



OPINION

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{ OUR TAKE }

Dose of caution
in the optimism

The MPC’s rate-cut pause is prudent as it waits for clarity on the impact of a host of factors — US tariffs to GST cuts — on the economy

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) now believes that the Indian economy will grow at 6.8% in 2025-26. This is higher than RBI’s 6.5% projection made in August. It has also made a downward revision to its inflation forecast for the current fiscal year from 3.1% in August to 2.6% now. This is the lowest-ever inflation, although within the 2%-6% target band of RBI, since the current series started in 2012-13. And a 6.8% growth rate is above India’s potential growth rate.

These numbers paint a very good picture for the macro economy that seems to be doing good in terms of growth without triggering inflation. Is the Indian economy in the so-called Goldilocks state, where it is neither too hot nor too cold? There is good reason to exercise some caution in jumping to this conclusion.

It is very likely that some of the upward revision in growth forecast is on account of indexation issues — inflation ending up lower than expected — rather than a discernible rise in actual economic momentum. This was evident and seconded by many analysts when the June quarter GDP numbers were released in August. To be sure, this does not mean that GDP numbers have been doctored to look good. But it does mean that the nominal growth rate — it is not the monetary policy committee’s mandate to project these — will likely end up lower than the budgetary forecast of 10.1%. This could lead to a squeeze in the fiscal room available to the government.

Given this backdrop, the MPC is justified in not having cut interest rates in October. It is best that RBI waits for clarity on the impact of both the headwinds — tariff- and trade-related — and tailwinds — from GST reduction and the income tax reductions announced in the budget — to economic activity before cutting rates once again. In the meantime, it would be prudent to facilitate transmission effects and also make other changes, which are targeted as specific sectors of the economy, among them export-focused industries. Some of the announcements by RBI and the MPC resolution are indeed focused on this task.

The Indian economy isn’t in as sweet a spot as the latest growth and inflation projections suggest it is — but there is nothing that suggests a deep-rooted crisis as well, and this is exactly why the MPC’s pause is a prudent one.

Towards a durable
peace in West Asia

Donald Trump believes his peace plan for Gaza could lead to “eternal peace” in West Asia. The hyperbole aside, his 20-point plan seems the only bet yet to end the two-year war in Gaza in which more than 66,000 Palestinians have been killed after over 1,200 Israelis were killed in a terror strike within Israel by Hamas, on October 7, 2023. That, perhaps, is why most of the Islamic world, including Fatah, which heads the Palestinian National Authority in the West Bank, as well as India and Pakistan, have backed the plan. Among the proposals are: release of Israeli hostages in Hamas’s custody, disarmament of Hamas, a phased withdrawal of Israeli Defence Forces, an international stabilisation force in Gaza, and a government of technocrats, reporting to a “Board of Peace” with leaders such as former UK PM Tony Blair, which in turn reports to Trump. The US president convinced Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu to back the plan, but it is unclear if the latter’s headline associates are on board. Qatar and Saudi Arabia are invested in the plan, but Hamas is yet to commit to it.

Questions about the future of an independent Palestine, an idea now endorsed by a large number of countries, including in Europe, and the agency of Palestinians in deciding their government, beg answers. The priority for much of the world now is to end the war; the afterlife of a ceasefire can be decided later. It may help if the US, the prime mover behind the plan, adopts a language of persuasion rather than threat while negotiating with Hamas. The prospects of reconstructing Gaza as an international city may be alluring, but its distinct character as a Palestinian homeland will need to be preserved. “Eternal peace” in West Asia rests on restoring agency and nationhood to the Palestinians and readiness in the Arab world to coexist peacefully with the Jewish nation. As it stands, the Netanyahu administration’s aggression has led to Israel’s isolation, and Hamas’s politics of terror has wreaked havoc on Palestinian civilians. This is a stand-off that holds no future for the Israelis or Palestinians.

{ INCIDENTALLY }

Gopalkrishna Gandhi



Today’s nuclear world
needs Gandhi’s values

Before somebody presses the button and rockets begin to fly, as Orwell wrote in *Reflections on Gandhi*, Gandhi’s espousal of non-violence to resist violence must be heard by the world

Mahatma Gandhi was killed in January 1948. British literary giant George Orwell wrote an altogether brilliant essay — an obituary-style assessment — titled *Reflections on Gandhi* in January 1949. Orwell died in January 1950.

The two years between those three Januarys saw a post-Partition India lose territory and population but gain a great Constitution that proclaimed it a Republic. A post-World War II Britain shrank dramatically as an empire but through the landmark London Declaration of 1949, became renewed as the Commonwealth of Nations. And the world as a whole, chastened by its searing experiences of the Holocaust and of Hiroshima-Nagasaki, came to adopt the Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaimed by the UN.

In his 1949 essay, Orwell wrote about the impact of Gandhi on the war-scorched world and asked, “...[T]he question becomes: Who is sane? Was Hitler sane? And is it not possible for one whole culture to be insane by the standards of another?”

And Orwell answered his own question like this: “These and kindred questions need discussion, and need it urgently, in the few years left to us before somebody presses the button and the rockets begin to fly. It seems doubtful whether civilisation can stand another major war, and it is at least thinkable that the way out lies through non-violence.”

To use two unlovely contemporary expressions that evoke laptops and fast-food joints, the keywords and take-aways from these lines of Orwell’s are “before somebody presses the button”, “rockets fly”, and “way out is non-violence”.

Orwell was not one to be found saying so-and-so is the answer, or such and such is the solution. In his characteristically understated but unmistakable way, he said in what was almost a farewell essay that Gandhi’s espousal of non-violent action to resist violence and evil had to be heard by the world that had just about survived an assault on its civility. The powerful Bertrand Russell-Albert Einstein *Manifesto* (1955), signed by nine other scientists, asking the leaders of States with nuclear weapons to renounce that path and “remember humanity, forget the rest” was still five years away from Orwell’s essay. The essay can well be said to have paved the way for that seminal call.

At the time Orwell wrote his essay, the world had 304 nuclear warheads, with Harry S Truman’s US holding 299, and Joseph Stalin’s Soviet Union holding five. No other country had them. Today, nine countries in the world stock between them a total of

12,331 nuclear warheads. In order of stock, the top three are Vladimir Putin’s Russia holding 5,499, Donald Trump’s US with 5,277, and Xi Jinping’s China holding 600. For some inexplicable reason, Emmanuel Macron’s France is at number four, with 290 of them, all stored inside the country that Jean Paul Sartre called his, as did Marie Curie and Louis Pasteur. If Einstein would have shaken his great mane of a head in disbelief at the size of the US’s nuclear arsenal today, Russell would have plucked his pipe out of his mouth and Orwell his cigarette to shout in dismay at the UK holding 225.

Narendra Modi’s India and goodness-knows-whose Pakistan hold 180 and 170 nuclear warheads respectively — totalling 350 — a good 125 more than the UK that once ruled them. India and Pakistan are the only members of the Commonwealth, besides the head of the Commonwealth, the UK itself, to hold nuclear weapons — certainly a dubious distinction. Benjamin Netanyahu’s Israel has 90 that are not spoken of much by way of either confirmation or denial — mystification adding a twist to the wick. Kim Jong Un’s North Korea, unlike Israel, is open about its stock, calling its 50 warheads its “shield and sword” — completing the list of nine.

Putin’s spokespersons have used the N-word more than once in the context of the war with Ukraine. Netanyahu’s horrors in Palestine-Gaza apart, his actions against Iran have dangled the nuclear threat before the world.



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HT ARCHIVE

In 2024 and so far in 2025, nuclear arsenals in some countries have stirred within their casques as never before in the post-World War II era. Which brings us to the buttons Orwell spoke of. “Before somebody presses the button and the rockets begin to fly...” That, of course, is how World War III may start. Or, perhaps a full dress rehearsal has started already? And now, there are non-nuclear buttons — biological, chemical, cyber, and AI — waiting to be but ever so lightly touched, let alone pressed, and not by nuclear States alone but by sinister non-State entities as well, and that horror of horrors — error.

Is the world upset by this? Gandhi’s truth would say, no it is not. It is going about its preoccupations with old festivals and new carnivals as if the planet has an eternity of joys ahead.

That truth also says smaller buttons are being pressed, with rockets being fired not just to drop bombs that obliterate life but also to ignite hate and suspicion that intoxicate the spirit before they destroy the body.

By whom? By us. Government leaders snapping at one another are backed by community leaders snapping in chorus, stoking fires that can detonate explosives that burn, spew acids that scar for life.

Orwell ends his essay on Gandhi with these honest words: “One may feel, as I do, a sort of aesthetic distaste for Gandhi, one may reject the claims of sainthood made on his behalf (he never made any such claim himself, by the way) ... but regarded simply as a politician, and compared with the other leading political figures of our time, how clean a smell he has managed to leave behind!” He does not say “fragrance” — that would be for Gandhians to say. He says “smell” — that honest word. But the key word there is “clean”.

Return, clean and lean you! It will not be a happy return for you, I know. But by God and by Orwell, do return as some other person, an AI geek perhaps, an AI Einstein or Russell. Teach us how to say no to all old and new ways of deceit and deception, including those that AI will invent. Pause your canons of celibacy, nature cure, salt-free food and homespun but teach us to stop telling lies and save us from ourselves. Before the buttons of hatred are pressed and the rockets of falsehood fly.

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Battle for West’s identity
intensifies in the US, UK

One element of our current global crisis is an internal western struggle for securing the identity of the West. Although it has been building up for years, two developments in recent days have given it a new momentum within the West and greater global visibility.

The first was the assassination of Charlie Kirk, an influential Right-wing American activist and media personality described by his supporters as a “plumline Republican”. The second was the “Unite the Kingdom” rally in the UK, led by far-Right activist Tommy Robinson, who has served multiple prison sentences in the past. The rally saw the participation of over one lakh people, one of the largest in the UK’s recent history.

Kirk and Robinson are part of an increasingly large number of individuals, groups and organisations — some more prominent and influential than others — who believe — in varying degrees of strength — that the West as an idea and a force in human affairs is facing an existential threat. One of them is Elon Musk. Speaking to the UK rally through a video-link, Musk said: “Whether you choose violence or not, violence is coming to you. You either fight back or you die.” The subtext was Kirk’s assassination.

Partisans of this struggle believe that the West is a civilisation, and amongst the finest that humanity has seen. Its roots lie in classical Greece and Rome. It is held together by the Christian faith. It was nourished by the European Renaissance and modernised by the Enlightenment. Its politics is marked by democracy and freedoms, foremost amongst the latter being the right to free thought and speech. Its founders are White people who are God fearing, family-oriented, industrious, and enterprising.

The partisans argue that this West is being insidiously undermined in five major ways. Mass influx of non-White people into western countries. Aggressive Islamisation being carried through unfair means. Loss of economic opportunities for White people. Attacks on the idea of the conventional heterosexual family. And deployment of western wealth, power and attention to solve the problems of the rest of the world at the expense of issues at home.

As per this view, the five pillars of the modern West — economy, family, religion, demography, and foreign policy — are under assault. The West, it is argued, is being made invisible in its own home.

How did this happen? The partisans argue that White people became complacent and stopped guarding their civilisation. They overdid secularism and fell for the lure of atheism and materialism, thus losing touch with the virtue and spirituality of the Christian faith.

THE CLAIM IS THAT WESTERN GOVERNMENTS HAVE STOPPED PRIORITISING THEIR OWN PEOPLE. THEY WERE INDISCRIMINATE IN WELCOMING MIGRANTS

They bought into the White guilt narrative, according to which the problems of the non-West are due to western colonialism and wars. This led them to be too accommodative of mass immigration and understanding of their governments’ foreign entanglements. And they took individualism and self-indulgence to the extreme, weakening the norm of the heterosexual and married family.

Furthermore, the claim is that western governments have stopped prioritising their own people. They were indiscriminate in welcoming migrants. They allowed industries to move out of the West, into China and elsewhere, hollowing out their economies. They went democratising — and funding the development of — other countries. They have fought other countries’ wars and continue to provide security for foreign countries for inexplicable reasons.

Who are the enemies, according to the partisans? “Radical left” activists and teachers who teach students to hate their privilege, culture, history, family and country. Islamists at home and abroad. Lobbyists and foreign governments. Sexuality rights campaigners who promote rights of the transsexual minority at the cost of the heterosexual majority. Corporations that pocket wealth. And globalists who undermine nationalism and patriotism.

So, what according to them should be the response? Save the West before it is too late. Speak up and defend its ideals. Identify and de-platform its opponents and enemies. Vote out governments that don’t prioritise the founding peoples of western civilisation. Campaign against the oligarchs and the globalists. And oppose foreign entanglements.

These ideas have crystallised across the West over years but the developments mentioned above mark, many feel, the end of liberalism in America, of multiculturalism in the UK, of hesitation amongst the conservatives to speak up across the West.

Critics of these ideas have for long dismissed or ridiculed them, saying that the ideas don’t reflect mainstream or majority reality. These responses miss the point. The relationship of these ideas to actually existing reality has become theoretical. What matters now is that the feeling of resentment, which was always real and had to be taken seriously, has found tailwinds. It is driving a movement that now has the sympathy of the world’s richest man and the most powerful government. It found an echo in US President Trump’s address to the United Nations General Assembly last week. And, it has put its opponents on notice.

There are calls in America to respond to Kirk’s assassination by a decisive crackdown against the liberal Left. And the UK rally may have started the process of a systematic mainstreaming of the far Right in British politics, with wider consequences for the media, business, academia and non-governmental organisations.

As this struggle intensifies, our global crisis deepens.

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{ POPE LEO XIV }



It seems that it is a realistic proposal ... I hope Hamas accepts it in the established timeframe

On the proposed peace plan for Gaza



In Gujarat, Gandhi lives
on in stories, in craftsmen

Once a tiny hamlet inhabited by Harijan weavers, Bhujodi exuded the symphony of the loom that had internalised both *Kabiriyat* and Gandhiness, their rhythm and rigour of austerity. I was meeting the master weaver Vashram (Vishram) Vankar (weaver) in his Bhujodi house-cum-workshop-cum sales depot that has a sprawling verandah with a cow-shed and a loom, nearly half a century after I first met him. Stoutly resisting the lure of showing off, Vashram and his family have still retained the Gandhian simplicity with compassion. The 80-year-old Vashram reads newspapers without specs, uses no hearing aids, wears the home-spun coarse cotton clothes, dons a *deshi* Gandhi cap and keeps chanting Gandhi Bapu! Gandhi Bapu! He even reminded me that the date of our meeting was Vinoba Bhave’s 130th birth anniversary. Vashram Vankar of Bhujodi (near Bhuj, Kutch) is an epitome of Mahatma Gandhi in Gujarat today.

In Gujarat, to my mind, Gandhi lives institutionally and instinctually. Gujarat has always offered a strange mix of responses to Gandhi. You’d need to feel them down to earth. Gandhi never ever returned to Gujarat after November 2, 1936, but still he smiles his toothless smile here.

It is, perhaps, the prevailing Jaina ethos (non-violence, vegetarianism, asceticism, *aparigraha* or non-possessiveness, business ethics and munificence) that has been contributing to the presence of Gandhi and Gandhiness across Gujarat and despite many heinous communal incidents. I felt the institutional and instinctual presence of Gandhi at two ashram-like hands down (Buniyadi) artisans’ training schools called Hunnarshala and Karigarshala near Bhuj. These unique spaces, quietly, compose symphonies of spontaneity and diversity through the practice of creating crafts. The young school-drop out boys and girls rejuvenate themselves here through creativity.

In South Gujarat, wherever you walk, you would be walking upon Gandhi’s footprints through the still-extant ashram-like institutions and historic places. In 2019, I had the idea of going around the city of Surat, what I called *panji tirath* (five Gandhian places of pilgrimage), within a couple of hours’ radius. These five places include Bardoli (Swaraj Ashram set up in 1928 during the Bardoli Satyagraha), Hariपुरa (venue of the Indian National Congress’s 51st session held under the presidency of Subhash Chandra Bose in 1938; Mahatma Gandhi had invited Nandalal Bose from Santiniketan to decorate *pandals*), Dharasana (the non-violent

satyagraha here was a direct follow-up to the Dandi salt march), Vedchhi Ashram (established in 1930 to promote tribal education and social upliftment), and Dandi, well-known for the Salt march or the Salt satyagraha led by the Mahatma in 1930. These five Gandhian places are still extant and active.

Come to the east-central part of Gujarat and you are struck by the presence of the co-operative movement reflecting the Gandhian influence of management and decentralisation. The prime example of which is the Kheda District Cooperative Milk Producers’ Union (Amul) launched in 1946 by scattered milk producers against the monopoly of private firms. The Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation is the umbrella organisation for this model transforming India into the world’s largest milk producer. On the western side, in Rajkot, we find the Rashtriya Shala (established in 1921), a site for the practice of spinning and weaving *khadi*. Gandhi studied at Rajkot’s Alfred High School, which turned into the Mahatma Gandhi High School; it now houses the Mahatma Gandhi Museum. Porbandar, the birth place of both (Kasturba) Ba and Bapu, has their memorials which are visited by many souls.

The political centre of Gujarat, Ahmedabad still retains visible Gandhian footprints in its various *ashrams* and institutions. Established in 1915, the Kochrab Ashram is still extant. On the west coast is the town of Adipur in Kutch, the only place in India having a *samadh* of Gandhi other than Rajghat in Delhi.

In August-September 2025, when Kutch observed the centenary of Gandhi’s first (and last) visit there in 1925, the difference between pre-colonial feudal Kutch and now was visible. A 100 years ago, the feudal royalty was not favourably poised towards him mainly because he was mingling with the “untouchables”. Everywhere, Gandhiji had to face the segregation between the people higher in caste hierarchy and lower. This time, many young students joined the Gandhi *padayatra* (foot march) to honour the occasion. Twelve-year-old Priyanshi from the Vallabhpur Ashram Shala from the Vagad region was the youngest *padayatri*, walking alongside 70-year-old Ramesh Barot in a *prabhatheri* (morning rounds). I witnessed it in my tiny village of Chhasara. In short, Gandhi still lives on — including in Gujarat. He matters to Gujarat as much as to the globe today.

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Pragmatic pause

Regulatory intervention will improve the ease of doing business

Theoretically, economic growth, surprising on the upside with benign inflation outcomes, is a desirable position for central banks. However, what makes life challenging for modern central bankers is the persistent uncertainty, owing to one cause or another. Given the uncertain economic backdrop and recent policy interventions, the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Wednesday rightly decided to leave the policy repo rate unchanged at 5.5 per cent. Some market participants were expecting a 25-basis-point cut. However, the MPC decided to wait for the impact of recent policy interventions to play out before deciding the next course of action. Policy transmission in the bond market, for instance, has been weak. Interestingly, the MPC in its statement has noted that the current macroeconomic conditions and outlook have opened up space for supporting growth.

The consumer price index-based inflation rate has been lower than the RBI's projections in recent months. As a result, the MPC has revised its inflation projection for this financial year to 2.6 per cent, as against 3.7 per cent in the June policy. However, since monetary policy needs to be forward-looking, it is important to consider how inflation is expected to behave in the coming quarters. The Monetary Policy Report, also released on Wednesday, shows that the inflation rate is projected to average 4.5 per cent in 2026-27, with the third-quarter reading above 5 per cent. With the repo rate at 5.5 per cent and the inflation rate projected at 4.5 per cent for next financial year, policy space can open up only if inflation projections are revised significantly lower in the coming months, or if the MPC is comfortable with the real policy rate falling below 1 per cent. Pushing the real policy rate below 1 per cent will need a sound explanation. The committee expects gross domestic product (GDP) to expand at 6.6 per cent in 2026-27, marginally lower than the 6.8 per cent projected for 2025-26. The MPC on Wednesday revised this financial year's GDP growth projection to 6.8 per cent from 6.5 per cent, largely on account of higher than expected growth in the first quarter. Growth is likely to slow in the second half of the year. Overall, the statement on policy space should not be interpreted as a sure sign of a coming rate cut. A lot will depend on how things move in the coming months.

Aside from the monetary policy, the RBI announced several regulatory decisions with a significant bearing on the banking sector. It will give a glide path for the adoption of the expected credit-loss framework, which will help banks adjust to the new regime. The banking regulator also proposed implementing the revised Basel-III capital adequacy norms effective from April 1, 2027. Further, the RBI has proposed to introduce a risk-based deposit insurance premium. This should incentivise banks to improve their risk-management systems. The regulator is also removing restrictions on the overlapping business of banks and their group entities. The limit on lending against shares and the limit for initial public offering financing have also been increased substantially, which had remained static for several years. Importantly, as demanded by banks for some time, the RBI has proposed to provide an enabling framework for banks to finance acquisitions by Indian corporations. This will increase business opportunities for Indian banks — a gap that was being filled by foreign entities. On balance, the proposed regulatory intervention will improve the ease of doing business for banks without losing sight of banking and financial stability.

RSS at 100

Next phase of its evolution should make it more open

As it turns 100, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) could look back with some satisfaction at having achieved its avowed objective of unifying and awakening the Hindus when it was founded on the Vijayadashami day (September 27) in 1925. That it is also at its mightiest, with its political arm, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), leading the government at the Centre for the past 11 years, and in over a dozen states, and with a former RSS pracharak as the country's third-longest-serving Prime Minister, is evidence of the self-proclaimed apolitical Sangh's electoral success.

Over the past hundred years, despite bans and a political climate that was not conducive to its survival, the RSS has continued to expand. For long on the margins of India's academia and intellectual discourse, the RSS' history and its icons are part of school curricula. Its affiliates — particularly the Swadeshi Jagran Manch, Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, and Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram — shape narratives in their respective fields of work, and through these affiliates the Sangh Parivar has a presence in all walks of life. But with great power have come new sets of responsibilities and challenges, including how it prepares its volunteers, several of whom go on to join politics, to make sense of a diverse nation, how it reshapes India's perception in the comity of nations, and how it continues to be relevant to a younger generation of Indians. RSS Sarsangchalak Mohan Bhagwat's three-day discourse at the national capital's Vigyan Bhavan in the last week of August suggested that the Sangh's leadership was keenly aware of the need to take the edge off some of its positions.

Beyond its target of increasing the number of its "shakhas", or locations where it holds its morning meetings, from 85,000 to 100,000 and enrol three-four million *swayamsevak*s, or "active volunteers", to take its number of such volunteers to 10 million, the Sangh has to address questions on admitting women to its "shakhas", although it argues that it has women-specific Rashtra Sevika Samitis, and its views on people's sexual orientations, food choices, and how it views India's minorities. As Mr Bhagwat observed in a previous series of discourses in 2018, the RSS is not dogmatic but dynamic, and pointed out that *Bunch of Thoughts*, by its second chief, MS Golwalkar, included speeches delivered in a particular context and could not be eternally valid.

Over the years, the Sangh has shown adaptability, but there is an increasing acknowledgement that the model needs a relook. At least since the 1981 Meenakshipuram conversions of Scheduled Castes, and the Ekamata Yatra of 1983, which a Sangh affiliate launched in its wake, the RSS has shown the ability to adapt, particularly on the question of addressing the Hindu caste system. On the question of minorities, especially Muslims, the RSS is of the view that Indians could be of any religious persuasion, but the important aspect is whether they honour the ethos of the country. But its ambivalence on whether it might support its affiliates in launching campaigns to "reclaim" temples at Mathura and Varanasi, and flagging of demographic change as the next big threat, indicates that it is unprepared to let go of its penchant to villainise a particular community. As the RSS enters the next phase of its evolution, its challenge would be to convince its *swayamsevak*s to imbibe the magnanimity required of a true cultural organisation.

Beware the promises of populists

Amid global uncertainty, correcting populist policies is essential for growth



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

Economic populism is a political approach that frames economic issues as a conflict between the common people and a corrupt or out-of-touch elite, quite often with a strong dose of nationalism railing against globalisation. Populism is back in fashion, this time in the United States, Hungary, and in several countries in the Global South. Populist parties have also made huge gains in Europe, including in its heartland, France and Germany.

In the United Kingdom — which left the European Union — a period of populist and incompetent governments under Boris Johnson and the hapless Liz Truss turned the electorate away from the Conservative Party. Rishi Sunak tried to restore confidence in the Conservatives but lost badly to the Labour Party. In Poland, a 10-year period of populist government ended with the election of a more liberal Donald Tusk. But Donald Trump, despite a chaotic first term from 2016-2020 and a mismanaged pandemic that led to his election loss in 2020, is back in power in the US, while Viktor Orbán, another right-wing populist, remains strong in Hungary.

The world has seen waves of populism before. In a study published in the *American Economic Review* in 2023, Funke *et al* examined periods of populist government across the world from 1900 to 2020. The share of populist governments rose in the 1930s — with the rise of Hitler and Mussolini in Europe — and again in the 1950s, mostly in Latin America. Populism rises and eventually wanes. Populism of the 1930s eventually led to World War II. A second wave of populism has now swept the world since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The study shows that the share of independent countries with populist governments rose from under 5 per cent in 1991 to over 25 per cent by 2019, and is now closer to 30 per cent.

In their 120-year study, Funke *et al* also show that the costs of populism are high — with gross

domestic product (GDP) per capita 10 per cent lower, public debt 10 per cent higher, and institutional quality weakened. They further find that left-wing populism is as damaging as right-wing populism. Their study includes many left-wing populists, such as Juan and Eva Perón in Argentina, Indira Gandhi in India, Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela, and Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico. On the right-wing side, Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Türkiye, and Narendra Modi in India are classified as populists. While some may nitpick about the study's classifications, the broader results would not change significantly even if a few names were excluded.

Populists, whether from the left or the right, have a greater penchant for autarchic policies that restrict trade and view the world through a mercantilist zero-sum perspective. Mr Trump's massive tariffs are the most recent example. Some also try to interfere with the interest rate policies of the central bank, weakening their credibility as Mr Erdogan did in Türkiye. Right-wing populism is also associated with immigration restrictions, driven by the mistaken belief that immigrants take jobs from locals, free-ride on services, and increase crime, whereas in reality they mostly contribute to economic prosperity, pay taxes, and are less prone to criminal activity.

They also favour industrial policy, where subsidies are directed at chosen firms combined with import protection. What is needed are pro-market policies supported by strong institutions that uphold the rule of law; what they deliver are pro-business policies accompanied by weakened institutions and cronyism. They are also fiscally irresponsible, with right-wing populists favouring tax handouts for the rich and left-wing populists favouring large welfare measures for the poor that are not properly targeted, leading to waste, cor-



IF TRUTH BE TOLD
AJAY CHHIBBER

Listing of Tata Sons: A critical call

All eyes seem to be on the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) for its decision on whether Tata Sons needs to go for public listing or not, as the deadline set by the regulator for the market debut of the holding company of the steel-to-software conglomerate expired on September 30. The customary monetary policy press conference on Wednesday offered a glimpse into the curiosity around the matter with the RBI governor being asked, among a volley of other questions, about Tata Sons' listing. Without giving away anything on whether Tata Sons has been given an exemption from listing, Governor Sanjay Malhotra only said that an entity which had a registration could do business till it was cancelled.

But, does the future of Tata Sons really rest on whether or not the RBI grants it an exemption? On the face of it, yes, as the world waits to hear the verdict from Mint Road. The reality, however, may not be that simple. Consider the timeline of the developments related to the matter. Exactly three years ago, in October 2022, the RBI classified Tata Sons as an upper-layer non-banking financial company (NBFC), asking it to list by the end of September this year. As the approaching deadline loomed, Tata Sons filed an application to surrender its NBFC-Core Investment Company (CIC) registration. It followed up by clearing its debt, a condition to be de-classified as an NBFC-CIC, in August last year. The move by Tata Sons in

2024 was to seek an exemption from listing. The application has been pending with the RBI.

If you look at it more closely, 2022 to 2025 is a long time in the history of the Tata group with a lot changing in these intervening years. For instance, if in 2022 a potential listing was a significant concern for Tata Sons, and in 2024 it was looking at ways to avoid it, it may well be favourably inclined towards such a possibility at this point. Tata Sons' biggest shareholder, Tata Trusts, reportedly appears to be a divided house with the trustees resorting to voting to decide who will be the Tata Trust nominees on the board of Tata Sons and who should be replaced. Against such a backdrop, Tata Sons may like to protect itself from Tata Trusts, which is seemingly looking to strengthen its oversight of the holding company of the conglomerate. Tata Trusts holds around 66 per cent in Tata Sons.

What has changed since October 2022, when the RBI diktat came, or even March 2024, when Tata Sons applied to the regulator to surrender its NBFC-CIC registration? Under Ratan Tata, Tata Trusts, which he chaired, did not show any signs of being a divided house. So, until he died in October 2024, the view of the largest shareholder (Tata Trusts) and that of Tata Sons on the listing of the holding company may have been the same: To remain a private entity and resist reporting complexities associated with



NOT FOR PROFIT
NIVEDITA MOOKERJI

ruption, and rising government debt. A detailed study of 8,000 municipalities in Italy over 20 years showed populist governments, even at the local level, saw higher cost overruns on projects, lower capacity to collect revenue, reduced debt repayment, higher bureaucratic turnover, and lower quality of bureaucracy as political appointees replaced experienced staff.

Recent experience shows that right-wing populists in the Global South have a penchant for prestige showcase infrastructure projects, much like those who came earlier like Mussolini. Mr Bolsonaro in Brazil was building roads into the Amazon forest. Mr Erdogan in Türkiye built new airports, bridges, and tunnels in Istanbul and approved shoddy construction, which crashed during the recent earthquake. While all this infrastructure spending boosts economic activity, they alone are not enough to generate jobs for millions and add to the country's debt. And in most cases, populists find it difficult to manage a crisis — such as a pandemic — because their instinct is not to consult, or follow scientific evidence and expertise, but to pass draconian decrees.

Some will question the right-wing economic populist label in the Funke *et al* study for the Modi government. Its infrastructure programmes have largely avoided wasteful prestige projects and have been very positive for the economy. India's information technology (IT) stack has also provided huge benefits in better service delivery and access to finance. It has instituted an inflation targeting regime and not interfered in the Reserve Bank of India's monetary policy committee decisions, and it has instituted reforms such as the goods and services tax and the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code, to name a few. But increasing import protection since 2018 and its pro-big business policies do come from a right-wing populist playbook, while its free food for 600 million people is more left rather than right-wing populism. Labels aside, India must focus on correcting these aspects of populism for a more competitive and inclusive economy.

How and when this wave of populism around the world will end is not clear. What we learn is that the path forward for the world may be uncertain, with geopolitical fractures, trade wars, advent of artificial intelligence, and climate change, but the lessons of the past — offer a clear warning against the siren song of populism both on the left and the right.

The author is distinguished visiting scholar, Institute for International Economic Policy, George Washington University. His book *Unshackling India* (HarperCollins India) was declared the best new book in economics in 2022 by the *Financial Times*, UK.

1. Manuel Funke, Moritz Schularik and Christoph Trebesch "Populist Leaders and the Economy," *American Economic Review* 2023, 113 (12):3249-328.

public listing. Just to put things in perspective, Tata Sons has not made any statement on listing over recent months. However, Tata Trusts has made it amply clear that it is against such a listing and has also advised Tata Sons on that matter through a resolution.

While Tata Trusts spoke in one voice under Ratan Tata, his tenure as chairman emeritus of the Tata group saw the conglomerate with a \$400-billion market cap fighting a prolonged legal battle over the ouster of Cyrus Mistry as Tata Sons chairman in 2016. The issue at the centre of one of the biggest corporate battles was alleged mismanagement in the group under Mistry and the trust deficit between the two sides — the Tatas and the Shapoorji Pallonji group. Mistry, who died in 2022, was the scion of the Shapoorji Pallonji group, the second-largest shareholder in Tata Sons. Shapoorji Pallonji strongly favours Tata Sons' listing because that may help revive the business group through a dilution of its stake, currently at around 18 per cent.

If Tata Sons indeed goes for listing, it would, in all probability, be able to contain any attempt, if at all, at overreach or control by its largest shareholders. Of course, there's no clarity yet on who will shed how much in case Tata Sons is listed or if there would be legal tangles on the road to its market debut, but it's important to know what Tata Sons, under chairman N Chandrasekaran, wants. Clarity on Tata Sons' position on listing, as of 2025, would help define the future of the group better, irrespective of the RBI stand. As of now, the ball is in the RBI's court, and everyone is watching the space.

Taiwan: Indispensable yet abandoned



AMRITESH MUKHERJEE

We live in a post-morality world that has perfected the art of forgetting while remembering.

Month after month, year after year, annexations continue, bombings remain ceaseless, ceasefires come and go, and the world, which once promised to "never again" let it happen, actively propagates such violence. The world watches, condemns, and then moves on to the next crisis. In this world of collective amnesia, what's one more Ukraine, one more Palestine? One more Taiwan?

Chris Horton's *Ghost Nation* chooses a different premise. The book assumes, correctly, that we live in a world where moral arguments have been rendered impotent. Morality

should be reason enough, but Mr Horton doesn't solely appeal to our better angels, for he assumes they've been permanently grounded. Instead, he speaks to our more reliable motivations: Economic anxiety, the fear of systemic collapse.

What if China were to annex Taiwan tomorrow? Taiwan produces over 60 per cent of the world's semiconductors and 90 per cent of the most advanced chips — every smartphone, every car, every data centre, therefore, depends on Taiwanese ingenuity. "In today's hyper-globalised world, nearly every country, from basic commodities exporters up to the most developed economies, would experience an economic pain that would make the recent pandemic seem mild," Mr Horton writes.

But to understand how Taiwan became this indispensable yet abandoned nation, Mr Horton traces a pattern as old as the island itself. Beginning with 17th-century records, Taiwan was passed between empires like a trophy, from Chinese dynasties, Dutch traders, Spanish colonisers to Japanese occupiers and ultimately

Chiang Kai-shek's retreating Nationalists, each bringing one form of exploitation or the other. The island has never belonged to itself.

Even today, Taiwan is a part of the Chinese expansionist propaganda, without any consideration of the Taiwanese people or culture. Mr Horton notes, "A popular hashtag for Chinese nationalists when discussing Taiwan online is... 'keep the island but don't keep the people'."

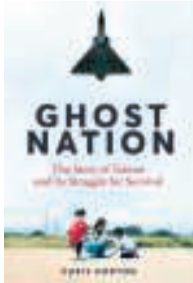
But Taiwanese democracy was a long struggle, emerging through cycles of repression and trauma. The 228 massacre of 1947, for instance, started with a cigarette vendor's refusal to pay tribute and escalated into a systematic slaughter as thousands were executed, intellectuals hunted like prey, and neighbourhoods disappeared into military trucks. For nearly four decades, mentioning "228" could mean imprisonment or disappearance. The White Terror that followed had political officers stationed in schools, children reporting on parents, neighbours vanishing without explanation, a nation turning against itself.

And yet, every act of repression

clarified what Taiwan was becoming. The White Terror, instead of crushing Taiwanese identity, refined and concentrated it. A society learning to survive under total surveillance learnt the skills democracy would later require: Reading between the lines, trusting networks over institutions.

Taiwanese democracy, as Mr Horton shows, has been tempered by adversity, which led to the creation of one of the freest and most vibrant democracies in the Asia-Pacific region. The island's protest culture, whether against Japanese colonial rule, KMT (Kuomintang) authoritarianism, or contemporary democratic governments, shows a civic engagement that China's surveillance state cannot comprehend or replicate.

A touching moment Mr Horton captures in the initial pages of the book is President Tsai Ing-wen's 2016 apology to Taiwan's indigenous peoples, the first such acknowledgment in the island's modern history. For centuries, these original inhabitants had been erased, renamed, their languages forbidden, their lands stolen.



Ghost Nation: The Story of Taiwan and Its Struggle for Survival
by Chris Horton
Published by Macmillan
336 pages ₹899

2024, relentless psychological warfare meant to drain Taiwanese resources and morale. The message being passed is explicit: Resistance is futile, capitulation inevitable.

But it is "not the CCP that has erased Taiwan," Mr Horton writes, "It is us: the liberal democracies, the developed economies, the supposed friends of Taiwan." Strategic ambiguity, that diplomatic masterpiece of having it both ways, has curdled into strategic abandonment. Twenty-three million

people exist in diplomatic limbo while their supposed allies calculate whether democracy is worth inconveniencing Beijing over.

Taiwan offers a living counterargument to authoritarian claims that democracy and economic growth cannot coexist. By ghosting Taiwan, Mr Horton suggests, the "liberal" world sabotages its own credibility.

Ghost Nation refuses to treat Taiwan as a mere diplomatic chess piece or economic asset. Within these pages, Taiwan comes across as simultaneously one of the most advanced technological societies on earth and one of the most diplomatically isolated, a booming democracy that most democratic nations pretend doesn't exist, a living refutation of Chinese authoritarianism that Chinese allies systematically ignore.

Taiwan stands as proof that some things — freedom, dignity — are worth defending. Will the world finally see Taiwan? Or will it remain forever a ghost nation, visible only in the moment of its disappearance?

The reviewer is a journalist, writer, and editor fascinated by the stories that shape our world. Instagram/X: aroomofwords

FOR ‘LINKS’ WITH UK-BASED GANG LEADER

Ex-AAP MLA Balyan booked under MCOCA

PRAGYNESH
NEW DELHI, OCTOBER 1

FORMER MLA and Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) leader Naresh Balyan has been booked under the stringent MCOCA (Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime Act) by the Delhi Police for his alleged links with UK-based gang leader Kapil Sangwan (alias Nandu).

Eight others have also been booked under the Act, aimed at controlling gang activity. All nine are in police custody.

A trial in absentia has also been initiated against Sangwan – the first one against a “ganglord” since the new set of laws were implemented last year, a senior police officer said.

Police said Balyan was actively providing potential extortion targets to Sangwan in exchange for a cut in the profits. “Balyan...was actively facilitating the extortion activities and provided the targets, includ-



Naresh Balyan

ing local builders of the area, to the...gang. His role was revealed from disclosure made by the co-accused and a voice clip of the conversation between him and Nandu.” Joint CP (Crime) Surender Choudhary said.

Balyan, a two- time MLA from Uttam Nagar, was arrested in December 2024, a little over a month before the 2025 Delhi polls. His wife Posh contested the polls from Uttam Nagar but lost to BJP’s Pawan Sharma.

Balyan has four other criminal cases against him under sections pertaining to extortion, money laundering and facilitating organised crime.

A purported audio clip of him allegedly conversing with Sangwan on a phone call be-

came public last year. The call, the police had alleged in their remand papers, was about the collection of ransom amount from a businessman through extortion.

The case in question was filed by a businessman who alleged in July 2023 that he received an extortion call demanding Rs 1 crore from Sangwan.

Sangwan’s incarcerated brother Jyoti Baba, currently in Tihar jail, has also been charged under MCOCA, along with Vikas Gahlot, who allegedly financed the gang, and Sahil who has 11 murder cases against him. Sangwan, meanwhile, continues to remain in the UK since jumping parole in 2019.

A team led by DCP Harsh Indora and Additional CP (Crime) Mangesh Kashyap, under the supervision of Special CP (Crime) Devesh Srivastava, busted the financial and logistical bases of the Sangwan gang with the arrest of the nine accused, the Delhi Police said.

NCRB REPORT - 2023

Thefts drive 59% increase in crimes at railway stations

EXPRESSNEWSERVICE
NEW DELHI, OCTOBER 1

AT DELHI’S railway stations, crimes increased by 59% in 2023 as compared to the previous year – with thefts making up a chunk of them.

The Government Railway Police (GRP) recorded a total of 5,176 cases, according to the latest data released by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB). Of these, thefts accounted for 4,813 incidents.

Delhi has seven GRP stations operating across the premises of 46 railway stations. The railway police stations are Anand Vihar, Hazrat Nizamuddin, New Delhi,

Old Delhi, Sarai Kale Khan, Delhi Cantonment and Sabzi Mandi. The GRP is responsible for maintaining law and order, as well as detecting and preventing crime at these stations.

Other cases included 24 of robbery, while three murders and three deaths due to negligence were reported from railway station premises in Delhi in 2023. According to data, a total of 2,332 cases were registered in 2021, which increased to 3,243 in 2022.

Meanwhile, the Railway Protection Force (RPF), which is responsible for passenger safety and protection of railway property at stations, registered 14,467 cases of property theft and other

related crimes at Delhi railway stations in 2023.

The number of cases registered by the RPF in 2022 was 13,425, while in 2021, it stood at 8,692.

In July, an interstate gang of bag lifters, which allegedly targeted passengers at railway stations, was busted by the GRP. The police arrested four men, recovering 12 stolen bags, mobile phones and cash. According to police, the gang would disguise themselves as cloth merchants and prey on heavy footfall trains. They would target passengers boarding and alighting trains, particularly at crowded stations, and quickly escape with unattended luggage.

Duo nabbed after exchange of fire with police in South Delhi, one injured

EXPRESSNEWSERVICE
NEW DELHI, OCTOBER 1

TWO ROBBERY accused were nabbed following a brief exchange of fire near Sanjay Van in

Southwest Delhi on Wednesday morning. One of the accused, Arman, 26, was injured after the bullet hit his right leg, police said.

Deputy Commissioner of Police (Southwest) Amit Goel said at 6.15 am, a team of

Operation Cell of the district led by Inspector Vijay Baliyan, In-charge Special Staff, acting on secret information, attempted to intercept two wanted criminals near Aruna Asaf Ali Road, Sanjay Van, Kishangarh.

On being intercepted, the criminals allegedly opened fire at the police party while trying to escape.

The police team, in self-defence, retaliated. Arman, a resident of Bawana, was immedi-

ately shifted to AIIMS Trauma Centre for treatment.

The second accused, Basheer, 24, also from Bawana, was apprehended on the spot along with an illegal firearm and live cartridge, police said.



International Institute for Population Sciences
(Deemed to be University)
An Autonomous Organization of Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, Govt. of India
Govandi Station Road, Deonar, Mumbai – 400088. Contact Details: Tel: 91-22- 42372489/490
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Notice regarding Re-Notification of Advertisement No. 01/2025


Reference: ASRB Advertisement No. 01/2025 dated 07.02.2025 [also uploaded on ASRB website (<https://asrb.org.in>)], for filling up of ten (10) Research Management Positions (RMPs) at ICAR HQ and its Research Institutes, with the last date for submission of online applications being 10.03.2025. Due to technical reasons, the Advertisement No. 01/2025 is re-notified herewith.

2. Applications are invited from all the eligible candidates. The candidates, who had applied earlier in response to Advt. No. 01/2025 notified on 07.02.2025, should also submit online application(s) afresh using the application form available on ASRB's website <https://asrb.org.in> OR <https://asrb.gov.in> only.

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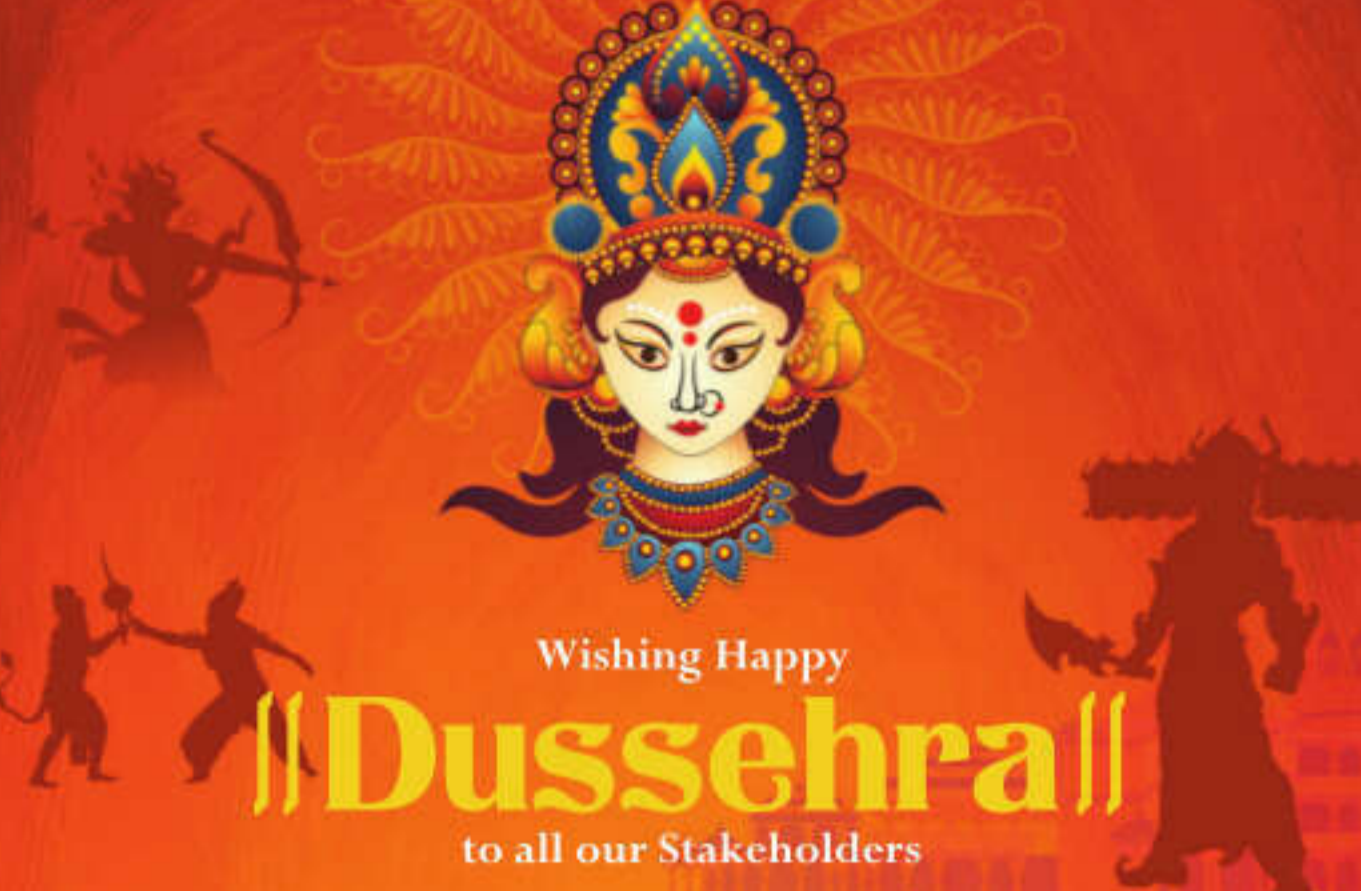
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The writer is an independent journalist



A thought for today
*Work gives you meaning and purpose,
and life is empty without it*
STEPHEN HAWKING

2 Sixes, Please

6-point-something GDP growth won't make India a developed country. The asking rate is 12-plus now

Asurplus monsoon bodes well for agriculture and rural demand this year. GST reforms, which kicked in 10 days ago, are also expected to spur consumption. So, RBI's revised growth forecast of 6.8% isn't surprising. It seems like a small increment from 6.5%, but in a \$4tn economy each fraction of a percentage point amounts to billions of dollars. Yet, it's nothing to celebrate when Trump's tariffs have cast a shadow over roughly \$50bn worth of goods exports.

Even otherwise, 6.5% or 6.8% isn't an aspirational growth rate for India. As the finance ministry has said more than once this year, India needs to grow at 8% "every year, at least for a decade" to become a developed country by 2047. Yes, India remains the fastest growing major economy, but relative performance doesn't improve living standards. In the late 1990s, when India's population was growing at 2% per annum, economists recommended a 9% growth target for 7% effective growth – to double income every 10 years. Now, although population growth has slowed to about 1% per year – based on estimates in the absence of a census – 8% is the slowest acceptable GDP growth target.

However, a new Morgan Stanley analysis shows even 8% might be too slow. To address the growing problem of unemployment, the asking rate must be 12.2%, it says. The report points to record youth unemployment – 17.6% – and a surge in agricultural employment, which are faces of the same coin. Growing farm employment is in fact the clearest sign of a jobs crisis. As countries develop, agriculture's share in employment and output shrinks. Farm work accounts for only 1.2% of employment in US. But in India, this year's Economic Survey showed agriculture's share in employment increased from 44.1% in 2017-18 to 46.1% in 2023-24.

Over the next 10 years, 84mn Indians – equal to the population of Germany – will hit working age. So, creating good jobs for them has to be a national priority. Long-neglected manufacturing, whose share in GDP had slipped to 15.9% in 2023-24 from 16.7% in 2013-14, should be the preferred engine for this, because it creates more related jobs than services. That's how US built its middle class in the 1950s, and China in the 2000s. The vision of developed India hinges on this.

Curb The Carbs

ICMR study shows how ruinous our diets are to our health. Policymakers, sit up

Listen carefully to what ICMR-India Diabetes study has to say – a cross-sectional population based survey weighted for region, age and gender, conducted from Nov 2008 to Dec 2020. Prevalence of generalised obesity is at a huge high of 29%, abdominal obesity at almost 40%, type 2 diabetes (T2D) at over 11%, prediabetes at over 15%. To put this in context, take the fact that non-communicable diseases (NCDs) account for almost 70% of deaths in India. And NCDs are caused by conditions substantially created by poor diet – low quality carbs (white rice, milled whole grains, and added sugar), low intake of protein and high levels of saturated fats. Now, the argumentative Indian would insist that pan India's basic rice-atta/maida staple has no parallel – at her own peril. For India has rapidly undergone dietary transition alongside ever-increasing physical inactivity. And it's not as simple as just replacing 'bad' carbs with fancy organics.

In fact, ICMR found that replacing refined cereals with whole wheat/millet flour *without* decreasing overall carbohydrate quantity doesn't reduce risk of T2D or abdominal obesity. The survey found that risk of T2D or prediabetes can be reduced by 6-10% if carbs are replaced with fish or egg – but meat does not have the same impact. Also, barring Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Arunachal and Manipur, no state met recommended saturated fat intake. While urban India is more overweight, and leads far more sedentary lifestyles than rural India, a total of 61% pan India was physically inactive, 43% overweight, 26% obese. The north had the highest rates of overweight people (54%). Nearly a third of India's population has hypertension (27%). This highly significant ICMR study comes not a day too early – policymakers must get down to formulating the changes that will help fix diets, increase protein intake, cut sugars, etc to eventually reduce NCDs, a ticking health bomb.

Dos and Don's

America's MAGAtma & our Mahatma

Bachi Karkaria

MAGAlomaniacs make the merely mega ones seem like models of Gandhian humility. Oct 2 is the right day to appreciate how many of the Mahatma's 11 vows Doland-ji has made his own. *Satya*. Trump's Experiments with Truth are unending. Not just bending it to his whim, he has X-ed out other platforms and expanded this core principle to "Truth Social". He has thus cleverly incorporated the Gandhian message of social justice. *Ahimsa*. Hear this: 'Only the PREJUDICED LYING MEDIA damns me the ANTITHESIS of non-violence. Nothing can be further from the TRUTH SOCIAL. You don't believe I stopped Operation Sindoor? Go ask that Paki fella who came with his box of coloured rocks to IMPRESS ME. More important, by siding alternately with 'Pootin' and 'Whatshisname', I've warned them that neither of you can depend on the US of Arms. So you better make peace. And let me get my much-deserved Nobel.'

Swadeshi. No one has made a bigger impact in getting so many countries to boycott American goods and turn to self-reliance. His 'good friend Narrendur' acknowledges this in every speech. 'Hey Vance, what's that word Injuns like yer wife have for praise? Ah yeah, *tarrif*.'

Aparigraha. Trumpji's H-1B tightening is 'selflessness' personified. The world's brightest and best will now stay home or flock to non-American countries. This will level the economic playing field, endorsing his mantra, MOGA: Make Others Great Again. *Asprishyata/Sparshbhavana*. Remember how, till recently, no one could touch America, or even come near its excellence in every sphere? Trumpji has singlehandedly succeeded in removing that 'untouchability'. *Satyagraha*. Gee!, POTUS non-cooperates with countries begging for more reasonable tariffs. Wow!, he's even made Lotus one non-cooperate with his demands. Non-violently.

Sarva dharma sambhav. *Doesn't* he treat all faiths, other than his own, with equal contempt?

Sharira shrama. MahaTrump has manifestly internalised the principle of 'bodily labour'. Have you any idea how much time he labours over just his hair?!

See, the MAGAtma clearly believes in 'Gandhian' vows. Only, his spelling's not too good.

Alec Smart said: "UNESCO tag for Chhat puja ok. But religion and politics should be kept polls apart."

NEVER BELIEVE

ALWAYS QUESTION

THE TIMES OF INDIA
THURSDAY, OCTOBER 2, 2025

Bihar's Janta & Parties

Caste acquired a bigger profile in the state's politics after Nitish Kumar's caste survey. But this very fragmentation of caste groups also stops his ally BJP from emerging as the state's uber-dominant party

Gilles Verniers

Amid Bihar's electoral rolls row, and state polls mere weeks away, political parties have been refining their electoral strategies. But as usual, caste remains at the centre of candidate selection.

There is a temptation to present any election in bipolar terms. Five years ago, Lalu Prasad declared that the election was a fight between *agda* (forwards) and *pichhda* (backwards), pitching BJP as the party of traditional upper caste elites. In 2024, INDIA coalition had also sought to present the campaign in dual terms, advocating for more substantive care of backward groups.

Bihar has a long history of backward groups' mobilisation that tends to structure electoral competition in terms of 'highs' versus 'the low'. However, the game of alliances and counter-alliances and overall political fragmentation of the party system routinely complicate this binary vision.

Historically, BJP's selection of candidates has always been skewed in favour of upper castes. In 2020, 33 of their 74 MLAs (40%) were upper caste. As everywhere else, BJP does not field Muslim candidates, which means the rest of their representatives are drawn from OBCs (26) and EBCs (2).

By contrast, only 10 of 43 JDU MLAs were upper caste, against 22 OBCs and EBCs, although they're predominantly OBCs. Most JDU MLAs belong to locally dominant OBC groups, including Kurmis (7) and Yadavs (4).

RJD, on the other hand, remains blatantly pro-Yadav. In 2020, the party took advantage of its seat-sharing agreement to nominate as many Yadavs as possible – 44, out of which 26 won. Contrary to BJP and JDU, RJD nominates Muslim candidates. So does Congress. In fact, Congress has the largest proportion of Muslim MLAs among major parties but also happens to be the smallest of the four major parties in Bihar.

Lalu Prasad's decline in the early 2000s created the

space for non-Yadav OBC representation, including for Kurmis, Koeris/Kushwahs, and some EBCs. Even BJP diversified, electing 28 OBC MLAs in 2020 across nine different groups, mostly Banias and Yadavs. Yet, whether in BJP, JDU or RJD, majority of elected OBCs still hail from locally dominant communities. EBCs, though central to campaign rhetoric, remain largely excluded. Despite comprising about 36% to 40% of Bihar's population, they accounted for only 11% of the assembly in 2020.

This pattern reveals a paradox. While most parties have diversified their tickets, the outcome has been greater fragmentation rather than broader inclusion. Most OBC groups represented in the assembly generally hold less than 5% of seats each,

intensifying inter-caste competition. Instead of reducing caste divisions, diversification has sharpened them.

This helps to explain why BJP hasn't emerged as the dominant party the way it did in the rest of the Hindi belt. Intense caste fragmentation and competition come in the way of building a pan-Hindu coalition. Since 2000, no party has gained more than 25% of total vote share. In 2024's Lok Sabha polls, RJD emerged as the largest party, with 22% of votes. BJP, while dominant in the Hindi belt since 2014, got around a fifth of the votes.

While it seeks to diversify its electoral base, BJP still depends on allies to remain in power. Crucially, its main ally JDU does not share its ethnic-religious nationalism

and still presents itself as a secular force.

Caste fragmentation and a long history of effective backward castes mobilisation have also prevented BJP from using Hindutva to build its social and electoral alliances. It also lacks charismatic Hindutva politicians such as Yogi Adityanath, who is rooted in politics but also in a militant monastic tradition.

The spread of Hindutva has also been greater in small towns and in regions that have urbanised. Uttar Pradesh is more urbanised in certain key areas, with greater penetration of mass media, social media and TV channels. Bihar, on the other hand, remains more rural in comparison with lower media penetration. Finally, Uttar Pradesh was always more communal, while caste violence historically has prevailed in Bihar. This has made religious polarisation less effective as a consistent electoral strategy.

Looking ahead to 2025's poll, the basic structure of Bihar's political grammar appears unlikely to change. Nitish Kumar's caste 'census' in 2023 has only strengthened caste as a foundational pillar in Bihar's politics.

The most significant uncertainties come from two quarters: Election Commission's handling of voter rolls and Prashant Kishor's Jan Suraj campaign. Kishor hopes to engineer an upset akin to Aam Aadmi Party's breakthrough in Punjab, where voters across communities rejected entrenched elites by choosing an outsider. Yet Bihar is no Punjab.

Caste is more deeply entrenched, and Kishor's own strategy reflects the caste arithmetic he helped codify as a political consultant. His manifesto may borrow from AAP's language of post-identity politics, but his campaign still relies on the conventional caste playbook.

In no manner is the outcome of the upcoming election known or even remotely certain. Uncertainty remains higher than ever. But any real change is likely to come from voters themselves, not from Bihar's political class.

The writer is a researcher at CERI, Sciences Po, Paris. Views are personal

Why Trump Wants US Military In American Cities

First, because he's always talked about this dangerous idea. Second, because a majority of Americans wrongly believe crime rates are up. That allows politicians to play on unfounded fear

Dan Cassino

Trump's extraordinary speech to military generals at Quantico, suggesting that US cities could be used as training ground for troops, has the makings of a watershed moment. In recent days, Trump has moved military forces into Washington, DC to curb what he calls "out of control" criminality in the US capital. He's also threatened to move troops into Chicago, the nation's third largest city, what the President calls "the worst and most dangerous city in the world, by far."

It's not surprising that Trump is attempting such moves – he's talked about doing exactly this for years – but what is surprising is that's coming at a time when crime in those cities, and in US overall, has been falling dramatically. Violence in US has been on a slow but steady decline for 30 years: but for some reason, people just don't believe it.

Trump's moves to put the National Guard – which normally deals with natural disasters and serves as a reserve military in case of war – as well as the regular military into US cities to restore order are of dubious legality, as US law prevents soldiers from carrying out law enforcement tasks. This has made these moves ineffective: in Washington, DC, National Guard troops who see a crime can't actually arrest anyone. Instead, they call the actual police just like anyone else.

Crime in US is at, or near, 30-year lows, but that would be news to the majority of people in US, who say that crime is increasing. In Gallup survey data, the percentage of Americans who say that there's more crime now than last year has been above 60% since 2005, even as the rate of violent crime has dropped by more than 1/3rd over that same period. The driver of these views is partisanship: last year, 90% of Republicans said that crime was going up, compared to just 29% of Democrats. Republicans think urban crime is a serious

and increasing problem largely because they don't live in the cities.

The desegregation of schools, coupled with the increasing urban unrest of the 1960s led middle-class whites to flee cities and settle in suburban areas. At the same time, young people and immigrants flocked to those same cities, leaving urban areas in US much younger, more educated, and racially diverse than suburban and rural areas. Politically, this is important because the people leaving the cities and their children



tended to be more Republican, while those moving in leaned Democrat. Today, in New York City, for example, Democrats outnumber Republicans more than 2 to 1. In Washington, DC, it's 15:1.

For outsiders, views of cities are shaped by how they're shown on the news, on television and in the movies. Media representations of violence tend to focus on gruesome crimes that stick in people's memories.

The reality of life in US cities is that cuts to social services have made streets and public transportation occasionally unpleasant, but not dangerous. The biggest problem facing residents of these cities isn't

crime, but the cost of living, with rents constantly rising because more people want to move in than there are apartments to house them. That's just not what you'd get if they were the deadly hellscape of Republican imagination.

These cities do have real problems, but none of them can be solved with more police, or with an occupying force of soldiers despised by the locals. The solution to homelessness is cash assistance and a more robust shelter system; the solution to mental illness is public hospitals and residential treatment facilities. Dispatching men with guns is symbolically powerful; actually fixing the problems requires time and investment that isn't nearly as showy.

The clearest sign of the disconnect between the cities that exist in the Republican imagination and the cities that people actually live in comes from Zohran Mamdani's campaign for mayor of New York. Mamdani, who has made mass transit a major issue in his campaign, ran a scavenger hunt across the city, challenging residents to use public transport to get to seven different locations based on clues. Thousands of people – far outstripping the 500 the campaign had anticipated – took part, spending a Sunday afternoon riding the buses and subways the US secretary of transportation says he's scared to enter, all over a city that doesn't look anything like the terrifying portrait painted by Trump.

One of the most dangerous trends in US politics has been the inability of citizens and leaders to agree not on policy solutions, but on basic facts. Is crime up or down, do vaccines work, who won the last election? There are objective answers to these questions, but increasingly, the answers people give depend on their political viewpoints.

The military occupation of US cities, and the belief that it's needed, is a direct consequence of this disconnect. There's a short-term political upside for political leaders in denying inconvenient facts, and getting voters to go along with them: but that doesn't mean that the public has to play along.

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Calvin & Hobbes



Dussehra Inspires Us To Overcome Demons Within

Rajyogi B K Brij Mohan

Dussehra, Vijaydashami, marks the victory of Ram who represents God, over Ravan and his demonic forces. Ram's victory over Ravan symbolises end of unrighteousness. In many regions, Dussehra also celebrates the victory of goddess Durga, representing the power of feminine divinity, over the demon Mahishasur.

The myths linked to Dussehra are not just ancient tales. They hold a message relevant to us in the present times. The occasion of Dussehra every year reminds us that good ultimately prevails over evil. The Ramayan tells of the effort undertaken by Ram to vanquish Ravan and rescue Sita. Ram's victory serves as an inspiration to all of us to allegorically overcome demon-like vices. These demonic weaknesses are different for each one of us: for some it may be anger, for others greed, jealousy,

laziness, or some other flaws. Just like demons, these defects lurk within us, impinging upon our thoughts, attitude and actions to stop us from being the best we can become. They poison our minds to cause pain, sorrow and sufferings to us and others.

Overcoming these defects does not require any hard battle, great penance or sacrifices. All that is needed is an inner awakening. Weaknesses develop within us due to darkness or inertia of mind. Darkness is nothing but the absence of light. The forces of light and darkness have been metaphors for millennia – light represents truth, virtues, and divinity, whereas darkness symbolises fear, ignorance, and negativity. Just as night becomes day when the sun rises, the darkness within the soul vanishes when we

ignite the light of awareness through right divine connection and spiritual contemplation.

We just must remember who we are. The human soul is essentially a being of purity, peace, and love. These qualities are innate to all of us, which is why we feel happy when we experience these virtues. When we become aware of our spiritual identity, that we are originally pure and peaceful souls, our self-image and outlook undergo change. Imagine a millionaire who has forgotten that he has millions in the bank and is living in penury. Then someone reminds him of his riches. It would transform his life – from someone who was needy and dejected, he would become happy and self-assured, and capable of being generous. Most souls in the world today are like the millionaire – they do not know themselves. Unaware

of the peace and love latent in the soul, they look for these outside and are repeatedly disappointed because those from whom they expect to get fulfilment are looking for the same.

The light of self-awareness resulting from regular practice of spiritual wisdom and Raj Yog meditation, dispels the darkness of ignorance within, revealing inner resources of virtues available to every soul. We realise that to experience real peace, we have to create peaceful thoughts and share the same with the world around. Daily cultivation of divine thoughts and positive feelings truly empowers the self. While others also benefit from our such spiritual state of being and goodness, we remain the primary beneficiary. Sharing our virtues with the world does not diminish our stock, rather multiplies it. That is spiritual arithmetic – goodness increases with giving.

Sacredspace



Nonviolence does not signify that man must not fight against the enemy, and by enemy is meant the evil which men do, not human beings themselves.

MK Gandhi