducing the "end-of-year tax surprise" to putting real-time business data at people's fingertips, so MTD is seen as a path to modernise and manage money better.

Stuart Miller
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Artists as connoisseurs

The essence of connoisseurship lies in disinterested and informed appraisal ("Is AI killing the art connoisseur?", Collecting, Life & Arts, November 29). The devil, however, is in the word "informed".

Snobbish connoisseurs of the old "One Instinctively Knows" school are self-disqualifying. However, a schism also exists between those who "know" what's what – through reading and looking – and those who know through "doing" and looking. That is to say, the divide between academic and artist scholars.

John Ruskin, cited by Julian Spalding ("Ruskin put 'seeing' ahead of talking and thinking", Letters, December 20), certainly saw clearly and talked plainly but he did so as an artist and nothing requires more attentive, disciplined looking than making art and/or copying the art of others.

It might be argued that artists make or are, necessarily, the finest connoisseurs.

Who after all acquired better collections of drawings than Rubens and Rembrandt?

And who bettered Sir Joshua Reynolds (who collected Rubens and Rembrandt) as a connoisseur/theorist/collector?

Michael Daley
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How the British Academy dealt with a Cambridge spy

The Royal Society's rupture over Elon Musk's fellowship is not entirely unprecedented for a learned society ("Musk should remain a Royal Society member despite Grok 'disgrace'", says president", Report, January 10).

In July 1980, the British Academy was set to debate whether the art historian, Cambridge spy and traitor Anthony Blunt should be expelled. Some such as Hugh Trevor-Roper thought not, writing that Blunt was "elected a Fellow for his scholarship, not for his politics, morals, or patriotism". A not dissimilar view to Paul Nurse's regarding Musk that "there's many bad people around, but they have made scientific advances".

In 1980, after a tense debate, the British Academy elected to "pass on to the next item on the agenda", rather than vote on Blunt's membership.

Several fellows resigned in protest. By August, Blunt relinquished his fellowship to "reduce the dissension within the Academy about his membership" – presumably out of a sense of shame and a wish to limit further harm. That's where the comparison with Musk ends.

Andrew Scheuber
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The parallel woes of PMs and Man Utd managers

The FT editorial "Britain's prime ministerial carousel" (The FT View, January 6) made interesting reading, as always. The constant changes in prime ministers and governments, and the resulting paralysis in decision making, have had an abysmal effect on our country. In a pleasing symmetry, the January 6 paper also reported the latest in a similar tale of woe at Manchester United. The parallels are striking, with the exception being that United fans still have a chance of seeing their team in Europe again soon, while the rest of us can only dream of a similar future for our beleaguered country.

Andrew Stoddart
Jalón, Spain.

Machines can deliver the blunt truths friends avoid

Sheila Hayman (Letters, January 9) claims chatbots, having no heart, cannot tell us the truths a friend might.

I find the opposite. I ask ChatGPT to criticise my work without mercy. The honesty is often embarrassing but always improves the outcome.

Masochism, perhaps, but the heartless machine delivers the blunt feedback even your best friend avoids. Synthetic friendship has its advantages.

Steven Fogel
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Opinion

VC's 'spray and pray' playbook lowers AI barriers to entry

TECHNOLOGY

John Thornhill



There is little doubt that billions of dollars of investment in AI start-ups will be vapourised over the next few years. But that's all part of the plan. The venture capital industry's standard operating procedure is to chuck capital at promising new technologies and see what sticks. Drip-fed eternal optimism, and relatively sanguine about financial loss, venture capital investors accept that most of their investments will crash. But they hope enough will fly to airlift their portfolios to the heavens.

That singular mentality is best captured by Paul Graham, the co-founder of start-up accelerator Y Combinator, in one of his classic essays. "Most people would rather a 100 per cent chance of

\$10m than a 20 per cent chance of \$100m. Investors are rich enough to be rational and prefer the latter," he wrote in *The Hacker's Guide to Investors*.

That "spray and pray" mentality is borne out by last year's financial data as AI fever has gripped the VC world. Overall, global venture funding rose 47 per cent to \$469bn in 2025, according to CB Insights annual report. In particular, investors piled into AI companies, which attracted 48 per cent of total venture funding with the adjacent field of robotics drawing record financing, too. The US reasserted its position as the global leader in VC, accounting for 70 per cent of total funding, followed by Europe with 14 per cent and Asia with 11 per cent.

"This is the biggest technological revolution of my life," says Marc Andreessen, co-founder of the VC firm Andreessen Horowitz, which has just raised a further \$15bn of funding to invest in multiple AI companies.

The latest investment frenzy differs from previous funding waves in being so heavily concentrated on one sector. Across the board, VC funding remains

35 per cent below the peak it reached in 2021 while the number of individual funding rounds is 45 per cent lower. This is partly because some VC firms have struggled to raise fresh funding from institutional investors as a result of slower payouts from older portfolios of investments. And the latest wave of AI start-ups may only be making the problem worse by further eroding the value

This latest investment frenzy is heavily concentrated on one sector

of some of these earlier software-as-a-service companies.

The top 10 most valuable private companies, including OpenAI, ByteDance, Anthropic and SpaceX, have been sucking up funding mega-rounds and are collectively valued at \$2tn. The top 10 most active VC funds, including General Catalyst, Andreessen Horowitz, Sequoia and Accel, are heavily focused

on AI. "The most influential investors are essentially running concentrated AI funds, not diversified portfolios," CB Insights concluded.

One other significant difference today is how the Big Tech companies are reshaping the start-up universe given their overlapping roles as suppliers, customers, competitors, funders and acquirers. The Magnificent Seven US tech companies – Nvidia, Alphabet, Microsoft, Amazon, Apple, Meta and Tesla – dominate the tech landscape in a way that was not the case at the dawn of the internet era.

These giant companies are massive allocators of capital in their own right, investing almost as much as the entire VC industry. They also provide start-ups with AI software, cloud computing services and direct investment funding through their own sizeable corporate venture capital arms. But they are furiously rolling out AI themselves in sectors as varied as video generation, healthcare, autonomous driving and scientific discovery. Every time a giant AI company releases a new generative AI model, scores of undiffer-

entiated start-ups shrivel up and die. Nevertheless, Ilya Strebulev, a finance professor at the Stanford Graduate School of Business, reckons that competition is stiffer than ever before given how AI has helped lower the barriers of entry for so many start-ups and VC firms. What is striking is how quickly many AI start-ups are generating significant revenue, boosting their valuations and emerging as potential winners in particular sectors. Whereas it previously took on average seven to eight years for a successful start-up to achieve a \$1bn post-money valuation, it is now less than four years, according to Strebulev. "The AI industry is maturing very, very fast," he tells me.

The VC industry can, at times, appear herd-like, ruthless and overly focused on a narrow subset of priorities. But it is also the most disruptive capitalistic machine yet invented. Given that global regulators appear unwilling, or incapable, of taming Big Tech, VC-backed Little Tech start-ups may be the best hope for contesting their dominance.

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Small nuclear reactors are worth the wait

Richard Ollington

The energy hungry AI boom is fuelling a new nuclear age of small modular reactors. Technology groups need reliable power for their ambitious data centre plans and they like the idea of zero-emission, right-sized, nearby sources. As the US electric grid struggles with demand, more companies are making their own deals with nuclear SMR power providers. Even if they don't provide enough clean energy to meet the sector's 2030 goals, the investments will help the long-term transition to clean energy.

Last week, Meta announced agreements with two SMR start-ups. It is pre-paying for power from up to eight of TerraPower's Sodium reactors and up to 16 of Oklo's Aurora reactors. This will make it one of the biggest corporate buyers of nuclear energy. Amazon, Google and other data centre developers have also signed deals with SMR start-ups including NuScale, X-energy and Kairos Power. Combined, I calculate that these deals will provide less than four gigawatts of power by 2030. This is just a small fraction of the 20GW demand that US data centres could need by 2030.

Part of the problem is nuclear reactors take time to build, even small ones. In Canada, GE Hitachi expects to finish the first of three planned SMRs eight years after initial site work began. In Russia, Rosatom has built 10 SMRs and is building 10 more for use on land and sea. Yet even with a mature supply chain and streamlined manufacturing, it reports build times of four to five years. Over 50 small reactors generating up

The benefit comes from scalability, particularly when compared with other clean energy sources

to 500 megawatts of electricity have been built in the past half-century. Their median build time has been eight years. By contrast, large reactors have been operational after seven years thanks to greater experience building them.

This doesn't mean SMRs are not worth investing in. Because they are smaller they have lower financing costs and greater ease of grid integration than their larger counterparts. And as they become more common and use more factory-made components, it is hoped that multiple small reactors can be built concurrently, benefiting from economies of scale.

The real benefit of nuclear energy comes from scalability rather than speed, particularly when compared with other clean energy sources. France proved this in the 1980s when it completed construction of over 50 reactors in 15 years. Average construction took 6.5 years, slow compared with wind or solar farms. But the scale was transformative – adding more than 5,000 kWh per person, over four times the annual electricity use of the average person in the UK today.

For tech giants consuming as much power as small countries, nuclear is the best route for the creation of large-scale clean electricity. Wind and solar projects may be quicker to build individually, but building many simultaneously is harder. Nuclear is also better able to avoid land, transmission and grid connection bottlenecks. And a high grid penetration of nuclear power is less complex and costly to manage than a high penetration of wind and solar farms. These are long-term plans. Deals with SMR developers for over 20GW of power post-2030 far outweigh the size of deals for power pre-2030.

If tech groups are going to meet their 2030 clean energy needs, they need to also make more use of existing nuclear assets. This is why Microsoft has secured the restart of the Three Mile Island reactor and Meta is underpinning the life extension of reactors in Illinois and Ohio. Improving the operational performance of existing reactors, uprating their power outputs and restarting other recently closed units could add the equivalent of more than 40GW of nuclear power globally.

SMRs have significant potential to transform energy provision in the US. But the real scale of their contribution is going to become apparent in 10 years' time, not five.

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A warning shot to our tech overlords

POLITICS

Robert Shrimley



It is easy to see why America's tech titans evince an air of invulnerability. They have procured a president who appears ready to treat any limits on their freedoms as an attack on American interests. Their monomania is often an engine of progress. Even when governments seek to act, lumbering legislators are no match for speedy technologists with wealth, media power, the advantages of extrajurisdictionality and a world view shaped by Ayn Rand; VPNs and Starlink offer ways to evade restrictions.

And yet, no one is infinitely untouchable. Democratic history is a timeline of states acting over mighty figures, from kings to business tycoons. Victories are rarely total but a new balance of power is ultimately reached. What it takes is an inflection point that rouses the people and the politicians. After the discovery that Elon Musk's AI chatbot, Grok, was digitally undressing photographs of adults and children, creating sexual images and nude pictures, the easy and obvious course was to apologise and address the problem.

While he now appears to be climbing down, Musk's initial tone-deaf response

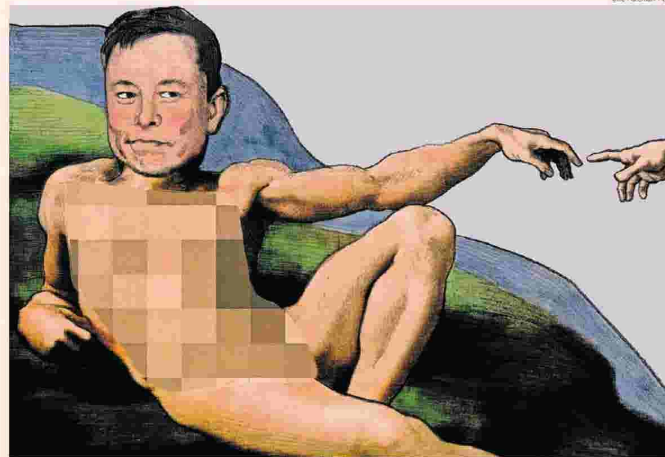
instead roused rather than calmed legislators. His first instinct was to turn the tool into a premium feature and denounce "any excuse for censorship". This is not solely an X problem. Other AI models offer questionable tools and the demand comes from individuals. But it reveals a broader point. The nudification tool was a feature, not a bug. Musk chose to create a "spicy" mode of Grok. Citizens are seeing the boundaries of social rules tested and set by the whims of unaccountable plutocrats.

Some countries, including the UK, have economic reasons for caution, not wanting to look Luddite in the coming AI revolution. But many have reached the point where citizens look to political leaders for action, not least since Donald Trump's re-election prompted platforms to abandon efforts to moderate content.

The clarity of the Grok case rallied legislators from the UK and Europe to India to take action. Had Musk taken the easy path, this would be a small squall. The fact his retreat was forced makes it more significant: each show of fortitude emboldens governments.

Child safety is the first and easiest line to draw. It is instructive that in the UK the curate's egg that is the Online Safety Act is popular because it was sold to voters as a means to protect children from harmful content.

The Conservative Party, which opposes censorship of social media, committed last week to following new Australian legislation banning it for under-16s. For now this is ideologically



coherent. Tory leader Kemi Badenoch argues that while adults can take care of themselves, youngsters must be protected. Few will be surprised if the UK enacts a similar ban. How long can the clean divide between adults and children hold given other concerns over misinformation and deep fakes?

Musk is not wrong that there are those who wish to censor him, though Grok is hardly a free-speech issue – and dislike of him is compounded by the way he actively uses his site to destabilise liberal governments. But so far ministers draw back from banning X, recognising the free speech arguments, the workarounds and that the toxic communities Musk helps convene will find somewhere else.

The world's authoritarian regimes

Democratic history is a timeline of states acting to curb mighty figures, from kings to tycoons

block or curb US sites, albeit imperfectly. Democratic nations rightly resist such draconian solutions but their voters are often more sympathetic to bans and regulations than civil liberty enthusiasts might wish. Even if states stop short of bans, regulators are already taking powers to levy fines so eye-watering that businesses may have to comply or curtail services.

The consequences for governments taking on the Trump-backed tech giants could be costly and serious. But it is also clear that populations may not tolerate social rules shaped by the atypical mores of tech oligarchs. The once admired Musk is now a disastrous ambassador for tech leaders.

This is not solely about social media. Apple and Meta are facing down the British government over the end-to-end encryption that ministers say aids terror and criminal networks.

The danger for tech companies lies in assuming they are invulnerable. They may feel safe today, but the constancy of Maga Republicans is not something anyone should take for granted. The

trustbusting of the 1890s and 1900s showed even the mightiest US monopolies can be cowed. This is an imperfect analogy but it is not hard to see a future techlash where left or right populists within the US regulate or break up the seemingly untamable titans.

Despite Trump's trade threats, it does feel that the mood has shifted. Demands for more protection are growing and we are only at the start of the AI wave. One politician feels pressed by their electorate, change can come fast.

Over-nighty tech lords may one day prove a perfect enemy for ambitious politicians. It might be wise to recognise this now, stop swaggering and pay more heed to social concerns.

A major shift may not be imminent. But few societies will indefinitely allow their codes and laws to be set by outsiders with wildly different values. A theme of politics is voters' desire to regain power over their lives. Tech oligarchs telling populations to suck it up is no one's idea of taking back control.

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Venezuela needs predictability, not predation

Ricardo Hausmann

For much of the past century, the US accumulated influence not mainly through force, but through a presumption – sometimes honoured, sometimes breached – that power would ultimately be exercised via institutions, and a measure of restraint. Venezuela is now the test case for what happens when that presumption is replaced by swagger.

Since the US operation that captured Nicolás Maduro, President Donald Trump has described the country's future in terms that sound like a transition than a takeover. He has said the US will "run" Venezuela. He has also demanded that Caracas give Washington and US companies "total access" to Venezuela's oil infrastructure.

There is a geographical premise embedded in this rhetoric that being in

the western hemisphere grants Washington exceptional prerogatives. Trump has invoked the Monroe Doctrine and declared that "American dominance in the western hemisphere will never be questioned again". Proximity, in this view, becomes entitlement.

At first glance, the posture may look decisive. It punctures Chavismo's mythology and exposes the regime's fragility. But it also jeopardises the one condition Venezuela's recovery cannot do without: a credible basis for rights.

Capitalism is not simply private ownership. It is voluntary exchange under predictable rules that bind the powerful as well as the weak, and that survive electoral transitions. Those rules make long-horizon investment possible. Predation is what happens when power writes the rules opportunistically, then demands they be treated as law.

This distinction matters most with oil. Reviving Venezuela's energy sector would require large, frontloaded capital spending to repair and expand infrastructure. Those expenses would have to be followed by many years of positive cash flows to repay sunk costs and earn

a return. Oil is the opposite of a quick-turn business. Its economics hinge on whether rights will be respected long enough to recover the initial outlays.

These rights do not emanate from threats. They come from a legitimate state: a government that can claim consent; a legislature that can authorise commitments; regulators and courts that can enforce them; and a political system that investors believe will hon-

Rebuilding a market economy requires more than threats. It requires credibility

our yesterday's deal tomorrow. Unpredictability may occasionally be an asset in international affairs, but trust is the real strategic currency.

And trust is precisely what a coercive interim arrangement cannot supply. Delcy Rodríguez, Venezuela's interim president, has no electoral mandate and inherits institutions whose legitimacy is

contested. Contracts signed now – especially if shaped under foreign pressure – will be politically and legally fragile. A future democratic government would have reasons to revisit them, if not repudiate them outright. In anticipation, US oil majors will not invest.

Investors can price commodity risk. They can hedge operational risk. What they cannot hedge is foundational illegitimacy: the risk that the very basis of a contract will later be judged void because it did not emanate from an authorised government. If Washington's message is that legality follows power rather than constraining it, capital will rationally assume that every deal is hostage to the next shift in power, whether in Caracas or Washington.

The political sequencing is also backwards. It is not prosperity that creates legitimate government; it is legitimate government – namely, democracy and the rule of law – that empowers people to create prosperity. With these foundations, markets can do what they do best: decentralise initiative, mobilise investment and reward productive effort rather than proximity to power.

OPINION

Operation Total Nuuk Submission



POTOMAC WATCH
By Peter K. Andersson
A. Strassel

Resetting Venezuela after more than two decades under a socialist dictatorship won't be quick or easy. Overthrowing a half-century of Islamic authoritarianism in Iran is hard and holds huge risks. Conquering a handful of fishermen and a few million Hygge practitioners to give the U.S. essential—if not formal—run of Greenland is simple, and pretty much already done. So why won't Donald Trump just declare victory?

It's a question up there with Winston Churchill's riddle-mystery-enigma, all the more so given the obvious White House benefit in clearing a few foreign-policy headaches from its charger. It's certainly a slight better than Operation Total Nuuk Submission, which requires agitating the whole of the European Continent, weirding out allies, and posturing over title like a pernickety real-estate agent.

Mr. Trump deserves credit for making Greenland a priority, recognizing a strategic asset that dates back to the creation of a 1951 U.S. military base in Thule, Greenland's geopolitical relevance—for oceanic and space domination, for missile defense, for critical-mineral extraction, for oil and gas—has only grown. Successive U.S. presidents ignored this, as the U.S. slowly dismantled its presence.

China certainly noticed this neglect and wants Greenland as part of its own increasingly aggressive Arctic strategy. It's expanding economic ties with the territory and has expressed interest in buying a former U.S. naval base, as well as building airports. It's actively working to horn in on Greenlandic minerals projects, in particular high-grade resources that China lacks. Europe has largely ignored this threat, investing little in Greenland's defense until recently.

As the Arctic grows more crucial, one superpower or another is going to lay claim to 'ownership.' Mr. Trump is correct to want it to be the U.S. He's been clear in objectives: He wants to use the territory for space defense programs. He wants a heightened military presence and surveillance of Russian and Chinese naval activity. And he wants access to Greenland's critical minerals, to help break China's global stranglehold.

Here's the cool bit: Denmark has essentially told him to have at it. Mr. Trump's maximum-pressure campaign—bolstered by the threat of annexation—quickly focused minds. The Danes, and Greenlanders—who, like us, have gone in a remarkably short time from hostility to outreach, promising more investment, more operation, more access, more deals. They've already announced an expanded "military presence in and around Greenland" that involves "aircraft, vessels and soldiers, including from NATO allies." In

high-level Wednesday talks between the Danish and Greenland foreign ministers and Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Vice President JD Vance, the Europeans offered the U.S. just about everything it wanted short of ownership.

Yet somewhere in the drumming Mr. Trump amped himself up into this week's declaration that "anything less" than Greenland "in the hands" of the U.S. "is unacceptable." "One way or another, we're going to have

Trump has already been offered free rein in Greenland. He should accept victory.

Greenland," he insisted. And so it is that the U.S. is scoring an offer of near-free rein, out of annoyance at the lack of formal closing papers. It isn't enough to have Greenland submit; it must become the 51st state (or maybe the 54th, depending on Canada, Mexico and the Panama Canal zone)—and like it.

To what benefit? Putting aside the feelings of the Greenlanders—who, rightly resent being volunteered for statehood—the risks likely outweigh any rewards. Formal annexation of Greenland would make Russia's day, a green light for Vladimir Putin to unleash his next round of conquest. Russia would commit to its Ukrainian land grabs, expand control in Georgia and Moldova,

and potentially take action against the Norwegian territory of Svalbard, where tensions are already rising. It could also poison rapidly expanding European alliances for increased Arctic control.

Also, should anyone wonder about the downside of a territory that doesn't want us, only our tax dollars, see Puerto Rico. Simple agreements with Greenland would give the U.S. vital national-security advantages and access to considered resource deals. Ownership would give the U.S. responsibility not only for the purchase price, but for forever subsidies (Medicaid, food stamps, Social Security), disaster aid, infrastructure, hospitals, public works, you name it—destined for a country with vast, inhospitable territory, and with a highly concentrated, vulnerable economy.

Some of this may be ego. Mr. Trump seems at times to be wistful himself as James Monroe, William H. Seward and James K. Polk, fixated on the next great territorial expansion, 21st-century MAGA style. Some of this may be poorly considered management decisions, as in the choice to give a key role in talks to Mr. Vance, who riles Europeans and can be found in a thesaurus as an antonym for "diplomatic."

Whatever it is, it's unnecessary. Amid true danger in intractable hot spots, this is rhetoric for the sake of bravado. The U.S. has an open play in Greenland. Take it, move on.

Write to kim@wsj.com.

BOOKSHELF | By Dominic Green

The Threads Of Modernity

The Dandy

By Peter K. Andersson
Oxford, 352 pages, \$38.99

A gentleman, Winston Churchill said, "buys his hats at Lock's, his shoes at Lobb's, his shirts at Harvie & Hudson, his suits at Huntsman, and his cheese at Paxton & Whitfield." Though all these London businesses survive, sartorial values have shifted. In his recent Golden Age of Travel Starts With You campaign, U.S. Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy asked Americans to stop traveling in their pajamas. Yet Churchill's wartime wardrobe included velvet slippers and one-piece rompers. The difference is that Churchill's attire was handmade, like the green velvet "siren suit" now preserved in a case in the basement of Turnbull & Asser. To be fashion-forward is always to be status-conscious.

Some gentlemen are dandies, but most dandies are not gentlemen. Peter K. Andersson's "The Dandy" is a carefully tailored account of the dandy's birth in Europe's age of democratic revolutions and reactionary restorations, his transatlantic triumph before 1914 and the periodic proofs of life that persist in our age of leasurewear. The dandy may have many names, but we know him when we see him—he projects the aristocrat's "superior air and nonchalant ennui," Mr. Andersson writes, only a little too much. Divided by competing urges to "join in and stand out," the dandy exaggerates style to the point of satire and social impotence.

Suetonius recorded that Julius Caesar was "somewhat overnice in the care of his person," and Elizabethan courtiers sported particolored slashed sleeves, but the dandy is a modern, urban phenomenon. His 18th-century forerunners, the London macaroni and the Paris *incroyable*, had one foot in the court and the other in the city street, but the dandy, posh or not, lived in a middle-class, democratic society. He was first sighted in London around 1818, in the form of George "Beau" Brummell, the ex-officer who refined men's tailoring from furbelowed popery to clean understatement, then accessorized this elegant simplicity with military-style mustaches, cravats, high collars and tight-waisted jackets.

Clothes made the man. Middle- and working-class men copied Brummell and the swells of the 1830s. Dickens's novels are indices of meretricious fashion: the vulgar legal clerks in "The Pickwick Papers" (1837) party in mosaic shirt studs. In "Great Expectations" (1861), Pip Pirrip's education includes joining the Finches of the Grove, a dining club of sharp-dressing young blades. Mr. Andersson omits the Finches but draws vividly upon the era's dandy-curios gossip magazines such as Sam Sly and The Past Man. The dandy existed to be seen, unless he was dodging his creditors.

Dandyism's persistent associations with criminality, effeminacy and homosexuality would achieve notoriety in Oscar Wilde's 1895 trials. But the typical Victorian dandy was a young, often middle-class man, enjoying his wages and leisure before settling down. He wore bright cravats, pointed shoes and yellow kid gloves. He sped around town on an early bicycle called a velocipede. He chased barmaids and cigar-shop girls. He loitered in the streets with his friends and called them "my pippin." He enjoyed "having a weed" (a cigar) and praised snapper dressers for "being the Still-ton." He ordered the most expensive Champagne, shouted "Yoicks" on the dance floor, and was on backslapping terms with Herr von Joel, the German-born vendor who whistled and made barnyard noises as he sold cigars at Evans's Supper Rooms.

The democratic London dandy's Parisian cousin was a reactionary. France's first postaristocratic dandies, the *muscadins*. Mr. Andersson tells us, were "foppishly dressed anti-Terror shopkeepers." Dandyism, Baudelaire wrote in 1863, was "a setting sun." The afterglow of aristocratic grace, the poet noted, was obscured by the "rising tide of decay, which invades and levels all things." The French future belonged to the *flâneur*, the man of sensibility, at home in the crowd.

The dandy of Victorian London wore bright cravats and pointed shoes. He called his friends 'my pippin' and drank expensive Champagne.

Meanwhile, Anglophone dandyism, always stronger on practice than theory, went global. By the late 1800s, the white American dude and the "negro swells" of New York's Sixth Avenue consulted the same magazines as the Bengali *babu* and the London masher, whose hooligan nights at the music hall were immortalized by the painter Walter Sickert.

The post-popular divide peaked in pre-1914 dandyism. Posh Johnnies and bloods fine-tuned the now-standard gentleman's suit, and aspired to being an upper-class twit called a knut (identifiable, P.G. Wodehouse wrote, by "a drooping carriage, the minimum of frontal development, and a high-power racing car"). Meanwhile, the ungentlemanly masher worshipped the ballet girls at the Gaiety Theatre and drank Champagne (now called "The Boy") with his "chappies" at Romano's on the Strand. After World War I, the chappies set the stylistic tone.

Most histories of men's style trace the Edwardian suit's post-1945 mutations into the Teddy Boy look of the 1950s and the Italian- and preppy-influenced Modernist revival of the 1960s. The Mod was a mohair-buttoned masher on speed: a dedicated follower of fashion who lived for the weekend and rode a Vespa instead of a velocipede. "Checkin' out the ladies / Ticking their fancy," Ray Davies sang in "Dandy," a 1966 Kinks tune whose musical feel and lyrical innuendo came straight from the Gaiety. But Mr. Andersson eschews the familiar and follows the dandy across the world: the American zoot suiter, Soviet *stilyagi*, Swedish *grällarne*, Congolese *sapeur*—before landing back where it all began, in London clubland, with the fancy-dressing New Romantics of the 1980s. Wherever the crowd, the dandy is always with us. As Secretary Duffy knows, if dressing down has never been so common, dressing up has never been so easy.

Mr. Green is a Journal contributor and a fellow of the Royal Historical Society.

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Anton Chekhov's Longing for Faith

HOUSES OF WORSHIP
By Gary Saul Morson

When Anton Chekhov was a boy, his tyrannical father made him sing in the church choir. Chekhov's grueling experience of religious observance, which often involved kneeling outside in the cold, left him without faith but gave him a deep appreciation of the liturgy. As an adult, he wandered the streets on Easter night listening to church bells.

He understood and deeply respected the faith he had lost. Several of his best stories deal with what it feels like to love church services and place one's faith in God. The plot often unfolds during a church holiday.

In "Easter Eve," the narrator, crossing a river to reach a monastery, falls into conversation with Ieronym, a monk assigned the job of ferryman. Ieronym's friend Nikolai, who has just died, initiated him into the beauty of holy hymns. "He would embrace me, stroke my head, speak to me in caressing words as to a little child," Ieronym recalls. "Now I feel like an orphan."

In a transport of delight, Ieronym explains the complex form and deep sentiment of the hymns Nikolai composed, which the other monks don't value. Having arrived at the festival, the narrator "could fancy Ieronym standing meekly somewhere . . . bending forward and hungrily drinking in the beauty of the holy phrase." When the narrator returns to the ferry, he

finds that no one has relieved Ieronym, and so the one person who would have truly appreciated the service has missed it. Yet the music is all the more enchanting when heard in thought alone.

"Frost" describes a frigid day when a provincial mayor and other town notables preside over the Feast of the Epiphany. The weather repudiation of the faith in an impoverished boyhood, when he endured extreme cold. In his reverie, the old man senses the importance "of that which is higher than good birth, higher than rank and wealth and learning, of that which brings the lowest beggar closer to God, of the helplessness of man, of his sufferings."

When a policeman comes to deliver a message, the mayor's guests, looking at the frozen fingers of his salute, "all for some reason felt that the policeman's heart must be aching, that his stomach must feel pinched, and his soul numb." The mayor's offer of wine embarrasses the officer. "Trying to drink without making any sound, he began discreetly sipping the glass." Although the mayor briefly forgets rank to reach another soul, such a cold evening as this, Ivan muses, the Apostle Peter had warmed himself as we are doing. Ivan proceeds to relate the story of how Peter three times denied Christ and then, realizing what he had done, went bitterly. "I imagine it, the still, still, dark, dark garden, and in the stillness,

student at the clerical academy, is returning home on Good Friday. "The cold, penetrating blew in from the east," depressing Ivan. "It seemed to him that the cold that had suddenly come on had destroyed the order and harmony of things." Remembering his poor parents, he "thought that just such a wind had blown in

The meaning he finds in the Gospel story suggests an agnostic's thirst to believe.

the days of [ninth-century ruler] Rurik and in the time of Ivan the Terrible and Peter [the Great], and in their time there had been just the same desperate poverty and hunger, the same . . . ignorance, misery, the same desolation around, the same darkness, the same feeling of oppression—all these had existed, did exist, and would exist, and the lapse of a thousand years would make life no better."

Ivan approaches a campfire tended by Vasilisa, an old widow, and her pockmarked, stupid daughter, Lukyera. On such a cold evening as this, Ivan muses, the Apostle Peter had warmed himself as we are doing. Ivan proceeds to relate the story of how Peter three times denied Christ and then, realizing what he had done, went bitterly. "I imagine it, the still, still, dark, dark garden, and in the stillness,

faintly audible, smothered sobbing." The two women cry quietly. Chekhov doesn't tell us why, but we wonder if each remembers her own failure to do what is right.

As Ivan continues home, his mood entirely changes. He realizes that Vasilisa wept "because Peter was near to her, because her whole being was interested in what was passing in Peter's soul. And joy suddenly stirred in his soul." Passing time and human history no longer seem futile and pointless but radiate with meaning connecting all people with each other.

"The past," Ivan thinks, "is linked with the present by an unbroken chain of events flowing one out of another." It seems to Ivan "that he had just seen both ends of that chain, that when he touched one end, the other quivered." Looking at the cold, purple sunset over his native village, "he thought that truth and beauty which had guided his life there in the garden . . . had continued to this day, and had evidently always been the chief thing in human life and . . . life seemed to him enchanting, marvelous, and full of lofty meaning."

Chekhov has shown us two states of the human soul without choosing which is right. The deep meaning and eternal relevance he finds in the Gospel story suggest an agnostic's thirst to believe.

Mr. Morson is a professor of Slavic languages and literatures at Northwestern University.

The Transgender Sports Deception

By Colin Wright

The Supreme Court heard oral arguments this week in *Little v. Hecox and West Virginia v. B.P.J.*, cases challenging state laws that restrict participation on girls' and women's sports teams to female athletes. A January 2025 poll found that 79% of Americans—including 67% of Democrats—believe male athletes who "identify" as women shouldn't be allowed to compete in women's sports.

Faced with this overwhelming consensus, much of the media has adopted a strategy of reframing the issue. It is presented as whether transgender people should be "banned from sports," not whether males should be excluded from female sports.

The headlines following the court's oral arguments were nearly interchangeable. The New York Times: "Justi-

ces Seem Inclined to Allow States to Bar Transgender Athletes." Reuters wrote that the justices "lean toward allowing transgender sports bans." The Associated Press said the court "seems likely to allow state bans of trans athletes in school sports."

Nobody is banned from playing, only from playing for opposite-sex teams.

But nobody is arguing that anyone should be barred from sports. The question before the court is whether a sports category created for women or girls can exclude males.

Sports are divided by sex for a reason. Men and women differ in ways that matter profoundly for athletic performance. These differences

aren't "social constructs" but biological facts rooted in sexual dimorphism.

Male athletic advantage doesn't depend solely on adult testosterone levels. Physiological differences that lead to performance gaps appear well before puberty, even in newborns. Puberty merely amplifies them. One case before the court involves a male athlete whose puberty was medically suppressed. During oral arguments, some justices appeared to assume this intervention fully neutralized male advantage. It doesn't.

Preventing males from competing in female sports isn't the same as "banning transgender athletes from sports." Transgender athletes aren't excluded from athletics; they are simply limited to competing with others of their own sex—like everyone else.

Sex isn't the only category that directs individual participation in sports. A

heavyweight boxer can't compete as a featherweight. An adult can't join a children's league. These rules don't "ban" anyone from sports; they preserve categories that are necessary for safety and fairness.

The same principle applies here. Men who "identify" as women remain eligible for the male category, and women who "identify" as men may compete in women's sports, subject to antidoping rules. Eligibility is based on sex, not subjective beliefs about identity.

Truth and clarity matter. These laws don't ban transgender people from sports. They reserve female sports for women and girls. Women's sports can't survive if we pretend that sex is irrelevant or invented.

Mr. Wright is an evolutionary biologist and a fellow at the Manhattan Institute.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

The 'Insurrection' Actors of Minneapolis

In better times with better political leaders, the tragic shooting of Renee Good in Minneapolis would have caused each side in the fight over Immigration and Customs Enforcement to de-escalate and try to calm the furies. Instead, both sides are courting more confrontation that could end in even more bloodshed.

Mr. Trump's latest move Thursday was to threaten to invoke the Insurrection Act to quell protests in the Twin Cities. He has the authority to do this under the Insurrection Act of 1807, which means he could call on the military to restore public order.

But events in Minnesota are so far nowhere near the standard for riots and destruction that would justify such a move. George H.W. Bush invoked the law in 1992 to put down the riots in Los Angeles.

In Minneapolis the protests are largely peaceful, marred by some individual acts of obstruction or violence against ICE agents. These can be met with arrests and prosecutions case by case, which ICE and other agents seem capable of handling.

Triggering the Insurrection Act might be White House aide Stephen Miller's fondest wish, or so it seems. But it could incite more protests, and it might cause more voters to wonder why the country is so unhappy in the second Trump term. It would surely motivate more Democrats to vote in November unless there is a broad threat to public safety that law enforcement can't handle.

Yet there is no denying that some ICE opponents seem eager to incite agents into a belligerent response. They are taunting ICE agents in the street, recording them on their phones,

and often using their own SUVs to obstruct ICE vehicles. Obstructing a federal officer in the course of doing his duty is illegal and deserves to be prosecuted. Acts of civil disobedience have a long and sometimes noble history, but the actors must also face the legal consequences.

We should add that Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz has lived down to expectations. His video on Wednesday night urging residents to leave their homes, and then monitor and record ICE agents to stop "atrocities" against the people of the state is courting more ugly incidents. What "atrocities" is he talking about? The shooting of Renee Good was awful, but whether it was a crime is far from clear based on the video evidence.

We believe Mr. Trump's policy of mass deportation is unwise. Targeting criminal migrants has popular support for obvious reasons. But too often his ICE sweeps are catching otherwise law-abiding migrants who are awaiting their asylum hearing or have been in the U.S. for years.

When Mr. Miller set his target for ICE of 3,000 migrant arrests a day, he set in motion enforcement that was bound to result in overkill and family breakups. Americans dislike it when police have to meet parking-ticket quotas, much less body counts for arrests.

But Mr. Trump won the election in part as a response to Joe Biden's de facto open-border immigration policy. The President has the legal authority to unleash ICE, and the agents are doing what they are told to do. The way to defeat the Trump policy is at the ballot box, not by obstructing agents in violation of the law. There's an election in nine months.

Obstructing ICE is a crime, but it doesn't warrant military intervention.

The ObamaCare Apocalypse That Wasn't

ObamaCare's annual open enrollment ended Thursday, and what do you know? The media-fueled panic over the expiration of the pandemic-era enhanced subsidies turned out to be a false alarm.

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) reported this week that 22.8 million Americans have signed up for ObamaCare plans as of January 3. That's down from 24.2 million last year. People could still sign up for plans on the federal exchange through Thursday, and some states have extended their open enrollment through the end of the month.

But even if there are few new sign-ups, enrollment is still running higher than it was in 2024—when the sweetened subsidies were available. The 1.4 million decline in sign-ups compared to 2025 enrollment is also less than was predicted. The left-leaning Urban Institute projected that ObamaCare's subsidized enrollment would drop by 7.3 million.

The Congressional Budget Office's ObamaCare baseline in 2024 assumed 18.9 million people would enroll in plans this year if the enhanced subsidies vanished. The budget gnomes have repeatedly underestimated ObamaCare enrollment and spending; they need to rework their models.

One reason forecasts may have missed the mark is that they overlook that most enrollees still won't have to pay all that much for their plans. The Paragon Health Institute estimates that an average enrollee making 150% of the poverty line (\$23,475 for an individual) will be expected to pay only \$14 a week.

The enrollment decline is far below CBO's latest faulty forecast.

An enrollee earning 250% of the poverty line (\$39,125) would have to pay more, but still only \$52 a week. Keep in mind that the income thresholds that determine subsidy amounts—which decline as incomes increase—don't include government benefits like food stamps, welfare and disability payments and the child tax credit.

The Administration says sign-ups declined this year mainly because of measures it took to crack down on fraud. Paragon's Brian Blase calculates that about 12 million ObamaCare enrollees in 2024 had no medical claims, suggesting they may have been enrolled in plans without their knowledge. Fraud may also explain why enrollment hasn't fallen more.

A federal court last summer blocked several CMS antifraud rules such as requiring people who are automatically re-enrolled to make minimum \$5 payments. The GOP tax bill's eligibility verification system doesn't take effect until 2028, a lengthy delay that was a blow to political worries about the 2026 elections.

Some Senate Republicans are negotiating with Democrats to extend the pandemic-era subsidies in return for capping them at 700% of the poverty line. But extending the pandemic-era subsidies would be expensive—\$350 billion over 10 years—and add to the distortions that ObamaCare has created in health insurance markets.

The Democratic ObamaCare scare campaign has turned out to be a false and partisan alarm. Republicans who still fall for it now that the reality is clear deserve to be in the minority.

Youngkin's Strong Virginia Legacy

Can a Republican Governor make a difference in a state dominated by a Democratic Legislature and left-leaning voters? Virginia Gov. Glenn Youngkin has done it in his single term, and he's leaving his Democratic successor with a strong economy and fiscal gusher.

When Democrat Abigail Spanberger takes office on Jan. 17, she'll inherit a revenue surplus likely north of \$2 billion. The commonwealth has had four consecutive years of surpluses, collectively totaling \$9.7 billion.

Virginia also ended fiscal year 2025 with a separate \$4.7 billion rainy-day fund of cash reserves, much of which can only be tapped if there's a sharp fall in revenue. Between fiscal years 2019 and 2024, Virginia rose to third from 14th among states with a AAA credit rating for rainy-day fund balances as a share of general fund expenditures.

In 2022 Mr. Youngkin inherited a budget with a \$1.8 billion surplus by the end of that fiscal year from Democrat Ralph Northam. But this was the heyday of federal pandemic largesse that couldn't last. Many states used the cash to expand government, and when the Covid cash ran out, they raised taxes. New Jersey and New York are exhibits A and B, as they usually are in tax raising.

Mr. Youngkin has delivered \$9 billion in tax relief in addition to the surpluses. When the Democratic House of Delegates proposed \$2.6 billion in tax increases in 2024, Mr. Youngkin stopped them.

Meanwhile, the state's economy has prospered as the Governor has welcomed companies and data centers. The state says it has secured

more than \$156 billion in investment commitments. Between the fourth quarter of 2021 and the first quarter of 2025, Virginia ranked 16th of the 50 states in economic growth, according to federal Bureau of Economic Analysis data. Virginia has generally outperformed neighboring Maryland, a state with comparable demographics though not the same governance.

Since January 2022, nonfarm payroll employment has increased by 264,000, creating a broader tax base. Year-to-date growth in withholding taxes as of October was 8.6% because of wage growth. In 2025 alone, to hedge against tariffs and cuts in the federal workforce, the Governor vetoed \$900 million in proposed budget items.

Mr. Youngkin has also made strides in education, growing lab schools that are akin to charter schools (which are effectively barred in the state) with math proficiency rising 19.6% for students in third to eighth grades.

The Governor managed this despite Democratic control of at least one house of the Legislature for all four years. He tried but failed to gain more GOP seats in the midterms, and his Lt. Governor lost her run to succeed him in the statehouse. But that attests to the Democratic lean in the state, especially with President Trump seeking to cut the federal workforce, many of whom work in Northern Virginia.

Ms. Spanberger ran as a centrist, but she'll have an emboldened progressive Legislature that will try to drag her to the left. She's inheriting a growing state with a healthy fisc, and whether that continues is a test of whether she meant what she said.

The GOP Governor leaves behind a healthy fisc and growing state.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

President Trump's Path to Victory in Tehran

Regarding your editorial "Iran's Regime Massacres Its Own People" (Jan. 13): For far too long America's Middle East experience has been defined by process. Lists are tabulated of human-rights violators, sanctions are levied against illicit financiers and terrorists are targeted with drone strikes. But to what end?

In a recent interview about Iran—which is experiencing three weeks and counting of antiregime protests—President Donald Trump articulated his desired outcome: "The endgame is to win. I like winning."

And win against the Islamic Republic he must. Under the cover of a five-day internet blackout, Tehran's theocrats have killed what is estimated at 2,000 to 12,000 Iranians. This makes the current crackdown the most violently repressed protest movement in the 47-year history of the regime.

What Americans need to understand is that acting against the Islamic Republic wouldn't be simply an act of charity to help the Iranian people. The forces engaging in this domestic suppression and government officials authorizing it are the same ones that for nearly five de-

cades have plunged the Middle East into chaos and challenged American interests at every turn.

In 2025, the president successfully pursued everything from economic sanctions, nuclear negotiations, military strikes and diplomatic pressure against these forces. Now in 2026 the administration must extend its gains from the previous year. This can be done by shutting the door to diplomacy permanently with Tehran and helping the rollback of a regime that has taken a nation of 92 million hostage and placed a bounty on an American president's head.

Whether or not Mr. Trump uses military force against the Islamic Republic and defends his own self-imposed red line is one question. But a more important question is how his decision feeds into a larger U.S. strategy against Iran that is proactive about supporting the Iranian people. We must not miss this opportunity. It's Mr. Trump's pathway to victory.

BEHNAM BEN TALEBU
Senior director, Iran Program
Foundation for Defense of Democracies
Washington

Fair Play Has Long Been a Battle for Women

Dr. Chad Carlson's op-ed gives a compelling explanation for why letting men claiming to be women compete in women's athletic competitions creates a physically dangerous environment for the women on the playing field ("Men in Women's Sports Are Unfair—and Dangerous," Jan. 13).

Dr. Carlson's focus is primarily on the physical risks to women in contact sports. That should be reason enough for the Supreme Court to uphold reasonable state efforts to protect women's sports.

But we should also consider the differences in the bodies of men and women. Many years ago the Illinois high-school association, an agency that organized athletic competitions, did not provide opportunities for girls to compete in varsity track meets. As a result the daughter of a colleague was barred from running in the boys' varsity track team, and there was no equivalent girls team in cross-country running, a sport in which she be-

lieved she would be competitive.

In an excess of youthful hubris I agreed to sue the association for unconstitutional sex discrimination. Among the witnesses called for my side was an orthopedic surgeon, from whom we all learned how, even at an early high-school age, women's hips and their leg joints are hinged in a way better for giving birth than for running fast. Nevertheless, noted the doctor, that was no reason to keep them from running if they wanted to.

The eventual settlement was that public high schools in the state would either provide separate girls' track teams or open existing track teams to women, if they chose to participate. A workable win-win.

I am still convinced, as I was then, that men and women are immutably different in many respects—and we should respect those differences.

JAY PLAGER
Longboat Key, Fla.

Our Lives Don't Need to Be Overly Confusing

Elliot Penn's astute observations about the unnecessary complexity associated with travel rewards programs struck a deep nerve with this lifelong traveler. ("Life Is Too Short for Frequent Flyer Miles," op-ed, Jan. 13).

I have been screaming his sentiments for years to anyone patient enough to listen to me rant. After countless hours, probably even days over the years, trying to use my rewards or seeking explanations for why I can't, I came to the conclusion that these opaque plans are simply marketing ploys intentionally designed to be so complicated as to minimize their use and therefore limit their cost to the program sponsors.

ED RYDER
Chicago

I share Mr. Penn's frustrations with the complexity of modern American life. But rather than opt-

ing out and choosing simplicity over affordability, I suggest a different solution: Marry someone who doesn't mind these small battles and is adept at finding a good deal.

My wife will spend two hours on the phone disputing a \$25 charge—time I can then devote to reading op-eds and writing letters to the editor.

MICHAEL A. WOOD
Fort Worth, Texas

There is a term for the complexity we face each day, "confusopoly," coined years ago by "Dilbert" creator Scott Adams. Companies intentionally use complexity to create confusion, thus reducing our ability to make decisions based on good information.

DANA R. HERMANSON
Marietta, Ga.

Isn't the Economy Growing?

Regarding your editorial "Lawfare for Dummies, Monetary Edition" (Jan. 13): President Trump's own bragging about the strong economy belies his claim that Fed Chairman Jerome Powell didn't cut interest rates fast enough.

But if Mr. Powell didn't, then why is the economy growing at such a fast pace, as Mr. Trump says? The Fed could no doubt have cut them even faster, but the public is already weary of inflation, and that would not have helped.

DAVID PETERSON
Orlando, Fla.

How to Eat—the Right Way

As a nutritionist serving people from all economic backgrounds, I find the new dietary recommendations, issued by the Agriculture and Health and Human Services departments, vital for teaching how to reverse unhealthy eating habits ("New Diet Guidelines: Eat More Protein, Less Sugar," Page One, Jan. 8).

These recommendations go a long way toward ending sugar cravings caused by processed foods, snacks and artificial sweeteners; it's like killing the head of the snake instead of the tail, which always grows back. The guidelines clarify the distinction between healthy and unhealthy carbohydrates and sugars, which food manufacturers have used to confuse consumers.

Healthy foods aren't necessarily more expensive or time-consuming. A banana or apple often costs less than chips or soda, and preparing oatmeal or steamed veggies takes only minutes, proving convenience is possible. This is moving us in the right direction.

GREG RALEIGH
Washington

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Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"I got plenty of your blood and sweat, Jones. This is the tears part."

OPINION

Why Have Business Leaders Gone Silent?

By Robert E. Rubin

If anything has surprised Mr. Rubin, the New York Times wrote less than a year into the Clinton administration, “it is the avalanche of criticism, especially from the business community.”

While I don’t recall specifics, I suspect the Times’s assessment was accurate. In 1993 I left Goldman Sachs to serve as director of the National Economic Council and later as Treasury secretary. Like nearly everyone I knew in economic policy, in Democratic and Republican administrations alike, I found

Everyone is intimidated by President Trump, but we need to find the courage to stand up against abuses.

that business leaders had no problem voicing their opinions. While few in the administration enjoyed having them publicly object to our decisions, we found that private-sector engagement provided helpful perspective.

The history of such criticism makes it all the more noteworthy, and concerning, that the business community is now largely silent.

Over the past year, President Trump has taken unprecedented actions to assert federal control over our economy and undermine the

constitutional system on which the economy depends. In response, many leaders in the private sector—as well as in philanthropy, media, law and academia—have responded not with criticism, but with acquiescence and accommodation.

This is a serious loss for our economy and society.

I recognize that some in the business community believe Mr. Trump’s actions, on balance, promote free-market conservatism. To them, I pose this question. Imagine if, a decade ago, I told you a future president would do the following within the span of a year: create domestic instability with campaigns of political retribution; issue sweeping pardons for allies who break the law; adopt a foreign-policy doctrine favoring military action for the explicit purpose of seizing other nations’ resources, threatening not only adversaries but North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies; attack the legal immigration system and universities; and undermine the rule of law on which our rights and property depend.

Further, he would demand government ownership stakes in large American companies; take a share of export proceeds in exchange for lifting export controls; cancel public investment already approved by Congress; unilaterally raise tariffs, often for reasons that have nothing to do with the economy; demand that companies hire or fire executives for political reasons; sow distrust in government economic data; attempt to fire a member of the



Federal Reserve Board without due process; and threaten his critics, including business leaders, with retribution, including financial penalties and criminal prosecution.

A large majority of business leaders, not long ago, would have agreed that this hypothetical future president would pose a grave threat to our country’s prosperity and our way of life.

Such a president is no longer hypothetical. In my experience, many leaders harbor deep concerns about Mr. Trump’s lawlessness, weaponization of the government, and interference in markets. They refrain from public criticism not because they find nothing to criticize but because they’re intimidated.

Such fear is understandable. Even so, when the business community and our leaders cease to speak out on matters of public concern, they turn their backs on the foundations of our country’s success.

Free markets can’t be separated from other freedoms Americans have cherished and sometimes taken for granted. Due process, the rule of law, free speech, a free press and honest elections have been among our most powerful advantages in the global economy. Countries where the rule of law is tenuous are viewed, rightly, as riskier places to do business. Most American leaders have an additional reason, beyond protecting our long-term prosperity and con-

stitutional principles, to support sound policy and the rule of law: They live here.

I don’t know how each leader should weigh and balance competing considerations in the face of this severe threat. But all should acknowledge the threat and consider how they might respond. Doing so can be as simple as keeping truth—and sound economic policy—alive in private conversation within the business community. It might involve advocating behind the scenes with elected officials in Congress and statehouses, or with opinion leaders in the media. It could mean considering how their organizations can mitigate the risks of coercion, even if those risks can’t be completely eliminated. In some cases, it might even involve being the rare voice willing to stand up to the government.

Perhaps most important, all business leaders—and leaders in all sectors—should ask themselves three questions. First, do Mr. Trump’s actions regarding the economy, the law, and use of the federal government cross a red line? Second, if not, what would? Third, what will I do differently if and when such a line is crossed?

The challenges of opposing authoritarianism can be great. But the ever greater consequences, if authoritarianism is left to continue, can be many times more severe.

Mr. Rubin, a senior counselor at Centerview Partners, served as U.S. Treasury secretary, 1995-99.

In Trump vs. the Federal Reserve, May Both Sides Lose



POLITICAL ECONOMICS
By Joseph C. Sternberg

The financial world is in an uproar over last Friday’s criminal subpoena that Pam Bondi’s Justice Department issued to Fed Chairman Jerome Powell. Ostensibly, the Justice Department is investigating whether Mr. Powell deceived Congress last summer in testimony related to cost overruns on the renovation of two Fed office buildings in Washington.

That’s a pretext. This episode is really about Mr. Trump’s intense irritation that Mr. Powell cut interest rates in the months before the 2024 election (supposedly to boost Kamala Harris’s prospects) and then didn’t cut rates for the first nine months of Mr. Trump’s term. Mr. Powell’s other sin is to tell the public that Mr. Trump’s tariffs could

have inflationary consequences.

Worse from Mr. Trump’s perspective, the Fed’s uniquely complex structure makes it much harder to bring to heel than other quasi-independent executive agencies such as the Federal Trade Commission. The Supreme Court has signaled it will be unsympathetic to attempts to fire Fed officials outright. And decision-making within the Fed concerning interest rates rests with a committee that includes regional Reserve Bank presidents not subject to White House appointment.

So Mr. Trump has turned to lawfare. Before the Powell subpoena, the administration tried to oust Fed Gov. Lisa Cook on questionable allegations of mortgage fraud, which she denies and the administration is struggling to prove. The play is seemingly either to intimidate Mr. Powell and Ms. Cook (and presumably others) into acceding to Mr. Trump’s policy wishes or, in the extreme, to push them off the board so Mr. Trump can nominate pliable replacements.

It’s classic Trump. Note, for instance, how this kerfuffle is goading his critics into defending the indefensible.

This is most visible in the fundamental question of whether the Fed ought to be independent of political oversight in the first place. Mr. Trump’s critics start from an assumption—hammered into economics students the world over—that it should be. The argument is that

Weaponizing the law against Jerome Powell is short-circuiting a vital debate over reform.

without this independence, politicians drag central bankers into doing, well, exactly what Mr. Trump wants Mr. Powell to do now: rolling the dice on higher inflation in exchange for pre-election policy gimmicks such as rate cuts to boost the economy.

A separate but related fear is that a subservient central bank becomes hostage to elected politicians’ fiscal decisions, forced to run the printing presses in an inflationary manner to finance large deficits. This is known as fiscal dominance

(see Argentina, monetary history of).

Yet the Fed’s record makes it hard to defend the central bank’s independence on these grounds. Mr. Powell presided over the Fed’s worst policy error in four decades and still hasn’t fully explained why Fed economists didn’t see the inflation coming, let alone brought it back down to the Fed’s 2% target (itself a constant erosion of purchasing power for which no one voted, by the way).

Mr. Powell also has waded directly into the political sphere in unhelpful ways. The worst instance was his not-so-subtle lobbying in autumn 2020 for big fiscal stimulus during the pandemic, which he now plays down. Such statements from the central banker—at a time when many commentators (and Democrats) argued that low interest rates would make the resulting deficits easy to finance—strayed uncomfortably close to the fiscal dominance Fed independence is supposed to avert. And Mr. Powell did this when Mr. Trump still was in office the first time.

So what exactly is everyone defending here? Before Mr. Trump and his Monetary Keystone Kops bumbled in, a serious debate was starting

to bubble up surrounding Fed reform. Ideas included hiving off some of the Fed’s regulatory powers where lack of democratic oversight is especially troubling, reorganizing its governance structure, or even giving Congress a veto over particularly aggressive policy changes.

Alas, any of those ideas probably are off the table for the foreseeable future now that Mr. Trump has foolishly forced everyone to circle the wagons to defend the Fed from a moronic lawfare campaign. And I do mean moronic, in classic Trump fashion. Such prosecutions, if they proceed, are likely to fail. That will entrench the Fed’s independence from the Trump administration. And as uncomfortable as Wall Street investors may be with Fed policymaking if you ask them in private, they are likely to be even less comfortable with Mr. Trump’s sloppy, scattershot lawfare—and may express that discomfort in the bond market at any moment.

The real cost of Mr. Trump’s pursuit of Mr. Powell isn’t that it undermines the Fed’s independence. Rather, it’s that Mr. Trump has made it harder for sane people to hold the Fed accountable in ways that would matter.

Black America Needs a Moral Rejuvenation

By Robert L. Woodson Sr.

Black America must declare a one-year moratorium on whining about racism. Not because racism has disappeared, and not to soothe the sensitivities of white America—but because grievance has become a shield protecting predators within our own communities. Accusations of racism are routinely weaponized to silence accountability, excuse corruption and reward moral cowardice.

Martin Luther King Jr. warned us against this temptation. In his final book, he wrote, “It is not a sign of weakness, but a sign of high maturity, to rise to the level of self-criticism.” If we truly honor his legacy, we must do what too many leaders refuse to do: confront the enemy within.

That enemy is most visible in the epidemic of black-on-black violence. In a single year, more black lives are destroyed by this violence than were killed by the Ku Klux Klan in four decades of terror. An elderly black man was beaten to death for inquiring why a 14-year-old boy was out at 3 a.m. with his 10-year-old brother as

part of a gang of black juveniles. Children are shot at birthday parties. Pregnant women, homeless men and innocent bystanders are brutalized by teenagers who have learned that life is cheap and accountability optional.

These aren’t isolated tragedies. They are symptoms of moral collapse. Yet such realities rarely dominate national headlines. Civil-rights leaders and politicians remain conspicuously silent, waiting instead for the next police shooting or racial controversy to exploit for media attention and moral posturing. Call out this silence, and you will be accused of racism—bullied into retreat by those who profit from outrage while ignoring the suffering in their own backyard. This silence isn’t compassion. It is cowardice.

The same moral blindness fuels corruption. Consider the massive pandemic-relief fraud in Minneapolis, where nearly a quarter-billion dollars meant to feed hungry children was stolen. Whistleblowers raised alarms early. But every question was deflected with accusations of racism—until the money was gone. When ac-

countability dies, predators prosper. When every critique is labeled racist, justice collapses.

Here is the truth we must confront: Poverty doesn’t produce moral decay. Deprivation doesn’t produce depravity. It never has. We once endured conditions far worse than today without losing our moral compass. During Jim Crow—when racism was written into law—black neighborhoods were safer than today. Elders were respected. Children could walk the streets without fear. Families were intact, churches were full, and black marriage rates during the Great Depression were higher than for any other group in America. We had less money but more order. Less power, but more integrity.

I remember growing up in the 1940s and ‘50s, when black communities were sanctuaries from white violence, not danger zones for our own children. Moral discipline, faith and strong families were our first line of defense.

Then came the transformation. The civil-rights movement dismantled segregation and expanded opportunity—an extraordinary achieve-

ment. But over time, leadership shifted from moral suasion to political patronage. Welfare replaced mutual aid. Bureaucrats replaced neighbors. Racial grievance replaced dignity. Poor blacks were told they could be redeemed only by outsiders, while a growing civil-rights industry prospered by managing their despair.

Stop whining about racism, honor Martin Luther King’s legacy, and confront the enemy within.

As conditions deteriorated, blame shifted outward. Failures of policy and leadership were blamed not on incompetence or corruption, but on vague “systemic forces” rooted in history. This narrative absolved leaders of responsibility and stripped communities of agency. It also created the conditions that made massive fraud and exploitation inevitable.

Victimhood is not liberation. It is a leash. Racism is real and still ex-

ists. But it can’t be the only explanation for every failure or the excuse for every crime. A community can’t be healed by lies, and it can’t be saved by slogans. No child was ever rescued by a hashtag.

True empowerment requires moral clarity. It requires the courage to tell the truth—even when the truth is unwelcome, and even when the guilty look like us.

Every dollar wasted on failing programs and fashionable activism is a dollar stolen from grassroots leaders who are already healing their neighborhoods from within. These leaders don’t need excuses; they need honesty, accountability and support.

In this new year, black America must stop outsourcing blame and start reclaiming responsibility. Confronting the enemy within isn’t weakness—it is strength. It is the first step toward renewal.

If we fail to do this, no enemy outside our community needs to defeat us. We will have already done the work for them.

Our future depends on whether we have the courage to rise to the level of self-criticism King demanded—and the moral discipline our ancestors exemplified.

Scripture is unambiguous: Judgment begins in the house. A people can’t cry out for deliverance while refusing correction or ask God for justice while excusing wrongdoing in its own ranks. If black America is to rise, it won’t be by shouting louder about oppression, but by returning to the moral discipline that once sustained us—truth over excuses, repentance over resentment, and responsibility over grievance. Only then can we rightly demand justice from the world, having first restored it among ourselves.

Mr. Woodson is founder and president of the Woodson Center and author of “Lessons From the Least of These.”

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Notable & Quotable: Sowell

Thomas Sowell writing for WSJ Opinion’s Free Expression, Jan. 15:

Tragically, the AI impersonation fraud is part of a much larger and much longer lasting undermining of the very concept of truth. At one extreme are those intellectuals who speak loftily of “my truth,” as if it were private property, exempt from challenge by facts or logic. But a privately owned truth is irrelevant to communication between people.

More important are whole institutions—including education and the news media—whose basic reason for existing is to convey truth, but who

cannot resist the temptation to seek power instead.

If there are no serious consequences for either individuals or institutions that create frauds—whether by AI or by silencing other viewpoints—we will have no basis for settling our inevitable differences other than violence.

And once violence takes over, it may not matter what issues set it off, as violence and counter-violence take on a life of their own. At that point, the issue is no longer which vision will win, but whether we shall survive as a free society, or survive at all.