



Danger of thought

Maharashtra's public security Bill endangers India as an open society

The Maharashtra Special Public Security (MSPS) Bill, 2024 follows the disturbing pattern of executive overreach in the name of security. Existing laws are often misused against political opponents and critics of the ruling party, including commentators. Charges are often vague and sweeping, and the process itself becomes the punishment in many of these cases. Given this pattern, the move by Maharashtra's Mahayuti government led by the BJP to create an entire law to criminalise a certain kind of thought portends danger to freedom and democracy. Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis has said that the new law would only target those who try to undermine the constitutional order, but the possibility – indeed the probability – of its misuse is apparent. The State says that it is seeking to prevent Maoists from brainwashing youth, professionals, and civil servants through front organisations. As in the proposed law, which is now awaiting the assent of the Governor before coming into force, the State government can declare any suspect “organisation” as an “unlawful organisation”. Offences under the proposed law include membership of such organisations, fundraising on their behalf, managing or assisting them, and committing unlawful activities.

The Bill's focus is on people and organisations that act as a front for Maoists, and what is unlawful is so broadly defined that anyone can be its target. Among other things, according to the Bill, ‘unlawful’ is “any action taken by an individual or organization whether by committing an act or by words either spoken or written or by sign or by visible representation or otherwise, which constitute a danger or menace to public order, peace and tranquility”. Offences are cognisable and the accused can be arrested without a warrant. Punishment includes jail terms of two years to seven years, along with fines ranging from ₹2 lakh to ₹5 lakh. The State argues that Chhattisgarh, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and Odisha have enacted Public Security Acts and banned 48 Naxal frontal organisations. The Opposition parties offered feeble resistance to the Bill and raised some broad concerns regarding its misuse but it was passed in the Assembly through a voice vote. As an afterthought, the Congress and the Shiv Sena (UBT) protested on the floor when it was taken up in the Legislative Council. The Bill had gone through a long deliberative process, but as it turns out, all parties appeared to be in agreement, barring the lone CPI (M) MLA who protested against it on the floor of the Assembly. The idea that thought and speech, howsoever unpalatable they might be to the ruling establishment, should be policed poses a grave danger for India as an open society.

Sectarian wounds

Syria under Islamists is at risk of falling into chaotic violence

Last week's violence in southern Syria, which saw the killing of hundreds from the Druze community, was a grave reminder of the country's deep-rooted sectarian tensions, now ruled by a former Sunni jihadist. When the Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS), formerly an al-Qaeda affiliate, captured power in Syria in November 2024, its leader Ahmed al Sharaa (who until recently was known as Abu Mohammed al-Jolani) pledged to protect the rights of all communities. But the realities on the ground tell a different story. Syria is approximately 80% Sunni, with minorities including Alawites, Shias, Christians and Druze making up the rest. The ascent of the HTS triggered widespread anxiety among these groups. These fears were only reinforced when violence erupted against the Alawites, the sect of former President Bashar al-Assad, in March in the western coastal region. Hundreds were killed in days long attacks orchestrated by pro-government militias, most of them jihadists. It took only four months before the next atrocity unfolded – this time in Sweida, a Druze heartland in the south. Clashes initially broke out between Druze and local Bedouin members, which prompted Mr. Sharaa to send in security forces. What followed was a massacre.

The sectarian violence escalated into a regional crisis after Israel began bombing Syrian government forces and military infrastructure in Sweida and Damascus. While Israel does have a Druze minority of its own, its claims of humanitarian intervention ring hollow in the context of its ongoing genocidal war on Gaza. Israel has long conducted strikes in Syria – earlier, its targets were Hezbollah and Mr. Assad's troops. Now that the HTS is in power, Tel Aviv does not want a consolidated Syrian military presence near its border. These internal and external pressures have left Mr. Sharaa vulnerable. Syria, which witnessed coups and counter-coups in the 1950s and 1960s, achieved some stability under the secular Baathist rule in the 1970s. When the Baathist regime became a dynastic dictatorship, cracks began to emerge in the political and social consensus that Hafez al-Assad, Bashar's father, had built, to culminate in a devastating civil war. The best chance for Mr. Sharaa to redeem himself and Syria was to rebuild a pluralistic state, with Kurds, Alawites, Christians and Druze enjoying equal rights. Instead, his push to establish a centralised Islamist regime in Damascus has deepened the sectarian wounds. And the HTS's armed jihadists, who go on killing sprees against minority dissenters, are pushing the country towards disintegration. Unless Mr. Sharaa takes urgent steps to rein in his fighters and rebuild a national consensus, Syria risks descending deeper into chaos.

Machiavelli believed that in politics, one is guided solely by the harsh realities of political life, viz., a struggle for power and survival. Today, we are at a point in history when old rules that once governed international politics appear to be in terminal decline. Alongside this, the means to achieve dominance are undergoing fundamental changes. To today's power brokers, the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 (that sanctified the construct of a nation state), and the Congress of Vienna in 1814-15 have little or no meaning. For most, new weapons are the be-all and end-all of modern politics.

The year 2025 is also one that celebrates eight decades of seemingly relative peace following the end of the Second World War, though the years in between did see, and had seen, several conflicts, though not on the scale of the Second World War. For many, even more than the defeat and decline of Nazi Germany, it appeared that it was the apparent invincibility of the United States (wielding the mighty atom bomb – two of which were dropped in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan in 1945) – that seemed to usher in a new era of peace. Concepts such as a ‘rules-based international order’ also gained traction at this time.

This was, however, at best an illusion of peace, and more of a ‘riddle wrapped in an enigma’ than the reality. A succession of wars of a lesser magnitude that continued to occur across the world – beginning with Korea, Vietnam and North Africa, not excluding parts of Europe itself – confirmed this. It reinforced a truth embedded in a seminal piece of advice often given to diplomats based in the United Kingdom, viz., ‘do not believe anything anyone tells you unless you have checked it yourself’.

Already by the 1990s, many of the fundamentals that prevailed had begun to be questioned. The end of the Cold War looked more like the beginning of a new era of conflict. Quite a few new conflicts had begun to emerge which had the potential to shatter any illusion that peace was at hand. Alongside this, it was increasingly becoming evident that a new era in global warfare was emerging. Few, however, admitted that the world was about to enter a new era of conflict.

The impact of 9/11

One of the more widely read articles recently harps on the End of Modernity and talks of the current state of the world in some detail. It lists the year 1989, when the Berlin Wall came down, as the beginning of a new era in global politics. For many others, however, it was September 11, 2001, when the Twin Towers in New York were attacked by terrorists, that seemed to usher in a new beginning. Admittedly, the events of 9/11 did begin a new chapter in global affairs, but it was hardly the curtain-raiser, or even indicative, of



M.K. Narayanan

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the fundamental changes about to take place in the future. What 9/11, perhaps, did was to give the U.S. and certain other nations an opportunity to invade other states based on their perception of what was right and wrong. It was not yet obvious, however, whether the basic fundamentals of conflict would undergo any radical change, and the implications it could have for future generations. The evidence for this is only now beginning to unfold. Even so, the catastrophic consequences of the change are yet to be fully understood or comprehended.

For this, perhaps, one needs to go to the early 1990s, and more specifically to 1991, to the impact which the U.S.-led Operation Desert Storm caused at the time, and also its impact on future wars. It was in effect the first modern-era war which would mark a “dramatic acceleration of warfare and the transformative synthesis of its operative, tactical and strategic elements”, and possibly transforming the nature of war and battlefield doctrines itself. It was also, perhaps, the first instance of three-dimensional strikes on a ‘preferred’ enemy. Even then, it is only very recently that strategists and military planners have become aware of how transformative it was and the impact it would have in the years to come.

Ukraine, West Asia and Operation Sindoor

At the time, the world was only riveted on the unrivalled power, economic, political and military, of the U.S. It has taken the war (since 2022) between Russia and a Ukraine backed by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, to fundamentally revise the thinking of war planners and get them to realise how the nature of war itself had changed beyond anything seen in the past. The war in Ukraine and in West Asia have propounded many new doctrines that are very different from those seen previously in the annals of warfare. The very nature of war, it would seem, as also the conduct of warfare had changed, or is changing. Today's wars bear little resemblance to what was seen in the past. Automation has become an essential feature of modern conflicts. The extensive use of drones (with several variations such as drones to gather intelligence and conduct precision strikes; drones able to operate semi-autonomously employing image recognition algorithms to identify high-priority targets, together with ‘loitering munitions’) have altered the nature of warfare beyond recognition.

The India-Pakistan conflict in May 2025 helped provide some glimpses of the fundamental changes seen in modern warfare. Unlike the earlier India-Pakistan conflicts, the conflict this time featured fixed wing and several other kinds of drones, together with ‘loitering munitions’. Fighter aircraft were a critical element to ensure air superiority and carry out precision strikes. Also, seen were advanced ‘air-to-air missiles’,

It entails much more than the use of highly sophisticated weaponry; it extends to tactics as well, which India must note

Spare live animals, move to biological models

Ankur Betageri

is Assistant Professor at Bharati College, University of Delhi

There is consensus today that animal testing is not effective in predicting harm to humans. The findings derived from experiments on animals are not always applicable to humans.

The case for a shift

Developments in the field of tissue engineering or regenerative medicine have enabled us to cultivate at least the following anatomical parts: artificial animal muscle, artificial pancreas, artificial bladders, cartilage, bioartificial heart, blood vessels, artificial skin, artificial bone marrow, bioartificial bone and trachea. It would be ethical and kind to conduct experiments wherever possible using these rather than using animals. It is the request of this writer – to scientists, laboratories and research organisations – to consider doing medical, pharmaceutical and other experimentation and testing, wherever possible, on cells, tissues, and organs developed in laboratories. Spare live animals. Conducting experiments on laboratory-grown anatomical parts would also help the development of the nascent field of tissue-engineering or regenerative medicine.

To make the replacement of animals with lab-grown organs a directive principle and an enforceable one, ‘Chapter IV: Experimentation on Animals’ of The Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960 may be amended to include an article which says: ‘Scientists, laboratories and research organisations should consider doing experimentation and testing, wherever possible, on lab-grown anatomical parts and bioartificial models of biological systems of humans and animals rather than on animals’.

Animals cannot be protected merely by

changing laws. If the laws which can protect them are inadequate it is because we have not accorded them their real status by recognising them as fellow beings who suffer just like us.

We also need to bring about a change in our values, the scientific procedure in laboratories which makes the use of animals inevitable, and create an awareness about animal suffering. The use of visual models on computers to understand the anatomical parts of animals has helped us do away with the practice of dissecting animals in biology classes and laboratories. We can definitely do away with all kinds of animal dissection for educational purposes and teach our students better anatomy by using 2D radiographic imagery and 3D visual models of the different organs and biological systems.

But, for the purposes of experimentation and safety testing, it would be useful if we make a paradigm shift from animal models to ex-corpus models or artificial biological models. This we can do by coordinating the shift with tissue-engineering organisations which can produce and provide these artificial biological models. The field of regenerative medicine can help with this shift by modelling and replicating the required biochemistry and biological systems of the body outside the body and by producing bioartificial functional models of the organs.

A pledge

Let us make our civilisation more hospitable to life by changing our procedures, practices and laws wherever possible. Let us pledge to conduct experimentation and testing as far as possible on biological substances and learn to recognise the inherent sacredness and dignity of animals.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Unceremonious exit

The Vice-President's office, once a symbol of parliamentary balance, is now seen as a new front in partisan conflict. In our constitutional design, neutrality in high offices is not optional but foundational. Yet, this principle has been steadily eroding, perhaps more rapidly of late. Neutrality in constitutional roles ensures institutional trust and continuity. Without it, governance risks becoming a series of political

skirmishes fought through institutions meant to rise above them.

R. Narayanan,
Navi Mumbai

Jagdeep Dhankhar's abrupt resignation is a shock. The conspicuous absence of the ceremonial send-off and farewell speeches for him is an unhappy development given his standing as a constitutional authority. As such, parties across the political spectrum should refrain from getting into a political slugfest over his

resignation. Instead, they should facilitate the process of the election of the next Vice-President of India.

G. Ramasubramanyam,

Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh

Tamil Nadu politics

In an interview in this daily, ('Tamil Nadu' page, July 22), Edappadi K. Palaniswami, who is the AIADMK General Secretary, Leader of the Opposition in Tamil Nadu and also former Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, has asserted that his party would return to power and form the

government on its own next year. Even though it is the AIADMK's major alliance partner, the BJP is not a strong force. However, there is a strong possibility of its popularity rising in Tamil Nadu on account of its efficient governance at the Centre. But Mr. Palaniswami's ambition to capture power and rule solely will not be realised unless he takes steps to enlarge the spectrum of his political alliance. Anti-incumbency votes will move to the

Tamilaga Vетtri Kazhagam headed by actor Vijay and the beneficiary will be the DMK despite its mediocre performance.

K. Chellappan,
Seattle, U.S.

The electoral ties forged between the BJP and the AIADMK do not seem to be working well (Editorial and 'Data Point', both July 23). The AIADMK is finding it hard to convince the people that it will not allow the saffron party to swallow it up. It is a “catch-22

situation” for the AIADMK, as stated in the ‘Data Point’. It cannot be seen to be with a party that speaks ill of Tamil Nadu's illustrious leaders. Neither can it sever ties with the BJP for fear of central agencies being unleashed on its leaders. The AIADMK lacks the political heft and the ideological conviction to stand up to the BJP.

G. David Milton,
Maruthancode, Tamil Nadu

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

Takeaways from the Swachh Survekshan

Rankings and celebrations apart, the ninth edition of Swachh Survekshan, branded as the world's largest cleanliness survey, provides policy makers and city managers a reality check on urban sanitation and waste management, and a reliable database. The annual survey steered by Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM)-Urban had not only over 4,500 cities competing, compared to less than 100 in 2016, but was also backed by elaborate assessments and third party verification and further bolstered by feedback from 140 million city dwellers. From segregation, collection, transportation, and management of waste to the welfare of sanitation workers and grievance redressal, the 10 parameters of the survey are comprehensive. The survey has emerged as an effective driver of competition and movement in city sanitation. It also provides a measure of the gaps in India's journey towards clean cities.

Different population sizes
The advent of Super Swachh League this year was an overdue twist to break the stalemate at the top of the rankings. Indore, Surat, and Navi Mumbai – all mascots of cleanliness for a while – entered this new space along with 20 other cities of different population sizes. Members of the League could create new benchmarks and compete among themselves while yielding space to new aspirants to enter clean city ranks. That is how Ahmedabad, Bhopal, and Lucknow could break into the top as India's cleanest cities this time in the million-plus category, with another 12 receiving ranks in their own population segments. Swachh Survekshan 2024-25 appeared focused on faster democratisation of city cleanliness. The expansion of population categories from two to five, starting from cities with a population of less than 20,000 to those with a million-plus population, provided a fairer



Akshay Rout
Former Director General, Swachh Bharat Mission. Views are personal

The business of waste management in cities may look chaotic, but it remains possible

platform for cities to perform. Those hitherto lagging are now catching up. Odisha is an example. Bhubaneswar moved up from the 34th to the 9th rank; small towns such as Aska and Chikiti worked their way to the top three clean cities in their categories; and mid-size cities including Rourkela, Cuttack, and Berhampur moved considerably upwards. These trends create hope that cleanliness is not a preserve of only certain States. Cities from the south are yet to make any big mark in the clean city show with Bengaluru being the least inspirational. Hyderabad, Tirupati, Vijayawada, Guntur, and Mysuru were the best in the region. The National Capital Region presents an interesting medley: while the New Delhi Municipal Council areas and Noida ranked best for meticulous sanitation implementation, Delhi, Gurugram, and Ghaziabad improved their ranks irrespective of the negative reports they received in the public domain. The clean city basket has grown larger since one promising clean city was picked up from each State based on its progress and potential. Once cities are positively stamped, they tend to stay in the aspirational course. Understood this way, the 78 Swachh awards given were not too many. Setting up the cleanest cities as mentors to the most underperforming ones could help in the proliferation of multiple good practices among urban local bodies (ULBs). While Indore is a veteran in segregating the last gram of waste into six buckets at source – dry, wet, domestic hazardous, plastic, sanitary and e-waste; Surat has been making good revenue by selling sewage-treated water. Pune's waste management is anchored on cooperatives formed by ragpickers. Visakhapatnam made an eco-park from remediated legacy waste site. Lucknow produced an iconic waste wonder park. The Kuberpur area in Agra, once a toxic dumpsite, transformed to 47 acres of green,

by engaging bioremediation and biomining technologies. Tourist destinations and places of high footfall received special emphasis in the survey. Prayagraj was awarded in the category of Ganga towns, and special recognition was extended to the recent Maha Kumbh for its sanitation management. India accounts for less than 1.5% of international tourist arrivals. Cities need to do much more than an occasional cleanliness drive to enhance tourist experience. **The theme this year** The theme of 'reduce, reuse, and recycle (RRR)', advocated by the 2025 survey, carries the prospect of jobs, enterprise, and invigoration of self-help groups. The theme of the last survey was 'waste to wealth'. We are yet to raise the billions of rupees out of waste that is possible. For this, policy needs to better incentivise investors. Waste-to-energy plants are gaining traction but the private sector may be concerned about commercial viability. Citizens are yet to take meaningful action even though the RRR approach is entrenched in India's ancient traditions. While a universal resentment against open defecation has been achieved by SBM, a behaviour change movement fostering intolerance against waste and fighting against consumerism has been tough to initiate. As more cities get identified as hubs of growth, we must prioritise the management of 1.5 lakh tonnes of solid waste generated every day. A lot will depend on delivery at decentralised levels, especially by ULBs in enforcing segregation, collection, transport, and processing, including of the more challenging plastic and e-waste. The business of waste management in cities may look chaotic, but it remains possible. The rise of Surat from being a place of garbage three decades ago to the top place in the sanitation chart last year shows that this is a possibility in all cities in India.

Fixing Delhi's air quality crisis

The current electoral mandate can enable States to fix achievable regional targets

STATE OF PLAY

Swagata Dey

July and August are prime months for Delhi to prepare for air pollution episodes in autumn and winter, which are now a defining feature of the National Capital Region (NCR). The electoral mandate this year has created a rare moment of political alignment across most States in the Delhi-NCR, opening the door for coordinated action on air quality. Delhi's air pollution stems from both local sources and emissions from neighbouring States. To achieve the National Ambient Air Quality Standards, emission reductions across the Indo-Gangetic Plain (IGP) are essential. As the sources of air pollution are similar across the larger IGP airshed, the mitigation measures are also similar. These measures are enshrined in most city and State action plans, including scaling up the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana to reduce household biomass burning, reducing emissions from freight movements across city boundaries, and using cleaner fuels and installing pollution control devices in industries. However, implementation has lagged due to fragmented governance structures. For instance, multiple agencies manage Delhi's roads – some under the Delhi government and others under the Centre. This makes coordinated action on road dust (responsible for PM10 emissions) difficult. As a result, while roads in areas such as Lutyens' Delhi are well-maintained, many others remain neglected. Similar issues persist across States. While the National Clean Air Programme notes



the importance of regulating industrial fuels, not all States have a clearly defined fuel list. Pet coke, a high-emission fuel, is banned only in some States. Age limits for vehicles also differ, allowing older, more polluting vehicles to move freely across borders. Given the transboundary nature of pollution, the gains of one State are often undermined by inaction in another. The need for regional coordination against transboundary pollution has been acknowledged globally. India is also a signatory to several agreements, including the Stockholm Declaration (1972), the Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution (1979, Geneva), the Rio Declaration (1992), and the Malé Declaration for South Asia (1998). The Malé Declaration, in particular, urges South Asian countries to build a scientific base, formulate regional action plans, and enable joint interventions. However, in India, there is no legal mandate to support such efforts. Although the Supreme Court has routinely stepped in (e.g., by issuing subsidies for crop residue management machinery across States), most policy instruments have failed due to the lack of regional cooperation. For instance, while brick kilns within Delhi-NCR are mandated to shift to zig-zag technology, nearby districts still operate older kilns. To manage transboundary

pollution, India has a promising institutional framework under the Commission for Air Quality Management for National Capital Region and Adjoining Areas (CAQM). CAQM holds considerable overriding powers for implementing clean air strategies, yet its impact depends on how actively it can align state actions with regional targets. The current political mandate aligning the Centre and most NCR States (Delhi, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, and Haryana) presents the right opportunity. States can draw from the Malé Declaration's tenets and collaboratively define emission standards and sectoral targets. Under the directive of CAQM and backed by Central funding, region-wide action could scale up mitigation measures. The entire IGP should be treated as part of a larger airshed. As freight and buses ply freely across State borders, a regional strategy backed by political will is essential. Biomass burning in the residential sector generates more pollution than transport and needs stronger action across the entire airshed. Further, if all line departments issue directives based on a joint mandate from the States, these strategies could be streamlined. While this coordination has historically been challenging, the current electoral mandate can enable the States to promulgate achievable regional targets. Now is the time to build on the momentum for clean air, not just in Delhi but across the IGP. The decisive mandate of February 2025 could make October 2025 more breathable.

Swagata Dey heads the Air Quality Policy and Outreach group at the Center for Study of Science, Technology and Policy

In Odisha, crimes against women mount as courts and police falter

With a high case load, poor conviction and chargesheeting rates, Odisha's response to crimes against women is inadequate

DATA POINT

Nitika Francis

Over the past few months, a slew of heinous crimes against women have been reported from Odisha. On Saturday, a 15-year-old girl was allegedly abducted, assaulted, and set ablaze by miscreants in broad daylight in Puri. She is in a critical condition at AIIMS, Bhubaneswar. A week ago, a 20-year-old student from Balasore, who had alleged that her complaints of sexual harassment by a teacher were ignored, died after immolating herself. There was widespread outrage over the college administration's alleged inaction. In February, a Nepali student died by suicide under similar circumstances in the Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology University. The incident led to tensions on campus and forced Nepali students to leave. This caught the attention of the Nepali Prime Minister, triggering a diplomatic crisis. It is not just that issues of women's safety in Odisha have been in the headlines frequently this year; data show that the State has fared poorly in disposing such cases over the last few years. Odisha registered the fourth highest number of court cases of crimes against women and one of the lowest conviction rates in the country between 2017 and 2022. **Table 1** shows the year-wise chargesheeting rate and conviction rate in cases of crimes against women in Odisha. Between 2017 and 2022, every year, only 10% or a lower share of cases of crimes against women in Odisha's courts resulted in convictions. Each year, at least 20 other States had a better conviction rate than Odisha in cases of crimes against women. In 2022, only 71.4% cases of crimes against women were chargesheeted by the police in Odisha. The State ranked 24th out of 30 States in this measure that year.

The chargesheeting rate was 91.2% in 2017 – the fifth best chargesheeting rate in the country – and rapidly worsened to 71.4% in 2022 and since then as well. Odisha also continues to feature among the States with the highest rates of crimes against women in the country. In 2022, the State recorded 51 police cases of crimes against women per one lakh population, which was significantly higher than India's overall rate of 33 such cases per one lakh population. **Chart 2** shows the State-wise police case rate of crimes against women in 2022 (police cases per one lakh population) on the vertical axis and the charge-sheeting rate in such cases on the horizontal axis. In 2022, Odisha was placed fifth in terms of police case rate and 24th in terms of chargesheeting rate, and so features in the left top of the graph. The States in this section of the graph, which include Haryana, Delhi, Uttarakhand, Assam, and Rajasthan, had a higher case rate and lower chargesheeting rate, a double whammy. In 2022, Odisha was also the State with the second highest rate of cases of crimes against women sent for trial (384 per one lakh population) with only about 9% of these cases ending in convictions (**Chart 3**). Only Delhi with a court case rate of 385 featured above Odisha. With a high court case rate and a poor conviction rate, the State features on the left top of the graph. The States in this section of the graph, which include West Bengal, Maharashtra, Kerala, Assam and Telangana, had a higher case rate and lower conviction rate, a double whammy again. More than 95% of court cases of crimes against women sent for trial in Odisha until 2022 remained pending (**Chart 4**). The State has one of the highest pendency rates in the country. It ranks just below Bihar, Arunachal Pradesh, West Bengal, and Uttarakhand in this measure.

Crimes up, convictions down

The data for the charts were sourced from the National Crime Records Bureau's "Crime in India" Reports from 2017 to 2022



Right to safety: Agitators being detained during a protest over the death of a college student in Odisha who set herself on fire after alleging that her complaints of sexual harassment by a teacher were ignored. PTI

Table 1: Year-wise chargesheeting rate and conviction rate in cases of crimes against women in Odisha

Year	Conviction rate (%)	Conviction rate ranking	Charge-sheeting rate (%)	Charge-sheeting rate ranking
2022	9.2	24	71.4	24
2021	8.3	23	80.1	16
2020	9.2	24	82	14
2019	10	21	80.9	14
2018	8.3	23	82.1	12
2017	7.4	24	91.2	5

■ Note: In table 1, Odisha was ranked among 30 States. In charts 3 and 4, to calculate the rate of court cases of crimes against women, the total cases pending trial in 2022 and the years before were analysed. In chart 2, only the police cases reported during the year were considered for analysis

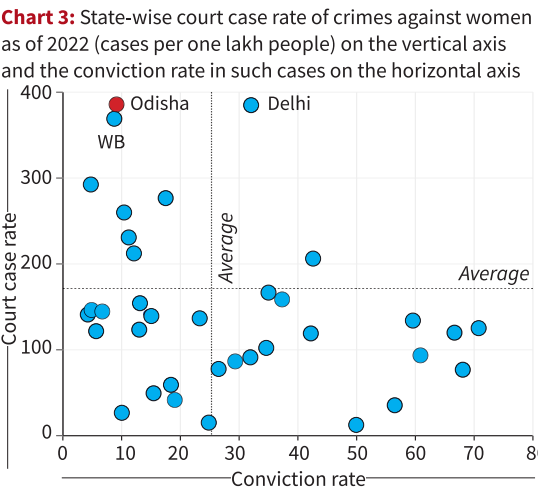


Chart 2: State-wise police case rate of crimes against women in 2022 (cases per one lakh people) on the vertical axis and the chargesheeting rate in such cases on the horizontal axis

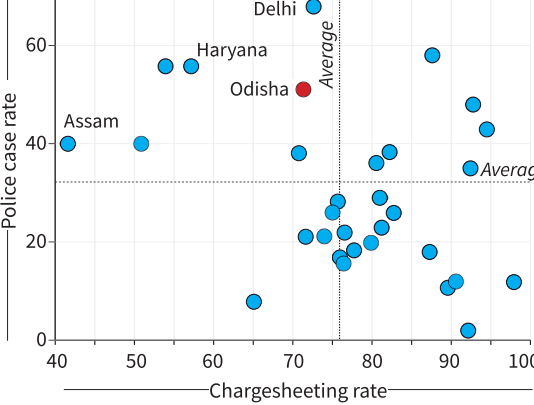
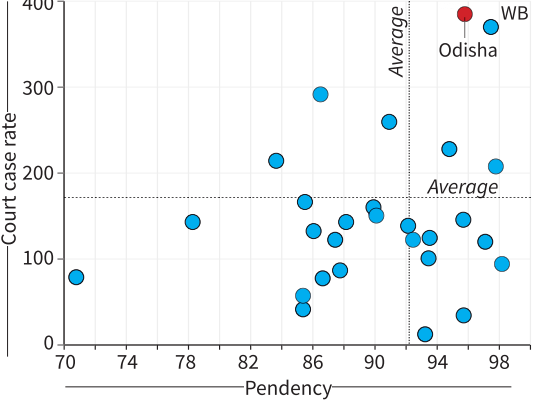


Chart 4: State-wise court case rate of crimes against women as of 2022 (cases per one lakh people) on the vertical axis and the pendency rate in such cases on the horizontal axis



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO JULY 24, 1975

Opposition can help to restore normal situation: Minister

New Delhi, July 23: Parliament to-day set its seal of approval on the proclamation of Emergency with the Lok Sabha endorsing it by 336 votes to 59. Three members abstained. The measure was approved by the Rajya Sabha yesterday at the end of a two-day debate. In his reply to the 14-hour debate on the subject, the Agriculture Minister, Mr. Jagjivan Ram, said "the restoration of the situation in which the Emergency proclamation would become infructuous depends on the Opposition parties." He appealed to them to conduct themselves in such a way that even if the Emergency proclamation remained on the statute book, its impact would not be felt. Mr. Jagjivan Ram said that the proclamation had helped to contain the dangers that were developing. The swift action of the Government had not only frustrated the plans of the Opposition parties but had created a new sense of confidence in the people. The Opposition, Mr. Jagjivan Ram said, had sought to undermine the authority and prestige of the Government. But the Emergency had helped in restoring its prestige and stabilising its authority. He hoped that the Opposition parties would lend their co-operation in implementing the 20-point economic programme, announced by the Prime Minister. Mr. Jagjivan Ram allayed the apprehensions expressed by some members that Emergency powers might be misused by the authorities. The State Governments had been asked to use the powers 'very cautiously' so that their misuse could be avoided.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JULY 24, 1925

India's demand

London, July 24: Dr. Annie Besant was the guest of honour at an "At Home" organised by Major and Mrs. Graham Pole. Dr. Besant, outlining the purposes of the draft Commonwealth of India Bill, which she had brought to England, said India had a feeling that Britain regarded her as a subject nation. The ambition of all Indians was to enter into partnership with the Mother-Country, somewhat on the lines of the Dominions.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Number of modern bus queue shelters to be added in Delhi

2,856 The Delhi government will construct thousands of modern bus queue shelters across the capital, drawing design models from global cities like London, Singapore, and Moscow to offer commuters a smarter and more uniform travel experience. PTI

School vehicles found violating safety norms in Uttar Pradesh

4,080 The Uttar Pradesh government conducted a statewide crackdown against unsafe school vehicles from July 1 to 15, during which more than 4,000 vehicles were found violating safety norms, an official statement said. PTI

Online betting sites blocked between 2022 and June 2025

1,524 The Union government issued orders to block websites and mobile apps related to online betting, gambling, and money gaming. It cited concerns around un-registered and offshore platforms violating the Information Technology Act, 2000. PTI

Missing persons untraced in Delhi from January to July

7,880 Nearly 8,000 people reported missing in Delhi between January 1 and July 23 this year remain untraced, with the highest number of such cases recorded in the Outer North district, as per data from the Zonal Integrated Police Network. PTI

SHGs formed to empower de-notified, nomadic communities

3,438 The Union government said it has formed more than 3,000 Self Help Groups (SHGs) with 46,067 members exclusively from de-notified, nomadic and semi-nomadic communities (DNTs). PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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Can Presidential Reference change a judgment?

What is the issue on which President Droupadi Murmu has invoked the Supreme Court’s advisory jurisdiction? Are such advisory opinions binding? What did the April 8 ruling state? Can a Presidential Reference prompt the Supreme Court to revisit an earlier ruling?

EXPLAINER

Aaratrika Bhaumik

The story so far:

On July 22, the Supreme Court issued notices to the Union Government and all States on a Presidential Reference seeking its opinion on whether the President and Governors can be judicially compelled to act within prescribed timelines on Bills passed by State legislatures. A Constitution Bench led by Chief Justice B.R. Gavai and comprising Justices Surya Kant, Vikram Nath, P.S. Narasimha, and A.S. Chandurkar indicated that detailed hearings would begin around mid-August.

What was the Presidential Reference?

The Reference stems from President Droupadi Murmu’s submission of 14 questions following the Supreme Court’s April 8 ruling. That decision arose from a petition filed by the Tamil Nadu government challenging Governor R.N. Ravi’s delay in granting assent to 10 Bills that had been re-passed by the State legislature, and his subsequent decision to reserve them for Presidential consideration. The judges held that the Governor’s prolonged inaction was illegal and, for the first time, imposed judicially enforceable timelines on Governors and the President to act on State Bills. The Presidential Reference broadly seeks clarity on whether courts can prescribe the manner and timeframe within which constitutional authorities must act.

Can the court advise?

Article 143(1) of the Constitution confers advisory jurisdiction on the Supreme Court, empowering it to render opinions on questions of law or fact that are not connected to any ongoing litigation. The only prerequisites are that the President must be satisfied that such a question has arisen or is likely to arise, and that it is of such a nature and of such public



Judicial opinion: President Droupadi Murmu administers the oath of office to Justice Bhushan Ramkrishna Gavai as Chief Justice of India, in New Delhi on May 14. ANI

importance that it warrants the court’s opinion. However, the court is bound to limit itself strictly to the questions referred by the President and cannot exceed the scope of the Reference.

Can it decline a Reference?

Although the Supreme Court has chosen to entertain the present Reference, it is not bound to do so in every case. In *In Re: The Special Courts Bill* (1978), the court held that the word “may” in Article 143(1) grants it discretion to decline a Reference. However, it must record reasons for such refusal. In 1993, the court declined to answer a Reference on the Ayodhya-Babri Masjid dispute, citing the pendency of a civil suit and deeming the Reference “unconstitutional” for violating secularism. The judges also cautioned against the misuse of the court’s advisory opinion for political ends.

Are advisory opinions binding?

The binding force of advisory opinions remains contested. Article 141 of the Constitution states that the “law declared” by the Supreme Court is binding on all courts in India. In *St. Xavier’s College versus State of Gujarat* (1974), the court clarified that advisory opinions do not amount to binding precedents, though they command significant persuasive authority. Nevertheless, there have been instances where the court has appeared to treat such opinions as authoritative. A notable example is the *R.K. Garg versus Union of India* (1981) case, where Justice P.N. Bhagwati treated the legal reasoning in the *Special Courts Bill* Reference as a binding precedent. This was despite Justice Y.V. Chandrachud’s explicit caveat in that Reference that the court’s opinion were not binding on other courts. As it stands, any advisory opinion issued in the present presidential Reference would not

have binding force. The Supreme Court’s April 8 judgment, delivered in the exercise of its adjudicatory jurisdiction under Article 141, would continue to prevail irrespective of the opinion.

Can the court overturn its April 8 ruling through the Reference?

In its opinion on the *Cauvery Water Disputes Tribunal* Reference, the Supreme Court underscored that Article 143 cannot be used as a means for the executive to seek a review or reversal of its settled judicial decisions. “When this court in its adjudicatory jurisdiction pronounces its authoritative opinion on a question of law, it cannot be said that there is any doubt about the question of law or the same is *res integra* so as to require the President to know what the true position of law on the question is,” the opinion said. Accordingly, the only valid recourse to challenge the April 8 ruling is through review or curative petitions.

However, in *re Natural Resources Allocation* (2012), the court held that there is no constitutional bar on its ability to clarify, restate, or even formulate a fresh opinion on a question of law under Article 143(1), so long as the *ratio decidendi* of an earlier judgment remains intact and the rights of parties in the original case are unaffected. The Reference followed the court’s decision quashing the 2G spectrum allocation and mandating auctions as the sole method for spectrum distribution.

However, in 1998, a Presidential Reference was used to modify certain aspects of a previous ruling on judicial appointments. While reaffirming the validity of the collegium system laid down in *Supreme Court Advocates-on-Record Association versus Union of India* (1993), the court revised the composition and functioning of the collegium, thereby refining the appointment process without overturning the earlier judgment.

While the April 8 judgment is final, its findings on the law may still be refined or elaborated upon by the Constitution Bench hearing the present Reference.

THE GIST

Article 143(1) of the Constitution confers advisory jurisdiction on the Supreme Court, empowering it to render opinions on questions of law or fact that are not connected to any ongoing litigation.

In its opinion on the *Cauvery Water Disputes Tribunal* Reference, the Supreme Court underscored that Article 143 cannot be used as a means for the executive to seek a review or reversal of its settled judicial decisions.

The binding force of advisory opinions rendered by the Supreme Court remains contested.

Is the plastic industry trying to influence green policies?

How has India tried to integrate informal waste pickers into formal waste systems?

Sweta Gupta

The story so far:

At first glance, tobacco and plastic might seem unrelated. However, environmental activists and health experts are now drawing attention to how the plastic industry, backed by fossil fuel giants, mirrors the tobacco industry’s playbook.

How does plastic mirror tobacco?

Both industries have used profit-driven tactics despite evidence of harm. Shifting responsibility: In many jurisdictions, advertisements for tobacco run with a disclaimer “smoking is injurious to health” while promoting the product, abetted by weak public policy. This places the onus on individual choice. Similarly, plastic-makers have blamed consumers for not recycling while diverting attention from corporate accountability. In both cases, the effect is

for systematic harm to be recast as personal failure.

Funding misleading PR and science: Tobacco companies have historically funded studies denying their effects on the body. Similarly, as *NPR* and *PBS* have reported, the plastic industry promoted recycling as a resolution from the 1980s despite privately acknowledging its economic and technical impracticality at scale. Yet even as trade groups launched public campaigns around the ‘recyclability’ of plastic, most plastic waste continued to be incinerated, landfilled or dumped in the open.

Greenwashing: Tobacco companies once used to market ‘light’ and ‘mild’ cigarettes as safer. Today, the absence of clear, enforceable standards and shortcomings in the country’s waste-processing infrastructure render plastic that is, or has been labelled, ‘biodegradable’ or ‘compostable’ to not be that way at all. This can give

consumers a false impression of plastics’ real-world environmental impact.

Do they target the Global South?

As regulations to reduce the use of single-use plastics and rationalise the material’s use in packaging tighten across the Global North, plastic producers have been focusing on low- and middle-income countries to sustain growth. According to the OECD’s ‘Global Plastic Outlook’ report in 2022, plastic consumption is projected to more than double in Sub-Saharan Africa and triple in Asia by 2060 but grow by only 15% in Europe in the same period. This shift in focus towards the Global South has coincided with weaker environmental regulations, and inadequate waste management systems, making these regions especially vulnerable to rising plastic pollution.

More recently, the plastics and fossil fuel industries have sought to influence negotiations for a global plastics treaty

under the UN. According to the Centre for International Environmental Law, industry influence was evident at the third round of treaty talks (INC-3), where there were 36% more lobbyists from the fossil fuel and chemicals sectors than in the previous round.

Where does India stand on plastics?

In India, the waste management system banks on lakhs of people, from ragpickers and sorters to grassroot recyclers, in the informal sector responsible for collecting and processing 70% of the plastic that is recycled. But this work often comes at the cost of their health and dignity, exposing them to hazardous materials and toxic fumes, without protective gear, legal recognition or social security. They face long-term health risks, and often live below the poverty line. The National Action for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem scheme launched in 2024 aims to integrate waste pickers into formal waste systems by providing safety measures, health insurance under Ayushman Bharat, and access to social security benefits. As per the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, as of May 2025, over 80,000 sanitation and waste-picking workers have been profiled under the scheme.

Furthermore, under the Plastic Waste Management Rules 2016, (amended in 2022), manufacturers must take responsibility for plastic they generate.

THE GIST

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As regulations to reduce the use of single-use plastics and rationalise the material’s use in packaging tighten across the Global North, plastic producers have been focusing on low- and middle-income countries to sustain growth.

In India, the waste management system banks on ragpickers and sorters in the informal sector to collect and process 70% of the plastic that is recycled.

BIBLIOGRAPHY



Behind the scenes: Demonstrators during a rally to mark one month of the ousting of the country's former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, in Dhaka on September 5, 2024. AFP

A father and a daughter, and the political volatility of Bangladesh

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's killing in 1975 and Sheikh Hasina's exit in 2024 have striking similarities, says a writer who has kept an eye on the country since his serendipitous reporting of the Liberation War in 1971. Did the Americans have a hand in both events? Three books examine the claims

Ziya Us Salam

Call it providence or whatever, veteran journalist, editor, author Manash Ghosh's fortuitous introduction to politics was to go a long way in helping him understand the crests and troughs of political leaders and ideologies in Bangladesh, India's eastern neighbour. As a cub reporter, he had gone to cover the Second Asian Highway Car Rally organised by a UN body, from Tehran to Dhaka. Instead, he ended up talking to a few locals. Years later, he wrote in his book, *Bangladesh War: Report from Ground Zero*, "I got talking to three Bengali strangers. Great talkers, as most Bengalis are, they chronicled for me the events on their own – from Field Marshal Ayub Khan's downfall to General Yahya Khan's rise to power, and Sheikh Mujib's six-point autonomy movement....I asked them point blank whether they were from Sheikh Mujib's Awami League. Their immediate riposte was, 'Every Bengali today, whether Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist, in East Pakistan, is a committed follower of Sheikh Mujib and his Awami League.' That was in November 1970, barely months before the Liberation War.

The cost of arrogance
But why did the Liberation War take place? Among many reasons, was the supposed arrogance of West Pakistan's military and civil leadership. As expressed by Muntassir Mamoon who went to Pakistan some 25 years ago for his book *The Vanquished Generals and the Liberation War of Bangladesh*, "The general assumption was that the people in East Pakistan, because they were Bengalis, were pro-Hindu. Rao Farman Ali, the person responsible for the murder

of the intellectuals in 1971, said that the Hindus were influencing the East Pakistanis. Major General Umar, who was the Secretary of the Security Council of Pakistan in 1971, expressed the same opinion. By pro-Hindu, they actually meant pro-India." Incidentally, Mamoon was asked, "After the creation of Pakistan, why did Jinnah first go to Karachi instead of Dhaka? He should have first gone to Dhaka because 56 per cent of the population of Pakistan were in the East." Probably, there lay the germ of the conflict.

Cut to August 2024 when Sheikh Mujib's elder daughter Sheikh Hasina was ousted from power and banished from the country. Hasina's ouster was a little under 50 years after Mujib, once said to have had the support of every Bangladeshi, was killed on August 15, 1975. Ghosh, widely respected as an expert on Bangladesh politics, clears the cobwebs in his new book. As he writes in the epilogue of *Blunders: The Power and the Plot Behind his Killing*, "There are striking similarities between what happened preceding 15 August 1975 – when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman along with 18 of his family members was killed – and that which occurred almost 50 years later on 5 August 2024 again in Dhaka when Mujib's elder daughter Sheikh Hasina was ousted from power in a bloodless coup. While in the case of Mujib, the CIA station chief in Dacca was the specific actor, in his daughter's case, there were two actors – Peter Haas, the U.S. envoy in Dhaka, and an American Assistant Secretary of State Donald Lu – who had already earned tremendous notoriety of being a past master in covert regime change operations having toppled, in the recent past, governments in Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal."

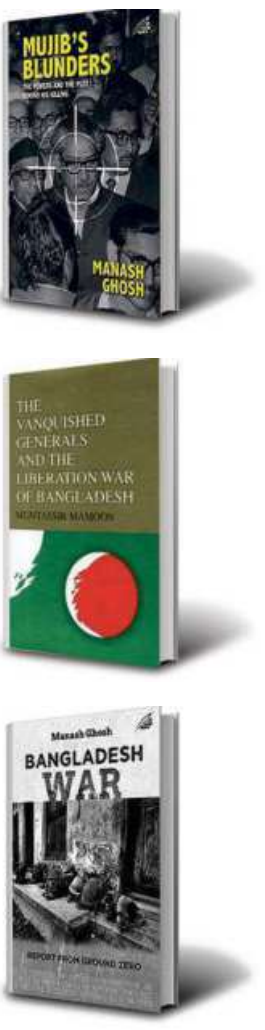
Power games
It might appear surprising to a layman who bought into the claims of a student revolution in the country, but in Ghosh's view in the book, it was far from it. He writes, "Hasina was anathema to Dhaka-based American diplomats who did not forgive her for rejecting out of hand their government's request to hand over the offshore St. Martin's island in the Bay of Bengal on a long lease to the Americans. The latter wanted to build a U.S. naval base for keeping an eye on Chinese and Indian naval build-up in the region. Washington wanted to have a regime led by someone who would be beholden to it and enjoyed its full trust and confidence."

It's quite possible that students and the people of Bangladesh did not understand the politics behind Hasina's removal. But what of Mujib's blunders after he had everything going for him? The picture is cleared by Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty, former Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh, who writes in the foreword of Ghosh's book, "Mujib failed to punish the collaborators of Pakistan out of compassion...Mujib failed to foresee that these pro-Pakistan elements would take full advantage of his magnanimity and impede his policies for the benefit of Pakistan. One such example was the 1972 India-Bangladesh Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation. The treaty was attacked...for being an instrument of India's hegemonistic design...China and Pakistan conveyed their disapproval to Bangladesh...China had not recognised Bangladesh and this was used as an excuse to decry the treaty." Incidentally, China recognised Bangladesh only after Mujib's assassination during the dictatorship of Gen Ziaur Rehman who was known for his anti-India stance.

During the decade-long rule of Major Zia's widow, Begum Khaleda Zia, the Liberation War was dubbed an 'India-inspired controversy which robbed Muslim Bengalis of their religious rights and identity'.

Tragic twist
Indeed, Mujib was too trusting of those not worthy of his trust. He paid the ultimate price. His country suffered too. Recalls Ghosh in his thoughtfully written book, "Mujib, or Bangabandhu, as he was popularly known, even after witnessing acts of betrayal by his supposed 'very close' confidants, like Mushtaq and Taheruddin Thakur...had sought to ignore the clear warning signals. He had been warned by Tajuddin not to be blind to the misdeeds of the venomous snakes in the grass that abounded in the party." Interestingly, in a rare departure from the spotlight on Mujib, Ghosh seeks to give Tajuddin (prime minister in exile in India) credit for much of the early success, writing, "Bangladesh would never have been liberated had Tajuddin not been the prime minister of the interim government. His unique leadership capability to bring people of different political hues, professions and religious faiths under the liberation war fold remains unparalleled."

In fact, Tajuddin went back to Dhaka only after getting the Bangladesh currency notes printed in Nashik Press. It didn't prove a wise decision for him then. From 1971 to 2025, Bangladesh has experienced political volatility. Warns Ghosh, "Political turbulence will gather steam and instability will continue to haunt this eastern neighbour of India. Hasina's Awami League is no pushover and far from a vanquished force."



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know Your English

K. Subrahmanian
S. Upendran

"The movie that you went to yesterday has got great reviews."
"It shouldn't have. There's nothing great about the film. It's the same old story. The hero is a confidence man and he..."
"You mean the hero is a confident man, not confidence man."
"No, I mean confidence man. A confidence man is someone who cheats you out of your money or belongings by telling you things that are not true. For example, people from villages think that cities are full of confidence men."
"That's true! The city is full of confidence men. By the way, do comen and confidence men mean the same thing?"
"Yes, they do."
"So, can I say, 'In movies, politicians are usually shown as comen'?"
"Yes, you can. And the unfortunate thing is that not all politicians are confidence men. Some are, that's true, but..."
"...let's not talk about politicians. Let's get back to the movie. You didn't like it?"
"It left me cold."
"Left you cold? What does that mean?"
"When something leaves you cold, it means that it failed to excite or interest you. For example, I can say, 'The new chairman's speech left me cold.'"
"Meaning that you didn't find it interesting?"
"I found it terribly boring."
"Can I say, 'Classical music leaves me cold'?"
"You can, I suppose. But it certainly doesn't leave me cold. I love it. Here's another example: 'Madhuri's performance in the latest movie left me cold.'"
"How can you even say that? She has done a wonderful job. She..."
"Relax, will you? It was just an example. Some people go to the Taj and they are not at all impressed by it..."
"They must be crazy! So you can say, 'The Taj left him cold.'"
"But I can also say, 'The Taj didn't leave me cold,' right?"
"Right! Here's another example: 'Madhuri's performance never leaves you cold.'"
"That's true... You know..."
"Stop right there. I made a mistake using Madhuri as an example. When you start talking about Madhuri, you never stop. You just go on and on. The way you go on, you would talk the hind legs off a donkey!"
"What? Did you just call me a donkey?"
"No, I didn't. I said you could talk the hind legs off a donkey. When you say that someone can talk the hind legs off a donkey, it means he/she talks a great deal without stopping and without telling the other person anything."
"Sounds like my next-door neighbour! Can I say, 'My next-door neighbour could talk the hind legs off a donkey'?"
"You certainly can."
"In that expression, hind refers to the back legs of the donkey. Is that correct?"
"That's right. I have a friend who can talk the hind legs off a donkey."
"Are you impressed with his ability to talk?"
"No, he leaves me cold."
"Speaking of cold, how about some nice ice cold tea?"
Published in The Hindu on May 13, 1997

THE DAILY QUIZ

Arthritis is a significant health concern in India, affecting an estimated 180 million people. A quiz on the health condition

Athira Elssa Johnson

- QUESTION 1
What is the most common type of arthritis that causes joint pain and stiffness due to wear and tear of cartilage?
- QUESTION 2
Name one autoimmune form of arthritis that primarily affects the joints and can also impact organs like the lungs or eyes.
- QUESTION 3
The medical specialist who treats arthritis is called a _____.
- QUESTION 4
Regular physical activity can help reduce arthritis symptoms. True or False?
- QUESTION 5
Which parts of the hand are commonly affected by osteoarthritis?



Visual question:
Identify this historical figure who made an important medical discovery related to arthritis. PUBLIC DOMAIN

- Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. In 1952, the Free Officers, a nationalistic military group led by _____, engineered a coup that overthrew King Farouk I of Egypt. **Ans: Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser**
2. This former emperor of Ethiopia is considered to be a defining figure in modern Ethiopian history. **Ans: Haile Selassie**
3. This English actor is one of the most recognisable actors in the world for this role he played in a film series from 2001 to 2011. **Ans: Daniel Radcliffe, Harry Potter**
4. This American activist, born on this day, became internationally known in the late 1990s after U.S. President Bill Clinton admitted to having had an affair with her. **Ans: Monica Lewinsky**
5. This company introduced the hugely influential Model T. **Ans: Ford Motor Company**
Visual: Identify this American astronaut. **Ans: Eileen Collins**
Early Birds: Tamal Biswas| Sunil Madhavan| Arun Kumar Singh| Piyali Tulji| Dodo Jayaditya

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

Word of the day

Prudent:
careful and sensible; marked by sound judgment

Usage: He is a prudent manager

Pronunciation: newsth.live/prudentpro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /ˈpɹʊdənt/

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

Price perfect

Market regulator’s proposal will increase transparency

The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) is rightly reviewing the way physical gold and silver held by exchange traded funds is currently valued. The rules are quite arcane and link the value of these assets to prices fixed by the London Bullion Market Association (LBMA). In the absence of clear guidelines, there is no uniformity in the methods used by asset management companies to arrive at the domestic price of gold and silver.



Therefore, SEBI’s proposal to use gold and silver prices fixed at Indian commodity exchanges to value the underlying assets of exchange traded funds will usher in some transparency. It will link the valuation more closely with domestic prices. According to current rules, gold and silver held by ETFs are valued based on the price fixed by the LBMA in dollars per troy ounce. The price is then converted into rupees based on RBI’s reference rate, the cost of customs duty and other taxes is added and the value adjusted according to the purity of the gold held. Further, discount or premium is added to this price based on the domestic prices. It has been observed that mutual fund houses use their discretion in applying the discount/premium and varying the periodicity with which the valuations are done. This leads to variation in the valuation among AMCs, though the underlying asset is the same.

The SEBI consultation paper offers a solution. Currently, spot gold and silver prices in India are fixed primarily by the Indian Bullion and Jewellers Association and the commodity exchanges. Both conduct price polling twice a day among traders, exporters, jewellers and other stakeholders in the physical bullion market. The prices are averaged, and after discarding the outlier prices, the final price is disseminated online. SEBI’s proposal that the prices discovered by the commodity exchanges be used by the fund houses is worth adopting. The exchanges are regulated by SEBI and it will be easier to ensure transparency.

The market regulator, however, needs to streamline the “price polling” mechanism at these exchanges. According to observers, there are less than 20 participants in the price polling for gold on MCX on most days, and from the same city. Besides poor geographical spread, vocational representation is also poor. More than half of them are bullion traders, which increases risks of front-running and price manipulation. Furthermore, not all participants quote prices in all the sessions. SEBI needs to lay down that sample size be increased to at least 100, and that participants are diverse in geographical and occupational terms. Exchanges also need to monitor prices quoted by the participants closely to weed out those polling very high or very low prices on a consistent basis. Participants should be screened for integrity. These moves will restore transparency in bullion pricing.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH



PINELOPI KOUJIANOU GOLDBERG

Three months after President Donald Trump announced plans to impose sweeping new tariffs on most countries, the US economy appears surprisingly resilient. The stock market has rebounded from its initial slump, inflation remains under control, and fears of a recession have receded — or at least they had before Trump announced a new 30 per cent tariff on imports from Mexico and the European Union, two of America’s biggest trading partners.

In the months since Trump’s initial announcement, several countries have entered negotiations with the US, offering concessions they had long resisted. Many observers view this as evidence that Trump’s aggressive trade tactics are working and that economists may have overestimated the potential costs.

Yet this interpretation overlooks a critical detail: many of the tariffs that Trump announced over the past few months have not been fully implemented. In fact, the administration has repeatedly backed down from its initial threats — a pattern so consistent that it has earned the acronym ‘TACO’: “Trump always chickens out.”

Despite its outspoken distrust of experts — particularly economists, scientists, and health professionals — the Trump administration has consistently been attuned to financial markets. Since early April, announcements of new or increased duties have repeatedly triggered stock-market declines. In response, the administration has often softened its stance by issuing exemptions, delaying some tariffs, and renegotiating others, leading to quick rebounds in equity prices. Announcements of bilateral deals have been met with investor optimism, while renewed threats of escalation have triggered sell-offs.

Until recently, this feedback loop has helped rein in the administration’s trade policies. But the latest escalation — including a 50 per cent tariff on copper, higher-than-expected tariffs on goods from Vietnam, and stalled negotiations with the EU — has barely moved the markets, with equity prices remaining elevated.

The most plausible explanation is that investors no longer believe the administration will follow through on its threats. Instead, they see them as part of a now-familiar cycle: bold proclamations followed by delays or partial implementation.



REUTERS

Why markets may soon call America’s tariff bluff

‘TACO’ FACTOR. Investors see them as part of a now-familiar cycle: bold proclamations followed by delays or partial implementation. But there is a risk in such a response

Complacency, however, introduces a new kind of risk. If markets become desensitised to Trump’s tariff threats, they may no longer serve as an effective check on potentially harmful policies. Freed from that constraint, Trump could be emboldened to move forward with measures his administration has so far been reluctant to implement.

It’s a classic “boy who cried wolf” dynamic. In the early stages, Trump’s aggressive rhetoric helped bring negotiating partners to the table without triggering the worst-case economic scenarios, largely because the market backlash acted as a deterrent. But as investors increasingly dismiss his tariff threats, the likelihood that he will follow through on them grows.

And if that happens, the long-feared consequences could finally materialise: higher consumer prices, reduced trade, disrupted supply chains, and slower long-term growth.

BILATERAL DEALS

This dynamic extends beyond financial markets. Many countries that were once firmly committed to multilateralism are now pursuing bilateral deals with the US in the hope of avoiding punitive tariffs. Some see these developments as vindication of the administration’s current approach — evidence that the US can use its economic power to reshape a system seen as unfavourable

to American interests. But the shift toward bilateralism is less an endorsement of Trump’s approach than a pragmatic response. Confronting the US directly would be costly. Finding themselves on increasingly hostile and unpredictable terrain, many governments are buying time and hedging their bets.

Such hedging can move in only one direction: away from the US and towards alternative trading partners, particularly China. For most countries, that is not the preferred outcome.

Vietnam, for example, has openly expressed its desire to strengthen ties with the US rather than deepen its reliance on China. But as US trade policy grows more erratic, governments are increasingly being forced to choose between the two powers.

The irony is that Trump’s efforts to bully foreign governments will ultimately diminish America’s global influence. Economic leverage, after all, depends on engagement. The US can

If markets become desensitised to Trump’s tariff threats, they may no longer serve as an effective check on potentially harmful policies

pressure trading partners today precisely because it remains deeply integrated into the global economy.

Consequently, US policymakers now find themselves in a double bind. In the short term, financial markets have mitigated the impact of Trump’s aggressive rhetoric by discouraging implementation of the policies that follow from it.

But if investors keep treating his threats as empty noise, they will ignore the wolf when it appears.

Moreover, given America’s central role in the global trading system, its retreat from multilateralism will drive other countries to seek alternatives and diversify their trade relationships. As they become less dependent on the US market, America’s bargaining power will inevitably decline.

While the Trump administration’s strategy may appear to be working, the absence of immediate costs is not evidence of its long-term viability. Instead, it is a sign that the warnings were heard and — for a time — heeded. If the administration ignores those warnings, economists’ dire predictions may come true.

The writer, a former World Bank Group chief economist and editor-in-chief of the ‘American Economic Review’, is Professor of Economics at Yale University. Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2025. www.project-syndicate.org

Don’t let promoters misuse public capital

SEBI’s recent circular should largely ensure listed companies don’t become operational arms of promoters’ personal empires

Tulsi Jayakumar

India’s capital markets have long wrestled with governance lapses. Yet, the June 2025 circular issued by the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) signals a serious attempt to close long-standing loopholes around related-party transactions (RPTs) — loopholes that have repeatedly allowed promoters to blur the lines between personal and public interest.

The circular introduces mandatory disclosure standards for all RPTs placed before audit committees and shareholders. For the first time, listed companies must provide clear, comparable, and contextual information — including transaction rationale, pricing benchmarks, alternatives considered, and impact on minority shareholders. The goal is clear: to empower boards and public investors to scrutinise such deals meaningfully and in advance, not after damage has been done.

This move comes not a moment too soon. The past year has seen several high-profile cases of promoter excess, with the Gensol-BluSmart episode standing out as a textbook example of what SEBI’s new norms are designed to prevent.

Gensol Engineering Ltd, a publicly listed renewable energy company, is under investigation for allegedly diverting proceeds from a Qualified Institutional Placement (QIP) into



PROMOTERS. Often control both ownership and management

BluSmart, a private electric mobility venture where Gensol’s promoters held substantial personal stakes. Funds raised in Gensol’s name — ostensibly for its own business growth — appear to have been routed to a loosely related private firm without shareholder consent or regulatory clearance.

At one level, this is a technical violation: a classic case of related-party transactions without disclosure or shareholder approval. But viewed through a governance lens, the implications are far more troubling. Promoters seem to have treated the listed company as an extension of their personal holding structure. This was not just a compliance failure; it was a fundamental breach of fiduciary trust and undermines the credibility of capital markets.

This raises three inter-related concerns:

First, a breach of fiduciary trust:

Investors in the listed entity put in their money based on the firm’s fundamentals and market potential, not to subsidise another venture, but capital was redirected to a loosely related private entity without adequate transparency.

Second, a subversion of capital market norms: Listed companies operate in a strict disclosure and compliance framework. Diverting funds to private entities places these assets beyond public scrutiny.

Third, a distortion of the firm’s risk profile: Investors believed they were backing a focused business in a specific sector — a green energy solutions company in this case. By linking the listed firm with risks from an unrelated private venture, promoters exposed investors to risks they didn’t sign up for.

This blurring of public and private interests reflects a broader issue in India’s business landscape. In too many family-controlled firms, listed companies are still treated as operational arms of personal empires, rather than as independent legal entities with responsibilities to all shareholders.

To their credit, the company’s independent directors did resign and SEBI took up the case.

A RESET NEEDED

The root cause of such episodes lies in India’s unique governance challenge: the principal-principal problem. Unlike the classic principal-agent issue, where managers might act against shareholder interest, India’s problem stems from

promoters controlling both ownership and management. As the Kotak Committee on Corporate Governance pointed out in 2017, promoters often dominate strategic decisions, board appointments, and information flows — leaving minority shareholders at a disadvantage.

These power asymmetries, coupled with a weak culture of disclosure, create fertile ground for the misuse of public capital. The Gensol-BluSmart case is not an isolated one — it is emblematic of a deeper malaise.

SEBI’s June circular is a promising first step. But rules alone will not suffice. Governance reform in India must go beyond structural compliance — it must target the mindsets that allow such overreach to occur. Promoters must internalise that once they tap public capital, they are no longer private actors — they become custodians of public trust.

To drive this shift, SEBI and institutional investors could consider: mandatory governance training and certification for promoters, just as independent directors are certified; independent audits of capital utilisation after large fundraises such as QIPs and IPOs; and the development of a Promoter Stewardship Code, outlining ethical responsibilities and long-term obligations to minority shareholders.

The writer is professor, economics and policy and executive director, Centre for Family Business & Entrepreneurship at Bhavan’s SPJIMR

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

Loan write-offs

The refers to ‘In 9 years, PSBs write-off ₹12 lakh cr’ (July 23). Since the technically written-off loans had been fully provided for, any subsequent recovery in those loans will positively impact the margins at the time of the recovery. Therefore, the causes leading to impairment of the loans need to be recognised in a timely manner so that remedial measures can be enforced and, thereby, curtail provisioning requirements and avoid the need for technical write-offs.. Downward movement of non-performing assets on account

of write-off of bad loans does not amount to an improvement in the efficiency of recovery. Action against wilful defaulters is critical to spread the message that banks are not only capable of lending but also equally efficient in recovering the dues.

YSK Pillai
Changanacherry, Kerala

Russian oil imports

Apropos the editorial ‘Oil slick’ (July 23), tremendous pressure is exerted on India by both the US and the European Union to stop buying of oil from Russia. India is now pushed to seek alternative routes to buying oil

at a slightly higher price. The government is optimistic that the prices of oil would fall in the near future with non-OPEC countries agreeing to increase their crude oil production, which would give some relief to India.

RV Baskaran
Pune

BRICS can lead

The evolution of BRICS into a serious geopolitical and economic bloc presents a historic opportunity for India, China and Russia to lead a truly multipolar order. With over 40 per cent of global GDP (PPP) and the

majority of the world’s population, BRICS can counter the West’s long-standing dominance built on colonisation, native genocides, dollar weaponisation, and resource exploitation. The US is unlikely to remain passive. Escalating Indo-China tensions via proxies like Pakistan is a real threat. India must tread cautiously — asserting sovereignty while advancing BRICS collaboration in food security, digital finance, and non-dollar trade systems. The Global South aspires for a just, equitable world.

Arul Mozhi Varman
Sivakasi, TN

Pause on GM crop

This refers to ‘US’ push for GM crops worrisome’ (July 23). Until a fairly large number of indigenous field trials and studies on GM crops are conducted and their potential impacts on various relevant factors analysed and recommendations given, it would in the national interest not to permit import of GM crop products or cultivation of GM crops. India should not succumb to any amount of US pressure in its attempts to gain access to the Indian market for its GM produce.

Kosaraju Chandramouli
Hyderabad

Auditing challenges

A decade since audit rotation and a chance to reset

Samir Shah

The auditor rotation mandate introduced under the Companies Act, 2013, which requires firms to rotate auditors after two consecutive five-year terms, will mark its tenth year in 2026-27. Audit rotation was designed to enhance auditor independence by addressing the “familiarity threat” — the risk that auditors may become too familiar with company personnel, officers, or directors, potentially compromising objectivity. As we approach the second decade, there are valuable lessons to be learned and a unique opportunity of evolution for the profession to address challenges, refine practices, enhance audit quality and independence.

SEPARATION OF SERVICES The debate on auditor independence for one has only intensified, with regulators increasingly advocating for a complete separation of audit and non-audit services. In response, many large firms have voluntarily ceased offering even permissible non-audit services to their audit clients.

Additionally, stricter reporting norms in recent years have further added to the challenges auditors face. Regulations such as the Company Auditors Report Order (CARO) 2020, applicable from FY22, require detailed reporting on aspects like loans and advances, investments, related party transactions, and fraud. Adding to this, the new audit trail requirements, effective April 1, 2023, mandate auditors to assess whether companies use accounting software that maintains a complete audit trail, further intensifying compliance obligations.

The annual inspections by the audit regulator have ensured certainty in regulations and clarity on expectations from the auditor. This will go a long way in further strengthening the trust in the profession.

Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and advanced data analytics are already transforming the audit process. Firms that invest in automating routine audit procedures and harnessing analytics to focus on outliers will not only drive audit quality but also unlock greater efficiencies. It will provide quicker insights into financial health.

Auditing today is a far more intricate exercise with companies



AUDIT. Quality must improve

being audited becoming increasingly complex and multifaceted. To maintain high-quality work, auditors must consistently invest in upskilling their professionals, cutting-edge technologies, and robust infrastructure.

As the next audit rotation cycle approaches, Audit Committees and Corporate Boards will once again face the task of selecting auditors in line with regulatory requirements. In doing so, they must consider several critical factors — the auditor’s experience, sectoral expertise, technological capabilities, and the infrastructure to conduct high-quality audits. An ideal audit team today includes not only chartered accountants but also technologists, forensic experts, data scientists, and industry specialists. However, sustaining such expertise requires auditors to commit to larger, long-term investments. Adequate compensation enables them to invest in these critical areas, ensuring higher quality audits and compliance with accounting standards. Audit fees have also come under pressure due to increased independence and reporting requirements. Therefore, auditors should not be selected solely based on the lowest bid.

Audit fees have failed to grow in tandem with revenue growth and market capitalisation of the companies since the introduction of auditor rotation. Between FY18 and FY24, the seven-year compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of audit fees for NSE 500 companies, was just 6 per cent, while CAGRs for revenues and market capitalisation were 12 per cent and 20 per cent, respectively. Moreover, the data reveals that in FY24, the proportion of audit fees relative to turnover was just 0.02 per cent. This proportion is at least five times higher at 0.1 per cent in global markets such as the US and the UK.

The writer is audit leader, Deloitte Haskins & Sells



NILANJAN BANIK

There’s a blind spot in India’s electric vehicle ambitions, which sits deep inside the battery. Lithium, neodymium, dysprosium, praseodymium are rare earth elements. Laboratory processing of these rare earth materials yields permanent magnets, which have applications spanning dental, aerospace, defence, electronics, batteries, and automotive sectors. And India imports most of permanent magnets from a single source: China.

In late 2024, China tightened its grip on permanent magnets exports, citing national security and environmental concerns. China controls more than 70 per cent of global rare earths production and refining. India’s \$240 billion auto industry just found itself exposed.

Although Indian automobile manufacturers frontloaded magnet imports in March and April this year, up 20 per cent and 87 per cent year-on-year, respectively — those stockpiles are expected to run out soon.

If India is serious about electrifying transport and building clean-tech self-reliance, it must first learn how others played this game.

DID US’ TACTICS WORK

Initially, the US improvised by importing through the third country route when China pulled the plug. US companies quietly redirected supply chains through third countries, mostly Thailand and Mexico.

Between December 2024 and April 2025, US imports of antimony oxide (a type of rare earth material) from the two nations reached approximately 3,834 tonnes, more than the previous three years combined.

None of it was listed as coming from China. That’s because it wasn’t, at least on paper. In reality, the materials were shipped from China to these intermediaries. There, they were relabelled and re-exported to the US, often disguised as unrelated goods such as zinc, iron, or even art supplies.

US regulations permit this kind of re-routing, so long as shipments are licensed. And Beijing has no easy way to stop it. Reuters traced over 3,366 tonnes of these shipments to Thailand’s Unipet Industries, a subsidiary of Chinese firm Youngsun Chemicals. The origin of the cargo? Omitted from shipping documents. The destination? US buyers who didn’t have to deal with Chinese customs directly.

However, this strategy of re-routing through third countries did not remain effective for long. Chinese government tightened export controls, making it increasingly difficult for the US to procure materials through transshipment channels.

Starting May 2025, the Chinese Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) launched a campaign against smuggling and illicit transshipment of these strategic items. Authorities intensified customs checks, investigations, and



How India should play the rare earths game

DIG IN DEEP. India must boost tie-ups with nations with vast rare earth reserves and develop domestic capabilities

legal actions against domestic and overseas entities involved in re-routing goods to the US.

Eventually, the US had to yield, according to reports by Reuters and CNN, leading to the much-anticipated Trump-Xi phone call in early June. As part of the deal, China agreed to remove the restriction on rare earth material exports to the US. In return, Xi urged Washington to “remove the negative measures taken against China”.

So the deal was made with Trump stating, “Our deal with China is done, subject to final approval with President Xi and me”. As part of this deal, the US lifted export restrictions on chip-design software (EDA tools) and ethane for firms like Siemens, Synopsys, and Cadence. This was a big bargain for China. Tariffs were also reduced to levels seen under the Biden administration, except for firms found to be excessively exporting fentanyl to the US, with an additional tariff of 20 per cent imposed on them.

CHINESE STRATEGY

China knows this playbook of protectionism quite well. After the 2008 global financial crisis and a rising tide of US tariffs, especially under the Trump administration, Beijing began moving production out of mainland China. But it

If India is serious about electrifying transport and building clean-tech self-reliance, it must first learn how others played this game

wasn’t a retreat; it was re-routing.

First, Chinese manufacturers shifted operations to lower-cost regions like the Greater Mekong subregion, Central America, and parts of Africa. That kept their goods globally competitive while sidestepping trade friction.

Second, by relocating factories, Chinese firms avoided direct hits from tariffs. In April 2024, US Trade Representative Katherine Tai accused China of funnelling steel products through Mexico to circumvent trade restrictions.

US imports from Mexico reached \$475 billion in 2023 — up \$20 billion from the year before. Imports from China dropped by \$10 billion to \$427 billion.

Chinese foreign direct investment in Mexico tripled to \$3.7 billion in 2023 when compared to the decade-long average till 2020 as over 30 firms — including EV giants BYD and Chery — set up shop there. Container traffic from China to Mexico rose by 22 per cent in 2024. China had simply redrawn the map to stay in the game.

Third, China has also used global investments in Africa and Asia to ease pressure on its own energy and raw material needs.

INDIA’S TURN

So, what must India do?

Step one: Secure alternatives. India should work with friendly countries that can serve as neutral conduits for rare earths, especially those with stables ties with both India and China. But it’s a temporary fix.

Step two: Invest overseas. Africa holds vast, underdeveloped reserves of lithium, cobalt, and copper. India is

already eyeing assets in Zambia, Congo, and Australia. That effort must be scaled up and fast-tracked. Australia, the world’s third-largest producer of rare earth elements, should be a strategic partner.

Step three: Build strength at home by encouraging new investments into mining, funding rare earth processing, and creating a research ecosystem to develop substitutes. India has the world’s third-largest reserve of rare earths of 6.9 million tonnes.

However, the excavation of these materials is expensive and not economically viable for private firms to undertake independently. The government’s production-linked incentive schemes must go beyond EV assembly lines and start backing rare earth supply chains from the ground up.

Efforts must be made to identify close substitutes for rare earth materials, such as neodymium, which is found in abundance in India and, with proper R&D, can be developed into more effective rare earth magnetic materials. India must also deepen cooperation with countries like the US, Japan, and Australia, not just for raw materials, but for tech and research support.

Step 4: Adopting a more liberal approach to Chinese Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) inflows, but with a binding clause requiring technology transfer as a condition for investment. In fact, the The Economic Survey 2024-25 had made a strong case in this regard. If India wants to lead the global EV transition, it can’t afford to be a bystander in the rare earth game.

The writer is Professor, Mahindra University, Hyderabad

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

July 24, 2005

Matrix, Strides call off merger plan

Matrix Laboratories Ltd and Strides Arcolab Ltd have decided to call off their proposed merger, following the failure to reach an agreement on valuation. This rare development in the Indian corporate mergers arena comes after the boards of directors of the two companies approved the merger in principle.

ONGC, L.N. Mittal group ink pacts for energy business

The State-owned Oil and Natural Gas Corporation and Mittal Investments Sarl, one of the investment arms of the L.N. Mittal group, entered into two memoranda of understanding to form two overseas joint ventures companies – ONGC Mittal Energy Ltd (OMEL) and ONGC Mittal Energy Services Ltd (OMESL).

China’s Nanjing Auto to buy MG Rover

Chinese carmaker Nanjing Automobile has won a bid to buy the assets of bankrupt British carmaker MG Rover, promising to employ up to 2,000 UK workers as it partly revives production of the iconic brand. Nanjing said it would relocate MG Rover’s engine plant and some car production to China. It expects to produce at least 80,000 MG saloon and sports cars within five years.

‘EU can strike a Japan-like deal with US’

Daniel Flatley
Annmarie Hordern

US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent stopped short of saying the European Union can win the same sort of trade deal as Japan cut with President Donald Trump, highlighting that Tokyo’s success came thanks to an innovative financing arrangement.

“They got the 15 per cent rate because they were willing to provide this innovative financing mechanism,” Bessent said in an interview on Bloomberg Television’s Surveillance

programme Wednesday, when asked whether other trading partners could get a similar reciprocal levy.

While Japan was previously facing a 25 per cent tariff, its negotiators reached an agreement for a 15 per cent rate, including on imports of automobiles — which are otherwise subject to a 25 per cent product-related duty. The deal also features a \$550 billion fund to make investments into the US. “They came to us with the idea of a Japan-US partnership, where they are going to provide equity, credit guarantees and funding for major projects in the US,” Bessent said. He

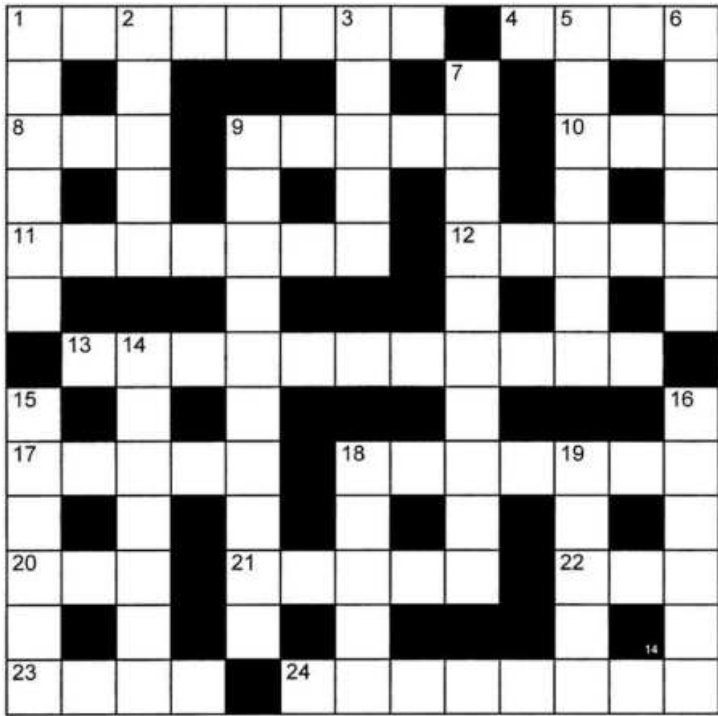


EU TRADE TALKS. US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent upbeat REUTERS

also said that the foreign direct investment pledge is “all new capital.” The Treasury chief also played down

a report about the EU preparing to levy 30 per cent retaliatory tariffs on some €100 billion (\$117 billion) worth of American goods. He said that “it’s a negotiating tactic, and it’s what I would do if I were in their place.” Asked whether Brussels had come up with anything innovative in the talks with the US, Bessent said: “Not yet, but again, talks are going better than they had been.” “We are making good progress with the EU,” he said, while reiterating his assessment that the bloc has a collective action problem given its 27 member nations. By contrast, Japan “moves as one entity.” BLOOMBERG

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2746



EASY

ACROSS

- With the skill of a master (8)
- Second-hand (4)
- Meadowland (3)
- Remove stubble (5)
- Knock (3)
- Full of defiance (7)
- Pungent bulb (5)
- Intricate, confused (11)
- Essay, literary composition (5)
- Lack of success (7)
- Frozen water (3)
- Man-made fibre (5)
- Automobile (3)
- Pour forth copiously (4)
- Decaying, lacking in moral, physical vigour (8)

DOWN

- Music; air, tune (6)
- Stick, prop (5)
- Rested sideways against (5)
- Suspicion, conjecture (7)
- Rely on, rest on (6)
- Explosion (10)
- Running, skipping about (10)
- Lie heavy upon (7)
- Bound, start up suddenly (6)
- Half-tamed variety of polecat (6)
- Untrue (5)
- ‘Pawnbroker’ (5)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- Showing great skill, males try it out (8)
- To be taken advantage of is nothing new (4)
- Land under pasture starts level, ends aloft (3)
- Use razor close for a narrow squeak (5)
- Criminal charge as to counterfeit halfpenny in old Ireland (3)
- Insolently bold Dane, fit for correction (7)
- Gets on with one on producing a vegetable (5)
- Went along with cat inside and got confused (11)
- Daily may appear to suffer a loss (5)
- No pass given if a rule is broken (7)
- It’s not these diamonds one will treat with civility (3)
- Material only gets, twisted at top of nightie (5)
- Vehicle pet put on the floor (3)
- To be effusive as American in Ghana (4)
- Ten years at the National Theatre lacking in moral vigour (8)

DOWN

- Tune got out of my old euphonium initially (6)
- It may be a prop for those working for the firm (5)
- Was inclined to let an entry be made (5)
- Conjecture that could make miser of us (7)
- Have to rely on how it will hang down (6)
- Noted upturn turning into a sort of explosion (10)
- Running about with holidaymaker in chalet to sing about (10)
- Work on the newspapers may be overwhelming (7)
- When it is bound to lead to summer (6)
- Like a polecat with its paws around the Right Reverend (6)
- The pounds in the safe may be counterfeit (5)
- A man in the family was called Erme (5)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2745

ACROSS 1. Merriment 5. Eat 7. Nigh 8. Appetite 10. Interest 11. Shed 13. Docile 15. Fettle 18. Lore 19. Multiple 22. Conforms 23. Flag 24. Lit 25. Fortunate

DOWN 1. Mankind 2. Right 3. Expose 4. Twee 5. Epithet 6. Trend 9. Frill 12. Heath 14. Coronet 16. Epergne 17. Mummer 18. Local 20. Polka 21. Hoof

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Hindustan Times
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{ OUR TAKE }

Reimagining the urban future

A World Bank report outlines the challenges ahead as India’s urban population is set to double by 2050

The past few monsoons have revealed the disquieting inadequacy of urban planning and infrastructure in India. This season, the cities in the National Capital Region, for instance, are struggling to function after intense rainfall, thanks to clogged drains and construction that disregards topography. In summer, many cities report heat deaths and crippling water shortages. Against this backdrop, the findings of the World Bank’s *Towards Resilient and Prosperous Cities in India* report should be a wake-up call. To blunt the triple threat of flooding, water scarcity, and heat, India’s urban centres need a minimum investment of \$2.4 trillion by 2050, the report estimates. While investments in the urban sector have been scaled up through initiatives such as AMRUT, the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, the PM-AWAS Yojana, and the recently concluded Smart Cities Mission, there is still a huge gap. And to make the most of even the available funds, city administrations need adequate capacity to prepare impactful projects, ensure proper implementation, and monitor their effectiveness in the long-run.

The problem of capacities runs deeper than just the ability to spend funds. What cities lack is the ability to raise finances — even basic user charges for municipal services and taxes are not adequately collected. To employ innovative instruments such as green municipal bonds or getting the private sector to partner in building the climate resilience would require city administrations to set their house in order. More importantly, power and finances need to be adequately devolved to urban local bodies. To that end, executive and political imagination needs to be unlocked to suit the future needs.

These findings outline the challenges — financial, environmental, and administrative — that lie ahead. Without adequate spending on climate adaptation infrastructure — better drainage, architecture that reduces the need for cooling and lighting — an urban crisis looms. For instance, heat mitigation measures can save up to 130,000 lives and increase the GDP by 0.4% a year, against the backdrop of exposure to dangerous heat stress having doubled between 1983-1990 and 2010-2016 in 10 of India’s largest cities. Similarly, losses from pluvial flooding could worsen without regular upkeep and upgrades of the drainage system. All this calls for urgent municipal action, especially since India’s urban population is expected to rise from 480 million in 2020 to 950 million by 2050.

That only half the infrastructure needed to support the growth in urban population has been built (as the report says) is both a challenge and an opportunity. The report’s recommendation that a dedicated national urban resilience programme be developed along with a financing strategy needs a close look.

When cricket comes under State oversight

The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) will likely come under the purview of the National Sports Governance Bill, something that most people involved in managing India’s most popular sport knew was inevitable once cricket became part of the Olympic movement. If this happens — and BCCI has time and again shown the ability to steer its own course — BCCI, which has long fought to stay autonomous, will come under government oversight, affecting its elections, office-bearer eligibility, and legal jurisdiction. It will also bring world cricket’s most powerful federation under the RTI Act and set new age/tenure caps. All of these are welcome changes.

But there is the unanswered question of how this will impact the workings of the world’s richest cricket body, which unlike all the other National Sports Federations (NSFs) in the country, doesn’t depend on government grants. Sure, BCCI will remain an autonomous body like all other NSFs but disputes, if any, will also come to the proposed National Sports Tribunal, which will become the dispute resolution body for sports matters ranging from elections to selection. Selection, for example, is always a subjective issue. In the past, people had no option but to buckle down and do better. Now, some might choose to go to the tribunal.

Will government oversight interfere with the processes that have allowed the BCCI to dominate world cricket? Sporting federations have often been at loggerheads with the government and while the law is expected to help streamline things, it remains to be seen how the right balance between autonomy of BCCI and State oversight can be achieved.

Why China refuses to resolve the border issue

The aim is not only to pressure India into accepting a border on Chinese terms but also to use the issue as leverage in matters that are of concern to Beijing in South Asia

India’s defence minister Rajnath Singh and external affairs minister S Jaishankar visited China recently in connection with the forthcoming Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in Beijing later this year, and aimed at preparing the ground for a possible prime ministerial visit that could be the first in seven years.

What is striking is the different tones adopted by the two ministers with their counterparts. During his visit in June, Singh created a minor flutter when he told his Chinese counterpart, Dong Jun, that there was a need “to have a permanent solution of border demarcation by rejuvenating the established mechanism on the issue”.

Jaishankar’s tone during his meeting with his counterpart, Wang Yi, in Beijing last week was quite different. He spoke of the “steadily improving” India-China relations as a result of the “resolution of the friction along the border and our ability to maintain peace and tranquility there.” Peace on the border, he told Wang, was the fundamental basis of good

relations. After the disengagement that had taken place in 2024, the time had come to undertake de-escalation that would see the reduction of the additional forces the two countries had massed in the eastern Ladakh-western Tibet region, he added.

The Chinese could not have been too happy about Singh raising the border issue the way he did. As Jaishankar noted, the two sides are in the process of repairing their ties that were shattered by the Chinese 2020 misadventure in Eastern Ladakh. They have barely agreed to restore status quo ante there, and now the Indians appeared to be taking a huge leap forward by suggesting that the two sides move to settle their long-running border dispute that has prevented the demarcation of their border. According to the government press release of June 27, Singh stressed the issue of border management and the need “to have a permanent solution of border demarcation by rejuvenating the established mechanism on the issue”.

The Chinese response to Singh came a day later when Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning pointed out that the two sides indeed have such a mechanism, that of the office of Special Representatives who had worked out the “Agreement on the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Border Question”.

When the Press Trust of India reporter pointed out that there had

been “20 rounds of special representative talks,” Mao’s reply was the standard Chinese retort that “The boundary question is complicated, and it takes time to settle it”. In the meantime, she hoped that the two countries would maintain communications and keep “the border areas peaceful and tranquil.

The Political Parameters agreement was signed a quarter century ago in 2005, and the two Special Representatives have held 23 rounds of meetings, the last in December 2024. The meeting of the Chinese Special Representative Wang Yi (who is also foreign minister) and his Indian counterpart, Ajit Doval, in Beijing in June, was at the sidelines of an SCO meeting. They did not take the opportunity to meet as the Special Representatives whose stated task is to resolve the border issue.

The Political Parameters Agreement was indeed a far-reaching one. It certified that the two sides were seeking to resolve their boundary question not through historical claims and maps, but on “political” grounds. Article III of the agreement said that both sides should make mutually acceptable adjustments to their respective positions “to arrive at a package settlement”.

Articles IV and VII seemed to suggest that the framework suggested would essentially freeze the border on an “as is where is” basis — China retaining control of Aksai Chin and India of Arunachal Pradesh.

But, almost immediately, China



Under the Political Parameters Agreement, the two sides had sought to resolve the boundary question on “political” grounds.

began to walk back from the agreement. In 2006, Chinese ambassador Sun Yuxi declared that China claimed all of Arunachal Pradesh, including Tawang. At the sidelines of the Asia-Europe Meeting in 2007, Chinese foreign minister Yang Jiechi told his Indian counterpart Pranab Mukherji that the “settled populations” part did not apply to the Tawang tract.

The Chinese shift seemed to have been occasioned by some internal re-thinking. This is related to the Dalai Lama and Tibet. The monastery in Tawang was founded at the instance of the fifth Dalai Lama, the “Great Fifth”. The Tawang region was also the birthplace of the sixth Dalai Lama, who was not Tibetan, but a Monpa. The Chinese worry that the next Dalai Lama could well be incarnated in the region.

Since that time, the Chinese have stuck to their position that unless Tawang was conceded, there can be no border settlement. Not surprisingly, India has told them that keeping Tawang on the Chinese agenda was the surest way to block a border settlement.

Leave alone demarcating a permanent border, China has steadily

refused to even clarify the Line of Actual Control that currently marks the border, creating the potential for conflict. It was the Chinese blockade preventing India from exercising its right to patrol several areas where there were overlapping claims that led to the 2020 crisis in eastern Ladakh.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi tried to persuade the Chinese in 2014 and 2015 to clarify these points on the LAC, but to little avail. The first time was when Xi Jinping visited India in October 2014, and the second was when Modi made a return visit in May 2015.

The only conclusion that arises from the Chinese equivocation on permanently settling the border is that they want to keep open a means of stoking conflict with India. The aim is to not only pressure New Delhi to accept a border on Chinese terms, but also use it as leverage against India in relation to Chinese interests in South Asia.

Manoj Joshi is a distinguished fellow, Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi. The views expressed are personal.

Setting sail for Viksit Bharat with maritime growth push

India’s ports are transcending traditional roles as logistical nodes to become modern gateways of commerce. A focus on capacity expansion, mechanisation, digitisation, and ease of doing business has propelled ports such as Visakhapatnam, Mundra, JNPA, and Kamarajar up in the global rankings.

The World Bank’s Logistics Performance Index (LPI) 2023 acknowledged India’s efficiency and speed, placing it ahead of many developed nations. The country has risen in key logistics indicators, ranked 38th of 139 countries in 2023, up from 54th in 2014. India’s rank in the international shipment category improved dramatically from 44th to 22nd in the period, while average container dwell time reduced to approximately 2.6 days, a competitive figure globally. The turnaround time (TRT) of major ports has also sharply declined from around 94 hours to about 48.06 hours.

Substantial infrastructure development underpins this progress. Cargo handling capacity at major ports, over the past decade, reached 1,681 million tonnes per annum (MTPA) from 800.5 MTPA. Ninety-eight port modernisation projects, costing over ₹32,000 crore, have been completed, adding more than 230 MTPA to the annual port capacity.

Major ports’ financial performance has been equally impressive, with total income rising from ₹11,760 crore in FY15 to ₹24,203 crore in FY25 — a 7.5% CAGR over 10 years. Operating surplus nearly tripled to ₹12.34 crore, driven by a 13% CAGR over the same period. Operational efficiency also improved significantly, with the operating ratio declining from 64.7% in FY15 to 42.3% in FY25, reinforcing the ports’ financial sustainability.

Significant projects like the Tuticorin International Container Terminal (TICT) and the foundation stone laying for the ₹76,000 crore VadHAVAN Port mark crucial milestones in enhancing infrastructure and logistics efficiency. The Vizhinjam International Seaport will boost India’s trans-shipment capabilities.

Ten Indian ports have now made it to the Global Top 100 in the World Bank’s CPPI 2023 Report, with the Visakhapatnam Port climbing to 19th position from 122nd in 2022. India is also reclaiming its rivers, once vibrant arteries of commerce, for modern logistics. Under the NDA government, 106 rivers have been upgraded as National Waterways, including the Ganga and the Brahmaputra. This drives a seven-fold increase in inland waterways-based freight movement, from 18.1 million metric tons (MMT) in FY14 to 146 MMT in FY25. The sector is now equipped with multimodal terminals, night navigation, and digital monitoring systems. Global attention has been drawn to this revival, with collaborations enhancing technology and promoting sustainable freight movement. The budgetary allocation for Inland Waterways Authority of India of ₹1,700 crore for FY26 is more than the total expenditure on inland waterways for the 28 years from 1986 to 2014.

The Cargo Promotion Scheme, providing a 35% incentive for inland waterway utilisation, further bolsters this growth. The first Inland Waterways Development Council (IWDC) meeting committed an investment of ₹45,000 crore for river-cruise tourism development by 2047.

Cruise tourism is also experiencing a significant upswing, with major international companies now docking at Indian ports like Mumbai,

Kochi, Goa, and Visakhapatnam. The launch of the Cruise Bharat Mission in September 2024 aims to double cruise passenger traffic by 2029, with plans for six new international cruise terminals. Sea cruise passengers increased from 84,000 in 2014 to 4.92 lakhs in 2024-25, registering a whopping 500% increase.

India’s commitment to sustainability in the maritime sector is evident through pioneering green initiatives. The Harit Sagar Green Port guidelines aim to reduce carbon intensity, and the Green Tug Transition Programme (GTTP) targets a 30% reduction in GHG emissions from port vessels of major ports by 2030, in line with the Maritime Amrit Kaal Vision 2047. Three major ports are being developed as green hydrogen or ammonia hubs under the National Hydrogen Mission. The Harit Nauka guidelines promote 100% green vessels by 2047, and India also launched its first indigenous hydrogen fuel cell vessel.

India has been re-elected to the Council of the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) for the biennium 2024-25 with the highest tally. New routes of collaboration are being forged, notably with the signing of the Inter-Governmental Framework Agreement with the UAE for the India-Middle East Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). The long-term contract for the development of Shahid Beheshti Port Terminal, Chabahar, signed with Iran, is a pivotal step in opening up the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) to Central Asia.

Beyond infrastructure, human capital and heritage are also key focus areas. An astounding 200% growth was achieved over the last decade in increasing India’s presence in the global seafaring community, raising the number of active Indian seafarers from 1.08 lakh in 2014 to 3.20 lakh this year. The number of women seafarers has risen from 341 in 2014 to 2,557 in 2025. The ministry of ports, shipping and waterways also launched Sagar Mein Samman to increase the participation of women in the maritime sector.

The development of the National Maritime Heritage Complex at Lothal, Gujarat, as a world-class maritime museum and cultural centre, along with the first-ever India Maritime Heritage Conclave, underscores a commitment to preserving and showcasing India’s rich maritime history.

Budget FY26 announced an array of fiscal incentives for shipbuilding and ship recycling, including the Maritime Development Fund, Ship Building Financial Assistance Policy 2.0, inclusion of large ships above a specified size in the Infrastructure Harmonised Master List, measures to facilitate shipbuilding clusters, extension of tonnage tax regime to inland vessels, extension of basic customs duty exemption on raw materials and components for ship building and ship repair for another 10 years.

This bouquet of initiatives has started attracting major global shipbuilding companies to joint ventures with Indian shipping companies. This is bound to create massive employment opportunities and investment multiplier effects.

In essence, the past decade has marked a decisive shift in India’s maritime narrative. India is rapidly transforming into a preferred maritime destination for trade, innovation, and investment as it charts the course for Viksit and Atmanirbhar Bharat.

Sarbananda Sonowal is Union minister for ports, shipping, and waterways. The views expressed are personal.

{ SHIGERU ISHIBA } PRIME MINISTER OF JAPAN

By protecting what needs to be protected, we continued the negotiations with an aim to reach an agreement that meets the national interest of both Japan and the United States

On US-Japan trade negotiations



AI must aid human thought, not become its replacement

Watching the recent resurgence of violence in Kashmir, I find myself grappling with questions about the role of technology, particularly Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI), in warfare. India is built upon the philosophy of live and let live, yet that doesn’t mean passively accepting aggression. As someone deeply invested in responsibly applying AI in critical industries like financial services, aerospace, semiconductors, and manufacturing, I am acutely aware of the unsettling dual-use potential of the tools we develop: The same technology driving efficiency and innovation can also be weaponised for harm.

We stand at a critical juncture. GenAI is rapidly shifting from mere technological advancement to a profound geopolitical tool. The stark division between nations possessing advanced GenAI capabilities and those dependent on externally developed systems poses serious strategic risks. Predominantly shaped by the interests and biases of major AI-developing nations, primarily the US and China, these models inevitably propagate their creators’ narratives, often undermining global objectivity.

Consider the inherent biases documented in AI models like OpenAI’s GPT series or China’s Deepseek, which subtly yet powerfully reflect geopolitical views. Research indicates these models minimise criticism of their home nations, embedding biases that can exacerbate international tensions. China’s AI approach, for instance, often reinforces national policy stances, inadvertently legitimising territorial disputes or delegitimising sovereign entities, complicating fragile diplomatic relationships, notably in sensitive regions like Kashmir.

Historically, mutually assured destruction (MAD) relied on nuclear deterrence. Today’s arms race, however, is digital and equally significant in its potential to reshape global stability. We must urgently reconsider this outdated framework. Instead of mutually assured destruction, I advocate for a new kind of MAD: mutual advancement through digitisation. This paradigm shifts the emphasis from destructive competition to collaborative development and technological self-reliance.

This evolved MAD requires nations, particularly technologically-vulnerable developing countries, to establish independent, culturally

informed AI stacks. Such autonomy would reflect local histories, cultures, and political nuances, making these nations less susceptible to external manipulation. Robust, culturally informed AI not only protects against misinformation but fosters genuine global dialogue, contributing to a balanced, multipolar AI landscape.

At the core of geopolitical tensions lies a profound challenge of mutual understanding. The world’s dominant AI models, primarily trained in English and Chinese, leave multilingual and culturally diverse nations like India, with its 22 official languages and hundreds of dialects, in a precarious position. A simplistic AI incapable of capturing nuanced linguistic subtleties risks generating misunderstandings with severe diplomatic repercussions. To prevent this, developing sophisticated, culturally aware AI models is paramount. Multilingual AI systems must leverage similarities among related languages such as Marathi and Gujarati or Tamil and Kannada to rapidly scale without losing depth or nuance. Such culturally adept systems, sensitive to idiomatic expressions and contextual subtleties, significantly enhance cross-cultural understanding, reducing the risk of conflict driven by miscommunication.

As GenAI becomes integrated into societal infrastructure and decision-making processes, it will inevitably reshape human roles. While automation holds tremendous promise for efficiency, delegating judgment, especially in life and death contexts like warfare, to AI systems raises profound concerns. I am reminded of the Cold War incident in 1983 when Soviet Lieutenant Colonel Stanislav Petrov trusted human intuition over technological alarms, averting nuclear disaster — a poignant reminder of why critical human judgment must never be relinquished to machines entirely.

My greatest fear remains starkly clear: A future where humans willingly delegate judgment and thought to algorithms. We should not accept this future. We share collective responsibility as innovators, technologists, and global citizens, to demand and ensure that AI serves human wisdom rather than replaces it. Let’s commit today: never allow technology to automate away our humanity.

Arun Subramaniam is founder and CEO, Articul8. The views expressed are personal.

The rise of EVs

New cars highlight challenges for auto sector

Foreign-owned electric-vehicle (EV) companies are expanding their footprint in India with remarkable swiftness. Vietnamese carmaker VinFast has begun accepting reservations for its VF6 and VF7 models. It has reportedly signed deals with dealers for physical showrooms in 27 cities in India. Meanwhile, Elon Musk’s Tesla has finally entered India and is taking orders from its Mumbai showroom for Model Y. The two companies, however, seem to have slightly different strategies. Tesla has chosen not to invest in a local factory, which might have allowed it to avoid paying tariffs on the imported Model Ys. As a result, the car is priced about 77 per cent higher than it is in the United States. VinFast, meanwhile, has not announced the final price for its vehicles; reservations for its vehicles are being taken with a deposit of ₹21,000. But it has claimed that it will spend \$2 billion over the next five years on a plant in Thoothukudi, Tamil Nadu, and has further insisted that it will use this plant not just to service domestic demand but also to export to nearby markets. This would allow it to benefit from a government scheme that offers a rebate on tariffs.

The growth of EVs offers some challenges to both the Indian automotive industry and, more broadly, the government. A recent study by economists at Imperial College, London, and Oxford University’s Sustainable Finance Group has pointed out that the impact on incumbent automakers in India will be variegated. Some, like Tata Motors, might benefit from a switch to EVs; others, like Maruti, might be disadvantaged. But the greater problem lies in the fact that EVs are fundamentally different from internal combustion engine (ICE)-based cars in terms of where the value is captured. The production process for ICE cars is far more disaggregated, with value — and thus profits — being earned at various places along the supply chain. For EVs, value addition is more concentrated, for example, in the production of batteries. This has serious implications for India’s auto-component sector.

For the government, there are multiple, sometimes contradictory, impulses at work. First, there is an unquestionable protectionist impulse, which should be overcome. Second, there is the natural need to increase the proportion of low-carbon vehicles in India, to reduce both local pollution as well as national emission. This has meant that the government offers incentives to EV purchasers while keeping high tariffs on foreign EVs. Logically, it should welcome investment in India-based EV production. But it has also chosen to minimise investment from the emerging EV superpower, China. BYD, the leading EV manufacturer, had sought to invest \$1 billion in India manufacturing, but it has been reported that the government did not allow it.

A more integrated approach to EV policy will be needed as the market shifts within India. Among other things, questions will be asked about the availability of charging infrastructure and the impact of large-scale adoption of EVs on electric grids, locally and nationally. Whether charging requirements should be standardised across companies is also a thorny question that regulators globally have wrestled with. India, as a large consumer of passenger vehicles and potentially a major producer, will inevitably embrace the EV revolution. The speed, efficiency, usability and local value associated with this transformation, however, will depend upon choices that the government makes now.

Expanding the net

Social-security scheme must be made more effective

The data released this week showed that the Employees’ Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) marked a significant milestone in May 2025, recording the highest net addition of members in any month since the launch of its data tracking. Of the two million new net subscribers, around 0.94 million were first-time ones, an increase of 11.04 per cent over April 2025. The increase indicates formalisation in the job market. Further, a major driver behind this surge was the pronounced participation of young workers. The 18-25 age group accounted for 59 per cent of all new EPFO members in May. This demographic indicator suggests expanding formal-sector opportunities for first-time job seekers. Equally notable was the uptick in female participation. The continued rise in female EPFO membership shows a broader shift towards a more inclusive and diverse workforce. Another encouraging sign stemming from the data was the significant number of “rejoined” members. These are employees who, having exited the EPFO system (often due to job changes or career breaks), have returned to the fold. Their return not only signals increasing job mobility in the economy but also underscores a growing awareness of the importance of retaining social-security benefits across career transitions. It suggests that workers are now better informed and more proactive in securing their financial futures.

While the absolute increase in formal-sector employment looks encouraging, the additions are not on a scale that would make any significant change in overall employment conditions. The data, for example, shows that about 80 per cent of Indian workers toil in the informal sector, where EPFO coverage is scant. In terms of social-security coverage, although there are government initiatives such as the Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maan-Dhan (PM-SYM), a voluntary pension scheme targeting unorganised workers, there has recently been a decline in government contribution. Also, a significant portion of the workforce has irregular earnings and insufficient documentation, and finds it difficult to navigate the formal processes required for enrolment. These challenges have been highlighted in the 2025 Impact and Policy Research Institute policy update.

Even in the formal sector, shortcomings continue to hamper the reach and effectiveness of the EPFO. The wage threshold for compulsory EPFO and Employees’ Pension Scheme (EPS-95) coverage has remained fixed at ₹15,000 per month since 2014, which limits contributions and pension calculations to this ceiling. This wage cap excludes an increasing number of workers earning above this limit from receiving full pension benefits, thus limiting its scope. For many pensioners, the minimum EPFO pension remains ₹1,000 per month, an amount that is grossly inadequate to meet basic living expenses. Thus, while the addition of EPFO subscribers in May 2025 is a positive sign of formalisation and the expansion of the social-security net, addressing coverage gaps, updating wage ceilings, ensuring pension adequacy, and simplifying administration are essential to improve outcomes for the Indian workforce. At a broader policy level, India must begin preparing for its demographic transition by implementing effective social-security schemes, and the EPFO can play a crucial part in this effort.

Using finance to green the planet

Why sustainable finance must follow, not lead, real climate action



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

Governments, financial market regulators, and civil society organisations increasingly view financial markets as the key to achieving a greener planet. This rests on the premise that investors prioritise public interest over their private gains, aligning capital flows with sustainability goals. While finance certainly has a role, it cannot be the fulcrum of climate action for several reasons.

Financial markets operate on a risk-return calculus. They allocate resources among competing businesses based on risk-adjusted returns, which, in turn, reflect prices in product markets, and those prices reflect consumer choices. If a business, say a coal-based enterprise, is profitable based on prevailing demand and supply, it will attract investment unless there is a regulatory constraint or an economic disincentive. Expecting investors to routinely disregard prices, returns, and risks is wishful thinking. This is akin to expecting consumers not to buy Chinese goods while allowing their widespread sale. That is neither how finance works nor how markets function.

Markets reflect choices; they don’t define them. It is policy and regulation that establish the boundaries of permissible conduct and determine what gets produced and consumed, how, and how much. A more effective and honest strategy, therefore, is to discourage or disallow harmful businesses at the source rather than hope markets will voluntarily avoid them. Adoption of electric vehicles did not happen because investors wanted to invest in these enterprises, but because of incentives and disincentives that influenced the choice of consumers and producers.

Environmental harm is perhaps the most severe and pervasive negative externality, where polluters do not bear the full ecological cost of their actions, and consumers typically pay only the private cost, not the broader environmental damage. The textbook remedy is simple: Price the externality. Make both the producer and the consumer pay the full ecological cost at the point of production and consumption. In the earlier decades, project appraisals often incorpor-

ated shadow pricing to account for environmental and social costs, not captured by market prices. Embedding such costs into pricing can correct distorted incentives and align market behaviour with sustainability goals.

This is entirely feasible within a market economy. When the full cost of dirty goods is reflected in prices, their consumption declines, profitability falls, production contracts, and demand for finance diminishes organically. In other words, full-cost pricing makes it unviable to consume or produce dirty goods, and, therefore, unviable to finance them. Capital stops flowing to unsustainable businesses, not because markets are virtuous, but because they respond to price signals. Therefore, full-cost pricing must precede, not follow, financial allocation.

There are inherent limitations to relying solely on finance to drive the green transition. First, finance influences the future more than the present. Sustainable finance tends to direct new capital into green businesses, helping shape tomorrow’s economy. But it does little to reform the economy of today, which continues to rely on polluting industries. These industries operate with sunk investments and internal accruals. Simply withholding new funding will not shut them down, nor can we expect consumers to stop buying products from these entities overnight. At the same time, green businesses, facing high upfront costs, will struggle to compete with legacy firms that bear no ecological burden. Unless we confront the entrenched, polluting industries (brown stock) and not just promote green investments, we risk creating a future that is green in patches, coexisting with a polluting present.

Second, firms are not monoliths, they are portfolios. A large conglomerate might run a coal plant, a solar energy division, a water purification unit, and a consumer goods business, all under one roof. One firm may produce both tobacco and asthma inhalers, while another produces diesel and electric vehicles. Some products have consumption externalities



M S SAHOO & CKG NAIR

Coercive bilateralism: The world trade order

On April 2, United States President Donald Trump announced a broad set of bilateral tariffs that stunned the world. The tariffs were high and uneven: India faced a 26 per cent tariff; China, 34 per cent; and the European Union, 20 per cent. Soon after, they were suspended for 90 days, with a blunt message: Unless the US’ trading partners agreed to “fair and reciprocal” trade deals during the pause until July 9 (now extended to August 1), the punitive tariffs would take effect. The announcement marked a hard pivot away from the rules-based trade architecture of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and its insistence on non-discrimination, placing many economies under pressure.

Several countries began negotiating bilateral trade deals with the US — from advanced economies like the United Kingdom (UK) to export-dependent partners like Vietnam. Others, including India, are compelled to do the same, lest they face exclusion from one of the largest consumer markets.

This moment marks a deeper shift in the global trade order. For decades, the US advocated multilateralism, spearheading the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the WTO. It pushed for tariff reductions, rule-setting, and dispute settlement mechanisms aimed at making trade fair, transparent, and predictable. But in recent years, that vision has eroded. Throughout the 1990s, the US gradually shifted from multilateralism to bilateral trade agreements. Mr Trump’s first term was defined by unilateral tariffs and trade wars. The US systematically blocked appointments to the WTO’s appellate body, leading to its paralysis by 2019. Domestic political-economy concerns about inequality, geopolitical fragmentation, and post-pandemic supply chain anxieties have further discredited the global trade system. The “July 9 ultimatum” crystallises this evolution. The

US is no longer trying to fix multilateralism, it is bypassing it entirely.

What we are witnessing is the rise of “coercive bilateralism.” The US is using its market access as a blunt instrument: “Either lower your tariffs, or we will raise ours to match.” For developing economies, this presents a dilemma: Either concede on sensitive sectors or face a tariff shock that could destabilise exports and investment inflows.

This approach has seen some success for the US: On July 2, Mr Trump announced a deal with Vietnam that slashed the proposed 46 per cent tariff on Vietnamese goods to 20 per cent (while trans-shipped goods, especially from China, would face a 40 per cent levy). In return, Vietnam would offer zero-tariff access to US goods, including large-engine cars, though the details remain unclear. For Mr Trump, this was a political win and a message to others: A deal is possible but only on Washington’s terms.

India, meanwhile, continues to negotiate under pressure. American and Indian officials are scrambling to resolve key differences, particularly over dairy and agricultural imports. India is reportedly resisting broad concessions in these politically sensitive sectors, even as the threat of steep new tariffs looms. While Mr Trump has expressed optimism about a deal with New Delhi, many sticking points remain. With nearly 18.3 per cent of Indian exports headed to the US, the stakes are high. A targeted agreement may be necessary to shield key industries from abrupt hikes.

The European Union, too, has sought a middle ground. While it is prepared to accept a universal 10 per cent tariff on most exports covering over €380 billion in trade — Brussels is pushing for exemptions in sectors like pharmaceuticals, semiconductors, aircraft, and alcohol. The UK had earlier agreed to a 10

per cent tariff on cars in exchange for improved access for its beef and aircraft engine sectors. Even China has negotiated a limited truce, restoring some rare earth exports to the US, though core disputes remain unresolved.

The consequences of coercive bilateralism are profound. First, multilateralism is unravelling. The WTO, once the anchor of the global trading system, is being sidelined. Second, power asymmetry is growing. Smaller economies are now forced to negotiate individually with a superpower, weakening their leverage. Third, the consistency of global trade rules is breaking down. Countries are being pulled into a web of inconsistent standards, digital provisions, and tariff exceptions, threatening the predictability that businesses depend on.

For India, the challenge is to strike a balance between tactical necessity and economic priorities. It is conceivable that changes sought by the US may work to India’s benefit by forcing tariff reforms that domestic politics have long delayed. But concessions — especially on sectors like agriculture or data governance — must be weighed against their long-term economic, political and national-security implications. Beyond the bilateral equation, India must also think multilaterally: Revitalising regional trade pacts, expanding South-South cooperation, and contributing to WTO reform.

While Mr Trump’s deadline has shifted again, the precedent his approach sets could define global trade for a generation. The danger is not just in the content of the agreements being signed but in how they are being signed: Under duress and at speed. This shift from multilateral rule-making to coercive deal-making forces the world to confront a basic question: Will we normalise a power-based trade order, or recommit to rebuilding a fair, rules-based system?

The authors are, respectively, former chairperson, Insolvency and Bankruptcy Board of India, and former director, National Institute of Securities Markets



PRAVIN KRISHNA & MONIL SHARMA

Impact investing: Balancing purpose and profit



SANJAY KUMAR SINGH

Can investment firms achieve social or environmental impact while generating sound financial returns? Author Mahesh Joshi answers in the affirmative in his book *H.I.T. Investing*, which explores the principles and practice of impact investing. This approach seeks to improve the world while earning competitive returns. The global impact investing industry is currently valued at \$2.3 trillion.

Impact investors begin by identifying causes that matter to them, then back early-stage companies aligned with those goals, typically in sectors such as microfinance, health, education and so on.

After a decade in private equity, Mr Joshi joined an impact investment firm in 2017, which was focused on making healthcare more affordable and accessible across South and Southeast Asia. Earlier in his career, he had been an analyst covering the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector — an experience that shaped his views on how companies can earn sustainable profits. He had observed that many FMCG companies consistently generate high return on equity with little or no debt. They produce products like soaps and shampoos that can easily be manufactured by rivals. But so strong is the brand perception they build in their customers’ minds that the latter are willing to pay a premium for them. They also ensure easy availability — within an arm’s reach of desire, as the Coca-Cola marketing campaign famously said — through a distribution network that reaches every nook and cranny of the country. These attributes create high entry barriers and

ensure profitability.

As an impact investor, the author had to find companies offering quality products and services at affordable prices. He found it hard to fathom how any organisation could build a sustainable business using this model. But many have done it.

One famous example is the Grameen Bank, founded by Muhammad Yunus, currently chief advisor of Bangladesh. In the 1970s, Dr Yunus, then head of the economics department at Chittagong University, lent money to a woman who made bamboo stools but was trapped in a cycle of debt to loan sharks. That small experiment culminated in the founding of Grameen Bank in October 1983. In 2023, it disbursed \$1 billion in loans. The uniqueness of the bank’s



H.I.T. Investing: Strong returns through high-impact investing leveraging technology by Mahesh Joshi Published by Penguin Business 214 pages ₹799

the Pyramid at the Bottom of K Prahalad argued that companies should view the low-income population as value-conscious customers and resili-

approach lay in getting customers to form associations. The group was held responsible for the credit received by its members. This created social pressure on members not to default. The bank’s enviable 99 per cent repayment rate allows it to charge low interest rates. In India, Ela Bhatt founded the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) in 1972, a co-operative with around 2 million members that works to empower small-scale women entrepreneurs.

Some corporations, too, have succeeded in serving low-income consumers. In *The Fortune at the Bottom of*

ient entrepreneurs. His insights galvanised many multinational corporations to target this segment by keeping prices low and volumes high. Hindustan Unilever’s success with the Wheel detergent brand is a notable example.

Gradually, Mr Joshi came to realise that a low-price, high-volume approach, which he had initially regarded as an impediment, can be a competitive advantage. Rivals find it difficult to disrupt a business delivering great value to customers at minimal pricing. Moreover, since fewer companies target this segment, competition remains limited.

Mr Joshi initially assumed impact investors relied on concessionary capital from philanthropists who are not chasing commercial returns. Over time, he found that most raise money from third-party investors and must deliver market returns. If they fail to do so, they find it difficult to raise capital in the future.

Impact investors, who are under pressure to deliver an exit within three to five years, sometimes make the mistake of focusing on sectors and companies that are the flavour of the season — those they believe will be easier to sell to

other investors in a few years. This mirrors the “greater fool theory” in stock markets, where during bull runs investors ignore valuation in the belief there will be a buyer willing to buy from them at a higher price. This approach works until the bubble bursts. Investors are then left holding overvalued stocks no one wants. Having witnessed the debacle in India’s construction sector in the 2000s, the author says he has since focused on companies creating real value for customers, instead of chasing popular investments.

In the second part, Mr Joshi profiles successful impact investors across sectors and geographies. Indian readers will relate to the example of Lok Capital, an early investor in several microfinance companies that have since received small finance bank licences from the Reserve Bank of India.

Anyone keen to learn about the opportunities and challenges in impact investing, and the firms in this area that have successfully struck a balance between purpose and profit, will find Mr Joshi’s book an insightful and rewarding read.



The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

THE WATER FRONT

After China's new project on Brahmaputra, India's plans to build storage facilities on the river must acquire urgency

LAST WEEK, THE Chinese government started work on the construction of a massive hydropower project on the Yarlung Zangbo, just before the river bends and enters Arunachal Pradesh, where it is called the Siang. The river then flows into Assam, where it is called the Brahmaputra. The \$170 billion project, linked to Beijing's developmental goals in the Tibetan region, is expected to generate 60 GW of electricity, roughly three times more than the Three Gorges Dam. The project has stirred old anxieties in the river's downstream, especially in Arunachal Pradesh and Bangladesh. Arunachal Chief Minister Pema Khandu has described the Chinese project as a "ticking water bomb". An increase in the Chinese capacity to manipulate the river's flows once the dam is constructed could increase the risks of floods in the country's Northeast, he has said. The fact that very little is known of the project's storage capacity has aggravated the unease. The risk could also stem from sudden surges in downstream flows — from unannounced water releases or from increased discharge as a result of the warming climate or even engineering errors. Hydrology experts fear that the Chinese project could disrupt water flow to the hydro projects proposed in the country's Northeast — the region holds nearly half of India's hydropower potential, over 80 per cent of which remains untapped.

India's Brahmaputra predicament is unlike that of most lower riparian states. The river gains most of its volume only after it enters Arunachal Pradesh, fed by largely river-fed tributaries in the Eastern Himalaya, such as the Lohit and the Dibang. In the Brahmaputra's lower riparian regions, the unpredictability of flood patterns is already a big challenge. The fears about inundation due to the river's changing flows are, therefore, not unfounded. In 2013, India and China signed a MoU on sharing information on river flows. But, by all accounts, Beijing has not always been open to sharing hydrological data. A more effective response to the Chinese dam would be to build up the defences of vulnerable regions in the Northeast. In 2017, when the Yarlung Zangbo dam was still at a planning stage, Niti Aayog had proposed a multipurpose project in the Siang region as a strategic counter to the Chinese hydro station. Besides generating electricity, the project's storage facility can cushion the Northeast from the risks of being flooded by water released from the Chinese dam. However, work on the Siang dam has progressed at a slow pace, largely because a section of the local population has opposed the project. The Ministry of Jal Shakti tasked the National Hydro Power Corporation to prepare a pre-feasibility report but vital investigations have not been conducted.

Fears about displacement and livelihood losses have found expression in the opposition to the Siang project. The political class and technical experts must come together to build safeguards and remove such apprehensions. The work on building storage facilities downstream of the Brahmaputra cannot be postponed.

BREAKING THE CHAIN

ICMR's push for TB diagnostic tests in primary healthcare centres could be crucial for early detection and treatment of infection

WITH THE AIM of making clinical testing for a wider range of diseases more accessible, the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has updated its National List of Essential Diagnostics to include rapid diagnostic tests for sickle cell anaemia, thalassaemia, Hepatitis B and syphilis, among others. Significantly, there is a push for early detection of tuberculosis (TB) at the lower levels of the healthcare system — the list recommends collecting samples at the level of the sub health centre (SHC) for molecular TB testing in order to identify asymptomatic individuals, as well as the TB skin test in community healthcare centres, to detect the presence of the pathogen in those without an active infection.

WHO data shows that since 2015, India has made good progress in tackling TB. There has been a 17 per cent drop in the number of reported cases and a 20 per cent drop in the number of deaths. More than 85 per cent of those detected with the infection have received treatment and efforts to contain multi-drug-resistant TB are yielding results. It is evident that the TB problem is not intractable, but given India's massive disease burden, accounting for 27 per cent of the global cases, there is no room for complacency. The challenge is compounded by the problem of subclinical TB, where infected individuals do not yet present symptoms like persistent coughing. A study published in The International Journal of Tuberculosis and Lung Disease in 2024 found that 39 per cent of TB cases in India are subclinical, and therefore more likely to escape detection and continue spreading. This is why the attempt to tackle TB as early as possible matters. The ICMR's update, making molecular TB testing available at the level of the community health centre (CHC) — with sub-centres and primary healthcare centres (PHCs) also sending samples to be tested — could be crucial to providing timely treatment and breaking the chain of transmission.

Despite making significant progress, India is unlikely to meet its target of eliminating TB by the end of the year. The government has made the expansion of primary healthcare a key pillar of its policy, with the aim of bringing a broad spectrum of services closer to the people through the network of over 1.7 lakh centres around the country. The broadening of the TB diagnostics must be factored in, equipping SHCs and PHCs to identify and treat infected individuals as early as possible, even as initiatives to reduce the financial burden of treatment and improve access to nutrition are strengthened.

BLIZZARD OF OZZ

Father of heavy metal and one of its most outlandish figures, Ozzy Osbourne leaves behind the music and the showmanship

LACK SABBATH FRONTMAN John Michael 'Ozzy' Osbourne, father of heavy metal and one of its most enduring and outlandish figures, died on Tuesday at 76. Earlier this month, suffering from Parkinson's and unable to stand without assistance, Ozzy rose from beneath the stage at the jam-packed Villa Park in Birmingham, less than a mile away from his home in Aston, where he grew up, seated on a custom-made throne fashioned like a bat. Forty thousand metalheads, who had gathered for a final hat tip to the metal pioneer, roared to the theatrical nod to that shocking moment from 1982 when Ozzy chewed off the head of a bat thrown on stage.

Ozzy's bat bite, while not deliberate — he later said he thought it was a rubber toy — clouded the line between performance and reality. The confusion allowed for the power of the absurd to prevail. Parents were worried if kids lined their eyes with kohl, wore black and blared the music of "Satan's friends". Ozzy, the freak, was the children's hero, their "Prince of Darkness". He himself grew up on a steady dose of The Beatles. After leaving school, he worked as a labourer and in a slaughterhouse before being recruited by bassist Geezer Butler as the singer for his band Rare Breed in 1967. With guitarist Tony Iommi and drummer Bill Ward, they became Black Sabbath in 1969. The eponymous debut album, followed by *Paranoid*, *Master of Reality* and *Sabbath Bloody Sabbath*, shot through the charts. While Ozzy's substance abuse and alcoholism got him fired by the band in 1979, he embarked on a solo career and was off-balance thereafter musically, and otherwise.

A strange Act Two came with *The Osbournes*, a reality-TV peek into his home. It had Ozzy roaming around in a robe, flinging profanities, trying to figure out a TV remote. While it took away the rock star myth, the vulnerability made it work the TRPs. It felt the same during the farewell concert, when he sang "Mama, I'm coming home", struggling with the notes. The metalheads sang along, letting him feel the last song. Just before it was time to leave.



PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

THE SILENCE AND denial around the moral catastrophe unfolding in Gaza only seems to grow in proportion to the scale of atrocity being inflicted on the Palestinian people. It is as if humanity is in moral regress. The fragile gains of international law — those slivers of humanitarian sensibility that once insisted atrocity on this scale must be unacceptable — are being steadily eroded.

There are signs of progress. The facts of what is happening in Gaza are more widely acknowledged, and the debate over how to legally and morally name the horror has intensified. Yet, paradoxically, the atrocity is also being made more invisible. Any ceasefire now will already be too late. The world will assuage its conscience only after mass death and destruction, and call the wreckage "peace".

But the silence around Gaza demands deeper analysis. Perhaps it was always naïve to believe that humanity was capable of sustained moral progress. As Bruce Robbins argues in *Atrocity: A Literary History*, moral indignation in the face of atrocity is historically rare. For much of human history, violence was treated like the weather — brutal, routine and morally unremarkable. Killing civilians was normal, and even the victims did not always think of themselves as morally wronged — only defeated. Often, mass violence was invested with redemptive meaning.

Even rulers with moral qualms about violence applied those doubts selectively. As a character in one of the few novels to confront moral culpability during wartime — Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* — says, "So it goes."

Robbins's powerful meditation exposes the many ways humanity evades confronting atrocity. Moral demands rarely override the narcissism of group identities. Even when atrocities are condemned, the critique is hemmed in: It must not destabilise existing hierarchies. Conservatives often fear mass violence not because of its human toll, but because it might disrupt order. Societies struggle to indict themselves; self-accusation is psychologically intolerable. Literature is saturated with violence, but most writers ultimately find it difficult to indict their own societies in the face of atrocity.

We are increasingly in a world in which moral concern is no longer trusted. It is pathol-

Across democracies, the silence and inaction over Gaza sends that message

Is there any precedent for this — where state after state not only denies the horror, but also actively expects silence? The US is effectively policing speech on Gaza, not just within its borders but globally. UN officials are being sanctioned with barely a murmur of protest from the international community. In India, criticism of Israel is now tantamount to being seen with the 'wrong side'. The states of West Asia now extensively regulate criticism of Israel. Australia is considering adopting a definition of anti-Semitism that, as Richard Flanagan noted in *The Age*, would render some of the most morally courageous Jewish voices — Joseph Roth, Tony Judt, Omer Bartov — effectively anti-Semitic.

ogised. Those who speak of atrocity are seen not as conscientious objectors but as the sort of people who feel superior in feeling bad about these things. They use it to make others feel bad. The function of atrocity talk is performing superiority, virtue-signalling, making others uncomfortable. Humanity's moral conscience, in the face of tribal loyalty, is shrinking terrain.

Yet there is still something alarmingly distinctive about Gaza. Is there any precedent for this — where state after state not only denies the horror, but also actively expects silence? The US is effectively policing speech on Gaza, not just within its borders but globally. UN officials are being sanctioned with barely a murmur of protest from the international community. In India, criticism of Israel is now tantamount to being seen with the "wrong side". The states of West Asia now extensively regulate criticism of Israel. Australia is considering adopting a definition of anti-Semitism that, as Richard Flanagan noted in *The Age*, would render some of the most morally courageous Jewish voices — Joseph Roth, Tony Judt, Omer Bartov — effectively anti-Semitic. Much of Europe has already made Israel its "reason of state". While some states are complicit, through sins of omission or commission, in failing to push back against the atrocities in Gaza, it seems that much of the world is becoming complicit in drawing a veil of silence over them.

One of the most important moral lessons of the Holocaust is being forgotten: That "never again" must be a universal ideal. To defend that principle is not to deny the Holocaust's specificity, but to protect its moral legacy. To reduce it to a licence for state violence is a betrayal of its memory. Anti-Semitism is a real and urgent problem. But its political weaponisation now threatens to empty the term of moral content. The most reactionary forces invoke it not to combat hate, but to silence criticism, stifle reflection, and protect impunity.

Most Western democracies are now sacrificing their democracy and civic freedoms — not for the Jewish people, but for the policies of the state of Israel. In West Asia, too, the discussion of Palestine is hemmed in by state repression. Fear of retaliation, of being seen on the "wrong side", chills public discourse. Even social movements seem unable

to articulate a language of universal principle: That no one should be targeted for who they are; that the mass killing of non-combatants is never justifiable. We are trapped in a nihilistic moment, where only one question matters: Which side are you on? Not: What are the limits of power, the principles that must bind all states and actors?

This tribalism is not new; nor is hypocrisy. But rarely in recent memory has there been such a drastic foreclosure of moral reflection. It is as if we now believe that vindication will not come from being humane, but from letting power operate unrestrained, whatever form that power takes.

The horror in Gaza is so palpable that explanation or contextualisation often feels obscene. These are now tools of evasion, not illumination. The evasions and silences are linked to the broader civic failures of democracy. In a powerful essay in *Harper's Magazine*, Speaking Reassurance to Power, Pankaj Mishra connects the silence over Gaza to the collapse of civic courage in democracies. He writes that "for all its claims to superior virtue, the American intelligentsia manifests very little of the courage and dignity it has expected from artists and thinkers in less fortunate societies".

Mishra sees this failure as rooted in complicity: The American intelligentsia, too close to the machinery of imperial power and too dependent on the largesse it doled out, was often disabled from speaking truth. It was meant to offer reassurance. Or rather the criticism that it permitted was costless. But the disquieting thought he offers is whether the willed silence over Gaza, and the relative lack of resistance to authoritarianism, are linked. They both speak of an easy adjustment to the realities of power. But this is not only America's problem. Across democracies, we are witnessing the ease with which civic discourse renders mass death invisible.

If Gaza's corpses can vanish from our conscience, how much easier it will be to ignore the quiet, shadowy encroachments of our own states, which are increasingly going after whoever they choose. What the silence and inaction over Gaza is saying is: Only brute power rules. As Vonnegut said, "So it goes."

The writer is contributing editor, The Indian Express



SANTOSH K SINGH

ANY VISUAL OF *kanwariyas* brandishing sticks and swords and indulging in violence, as witnessed on several occasions recently, goes against all that religious pilgrimages have traditionally stood for. The holy month of Shravana signifies the arrival of the monsoon season. Rains placate the parched land and *kanwariyas* start their journey. The pilgrims collect water from the Ganga and carry it in a palanquin to offer it to Lord Shiva. It is believed that the water helps reduce the bitterness of the poison that Lord Shiva has carried with him since *samudra manthan*.

Mircea Eliade, Romanian scholar of history of religion, considers a pilgrimage to be an act or journey towards transformation, a quest for a higher order of the sacred, away from the everyday world of the profane. Humans have a tendency to come close to what he calls Axis mundi, or the centre of the world — a point where heaven and Earth connect. Eliade considers these experiences to be hierophanies or the appearance of the sacred in the everyday world, which are universal across societies and cultures. Pilgrimages are moments of hierophanies.

The *kanwariya* pilgrimage has a rich, profound and ancient past. Baidyanath Dham or Baba Dham, now in Jharkhand, is renowned for its great *kanwariya* tradition. In Shravana, pilgrims rush to Sultanganj in Bihar, where they take a bath in the Ganga, take water from the sacred river in pitchers and start walking

WALKING WITH FAITH

What Kanwar Yatra stood for and evoked, before the spectacle took over

IN GOOD FAITH

Two distinct childhood memories, in particular, remain indelible. Once, an elderly aunt, in her 60s, returned from the Kanwar Yatra. She looked weak. Her feet were swollen and bruised because of the continuous walking. The whole family and the neighbourhood came to tend to her feet and seek her blessings. It was believed that the blessings she had earned in the pilgrimage would pass on to those who served her.

barefoot to Baidyanath Dham. They are popularly known as bam and address each other as such. A popular chant during the journey happens to be "*Bol bam, bol bam; Bol re bhaiya bol re didi bol bam*" (Chant O brother, chant O sister, chant O bam). Typically attired in saffron clothes and carrying decorated palanquins of all sizes and colours, these bams walk day and night, navigating difficult terrains. The entire journey brims with camaraderie. More distinguished among the *bams* are those who walk non-stop and are known as *daak-bam*. People will make way for them, treating them with utmost reverence. All the ordinary barriers — of caste and class — will evaporate amid this bonhomie of faith. All one can hear are stories of support, gestures of sacrifice and help, like in the case of a stranger who carried an elderly *bam* on his back for several kilometres. People return home having experienced not just divinity and *communitas* but also lessons in fellow feeling and togetherness.

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age were transmissible to the deserving and eligible. One learnt profound lessons in humanity in these moments: Any attempt to achieve higher goals must necessarily celebrate the pain and suffering of the process.

The onset of rains and the beginning of Shravana also brings back the memory of the dance of the saintly fellow who would come visiting every household in the village, seeking alms to undertake the *kanwariya* pilgrimage to Baidyanath Dham. His devotional songs were melancholic and left a deep impression. That he came from the outskirts of the village made no difference whatsoever. People watched him perform with awe and reverence. Two lines that he repeated often — "*Baba ho virage Odisha desh me. Bol bhaia Ram-e-Ram*" (Lord Mahadev who belongs to Odisha desh, let's all chant the name of Ram) — continues to resonate, reminding us of a time when Odisha and Bihar were part of the Bengal Presidency. In that world, religion organised societies and people used to communicate through its symbolic meaning. Today, are we even listening to our gods and what they signify in essence? Religion without its core of compassion loses its profundity, and thus, its soul.

The writer teaches Sociology at Dr BR Ambedkar University, Delhi. His latest book is The Deras: Culture, Diversity and Politics. Views are personal

JULY 24, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

RAJIV-LONGOWAL MEET

PRIME MINISTER RAJIV Gandhi and the Akali Dal chief, Harchand Singh Longowal, met for over half an hour in an effort to solve the Punjab problem. It was followed by another meeting between two aides of Longowal and the members of the political affairs committee of the cabinet. According to informed sources, the trend was hopeful.

OPTIMISM IN PUNJAB

THERE WAS GENERAL optimism in Punjab over the talks between the Centre and the Akali Dal leaders in New Delhi with various political par-

ties including the Congress-I, the BJP and the CPI(M) welcoming the fresh initiative. The only notes of dissent came from the merged Akali Dal of Joginder Singh and the All-India Sikh Students Federation (AISSF).

MORE DIE IN GUJARAT

AT LEAST SIX persons were killed, three in bomb blasts and three in stabbings, in different incidents in Ahmedabad city, taking the toll in violence to 45 since the withdrawal of the Army. The police fired a dozen rounds in the Kach-ni-Masjid locality in the Jamalpur area to disperse a mob pelting police pickets with stones. In another incident in the Jamalpur area, an SRP

jawan fired one round in the air to scare away two pedestrians who were attacking an autorickshaw driver. Two people were arrested in connection with the incident.

RENT CONTROL

THE DELHI METROPOLITAN Council passed some amendments watering down the legislative proposals to change the Delhi Rent Control Act, 1958. While Opposition members described the proposals as grossly antitenant, ruling party members expressed this feeling through amendments aimed at toning down some of the proposals heavily favouring landlords.

THE IDEAS PAGE

A fiction called SIR

ECI's claims about progress of electoral roll revision in Bihar are sharply at odds with first-hand accounts of confusion and procedural violations



DESHKAAL
BY KAMAYANI SWAMI,
RAHUL SHASTRI AND
YOGENDRA YADAV

WE WERE IN Patna when the news channels started reporting on the Election Commission of India's (ECI) counter-affidavit on the Special Intensive Revision (SIR). We had just finished a day-long *jansunwai*, a public hearing organised by peoples' organisations, on the ground experience of the SIR in Bihar. About 250 ordinary people from 19 districts across Bihar, mostly villagers and a majority of them women, had come to Patna to share their stories. Some had travelled through the night in trains packed with *kanwariyas* and job aspirants coming to the state capital for a major exam. Exhausted, a few snoozed off and on, squatting uncomfortably on chairs. About three dozen of them got to tell their stories to a distinguished panel comprising Justice (Retd) Anjana Prakash, Wajahat Habibullah, Jean Drèze, Nandini Sundar, DM Diwakar and Bhanwar Meghwanishi.

We read news reports about the affidavit late in the evening. And we recalled what we had heard through the day in the multiple languages of Bihar. The first-hand accounts we heard that day and in the preceding weeks had no resemblance to the official account. These two were clearly about two different worlds. The official account attributed to the ECI could well have been a piece of creative writing, a fiction about an imagined land, if only it were written better. On the ground, it has been a month of dystopia.

Phulkumari Devi, a farm labourer from Hasanganj in Katihar, was asked for her photo, a copy of her Voter Card and her Aadhaar Card. (For context: the ECI had dispensed with the requirement of a photograph; EPIC was unnecessary as it was pre-printed on her form; Aadhaar number was "optional" and the card inadmissible as per the ECI.) She had to sell the rice obtained from the ration shop, the only thing she had, to get photocopies and a photograph from the nearby town. She went hungry and lost two days of wages.

Sumitra Devi, around 60 years old, came from Saharsa. She was told she needed to submit papers for her parents, who died long ago, and give caste or domicile certificates for herself, or else she would cease to be "*sarkar ke log*". She has spent Rs 300 to apply for a caste certificate, which she awaits. Gobind Paswan, again from Saharsa, was asked to give a copy of his passbook and land records. (Context: both were on the voters' list in 2003 and were not required to give any documents.) We heard many stories of touts (the husband of an anganwadi worker who was a BLO, for example) who charged poor people Rs 100 for filling in the form. Woman after woman spoke of how difficult and in many cases impossible it was to arrange documents from their *mayaka* (which was in Nepal in many cases) on the status of their parents in the 2003 electoral rolls.

In this context, the idea that migrant work-



C R Sasikumar

ers would "fill the enumeration form in on-line mode using their mobile phones through the ECINet App" is a joke. The findings of a rapid survey of migrant workers by Stranded Workers Action Network were reported in the *jansunwai*. Of the 235 migrant workers staying outside Bihar who were surveyed over the phone, one-third had not heard of the SIR. Among those who had heard, almost three in four had no idea of the required documents. Only one-tenth had heard about the official announcement of online submission.

Let's compare just one sentence of official fiction with ground reality. Here is Guideline 3(b) of the SIR order, which the ECI claims to have followed faithfully: "BLOs shall visit each household and distribute Enumeration Form, with pre-printed details of existing electors, to each existing elector in duplicate and will guide them in filling up the form." This simple instruction contains six tasks. And it exposes six lies of the ECI.

One, the BLOs were supposed to visit each household within their booth. They did not. Given the impossible deadlines, they could not. After trying for the first few days, they were instructed not to "waste their time" in going from house to house. In nearly half the cases, we heard about voters chasing the BLO and not the other way round. Two, the distribution was to be done by the BLOs. In many urban areas, this was done by municipal employees with no official credentials. Three, they were supposed to give a unique form to each voter with pre-printed details. In many urban areas, including Patna, residents were given a blank form with no personal details. Four, the forms were to be given to each person on the existing voters' list. We heard numerous cases where not every member got the form. Five, the forms were to be given in duplicate, one copy to be given to the BLO and the other to be retained by the voter with a proof of receipt. This simply did not happen, unless an exceptionally persistent voter took a photocopy of her own form and forced the BLO to give an acknowledgement. Mostly, people were given only one form, with no proof of having submitted it to

We came across a multitude of cases of voters reporting this gross violation of the process. Either family members signed for a person out of station, or people were informed by the BLO that their forms had been submitted, without their having seen or signed them. In several cases, the voters discovered on the ECI website that they could not file their form as it had already been submitted. At least a quarter or more of the total forms filled in (the ECI reports a success rate of 98.01 per cent) could belong to this fraudulent category.

the BLO. Six, the BLO was to assist and guide people in filling in the forms. This was an impossible ask of the poor BLO, often ill-informed and already beleaguered. The best they could do was not misguide the voters.

Senior journalist Ajit Anjum has released a number of video reports exposing on camera the SIR's biggest fraud: Enumeration forms being filled in without the voter's consent or even knowledge. We came across a multitude of cases of voters reporting this gross violation of the process. Either family members signed for a person out of station, or people were informed by the BLO that their forms had been submitted, without their having seen or signed them. In several cases, the voters discovered on the ECI website that they could not file their form as it had already been submitted. At least a quarter or more of the total forms filled in (the ECI reports a success rate of 98.01 per cent) could belong to this fraudulent category.

These are not exceptions or operational lapses that often happen in a large exercise of this nature. The confusion and chaos of the SIR are an inevitable outcome of its design. What else should you expect if you kickstart such a massive exercise with less than 24 hours' notice, if you expect an ill-equipped and overburdened administrative machine to carry out multiple tasks within four weeks, and if you demand of 8 crore people the documents you know they may not possess? The brazen violation of rules and norms and fake documentation being reported from all over Bihar was built into the SIR. It is pointless to blame the BLOs and the rest of the administrative machinery. They are as much victims as the ordinary people. The blame lies squarely with the ECI. It is not too late for it to acknowledge the reality and cease this experiment on the people. The *jansunwai* in Patna ended with a unanimous call to annul the SIR.

swami is state coordinator of Bharat Jodo Abhiyaan, Bihar. Shastri and Yadav work with the national team of Bharat Jodo Abhiyaan. Yadav has filed a petition in the Supreme Court challenging the SIR



SHALINI SINGH AND PRASHANT KUMAR SINGH

The silent epidemic

India's obesity crisis carries a threat that can no longer be ignored

WHILE WE CONTINUE to battle malnutrition in many communities, a silent epidemic is spreading through our households — one that carries far graver consequences. Obesity, once considered a problem of the affluent, is now clustering within Indian families at an alarming rate, and with it comes a hidden threat that policymakers can no longer ignore: Cancer.

Recent national data paint a disturbing picture of India's nutritional transition. Nearly 20 per cent of Indian households now have all adult members classified as overweight, while 10 per cent have all adults classified as obese. This suggests shared environmental and behavioural factors. In states like Tamil Nadu and Punjab, two out of every five households have all adults classified as obese. Urban areas show clustering rates which are double those of rural areas, conveying a clear picture of how prosperity and urbanisation are transforming India's health landscape.

What makes this particularly concerning is its transgenerational nature. When obesity clusters within households, children grow up in environments that normalise unhealthy dietary patterns and sedentary lifestyles, creating cycles of risk that transcend generations.

The evidence linking obesity to cancer is overwhelming. The WHO's International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) has classified excess body weight as a significant risk for cancer. Obesity is directly associated with at least 13 types of cancer: Colorectal, breast (postmenopausal), endometrial, kidney, liver, pancreatic, ovarian, thyroid, meningioma, multiple myeloma, adenocarcinoma of the

esophagus, gastric cardia, and gallbladder cancers. An IARC study, published in 2023, the largest of its kind, showed that having a high body mass index increases cancer risk by 17 per cent for people who also have cardiovascular diseases. The American Cancer Society estimates that excess body weight accounts for about 11 per cent of cancers in women and 5 per cent in men in the US.

The biological pathways are clear. Hyperinsulinemia — chronically elevated insulin levels and insulin resistance — promotes obesity and diabetes. Insulin is also a growth factor and when chronically elevated, it can drive malignant transformation. Chronic inflammation associated with obesity represents another deadly pathway. Excess body fat cells (adipocytes) produce inflammatory factors, creating a state of chronic low-grade inflammation that damages DNA and interferes with immune surveillance — our body's natural defence system against cancer.

Hormonal disruption adds another layer of risk. Fat tissue produces excess estrogen, and dramatically increases risks for hormone-sensitive breast and endometrial cancers. Cardio-metabolic dysfunction completes this deadly quartet. Hyperinsulinemia/insulin resistance and altered glucose metabolism in the run-up to obesity creates a metabolic/inflammatory environment that favours development of cancer cells, their rapid growth and metastasis.

India's situation is particularly precarious because we face this obesity epidemic alongside existing healthcare challenges. The economic implications for patients are staggering, too. Cancer treatment can devastate families financially, and when obesity-related cancers strike multiple household members — as clustering patterns suggest they might — the economic burden can be catastrophic. Prevention, therefore, isn't just a health imperative; it's an economic necessity.

The household clustering of obesity presents both a challenge and an opportunity. Rather than treating obesity as an individual's problem, we must recognise it as a health problem that requires targeting the family as a unit for intervention.

The government's recent commitment to establishing Day Care Cancer Centres in all district hospitals over the next three years, with 200 centres planned for 2025–26, provides a crucial foundation. However, these centres must prioritise prevention alongside treatment. We must scale up existing programmes like the National Programme for Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Diseases to specifically target high-risk households and individuals. The data show we need concentrated efforts in southern states, urban areas, and affluent households. Regulatory interventions have proved effective globally — implementing taxes on sugary beverages, mandating front-of-pack nutrition labelling, and restricting marketing of ultra-processed foods.

Obesity prevention programmes should target entire households, teaching families to shop for healthier ingredients; prepare meals at home consisting of fresh vegetables, leafy greens, whole grains and fruits; and engage in physical activities as a unit. Workplace and

school-based nutrition programmes can break the cycle by creating healthy food environments outside the home. These behaviours can dramatically transform household practices reversing altered metabolic pathways and cardio-metabolic risk factors in a matter of days and weeks.

However, it is crucial to understand that exercise alone cannot undo the harms of unhealthy food intake. While physical activity is essential for overall health, the metabolic damage from ultra-processed foods, excess sugar, poor dietary and inadequate sleep patterns cannot be "burned off" through exercise. Poor nutrition requires dietary intervention, with exercise as a vital but complementary component. Our cities must become laboratories for obesity prevention. This means creating walkable neighbourhoods, ensuring access to affordable fresh farm produce, and designing urban/ work spaces that encourage physical activity rather than sedentary lifestyles.

India's obesity crisis is not a distant threat — it's a present reality. Instituting practices to prevent obesity today mean preventing cancer tomorrow. The issue isn't whether we can afford to implement comprehensive obesity prevention strategies but whether we can afford not to do so. Our families, our healthcare system, and our economic future depend on the choices we make now.

Shalini Singh is director, and Prashant Kumar Singh is senior scientist, ICMR-National Institute of Cancer Prevention and Research, Noida

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"How much more must the people of Gaza suffer before they are saved? If world leaders truly stand for humanity, they must come together to stop Israel from continuing its inhuman campaign in Gaza." — **THE DAILY STAR, BANGLADESH**

The critical minerals contest

India cannot afford to anchor its tech aspirations on supply chains that remain opaque, concentrated and subject to political risk



AMITABH KANT AND
ADIL RANA CHHINA

CRITICAL MINERALS ARE emerging as the defining geoeconomic axis of the 21st century. These are no longer peripheral to industrial development but lie at the heart of advanced manufacturing, clean energy systems, strategic technologies and national security. Energy transition, digitalisation and the pursuit of supply chain resilience are rapidly amplifying the demand for minerals such as lithium, cobalt, nickel, graphite and rare earth elements. Their availability and accessibility will determine the pace and quality of growth for all major economies.

Unlike fossil fuels, critical minerals are characterised by high geographical concentration, limited transparency and complex value chains. China dominates the mid-stream processing stage for most key minerals, accounting for over 90 per cent of rare earth refining, 70 per cent of cobalt processing and close to 60 per cent of lithium conversion capacity. These are not incidental advantages but outcomes of decades of strategic investment, policy coherence and state-backed industrial planning. With China 20 years ahead in the supply chain race, India cannot afford to anchor its future energy, mobility or technology aspirations on supply chains that remain opaque, concentrated and subject to political risk.

In 2022, the Ministry of Mines identified 30 critical minerals based on their strategic importance to clean energy and future technologies, high import dependence, domestic resource constraints and relevance for agricultural and industrial needs. In January, the National Critical Mineral Mission (NCMM) was announced to secure critical mineral supply chains by ensuring mineral availability. Its success will rest on how effectively it translates intent into action.

Currently, India is 100 per cent import dependent for lithium, cobalt, nickel, rare earth elements and silicon. At the same time, India's domestic resource base for critical minerals is underdeveloped. The Geological Survey of India has ramped up exploration, with 195 projects underway over the past year and another 227 approved for the upcoming year. In response to the inclusion of critical minerals in the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, the government launched four tranches of auctions for critical mineral blocks last year, and a fifth was concluded in January 2025.

However, the auctions revealed persistent challenges. A large number of blocks were annulled as high capital costs, limited domestic processing capacity and a shortage of technically qualified bidders dampened participation. These outcomes underscore the need for policy refinement to attract credible investment and build industry confidence in the viability of critical mineral development.

As India seeks to scale up domestic exploration, it must also confront a major structural limitation: Lack of sufficient capacity to refine and process minerals into battery-grade or component-ready materials. This midstream bottleneck risks locking the country into a dependence on foreign processors, especially for lithium, cobalt and

rare earths. To address this, the NCMM plans to set up dedicated mineral processing zones with modern infrastructure. Within these, production incentives modelled on PLI schemes could be used to catalyse private investment into refining, separation and chemical conversion facilities.

Amid growing concern over mineral security, recent export restrictions on rare earth elements by China have also exposed the vulnerability of India's automotive sector, with some firms already indicating potential production cuts. Rare earth magnets are essential to electric and internal combustion vehicles alike. To mitigate this risk, India must accelerate investments in independent supply chains, including targeted exploration, processing capacity and strategic partnerships.

Given the demand intensity and India's current reserves, international engagement and friendshoring will be vital to the creation of a diversified and resilient supply chain. India has taken steps by joining the Mineral Security Partnership and initiating collaborations with Australia, Argentina and others. These partnerships signal a deeper alignment with global efforts to diversify supply chains away from China. India should leverage geopolitical platforms such as the Quad and G20 to secure further stable mineral trade relationships, promote joint ventures and facilitate best-practice sharing. Developing a critical mineral stockpiling framework will also be essential to buffer against supply disruptions and price volatility. These efforts must remain strategically aligned with broader foreign policy objectives.

India must also build domestic self-sufficiency in critical minerals through more sustainable and circular approaches. Recycling offers a promising path to reduce import dependency. The recycling chain for batteries and electronics is fragmented and largely informal. Without investment in formal collection, dismantling and high-efficiency recovery, circularity will remain aspirational. India must also prioritise resource recovery by incentivising recyclers and by expanding formal infrastructure for waste collection.

Sustainable mining practices and responsible sourcing of critical minerals are crucial. Several critical mineral reserves lie in tribal or ecologically sensitive areas where inadequate environmental, social and governance (ESG) compliance has led to delays, protests and legal challenges. India must adopt comprehensive ESG frameworks in mining, incorporating community trust-building and third-party audit mechanisms. Strengthening community participation through local benefit-sharing and decision-making will be key to fostering enduring community trust and support for mining activities.

Policymaking must be informed by rigorous, sector-specific assessments of future demand, supply and technological developments. India should periodically reassess its critical mineral list and adjust sourcing strategies in line with domestic and global shifts.

The contest for critical minerals will shape the contours of future economic resilience and technological sovereignty. India has the market scale, industrial ambition and diplomatic leverage to lead. It must now ensure timely execution, sustained institutional support and a clear commitment to self-reliance, sustainability and global alignment.

Kant is former G20 sherpa of India and former CEO of Niti Aayog and Chhina is a policy specialist — climate and energy

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

ERODING PRINCIPLE

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'Why he resigned' (*IE*, July 23). As Governor of West Bengal, Jagdeep Dhankhar often clashed with the elected state government. This combative style continued after he became Vice President and Chairman of the Rajya Sabha, where he appeared to view the Opposition, and even the judiciary, as adversaries. This is part of a larger trend for governors in Opposition-ruled states. In our constitutional design, neutrality in high offices is foundational, but this had long been eroding.

Janaki Narayanan, Navi Mumbai

LET AID IN

THIS REFERS TO the report, "Must end

now": Pressure mounts on Israel as allies condemn Gaza killings' (*IE*, July 23). The strong stand taken by several countries on Israel's bloody campaign in Gaza reveals that governments are finally recognising the gravity of the horrific scenario. Israel's defence forces have been firing indiscriminately at unarmed and starving Palestinians, including women and children, on stereotyped pretexts, as they gather to collect aid, demonstrating total disregard for international humanitarian law. It is even bombing hospitals that treat the wounded. Millions of Gazans, impoverished and famished, are frequently compelled to relocate.

Kamal Laddha, Bengaluru

SPACE CAPABILITY

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Science at the final frontier' (*IE*, July 23). The Axiom-4 mission was a landmark for India's space programme, marking its return to human spaceflight and providing critical experience for future missions like Gaganyaan. The mission's success in conducting microgravity experiments positions India as a contributor to global space science.

Kunal Verma, Jabalpur

Limits of intrusion

The I-T Bill must incorporate clear-cut safeguards against privacy breach

THE SELECT COMMITTEE of the Lok Sabha has done a thorough job of reviewing the Income Tax Bill, 2025, making good use of the inputs from various stakeholders and experts. The report reveals a keen eye has been kept on each provision and phrase of the Bill, which was meticulously drafted in the first place. The committee has identified certain inadvertent omissions, and residual ambiguities in the Bill that would have produced unintended consequences and led to avoidable disputes, and made suggestions to set them right. The Bill that seeks to supplant the unwieldy Income Tax Act, 1961, is admittedly not a vehicle for substantive tax reforms. Whatever the government deemed necessary as reforms have been undertaken in recent years. The overall direction of these reforms has been to simplify the tax structure, laws, and governance, and ease compliance. The imperatives of broadening the tax base, and raising the tax-GDP ratio have also been kept in mind. Domestic policies are being aligned with global practices, even while sovereign taxation rights and revenue interests are fiercely protected.

The committee, headed by Bharatiya Janata Party MP Baijayant Panda, has therefore refrained from getting into areas of serious policy debate, stating that these fell out of its remit. The restraint was notwithstanding the policy imbroglio over a few momentous aspects of taxation. For instance, the policymakers are at their wits' end on how to cut across the divide on taxation of digital economy, and secure the country's sovereign revenue rights, after the Trump administration abruptly withdrew from a hard-won 2021 agreement among nearly 140 nations. However, the committee seems to have erred in not mitigating a potential inconsistency of the Bill with the Digital Personal Data Protection Act (DPDPA), 2023.

The genesis of the DPDPA is the Supreme Court's (SC) 2017 judgment, where it upheld that privacy is a fundamental right entrenched in Article 21 of the Constitution. While Section 132 of the I-T Act provides for search and seizure in physical spaces, the Bill extends these into the "virtual digital space" that includes emails, cloud drives, and social media accounts. The tax officer is entitled to secure the access code or even override it, if necessary, to inspect digital records/computer systems whatsoever. This not only creates serious issues of privacy breach and uncertainties in cases involving encrypted apps, but potentially runs foul of the "proportionality test" instituted by the apex court.

The select committee chose not to recommend any changes to these provisions of the Bill, citing incidents of incriminating evidence found in such digital domains, and general reluctance of those in possession of such digital data to grant access. On its part, the tax department notes the huge gap between the taxable income reported/number of actual taxpayers, and the high-value transactions captured in the annual information statements of the assessees. While the virtual digital space in the modern context cannot be kept out of bounds for the taxman, sufficient safeguards must be put in place to proscribe unauthorised collection, storage, or processing of personal data. It is vital to ensure any such data collected is used only for the stated limited purpose. Searches of personal data should require a warrant, and be restricted to those who function under strict confidentiality protocols. Any information of private nature that is incidentally exposed during investigations should be summarily redacted. The new I-T Act should be fully in conformity with the SC ruling on privacy, the DPDPA, and the relevant rules being issued.

Bitcoin in your 401K? That's not a risk I'd take

I HAVE LONG been a crypto sceptic, but as it worms its way into America's financial infrastructure, it is getting harder and harder for me to maintain the argument that it will crash and burn. So I have revised my opinion. Crypto does have a future—as a speculative asset that enhances risk for gamblers, the paranoid, and less sophisticated investors, all the while diverting capital from more productive uses.

See? I told you I had changed my mind.

Something about crypto has never sat well with me. It contradicts everything I understood about money: It is volatile and hard to use, and it solves a problem there is already a better solution for: Government-issued money is pretty great. Even stablecoins, which could become a viable means of payment with new federal regulation authorised by the law President Donald Trump signed last week, can't match the dollar.

Yes, blockchain technology may prove to be a good alternative to the clunky and flawed payments system. Crypto is also a useful currency for anyone engaging in illegal transactions or living in a country experiencing hyperinflation. But these use cases do not begin to justify the price of Bitcoin, let alone all the other cryptocurrencies.

But I have learned to let all that go and accept crypto's existence. Markets are weird sometimes, and they can stay weird for a long time.

What bothers me is this: If you look at the long history of financial disasters, they always start the same way. There's an asset or strategy sold as risk-free, yet it also manages to deliver above-market returns. That should be a bright red flag that something is wrong and will end badly. It is the hard truth of markets: Bigger rewards can come only from taking more risk. Yet crypto's defenders will say it is the ultimate hedge against the collapse of the dollar and possibly the entire US economy—and yet it is also priced as a very risky asset. This makes me uneasy.

As crypto enters the mainstream, however, my worries are changing. I see three potential futures.

One is that—my revised opinion notwithstanding—crypto will collapse after all, and the price will go to zero or something close to it. Trump is readying an executive order to allow it in people's 401(k) plans, and even if it is blessed by the SEC, there is always a risk that a speculative asset with no intrinsic value will crash. If that's the case, these last 15 years will be remembered as a weird quirk of financial history. The regulatory law Trump signed last week makes this scenario less likely, since there is now a population of captive buyers.

Another, more likely scenario is that crypto is here to stay. It will be mostly owned by investors who want lots of risk in their portfolio; those who are financially naïve; and those who distrust both the government and the global financial system and believe there is a non-trivial probability it will all collapse. (There could be significant overlap in all these groups.) These investors think cryptocurrencies offer a hedge and will allow them to profit from a world in which the US economy collapses and yet they still somehow have internet service.

It is impossible to estimate how many of these people there are, but there are a lot. They already prop up a decent chunk of the gold market—another asset that is supposed to be safe but is actually quite volatile.

There is no financial calamity here. But it is not a benign scenario, because there is a lot of capital going to an asset that does not serve the economy in any real way. Speculating on crypto is not like investing in a company that makes things. This means there will be less capital funding the real economy, instead going toward something that is effectively a collectible, in that its primary value is its limited supply.

The third scenario is that, despite everything, this all goes well. Perhaps the dollar will collapse, and we will all start using cryptocurrencies for everyday transactions. Maybe stablecoins will overcome their issues and replace the credit-card and banking industries. Maybe some other use case will emerge.

If any of that happens, all those people who put their 401(k) in crypto will be vindicated. It's possible, I suppose. But I wouldn't bet on it.



ALLISON SCHRAGER
Bloomberg

● CITY PLANNING

URBAN MANAGERS WILL BE BETTER SERVED IF THEY ALLOW FOR CONCENTRATION AND BUILD INFRA TO SUPPORT IT

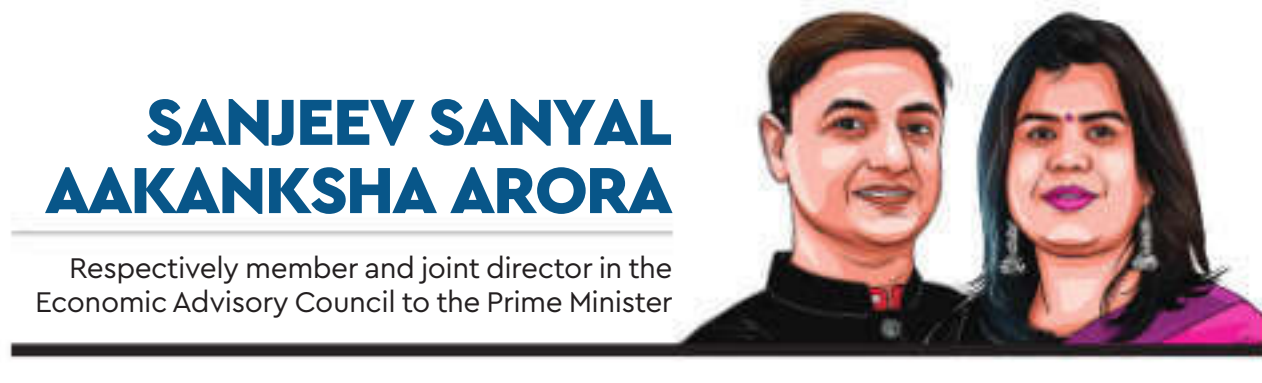
Obsession with 'de-congestion'

A MAJOR SOURCE of India's urban management problems is a philosophical mistake. Both policymakers and the general public have a view that India's urban problems are due to being "overcrowded" and "congested". This leads to the obvious conclusion that the primary solution is to "decongest". The approach is embedded in our regulations—be it National Building Codes, master plans, or building bye-laws of states. Yet, after decades of trying this approach, almost all our cities continue to feel over-congested! Surely, there is a need to rethink the issue afresh.

The reality is that the experience of congestion is only relative to available infrastructure. Thus, successful cities like Singapore, Hong Kong, New York, and Tokyo are very densely populated but have built infrastructure to support the density. This is why density is not the same as overcrowding. Indeed, this goes to the very heart of why cities exist in the first place—to concentrate human activity. If concentration did not have high social and economic value, we would all be living in large, affordable houses in remote locations with no traffic jams.

Given the power of agglomeration, cities require efficient infrastructure that allows for concentration. Instead, what we do in India is the exact opposite. We restrict compact development, thereby spreading the population outwards and thinning out the infrastructure. This misses the point that it is cheaper and more efficient to build infrastructure in a compact area. Take the example of ribbon development all along the Delhi-Jaipur highway. It is simply not possible to provide urban amenities (water supply, sewage etc.) in such a spread-out area.

The decongestion approach, therefore, leads to many problems. First, we



SANJEEV SANYAL
AAKANKSHA ARORA
Respectively member and joint director in the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister

have cities with large-scale wastage of productive land, which creates an artificial scarcity of space and inflates prices. Indian building regulations such as floor area ratio (FAR) and setbacks are among the world's most restrictive. For instance, regulations on ground coverage, setbacks, parking, and FAR mean that Indian factories are unable to use almost half of their land.

Second, we must realise that "decongestion" is just a euphemism for urban sprawl. Rapid outward expansion of cities leads to encroachment of productive agricultural and forest land. Moreover, it makes provision of infrastructure more difficult since the infrastructure requirements grow at the square of urban expansion. This renders many urban utilities uneconomical—be it public transport, water supply, sewage pipelines, waste disposal, etc.

Third, in the name of decongestion, restrictive zoning laws have led to absurd land-use outcomes. For instance, worker housing is not allowed in industrial areas. The consequence is that either workers live "illegally" within the factories, or slums emerge near industrial areas. Alternatively, companies have to ship in workers to distant locations. None of these are

If concentration did not have high social and economic value, we would all be living in large, affordable houses in remote locations with no traffic jams

desirable urban outcomes.

Fourth, the multiplicity of regulations to enforce decongestion means that no construction is viable without violating some norm. This leads to rent-seeking, harassment and/or flagrant violation of even sensible norms.

Finally, and most fundamentally, de-clustering reduces the social and economic value being generated by urban agglomeration. Urban managers would be much better served if they allowed for the concentration and built infrastructure to support it.

The good news is that policymakers have begun to recognise some of these problems. Uttar Pradesh recently passed the Model Building Construction and Development Byelaws and Model Zoning Regulations for Zoning Authorities of Uttar Pradesh, 2025. It is an example of a welcome shift towards compact development.

First, companies are allowed to maximise ground coverage after ensuring the minimum setbacks, as compared to just 40-60% for industrial and commercial areas, and 40% for hotels previously. This change should roughly allow for 20-40% more ground coverage (except in a few heritage and restricted zones).

Second, FAR has been increased for

most categories. For instance, for roads from 18-45m, FAR has been increased from 1.5 to 10.5 for industrial areas, from 2.5 to 8.75 for hotels, etc. on purchasable basis, and the limit has been removed for roads with width greater than 45m. Similarly, building height restrictions have been removed. It will now be determined based on utilised FAR, except for specific cases.

Finally, regulations have been changed to improve land utilisation. The setback requirements have been rationalised even as minimum plot-size requirements have been reduced for various categories such as hotels, shopping malls, convenience stores, etc. All of these are steps to promote compact development in cities.

Simultaneously, outdated zoning requirements are also being relaxed. The land-use categories have been standardised across the state and mixed-use zoning is being promoted. For instance, non-hazardous industries can now be built anywhere that road width and other infrastructure allow it (with reasonable restrictions for forest/heritage/public areas). The removal of rigid zones means that worker housing will now be permitted in industrial areas (again, restrictions remain for hazardous industries).

Overall, these changes are a good example of how our building and town-planning laws need to evolve. It is important, nonetheless, to note that such compact development succeeds only when it is accompanied by concentrated urban amenities and infrastructure. Our point is that density should make this easier since infrastructure will now have to be built for a more compact area, and there are now provisions to charge for the density (for instance by purchasable FAR). In short, anticipate and build for density.

Views are personal

VP SINGH, PRADEEP S MEHTA & AKASH SHARMA

Singh is former governor of Punjab; Mehta and Sharma work for CUTS International, a global public policy research and advocacy group

Policy efforts must focus on incentivising private investment in transmission infrastructure and standardising banking mechanisms across states

INDIA NEEDS TO install nearly 50 gigawatt (Gw) of renewable energy (RE) each year to reach its goal of 500 Gw of non-fossil fuel-based energy capacity by 2030. A large part of this—around 300 Gw—is expected to come from solar power. However, based on recent installation trends, India will need to deploy close to 10 Gw more solar capacity annually than the average of the past few years to stay on course.

While solar power is auctioned almost every fortnight and developers are actively securing capacity, strengthening the power transmission network remains crucial to ensure that the generated power can be effectively delivered and utilised. Captive solar also holds considerable promise, and unlocking its potential can make a meaningful contribution toward achieving our RE targets.

Solar power plants in India are typically commissioned within 12-18 months, depending on their capacity and location. In contrast, dedicated transmission infrastructure can take three to four years to become operational. This mismatch creates a significant lag between project completion and the actual injection of power into the grid. Even when connected, many plants face curtailment due to grid congestion, limiting the full utilisation of installed capacity.

According to the International Energy Agency, nearly 3,000 Gw of RE capacity globally was awaiting grid connectivity as of 2024, with India among the countries facing the biggest backlogs. This is despite the commendable work of the Power Grid Corporation of India, which has built a robust national transmission network

across such a vast and diverse geography. Notably, over 30% of India's total transmission capacity has been added in just the last decade—a testament to sustained institutional effort and commitment.

Solar power project developers also cite land acquisition and right of way (RoW) as significant hurdles to timely project commissioning. With the majority of projects concentrated in the western and southern states—including Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu—further expansion in these areas risks deepening technical bottlenecks and may also lead to growing social tensions and community resistance.

The Ladakh Green Energy Corridor serves as a strong example of how transmission and connectivity challenges can be addressed effectively. Currently under development with an allocation of over ₹20,000 crore, this transmission system is designed to evacuate 13 Gw of RE from Ladakh and transfer it into the national grid. More such projects are needed in similar regions, where high solar irradiation levels can result in a higher capacity utilisation. Additionally, the vast, sparsely populated landscapes significantly reduce issues related to land acquisition and RoW.

Establishing transmission infrastructure in the northern and north-eastern regions can also help harness the significant hydropower potential of neighbouring countries such as Nepal and Bhutan. This aligns well with the vision of One Sun, One World, One Grid,

Reforming the captive and group captive frameworks could be a game changer for the sector

provided enabling regulations are formulated and these countries receive financial assistance and a guaranteed market for the sale of power.

The challenge of India's transmission bottlenecks stems partly from limited industry involvement. Despite significant private investment in RE generation, both as investors and project developers, the power transmission sector has seen limited private participation. According to the ministry of power, of the 37 Inter-State Transmission System projects awarded to private entities, only 13 have been commissioned, 20 are under construction, and four have been cancelled. Data from NITI Aayog further reveals that just 9% of India's transmission lines are built by the private sector, either independently or through joint ventures with government agencies, underscoring the sector's heavy reliance on public investment.

Private capital is making inroads into various clean energy and allied sectors, and even the traditional barriers to entry in nuclear energy appear to be easing. It is now essential to channel more private investment into the transmission sector for accelerating the development of infrastructure critical to achieving clean energy goals.

Another complementary and effective strategy would be to proactively promote captive solar plants. Regulations governing captive solar projects are largely focused on self-consumption,

with rigid requirements around equity ownership, minimum power offtake, and battery storage. However, reforming the captive and group captive frameworks could be a game changer for the sector. Such reforms would enable a broader range of industries to access affordable and reliable clean energy, with attendant advantages.

While the Green Energy Open Access Rules have helped streamline procedures and introduced banking facilities, they fall short of addressing key barriers to the scalability of captive solar. To unlock its potential, policy efforts must focus on incentivising private investment in transmission infrastructure and standardising banking mechanisms across states. Expanding captive solar will generate additional revenue for utilities and boost the trading of RE certificates, supporting obligated entities in meeting renewable purchase obligations. A broader approach must also be adopted—one that goes beyond captive models to attract larger volumes of private investment across the RE ecosystem.

India is now among the leading producers of RE—a remarkable achievement that merits recognition. Just a decade ago, its installed RE capacity stood at around 40 Gw. Since then, it has expanded at a compound annual growth rate of nearly 19%, crossing the 200-Gw mark by late 2024.

As a leading voice of the Global South, India must continue to set an example, reinforcing its commitment to clean energy and demonstrating to the global community that it is leaving no stone unturned in building a sustainable energy future.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Self-employment is key

The data of the Periodic Labour Force Survey, labour force participation rate, and worker-population ratio in the "Why fewer people are looking for jobs" (FE, July 23) are promising and reveal a shift where self-employment has emerged as a key factor. However, job websites, apps, and networks should also transform to provide opportunities to gig workers, partnerships, retainerships, and part-

time engagements. It is a challenge to find part-time vocations. There should be a robust platform for such workforce too. Self-employment has no limitations and opportunities are still largely unexplored, particularly for educated and enterprising women. Lakhs of highly experienced, technically qualified retired government employees can also be tapped as a talent pool. We need to look for the skilled, semi-skilled, and even unskilled candidates. In data on

unemployment, part-time and gig workers should be excluded. —Vinod Johri, Delhi

Erosion of neutrality

As governor of West Bengal, Jagdeep Dhankhar frequently clashed with the state government. This continued after he became Vice President and chairman of the Rajya Sabha, where he appeared to view the Opposition and even the judiciary as adversaries. Governors in Opposition-ruled states inc-

reasingly act as political agents of the Centre. In our constitutional design, neutrality in high offices is not optional but foundational. Yet, this principle has been eroding, irrespective of the political dispensation at the Centre. Without neutrality in constitutional roles, governance risks becoming a series of political skirmishes fought via institutions meant to rise above them. —R Narayanan, Navi Mumbai

● Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

POLITICAL NEUTRALITY MUST GUIDE DHANKHAR'S SUCCESSOR IN VP'S POST

THE abrupt resignation of Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar midway into his tenure citing health concerns shows the BJP's struggles in digesting some lateral entrants into the party who are subsequently assigned high constitutional positions. From Satypal Malik to Yashwant Sinha, quite a few imports ended up as outliers as the system failed to assimilate them. On the flip side, those like Himanta Biswa Sarma became indispensable as they contributed handsomely for the party's growth even beyond their geography. As for Dhankhar, he established his worth for the BJP as West Bengal governor, hitting the headlines frequently as a one-man army with a bazooka against Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, and was rewarded with the VP's post. Nemesis sprang out of nowhere three years later, shoving him out without the dignity of even a farewell speech.

Dhankhar accepting an opposition notice for impeaching Justice Yashwant Varma over alleged corruption, at a time when the government was trying to make it a bipartisan exercise, appeared to be the last straw on the camel's back, as he had crossed the NDA red line far too often. The VP's exit drew sympathetic noises from the opposition, who ironically were gunning for his scalp just a few weeks ago. Since Dhankhar is the only VP to have departed under such circumstances—the others had left to become president—it threw up questions on the constitutional grey area on electing his successor. While the Constitution does not specify a timeline, it mandates that the vacancy be filled as soon as possible, and gives the person a full term of five years. The resignation did not create a constitutional void as the institution of the Rajya Sabha deputy chair is in place; it's a moment to remember that the position of the Lok Sabha deputy speaker is still vacant.

Far too often, Dhankhar had taken confrontational positions with the judiciary on questions like 'one nation, one election', the power of judicial review, parliament's supremacy, and timelines for legislative assent—at times making the executive squirm. Both gubernatorial and vice presidential posts are titular positions that require politically neutral individuals in office. Unfortunately, they are anything but. The vice president has a larger role as the Rajya Sabha chairperson, discharging an important democratic and constitutional function. Here's hoping Dhankhar's replacement will uphold the dignity of his high constitutional office.

HARMFUL CHEMICALS CLIP WINGS, IMPERIL HUMANS

THE National Centre for Biological Sciences has found a drastic 25 percent decline in India's bird population over the last two and a half decades. Such a trend would affect soil nutrient cycles, pollination, seed dispersal and ecosystem balance, besides triggering a cascading effect on public health. The study highlights the poor understanding in India about the consequences of pesticides, which are implicated in the decline of open-habitat birds and insectivores, depriving the birds of their prey and leading to their population decline. Pesticides are widely understood to be the main reason for the decline of insects, which in turn has affected several bird species worldwide.

Among the main villains is a class of pesticides called neonicotinoids, which are chemically similar to nicotine and are rampantely used in agriculture and veterinary medicine in India. Neonicotinoids have raised global concerns due to their harm to beneficial insects like bees and other pollinators. This led to the ban of three neonicotinoids by the European Commission in 2018. But their continued unregulated use in India has led to prey deprivation for grassland and raptor bird species like the tawny eagle, greater spotted eagle, saras crane, great Indian bustard, Indian roller, Bengal florican and common pochard. Also blamed are changing agriculture patterns, water pollution, silt accumulation, unscientific desilting and poor lake rejuvenation that has affected wetland and aquatic birds like the northern pintail duck, tufted duck, greater flamingo, Eurasian spoonbill, black-capped kingfisher, Bailloon's crake, spot-billed pelican, lesser adjutant, painted stork and pied kingfisher.

It needs to be realised that a robust avian population across species is beneficial to ecosystems and human well-being. Loss in bird populations can potentially lead to reduced agricultural yields and perpetuate the reliance on harmful pesticides, only further aggravating the situation. This can have an adverse impact on public health, besides signalling a wider biodiversity loss that can also negatively impact the economy in the long run.

Agricultural scientists, farmers and the central and state governments need to wake up to these adversities arising from shrinking bird populations. They should spread awareness about the scientific use of pesticides and solar-panelled water pumps through strict regulatory measures. We cannot afford our skies to be even more forlorn.

QUICK TAKE

HOW NOT TO BE COLDPLAYED

COLDPLAY is no longer only a British rock band's name; it's now a social media slang for being outed at a public event, too. The word's somewhat apt verification followed an awkward moment that played out at a Coldplay concert in Foxborough, US last week—a tech CEO in attendance was pictured on the stadium's giant screen getting cosy with his HR chief. Before you shout "invasion of privacy", do consider that 'kiss cams' are an American phenomenon that started in the 1980s to fill gaps in sport telecasts. It's wiser to accept that cameras are everywhere nowadays and social media trend-hunting is a brutal sport. That, however, should not give broadcasters the licence to zoom in on *affaires privées* in the stands.

BASED on interactions with American national security elites at the annual Aspen Security Forum in Colorado, *Politico* compiled a report six months into Donald Trump's second presidency last week-end. The digital newspaper reported the Aspen delegates "accepted that this president has irrevocably upended the global order... former and current US and foreign officials, business leaders and analysts acknowledged publicly and privately that the Trump administration has dealt a lasting blow to much of the post-World War II consensus around free trade and long-term cooperation".

Indeed, isn't this how history rolls on—when a statesman appears out of nowhere with a sledgehammer and a bold agenda to break the crust? The demolition is painful to watch and the outcome difficult to predict, which is reflected in the industrial-scale demonisation of Trump by the self-styled 'liberal globalists'. Trump has smashed not only "the norms and conventions that governed US trade relations, use of military force and engagement with stalwart partners and alliances", as *Politico* characterised it, but also rolled back the agencies entrusted with foreign policy tasks including USAID, CIA, Pentagon and the state department.

Indian foreign policy elites seek solace that Trump's policies will not have a long shelf life and could be easily reversed once he leaves office. However, former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice admitted at the closing panel of the Colorado summit, in her capacity as co-chair of the Aspen Strategy Group, "We have to recognise that we're probably not going back to exactly that system".

We find Trump's pugilistic approach on India-Pakistan tensions to be irksome, as our attempts to influence it on the edges are being rebuffed. But US mediation between India and Pakistan has been a fact of life going all the way back to the Indus Waters Treaty. The difference today is that Trump is claiming credit for it, which is profoundly embarrassing for the Indian leadership. But then, our politicians are second to none in grandstanding either.

After Trump's election victory in November, Delhi went overboard to propagate it was cruising the transition from the Biden era to Trump with delectable ease. The Prime Minister's hastily arranged visit to Washington in February cemented such a perception. Today, if a contrarian assessment has arisen that the government's foreign policy has collapsed, we are

Despite his tough talk, the actions taken by Trump show a method in his idiosyncrasies. India can learn from China and Russia in facing his desultory diplomacy with firmness

ANOTHER YALTA MOMENT FOR A NEW ORDER



at fault for raising expectations sky-high. Apparently, we estimated a certain predictability about Trump's policies. But his tariff war came as a rude shock.

However, Trump's imposition of tariffs amounting to an extra 145 percent on Chinese imports was swiftly abandoned and replaced with a more favourable deal pending a resolution of the fantanyl issue. In recent days, relations have warmed further: China agreed to lift restrictions on the export of rare earths and, in return, the US eased restrictions on the sale of advanced computer chips to China. Jensen Huang, CEO of Nvidia, one of the world's most valuable companies whose chips are used for advanced artificial intelligence tasks, was on a celebratory tour of China last week. Huang was ecstatic about the business possi-

bilities with the "massive, dynamic, and highly innovative" Chinese market. He declared, "It is indeed crucial for American companies to establish roots in the Chinese market."

Trump's China strategy should be understood properly to sense that there is a method in his idiosyncrasies. Huang responded when asked in another interview whether his enthusiasm for the Chinese market would clash with the views of Trump and his Republican supporters. He said he had spoken before the visit with Trump, who had wished him well. "There is always room for two people in any house," he said.

The US-India relationship remains on strong enough foundations to withstand the current turbulence. India's strategic autonomy and multi-alignment doctrine

THE POLICE LINE WE NEED TO CROSS

THE brutal custodial death of 27-year-old temple security guard Ajith Kumar in Tamil Nadu last month forced the country to confront an uncomfortable truth: custodial torture is not an aberration, but a systemic feature of policing in India.

According to the autopsy report, there were more than 40 injuries on his body, pointing to sustained and deliberate assault. In a moment of judicial candour, the Madurai bench of the Madras High Court described it as "police-organised crime" and concluded that "a state has killed its own citizen". That tone is necessary and speaks to the scale of the rot.

The state acted swiftly in the immediate aftermath. Five policemen were arrested, six others were suspended and a judicial inquiry was ordered under strict timelines. The Tamil Nadu government offered compensation: ₹5 lakh and a government job for Ajith's brother, and a parcel of land. The case was also handed over to the CBI.

Yet, for all the official gestures, Tamil Nadu's record on custodial violence remains deeply troubling. Between 2016 and 2021, there were 478 custodial deaths, with perpetrators not convicted in the vast majority of cases. In 2022 alone, at least 12 more cases surfaced. The accused cops behind the infamous 2023 Ambasamudram custodial torture case, in which detainees were reportedly assaulted with iron rods and had their teeth smashed, are on active duty.

The national figures paint an even grimmer picture. According to the National Human Rights Commission, there were over 2,300 custodial deaths—2,152 in judicial custody and 155 in police custody—in India in 2021-22. Over the last six years, Uttar Pradesh alone has reported 2,630 custodial deaths, the highest in the country, while Tamil Nadu recorded the highest cases among the southern states. Overall, there were 11,650 deaths in custody in India between 2016 and 2022, a staggering figure for a democracy.

What is most disturbing is the near-total absence of justice. A 2023 analysis of NHRC and government data reveals between 2017 and 2022, only 345 magisterial inquiries were ordered nationwide into custodial deaths, resulting in just 123 arrests. Charges were filed only in 79 cases. There were no convictions. In Tamil Nadu alone, 39 such inquiries were conducted during this period, none leading to conviction. The legal



Custodial deaths in India are often linked to caste, class and community. We need a legal system to deliver justice to those on the margins, not shield the perpetrators. Every custodial death should trigger an FIR and an independent probe, not an internal review

Custodial violence in India is not merely a law and order issue: it is fundamentally linked to caste, class and community. NHRC data reveals that 71 percent of custodial deaths between 1996 and 2018 involved detainees from poor or vulnerable backgrounds. The over-policing of Dalit and Adivasi communities is no accident—it is rooted in the deeply hierarchical nature of Indian law enforcement.

Ajith Kumar's death is no aberration—it followed the institutional script. Taken on mere suspicion, tortured in custody and cremated with alarming haste, his erasure illustrates the brutal efficiency with which the state can ex-

tinguish the lives of those on the margins. It marks the intersection of economic precarity, social discrimination, and unchecked impunity.

This custodial death crisis demands more than reform—it requires a rupture. Change must begin at arrest: enforceable detention protocols, constant judicial oversight, recorded interrogations and medical checks must be mandatory. Every custodial death should trigger an FIR and an independent probe, not an internal review. Fast-track courts must replace bureaucratic delay. A public, disaggregated database and regular audits by SC/ST and civil society groups are essential to transparency and oversight.

Justice must also be reparative. Victims' families deserve immediate compensation and long-term support. Police training must be rooted in constitutional rights and anti-caste ethics. Institutions like the NHRC need prosecutorial powers and procedural sabotage must attract criminal liability.

A democracy cannot sustain itself when fear supplants trust in its guardians. The right to life is not earned through compliance, nor does dignity expire at the threshold of custody. Ajith Kumar's death exposes a state too willing to obscure the truth with silence. Without systemic reform, independent oversight, and a fundamental reimagining of policing, such tragedies will remain fleeting ruptures, memorialised not as reckonings, but as forgotten footnotes.

India is at a moral and constitutional inflection point. It can do nothing and aid the normalisation of custodial violence, or it can reaffirm, with clarity and conviction, that the deprivation of liberty must never entail the forfeiture of life. The true measure of a republic lies not in its indulgence of the powerful, but in its unwavering commitment to the dignity and protection of the powerless. Justice, if it is to retain meaning beyond rhetoric, must extend to Ajith Kumar and to the countless others whose lives are extinguished without record, recourse or remembrance.

(Views are personal)
(Tweets @ens_socialis)

are robust enough, too. Besides, it is not as if Trump's pragmatism is not applicable to India or that he harbours some animus against India. Fortuitously, an opportunity is at hand for the government to reset its compass on two issues of far-reaching significance, which would have a sobering effect on the Trump administration. One, Trump's threat to impose secondary tariffs of 100 percent on countries that buy oil from Russia; and two, Washington's advocacy that Delhi should unceremoniously dump Russia as a defence partner.

In all probability, Trump is not going to impose sanctions on Russia—just as his Ukraine U-turn is less dramatic than it seems. Keeping Russian oil out of the world market may not even be in Trump's interests. He is well aware that Putin would not be deterred by sanctions and there is no question of the Russian president suspending the special military operation in Ukraine without realising its objectives.

As for India's defence ties with Russia, the upcoming government decision will be a defining moment as regards a production partner for the indigenous advanced medium combat aircraft and an interim fifth-generation platform. For both, Russia's fifth-generation fighter Su-57 appears to be the most viable candidate—not only in costs, but also in terms of Moscow's offer to set up Indian production and share technology.

India can learn from Russia and China's playbook that transparency and firmness pay with Trump. Xi Jinping showed he won't be a pushover if there was a tariff war; equally, Putin is immovable when it comes to a ceasefire in Ukraine without realising the objectives of the military operation. That said, desultory diplomacy is the hallmark of Trump's strategy and India cannot be impervious to it.

Chinese social media chatter is speculating about a trilateral summit between Xi, Trump and Putin during the 80th anniversary of the victory against Japanese aggression and fascism. *The Times* newspaper, too, reported it last week. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov sounded sceptical initially, but conceded on Monday that such a meeting can't be ruled out. Russian officials and state media have for years pivoted on the idea of a concert of big powers—à la Yalta conference in 1945—to uphold the balance of power. As for Trump, this would be a colourful new way to convey his political desiderata, a critical element of his diplomatic style.

(Views are personal)

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WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Deceptive closure

Ref: *Find the real 7/11 killers and reason for lapses in probe* (Jul 23). The court's entire verdict is appalling in what it reveals. Precious lives lost are not being acknowledged in the bureaucratic failure that has mishandled evidence and botched the investigation, leading to a deceptive closure.
Avinash Krishna Kumar, Mayurbhanj

Dharmasthala probe

Ref: *Justice for the missing women of Dharmasthala* (Jul 23). The disclosure by the former Dharmasthala worker has revealed a spate of criminal cover-ups. This must not continue any longer, and no one should be allowed to influence or interfere in the investigation, as has been the trend.
Bilal Perambra, Kozhikode

Public access

Ref: *Heed Cabinet Secy's call for ear to the ground at lower levels too* (Jul 22). Longstanding protocols hinder transparency and accountability within the government. If bureaucrats are rightfully accessible to non-officials and the general public, it can lead to more effective solutions.
Sinan Rasheed, email

Roll loopholes


Ref: *Bihar SIR: Doing the right thing the wrong way* (Jul 23). I think the Election Commission has rightly initiated the SIR to ensure that a voter is not registered multiple times, weeding out the loophole created by the self-declaration provision. This move, coupled with the census and use of AI can ensure a healthy and robust democracy.
Sriramprasad Ramamurthy, email

Oriental giants

Ref: *On the same side of the future* (Jul 23). India and China are oriental giants being put in a position to contend with the occidental hegemony. If a synergy is to be established, a mutually beneficial tie-up is inevitable.
Venkat Desikan, Chennai

Constructive debate

Ref: *Oppn stalls parliament on SIR; double standards, says govt* (Jul 23). The opposition parties' walkout is a disappointing display of political escapism, especially when the government has expressed readiness for an open discussion. The strategy of abandoning dialogue instead of strengthening it, reflects the loss of a constructive force in the parliament.
Mudgal Venkatesh, Kalaburagi



A thought for today
I shall allow no man to belittle my
soul by making me hate him
BOOKER T WASHINGTON

‘Us’ Bashes ‘Them’

Attacks on immigrants in West & internal migrants in India extract big socio-economic costs

In one variation of the trolley dilemma, you can stop a runaway tram and save five lives by throwing a heavy man on the track, but almost nobody likes this solution. It’s because humans – despite all the gore in history – are not normally comfortable with violence. Yet, Charanpreet Singh was bashed up in Adelaide on Saturday evening. A few hours later, another Indian was brutally assaulted in Dublin. Both cases have the appearance of hate crime, which is a growing problem around the world.

It might not be the age of peak hate against foreigners because something like America’s Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which practically barred immigration from China for about 60 years, seems unthinkable today. But that could be the result of political correctness. Data from America – self-appointed guardian of democracy and liberal values – shows a 13% jump in hate crimes in the top 10 cities between 2022 and 2023. As Indians, we narrowly focus on attacks targeting Indians, whether in US, Canada, UK, Australia, or elsewhere, but other nationalities are equally targets of hate. In Jan, Nigeria issued an advisory for its citizens travelling to Australia. Let’s not forget that internal migrants in India are often targeted by goonish groups.

It is normal for people to be suspicious of the outsider – different in speech, appearance, garb, customs – and be reserved, but violence is hard to explain. What might trigger it? Toxic ideology was the culprit in Nazi Germany. Now, there are reactionary ideologues everywhere. Even Trump’s Maga push relies on the vilification of immigrants. But as economist Michael Martell points out in a paper, hate is not the way to achieve national greatness. In fact, it has enormous social and economic costs.

Martell cites the 2012 shooting at a gurdwara in Wisconsin that left six dead. Not a high toll at first glance, but its cost to society quickly added up. The gurdwara upgraded its security. Alongside, mosques and Hindu temples took note of the attack and spent on better security systems. Terrorised immigrants curbed their movement, affecting local businesses. And this was just one case of hate crime among many. The cumulative cost of fatal and non-fatal hate crimes in US, in 2019, was estimated at \$3.4bn.

The economic loss from all the hate crime around the world would be many times more. The social cost enormous. As a community leader in Dublin pointed out, immigrants are crucial for keeping services running. Even demographically young India needs Chinese manufacturing experts, and US needs Indian scientists and engineers. So, all countries – India included – must make an effort to dial down xenophobia.

The Talented Mr Ladonia

What the fake embassy of a fake nation, next door to our capital, says about us & our sarkars

Hindustan in some ways is fakeistan. There are the standard fake iPhones and Guccis and Johnnie Walker, forged Jamini Roys and Labubus. Then there are the more exotic *nakli* GST notices and caste certificates. But a certain Harsh Vardhan Jain has taken the game to nextxt level: Creating a fake nation. Out of a standard Ghaziabad rented house, he ran a very very freaky ‘Westarctica Embassy’. Until a UP police special task force busted it, this gentleman presented himself as ambassador of Seborga, Ladonia, and some fictional micronations. The creativity of it all is really dazzling con-noisseurs.

They say a good conman doesn’t steal your money but convinces you to give it to him. On the big screen, that’s what we love about a Danny Ocean (*Ocean’s Eleven*) or a Frank Abagnale Jr (*Catch Me If You Can*). It’s not just that they’re dangerously charming but also that they’ve really cracked human psychology. You have to know

people to fool people. No surprise then the ‘Westarctica ambassador’ has really set social media abuzz. Lionising comments like ‘Only respect’ and ‘India is not for beginners’ outnumber horrified ones. Ladonia has acquired its own fan club. It sounds no less enchanting than Narnia. The inventiveness is con-summate indeed.

All this applause also explains how such swindles flourish in India. Sure, goggling at those Audis and Mercs, with blue diplomatic looking number plates, is not complicity with the crime. The problem is that various authorities, evidently, share this quality of tolerance. Forged diplomatic passports and MEA stamps tell a bigger tale. That it takes an STF to tell a real embassy from a fabricated one is what’s con-sequential. The only thing about this that ain’t funny is the laxity of security that made the hoax possible.

Strawberries & scholarship

India and Iran converge again in Cambridge

Bachi Karkaria

The temptation was strawberries, but I savoured learning’s creamy layer. In 1998, I’d met Richard Blurton when, as director of British Museum’s South Asian section, he’d brought ‘The Enduring Image’ exhibition. We reconnected 26 years later, at a Bhubaneswar liftest, where he presented his latest tome, *India: A History in 100 Objects*. When I was recently in London, he said, ‘Do come to the Ancient India and Iran Trust (AIIT) garden party in Cambridge. There’ll be plenty of strawberries, cream, and bubbly. You’ll meet its new Chair, Almut Hintze.’ Wow! She belonged to the august lineage of non-Zoroastrians dedicated to the study of my 3,000 year-old faith. And there she was in person – and so personable.

The 23 Brooklands Avenue property had been bought by the five founders of AIIT formed to ‘promote the study of prehistory, archaeology, art history and ancient languages of South & Southeast Asia, Central Asia and Iran.’ If journalism is history ‘To go’, scholarship is history ‘on the slow’. My goosebumps rose as I padded through rooms bringing alive Zoroastrianism’s lifelong researchers such as Mary Boyce and John Hinneals. Their personal libraries were among this 50,000-strong trove.

The Bridget Allchin Archive included photographs of everything once displayed in Kabul Museum; priceless because it was all trashed in Afghan’s civil war. India Room’s mantelpiece displayed a celebrated quartet of bronze figurines from another founding-Trustee collection. It captured men cracking open a coconut, playing a flute, and two engrossed in the rattan-ball game of chhinlone, which I learnt was deeply embedded in Burmese cultural history.

A month later Richard addressed London bankers. Whyy? Because: “In today’s world anyone operating internationally is at a disadvantage without an understanding of the fundamentals on which South Asian society is built. This is increasingly important since more and more people of South Asian origin, especially Indian, are at the summit of commercial, financial, academic and political activity. This understanding we try to deliver at the British Museum.” Good to hear authoritative, *non-bigoted* lips proclaim our great past and present.

Alec Smart said: “Train blasts: was justice derailed?”

It’s The Report, Not The Reporting

AAIB’s first findings on AI 171 were presented in a way that encouraged speculations on pilot action. Credible alternative possibilities centered on machine malfunction were not given due attention

D Raghunandan



In his statement on AI 171’s crash, civil aviation minister Rammohan Naidu told Rajya Sabha that AAIB was conducting an unbiased, transparent inquiry. He was critical of various narratives in media, especially by foreign news outlets. The problem is, AAIB’s report itself opened the door to such speculative reportage on pilot action.

The report is expected to only place facts as discovered, and not pass judgment on cause, nor make recommendations. However, AAIB did just that. The report presents facts selectively, makes veiled suggestions, and points to pilot action. AAIB did nothing to prevent media leaks, even of pilot remarks not given in its report. It has also not held a single press briefing that could have demonstrated transparency, quashed rumours and reassured stakeholders and the public.

The report surprisingly deals with fuel switches in its very first substantive paragraph. It discusses at length early design problems that were rectified, Boeing’s corrective advisories, and Air India’s reasonable maintenance record including for this aircraft. Inadvertent movement of faulty switches is thus ruled out.

On the crash itself, the report zeroes in on the fuel switches going from ‘Run’ or ‘On’ for take-off to ‘Cut-Off’, both engines losing thrust, the switches turning back to ‘Run’ for attempted restart, engines relighting but unable to regain thrust, then the crash. Pilot action is clearly implied, since the switches themselves were deemed okay.

This point is underlined by the report noting that one pilot asked, “Why did you cut off,” the other replying, “I didn’t” or words to that effect, followed by the mayday call. A transcript would have provided important context, but only this paraphrased exchange is given. It is hardly surprising that media would pick up on pilot action, then speculate further.

Again drawing partial conclusions, the report virtually exonerates Boeing and General Electric, stating “there are no recommended actions to B787-8 and/or GE”. Air India has said it too has received no

recommendations for action. However, DGCA did later call for an inspection of fuel switches in relevant Boeing aircraft in India, followed by similar actions for airlines in Japan, South Korea among others.

In jumping to conclusions on the fuel switches and pilot action, AAIB has missed other evidence and plausible directions for further inquiry, even though these issues have a history in Boeing 787s.

A growing number of experts are now of the opinion, as is your correspondent, that AI 171 may have experienced an electrical failure or malfunction almost immediately after take-off. Here’s what to know:



- The sole survivor has recalled cabin lights flickering during the take-off roll. This would have triggered very similar events to those noted in the report.
- The Ram Air Turbine (RAT) to supply emergency power for hydraulics and other systems would have deployed.
- Fuel supply would have been cut off to both engines by the Full Authority Engine Control (FADEC) system, *bypassing* the cockpit fuel switches.
- Other electrical problems such as false signals from ‘air/ground’ sensors or electronic failures could also have led FADEC to execute a mid-air engine shutdown. Electrical failure or other issues also explain

Ozzies Everywhere: Leicestershire To Ohio To Paikpara

Heavy metal’s guttural howls & ear-splitting guitar may no longer top charts. But metalheads abound, across countries & cultures, in any offbeat space willing to handle the decibels

Mohua.Das@timesofindia.com



Once upon a snowstorm, heavy metal blasting from a car stereo saved a man’s life. Or so claimed a 1990s print ad that ran with the tagline, ‘Judas Priest saved my life’. The story went that a man trapped in the snow was miraculously rescued when Rob Halford’s screams pierced through the blizzard and alerted help. The joke sold speakers. But it was also kind of believable. Because that’s the thing about heavy metal. It doesn’t ask to be heard. It bludgeons its way into your ears.

Cut to 2025. Ozzy Osbourne just died. Judas Priest isn’t selling sound systems anymore. Metal isn’t on the charts and the long-haired leather-clad gods of yore haven’t ruled pop culture in decades. But try telling that to the 80,000-strong crowd at the Download Festival in Leicestershire each June where bands like Metallica, Iron Maiden and Slipknot still reign supreme. Or to the sea of loyalists at Sonic Temple in Ohio, where crowds top 120,000. Or, closer home, at underground mosh pits and DIY metal fests in Bangalore, Bombay and Bengal.

But first, what even is this noise? Ask ten metalheads and you’ll get twelve answers. Most will agree, it’s the heaviness. Angry, theatrical, and unapologetically loud. The most polarising element is the vocals. For the uninitiated, the shrieking, rasping, guttural howls can sound less like music and more like a wild animal mid-exorcism. For fans, that’s the whole point.

Cream, Jimi Hendrix, the Yardbirds all helped build the genre’s skeleton but it was the unholy trinity of Black Sabbath, Led Zeppelin and Deep Purple who gave it muscle and mystique. Sabbath, especially, was born from Birmingham’s economic gloom, a blue-collar factory town where guitarist Tony Iommi famously lost two fingertips in an industrial accident. To keep playing, he detuned his guitar, tried power chords, and accidentally created the dark, sludgy sound that would define metal.

Metal’s biggest icons were often as unhinged on stage as their music. Ozzy Osbourne famously bit the head off a bat mid-concert, thinking it was rubber

(it wasn’t). But for all their onstage mayhem, many of these supposed wild men were surprisingly zen offstage. Ozzy might’ve howled like a demon and urinated on monuments but at home he morphed into a soft-spoken, slightly bewildered reality-TV dad who liked tea and Monty Python.

Also hard to miss – though often missing – are women. For a genre that rages against the system, metal’s own stage has stayed stubbornly a boys’ moshpit.

When alt rock and pop arrived and suddenly bands with buzz cuts and cardigans were calling the shots,



metal was shoved aside. Declared dead, it carried on in basements, DIY festivals, Telegram groups and worn-out band tees even as pop, rap and hip-hop took over charts.

India’s metal story began in the backyards. Back in the early 1990s, when most Indians were still being serenaded by Kumar Sanu or discovering Metallica via MTV, Manipur was already ahead of the game. Post Mark’s journey was tragically cut short when front-man Abungcha Kshetrimayum died in an accident in 1999, but their legend lives on. When Metallica finally toured India in 2011, fans crowdfilled Post Mark’s travel to attend as a full-circle tribute to the OGs.

That loyalty still pulses through the Northeast. In Imphal, bands like Sandrembee have turned metal into

omissions or gaps in the report.

● Timing of RAT deployment is omitted in the report, which only notes CCTV footage of take-off. This could prove crucial and needs to be determined.

● The report notes that a one-second interval between fuel supply to the two engines shutting down – deemed virtually impossible by most pilots for manual switch operations – may be due to automatic fuel shut-off by FADEC.

● Signals from engine shutdown could have led the pilot flying to wonder why fuel had been cut off, and the other to respond he hadn’t done it – meaning FADEC had done it autonomously.

● The pilots would then have tried to restore power. However, since the fuel switches are still in ‘run’ position, FADEC having already bypassed them, the pilots would have to ‘cycle’ both switches – meaning move them first to ‘cut-off’, then back to ‘run’, similar to computers or smartphones being rebooted when they hang. That would explain the switch movement as noted in the report.

Experts recall many such incidents on the B787 earlier, such as the 2019 case involving the Japanese ANA airline, other problems with FADEC receiving false ground/air sensor signals, and a 2021 FAA Bulletin calling for replacement of a faulty micro-processor that sent false electrical signals on fuel supply. Unfortunately, the report does not look into this angle at all, but hopefully may do so upon further analysis.

AAIB, supposed to be an independent body, is not entirely at fault for these failings. The setting up of the investigation was not announced by AAIB, but by the minister, who also announced the institution of a high-powered committee – with overlapping functions and authority. It’s still not clear what this committee will do.

AAIB took a long time to decide if the black boxes were to be sent overseas or if the decoding would be done in AAIB’s new lab, or if the new lab had the requisite capability. The data was finally downloaded in AAIB’s Delhi lab using equipment flown in from US’s NTSB.

Who knows how much pressure AAIB is under? The final report is due by about June 2026. AAIB has almost a year to write a report that doesn’t raise the kind of questions its first attempt has.

The writer is with Delhi Science Forum & has worked in the aviation sector

Calvin & Hobbes

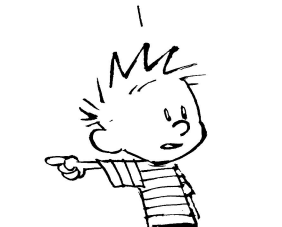
HA HA! THEY JUST ANNOUNCED THE SCHOOLS ARE CLOSED! IT’S A SNOW DAY! WHEEEEEEE!



YES! YES! YES! YES! YES! TALK ABOUT LUCK! NOW YOU CAN DO YOUR HOMEWORK AND YOU WON’T GET IN TROUBLE!



RIGHT, BUT THERE’S OVER TWO FEET OF SNOW THAT REQUIRES OUR IMMEDIATE AND UNDIVIDED ATTENTION.



FIRST THINGS FIRST.



Sacredspace



To give preference to the life of a being simply because

that being is a member of our species would put us in the same position as racists who give preference to those who are members of their race.

Peter Singer

Let’s Get Rid Of The Little i

Satish K Kapoor

Just as Hath yog strengthens the inner and outer body, Bhakti yog purifies the heart, and Karm yog renders nobility to human actions, Jnan yog opens jnan-chakshu, ‘eye of knowledge’ through self-inquiry, study of scriptures and meditation.

The Bhagwad Gita, 4:38, says: *Na hi jnanena sadrisham pavitramiha vidyate/tatsvyam yogasamsiddhah kalenatmani vindati* – verily, there is no purifier in this world like knowledge. In due course of time, the devotee who is successful in yog will spontaneously realise this within his self.

Jnan yog does not negate a life of action or devotion, but advocates for steadfastness in gaining knowledge by analysing true nature of the Self. Bhadragiriyar, 14th century Tamil poet-mystic, says: “It is knowledge which knows knowledge through

knowing knowledge.” Knowledge is *para*, infinite or *apara*, finite. The former relates to the higher dimension of being, the latter to the spatio-temporal world.

The basic principles of Jnan yog are following: the Self alone is real; the world is only an appearance; to cognise appearance as reality is erroneous; to identify oneself with the mind, body and senses, is *avidya*, plain ignorance, and by knowing the Self, one becomes the Self.

The light of true knowledge is imparted by a competent guru who is found by god’s grace. To the question, *ko jagriti?* – Who is vigilant? Adi Shankaracharya replied, *divakti* – one who has the power of discrimination. By cultivating vivek, one can distinguish between the real and unreal, Self and non-self,

permanent and transient. Vivek leads to vairagya, dispassion, and vairagya to the supreme realisation that ‘there is but one Self in the universe, of which all lower selves are but manifestations.’ Swami Vivekananda advised: “Let us get rid of the little ‘I’ and let only the great ‘I’ live in us.”

Vivek guides one to perceive the cosmic Self in the individual self, the cosmic mind in individual mind, and cosmic consciousness in individual consciousness. As a result, the ego is obliterated, and one feels oneness with existence.

Jnan yog adds to self-understanding by enlightening one about the pancha koshas or five layers of the soul, and about ashta chakras, eight whirling energy-centres of the subtle body that distribute life-current to the physical body.

After one is established in Brahm



THE SPEAKING TREE

bhav, divine feeling, by right knowledge, one can go beyond the ordinary states of consciousness. Yet, Jnan yog is not merely an intellectual pursuit, since its goal is to transcend the mind.

Jnana yog postulates three ways to grow spiritually: shravan, listening about the ultimate truth from the one who knows it; manan, reflecting on the truth; nidhidhyasan, meditation on the truth. By dwelling on one’s inherent nature, one can realise the identity of atman, individual soul, and *Brahmn*, the Supreme reality, and experience bliss.

The Jnan yogi undergoes four stages: seeking, knowing, becoming, and being. He uses his mind to inquire into his own nature and offers his senses and life-energy as oblations in the fire of self-control, kindled by knowledge. The Gita says, “He is a jivanamukta, liberated while living, and comes to realise that he is a divine being, ‘the child of immortality’.”