

THE ASIAN AGE

29 JANUARY 2026

Ajit Pawar demise is a sombre turning point

The tragic demise of Maharashtra's deputy chief minister, Ajit Pawar, in a plane crash at Baranatti marks a sombre turning point in the state and national politics. As the dust settles over the charred remains of the Learjet 45 involved in the tragedy, the state mourns a leader who was often described as the "perpetual Deputy CM" — a man of administrative grit whose influence over the cooperative sector and the state's treasury was unparalleled. His detractors saw in him an autocratic style, while his admirers praised him as a decisive leader who cut through red tape to deliver results.

For decades, the Pawar name has been synonymous with power in Maharashtra. Known affectionately as "Dada", Ajit Pawar's sudden exit leaves a massive vacuum that complicates the already fractured legacy of the clan.

Within the Ajit Pawar-led NCP, the question of leadership now looms large. While his sons, Parth and Jay, have been active, they lack the "Dada" persona — that blend of accessibility, blunt honesty and iron-fisted control over local cadres that their father possessed.

The split between Ajit and his uncle, Sharad Pawar, was a deep-seated control in the family. With Ajit gone, the "rebel" faction faces an existential crisis. Will the MLAs who defected with him drift back to the senior Pawar's fold, or will they seek a new identity under the Mahayuti alliance?

The involvement of a Learjet 45, mid-size business jet aircraft, in this tragedy adds a layer of bafflement. Produced by Bombardier, the Learjet series is known for its safety records.

Sharad Pawar, the patriarch who has weathered every political storm, now faces a personal and political challenge. While the rivalry was fierce, the blood ties remain. The recently concluded civic elections in Pune and Pimpri-Chinchwad in January 2026 served as a pilot project for reconciliation. The sight of Ajit Pawar and Supriya Sule sharing a stage to release a joint NCP manifesto was more than just a "seat-sharing" arrangement — it was a public signal that the family had resolved its internal frictions. Before the crash, there was a deafening buzz about a formal political reunion. This tragedy might either trigger a sentimental reunification of the NCP or lead to a final, messy disintegration of the influence of the clan.

The involvement of a Learjet 45, mid-size business jet aircraft, in this tragedy adds a layer of bafflement. Produced by Bombardier, the Learjet series is known for its safety records. The details emerging from Baranatti Airport suggest a harrowing final few minutes. Prima facie reports indicate that the pilot encountered a technical snag during the initial landing phase. The aircraft reportedly abandoned its first approach, circled the airport, and crashed during a second attempt. In private aviation, the pressure to meet tight political schedules can sometimes lead to operational risks that the aircraft, despite its engineering brilliance, cannot overcome.

As Maharashtra enters a period of mourning, the investigation must go beyond the cockpit. We need to know if the pressures of a hectic political schedule compromised safety standards.

The tragedy has left the "Pawar brand" at a crossroads. The family and political factions may unite, but the administrative vacuum left by Ajit Pawar — the man who knew every file and every worker by name — is a gap that no political merger can easily bridge.

India-EU FTA sets a template

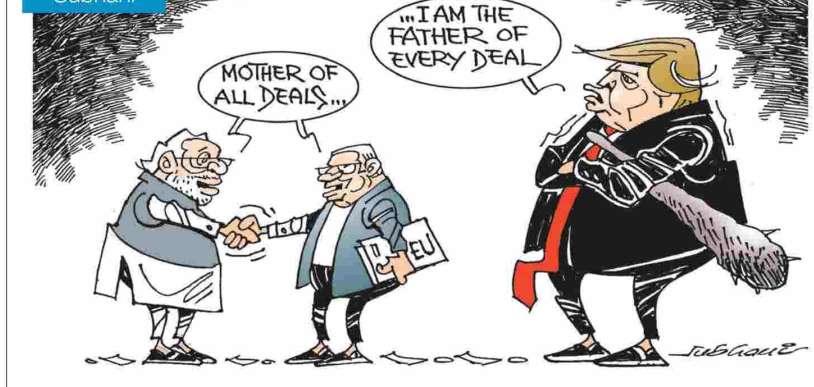
The free trade agreement between India and the European Union, which was billed as the mother of all agreements, signals the beginning of a new era — as suggested by Prime Minister Narendra Modi — at least for the Indian economy. For this was the agreement that got bogged down for over a decade owing to insecurities and impracticalities exhibited by both the parties — India was hesitant over that threat the European car makers pose to the nascent Indian automobile sector while Europe was reluctant to compromise on its climate concerns.

Nevertheless, both India and EU shed obduracy to bring out a fairly balanced trade deal that protects their core interests. It is a "win-win" deal that safeguards the interest of Indian farmers and small businesses, while opening up a huge market for European wines, spirits, beer, olive oil, processed foods and some fruits. The India-EU deal could serve as a template for New Delhi's trade negotiations with other countries, including the United States.

The India-EU free trade deal reaffirms global faith in the free trade regime, especially when the United States, long considered the vanguard of laissez-faire economy, shuts itself in a cocoon. It creates a free trade market consisting of two billion people — representing a fourth of global population and nearly a fourth of the world economy. The deal also has a great synergy with Europe offering technology and India bringing to table its vast talent pool.

It may be just a matter of time that the United States, too, clinches a deal with India. But having signed free trade deals with various countries, Indian businesses must shed their jugged mentality and focus on manufacturing products that compete with the best of the best in the world in quality. For centuries, India was known for its fine products. Now it's time that we revive our past legacy.

Subhani



Will EU's big India trade deal sideline US tariffs?



K.C. Singh

The European Union's top leaders, for the first time, were the chief guests at India's Republic Day celebrations on January 26. Ms Ursula von der Leyen is the president of the European Commission. Her organisation functions as the EU's executive branch, proposing laws, managing policies, and enforcing the European Union's law.

Accompanying her was Antonio Costa, the Indian-origin president of the European Council, which defines the EU's overall political direction and priorities, bringing together the heads of state but without enjoying any legislative power. It handles high-level decision-making, including the appointment of the president, Ursula von der Leyen. That explains why they were jointly invited, as their coordination is necessary to take forward any important new proposals.

The timing of the visit is crucial, considering the prevailing global environment, which was succinctly captured recently by Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney in his Davos speech. He said the global order faces a "rupture", caused by US President Donald Trump's disruptive approach to global trade, diplomacy and the rules-based international system. India has borne the burden of 50 per cent tariffs on most Indian exports to the US. The threat of further escalation lingers due to the US alleging India-Iran commercial ties, especially oil imports. The India-US trade deal has continued to get delayed, as the United States keeps introducing new irritants.

The EU also has entered a new uncertain phase after initially humouring President Donald Trump into approving a new trade deal. The discord arose over President Trump's claim on the Denmark-controlled massive landmass called Greenland. Prior to his Davos trip, President Trump absolutely insisted on the US annexing Greenland, using military force if necessary. The churn amongst the European Nato members was almost instantaneous. They debated that use of military force against a Nato member would shatter the crucial alliance. With the US markets plunging, the message was unmissable. Consequently, President Trump, in his Davos speech, ruled out employing military force. However, the Europeans, so far keeping their concerns hidden, now began to seriously deal with the "rupture" in the global order. China had already demonstrated that only a firm stance gets the desired results. Trump to climb down from aggressive and punitive positions. Canada also similarly began realigning its trade and foreign policies. It concluded that unless its dependence on the US market was diminished, Mr Trump was unlikely to stop claiming Canada as the 51st province of America.

President Trump has a March summit ahead scheduled with Chinese President Xi Jinping. The implicit US-China bipolarity globally leaves the middle powers in Europe, Africa, Latin America, etc., exploring other options. An obvious solution is the crafting of a "third pillar" — India and the European Union are the ideal core of such a coalition. If the endangered global order is to be protected, the European Union are the ideal core of such a coalition. If the endangered global order is to be protected, the European Union are the ideal core of such a coalition.

Otherwise, the strategic independence of even members of the G-7 bloc of developed nations, except the US, may get compromised. This is so because President Trump uses tariffs not just for obtaining trade-related concessions but also for strategic dominance. The joint statement after Tuesday 16th EU-India summit has 22 pages. European Council president Antonio Costa posted on X his reading of the summit. He wrote:

US treasury secretary Scott Bessant hinted at the lifting of 25 per cent tariffs on India for buying Russian oil, while noting that their European allies were signing a 'big trade deal' with India

"EU and India are committed to acting together as anchors of stability in an increasingly fragmented and multipolar world". He also described three core outcomes. One, the Free Trade Agreement, which Mr Costa describes as "offering partnerships instead of tariffs". Ms Leyen called it the "mother of all deals". It certainly creates a new trading bloc, covering a combined population of two billion people.

The second outcome is a new "Security and Defence Partnership". Against the backdrop of President Trump's constant deriding of Europeans for their low defence spending and over-dependence on America, the EU is at last moving towards a more unified defence. It creates an ideal basis for defence technology sharing and co-development. Cooperation also covers maritime security, defence industry, cyber and hybrid threats, space and counter-space.

The third outcome encompasses a Joint Comprehensive Strategic Agenda towards 2030. It covers energy connectivity (via sea, land and air) and mobility. The last relates to migration and the movement of skilled labour. With the anti-immigration grant Make America Great Again (MAGA) targeting of mostly non-white individuals, including H-1B visa holders, Europe may well be a more welcoming destination. The simplification of the Schengen visa regime is to be examined.

Pilot European Legal Gateway Office is named as an institution to facilitate migration enquiries.

Interestingly, many themes that the Trump administration has enthusiastically sidelined are listed for action. The importance of the Paris Agreement to handle climate

change is restored. The target to keep global warming below 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels is underscored. A task force on Green Hydrogen and a Wind Business Summit are envisaged. A vast range of subjects are listed for cooperation. These, inter alia, are: supply chains for agricultural and critical minerals; energy security; smart and sustainable urbanisation; industrial decarbonisation; space; and high-performance computing.

The Free Trade Agreement stands approved but can only be signed after the EU completes legislative procedures. That may not happen before the end of 2026. Work is also to start on an Investment Protection Agreement (IPA).

The joint statement also notes the two sides discussing ongoing conflicts and international stand-offs. In Ukraine, "comprehensive, just and lasting peace" is endorsed, using dialogue and diplomacy. The sanctity of the UN Charter and international law is emphasised. Regarding Gaza, it shrewdly refers to the UN Security Council Resolution 2030 of November 17, 2025, which suggested the Board of Peace and Stabilisation Force. However, the statement seeks its implementation "in its entirety". This is intended to contain President Trump's more expansive interpretation, to use the board for global peacekeeping, which only the UNSC is authorised to undertake.

On the Iran issue, again dialogue and diplomacy is advised without recommending any specific course of action for avoiding military confrontation.

The EU's summitary already being impacting America's policy towards India. US treasury secretary Scott Bessant hinted at the lifting of 25 per cent tariffs on India for buying Russian oil, while noting that their European allies were signing a "big trade deal" with India. If this happens it will corroborate the Chinese lesson that standing upright and political juggling back may be the only way to trump today's America.

The writer is a former secretary in the external affairs ministry. He tweets at @ambksingh.

LETTERS

MERIT COMES FIRST

New UGC Rules, 2026, provide legal protection against any unfair or discriminatory treatment towards SC, ST and OBC. However, the draft bill fails to specify under which law the government will protect the rights of more qualified, intelligent and knowledgeable candidates from the general category if they face unfair or discriminatory treatment. It appears that this attempt to introduce and amend the existing regulations is aimed at gaining political advantage in the upcoming Uttar Pradesh elections next year. The new law/regulations will likely exacerbate inequality in the higher education system, perpetuate a discriminatory environment, disadvantage deserving candidates and discourage meritorious students.

Yugal Kishore Sharma
Faridabad

TAIWAN WAR NEXT

CHINA'S HIGHEST-RANKING general after President Xi Jinping one of the few PLA commanders with real combat experience and long-standing personal ties to Mr Xi has reportedly fallen in the latest and most sweeping purge of the Chinese military leadership in decades. The investigation of Gen Zhang, alongside fellow Central Military Commission member Liu Zhenli, for "serious violations of discipline and law" completes Mr Xi's three-year dismantling of the PLA's top command under the banner of anti-corruption, a campaign unmatched since Mao's era. If both are removed, the seven-member CMC that commands the million-strong PLA will shrink to just Mr Xi and the internal watchdog Zhang Shengmin concentrating military authority in unprecedented fashion. While corruption is the official charge, observers suspect deeper strategic fault lines, particularly over assessments of the PLA's readiness for a Taiwan operation, which US intelligence believes Mr Xi wants to keep viable by 2027.

Amrakes Kumar
Hazratnagar

HALWA FOR MASSES

THE FINANCE MINISTER always hosts the budget ceremony before presenting the Union Budget. While the halwa is distributed among finance ministry officials, the Indian public expects to get a portion of it in the form of concessions and tax rebates. The expectation is different from each section of the society, but no one wants higher taxes. Price stability and reduction of unemployment is another area where everyone wants improvement. Healthcare is costly and needs more funds. Senior citizens expect more care from the government. Can the PM give a taste of halwa to the masses?

D.B. Madan
New Delhi

THE ASIAN AGE

KAUSHIK MITTAL

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K. SUBHASREE

Printer & Publisher



John J. Kennedy

Newspapers as part of education: Will Rajasthan move set off a trend in India?

A recent decision by the Rajasthan government to make reading of newspapers mandatory in government schools may seem ordinary at first. Ten minutes in the morning assembly. Two newspapers — one Hindi, one English. A few new words and a brief discussion on current events. However, behind this small reform lies a powerful idea — education must prepare students not only for exams and jobs, but for responsible citizenship in a democracy.

The practice itself is not new. For decades, many schools had newspaper reading informally. Students often read headlines during assemblies, reflecting an instinctive belief that current affairs mattered. What makes the Rajasthan initiative significant is its formal mandate. By institutionalising the practice, the state affirms that civic awareness is not optional, but central to schooling.

In recent years, education policy in India has focused heavily on employability, skills and rankings. While important, these cannot be the sole aim of education. A technically skilled yet socially indifferent youth is poorly equipped to serve society. This is where regular newspaper reading matters.

Newspapers expose students to real events — parliamentary debates, social movements, court judgments, global conflicts, economic decisions and everyday struggles. They help students see society not as a textbook idea, but as a living reality which is unfolding each day. In a democracy, awareness is essential. Citizens have

rights, they also have duties. Voting, questioning authority, engaging in public debate, and holding institutions accountable require basic political literacy. For first-time voters especially, political awareness is crucial. Without it, choices are often driven by emotion, identity or misinformation, rather than informed judgment. Reading newspapers from a young age will help students understand how policies affect lives and how decisions taken today shape tomorrow.

One of the worrying trends from many campuses today is political indifference. Many students feel politics is dirty, irrelevant or not worth engaging with. This cynicism does not emerge naturally; it grows from a lack of exposure and engagement. When political discussions are discouraged in schools and colleges in the name of neutrality or discipline, students grow up without the ability or the confidence to form independent opinions. Democracy weakens as a result. Educational institutions must therefore encourage informed debate and dissent. Avoiding so-called "controversial" topics may seem safe, but it comes at a cost. Students need spaces where they can discuss current events, debate ideas and even disagree, of course, peacefully and respectfully. Newspapers offer a safe entry point. An editorial discussion or a debate on a policy issue teaches students that disagreement need not lead to hostility, and that democracy thrives on dialogue.

At the heart of social and political awareness lies critical thinking. Reading news regularly trains students to

compare perspectives, question narratives, and identify bias. It encourages them to ask: Why is this happening? Who benefits? Who is left out? Such skills are vital in an age of social media, where misinformation spreads faster than facts. Without critical thinking, students become easy targets for propaganda and polarisation.

Understanding social realities also requires historical and contextual knowledge. For instance, issues like caste inequality, gender discrimination and regional disparities cannot be understood in isolation. Newspapers often link present events to historical injustices and constitutional principles. Awareness about leaders like Dr B.R. Ambedkar and the struggles that shaped India's Constitution helps students appreciate why certain protections and policies exist. Ignorance of this context breeds prejudice and simplistic opinions. This becomes particularly important in debates around reservation and social justice. Many students oppose affirmative action without really understanding its historical necessity or contemporary relevance. Regular engagement with news exposes them to data on underrepresentation in education, bureaucracy and the judiciary. Informed opinions emerge only when students understand both privileges and disadvantages. The idea of "merit" itself cannot be understood without social awareness. Merit is often shaped by access to good schools, supportive environments and economic stability, not just by individual effort. Newspapers help students see how systemic barriers affect opportunities.

Without this understanding, public debates become shallow, unfair and divisive.

Classroom learning must connect with what students see in real-world developments. As current affairs enter classrooms, learning becomes meaningful. Discussions on elections, budgets, social movements or court verdicts could build empathy and tolerance, helping students see how theory meets practice and how their lives are linked to larger social processes. Experiential learning, research shows, deepens this awareness. Volunteering, community engagement and service-learning expose students to social realities firsthand. Paired with informed reading, these experiences turn knowledge into understanding and concern into responsibility. Educational institutions carry a moral responsibility: Schools and colleges do not just train workers; they shape citizens. When social and political awareness is neglected, it often results in the misuse of rights, intolerance, and social fragmentation. The Rajasthan initiative acknowledges this duty by institutionalising a practice that once depended on individual schools or committed teachers, reviving an older educational wisdom suited to today's democratic needs. Ten minutes with a newspaper may be among the most valuable lessons a school can provide.

The writer is retired professor and former dean of the School of Arts and Humanities at Christ University in Bengaluru.

Who loses when teachers are attacked?

Last October, at the University of Delhi (DU), a student union leader, accompanied by a group of supporters, slapped a teacher in the presence of the police, fellow teachers, and students. In a similar way, last year's student union leader reportedly went around several colleges, creating a ruckus and misbehaving with teachers, including a physically challenged teacher, and even with principals. Interestingly, these incidents are not outbursts of anger but calculated displays of power. There seems to be, perhaps, a competition of sorts to gain cheap publicity.

However, the purpose of this article is not to deliver moral sermons or indulge in emotional rhetoric such as "a society that disrespects teachers cannot progress" nor to recall Sant Kabir's dictum - "Without a teacher, knowledge does not arise." Instead, it seeks to reflect on what such incidents do to the process of teaching-learning, and most importantly, to the students who remain silent, thinking it is not their concern.

The focus here is certainly on DU, which, being one of the finest institutions in the country, has been relatively less affected by such acts of violence. Elsewhere, however, teachers have been killed, thrashed, or even had their hands chopped off for stopping harassment, preventing cheating in examinations, or setting questions deemed unacceptable by fundamentalists, respectively.

Implications of attacks

Those in the profession know that teaching is not a mechanical process one can switch on at will. It is a deep human exchange, sustained by trust, curiosity, and respect. More than the content, the quality of a lecture depends on the teacher's enthusiasm.

However, when a teacher's dignity is attacked, the teacher may continue to take classes, but without the same warmth, creativity, or emotional



Anish Gupta

Associate Professor,
Delhi School of
Economics

investment, and the act of teaching will turn into a mechanical exercise, performed merely because it is part of the job.

The second casualty is the fairness of student evaluation, which is one of the most crucial aspects of learning. Just as the judiciary cannot deliver justice under threat, teachers cannot assess students objectively when they fear public humiliation. To avoid confrontation, many begin grading leniently, blurring the line between effort and indifference, merit and mediocrity.

This trend dates back to the early 2000s, when Delhi University introduced a 30% internal assessment component (now about 43.75%) to promote continuous evaluation and reduce reliance on final examinations. Internal assessment allows students to see their marked scripts, often leading to unnecessary comparisons and demands for justification. To avoid frequent confrontations and disputes over marks, many teachers began awarding higher grades. The outcome was clear: average scores rose across undergraduate courses.

When marks lose credibility, employers lose faith in degrees, and students lose faith in the very value of education.

The third casualty is the safety of students. Teachers are often the first people students turn to when something goes wrong. But the moment teachers themselves begin to feel unsafe, they naturally hesitate to get involved and start referring every issue to the police, and we all know how police administration usually functions. The exposure of young students to such an unjust system at an early age can have lasting consequences.

Fourth, history offers grim lessons, as seen in the exodus of students that follow when campuses turn violent. Once this culture seeps into educational institutions, it can take decades or become impossible to undo the

damage. For instance, universities in West Bengal, Bihar, eastern Uttar Pradesh, and until recently in Kerala were once among India's most reputed centres of learning. Today, students from these regions migrate elsewhere because of violent politicisation of campuses.

Are teachers to blame?

It is often argued that students' disrespect toward teachers stems from a decline in teachers' values and quality. But this view overlooks a larger truth: corruption has corroded almost every institution in the country, i.e., the bureaucracy, police, judiciary, politics, and the media. Everywhere, officials seize every opportunity to extract money from the public. And yet, public educational institutions have largely held their moral ground. Had the teaching community at DU been similarly corrupt, it could have monetised admissions or internal assessment marks; yet not a single incident supports such a charge. Despite holding immense power over students' futures, teachers have largely continued to uphold integrity and moral responsibility.

Who bears the burden most

Once a culture of violence takes root and teachers are forced to kneel, it is not the teachers who suffer most. They learn to adapt and survive, as seen in many State universities, while continuing to draw their salaries. The real victims will be the students and their parents, who will pay the ultimate price through poor-quality education, unsafe campuses, and the need to migrate elsewhere. However, given the increasingly hostile environment abroad, even that escape may no longer be available.

Even alumni who remain indifferent to what happens in their alma mater must realise that when a reputed institution loses its standing, the respect and credibility they command for having studied there also fade.

Quenching Chennai's growing thirst

New reservoir should be built by addressing livelihood issues of all stakeholders

STATE OF PLAY

T. Ramakrishnan

ramakrishnan.t@thehindu.co.in

It is well known that Chennai and most of Tamil Nadu do not have much potential for tapping surface water and building any new reservoir, even for drinking water purposes. So, when the State government announces a plan to raise one, particularly for the city, the move should have received praise. Instead, the government is drawing flak from sections of fishermen and residents on the grounds that the initiative will "disrupt their livelihood and permanently alter" the fragile brackish-water ecosystem.

The project in question is the ₹342.6-crore Mamallapuram drinking water reservoir project, for which Chief Minister M.K. Stalin laid the foundation stone on January 19. Billed as the city's sixth drinking water source (the others being Cholavaram, Red Hills, Chembarampakkam, Kannankottai, Thervoykandigai and Satyamurti Sagar in Poondi), the proposed reservoir will come up in two years near Mamallapuram, a world heritage site about 55 km from Chennai. It will be spread over a land parcel in Thirupur taluk of Chengalpattu district between the East Coast Road (ECR) and the parallel Old Mamallapuram Road (OMR).

Named after Narasimhavarman I (600-668 CE) of the Palava dynasty who was called Mamallan (the great wrestler), the drinking water reservoir project is aimed at harnessing surplus flows from the Manamathi group of tanks and Kovalam sub-basin to augment Chennai's water supply with up to 170 million litres per day



(MLD). To be constructed with a capacity of 1.65 thousand million cubic feet (TMC), the proposed reservoir will benefit approximately 13 lakh people, accounting for about 14% of around 1,200 MLD that is being supplied by the Chennai Metrowater to Chennai and other parts of the Chennai Metropolitan Area (CMA). Among those who are going to be covered are residents of Sholinganallur, Pallikarai, Siruseri and Mamallapuram. As Chennai does not have any perennial source of water and is dependent on the Krishna water from Andhra Pradesh for a bulk of its requirements, its average quantum of water supply is 700 to 800 MLD. The present demand of 1,100 MLD is expected to double in 10 years. For the broader CMA that covers the reservoir site, the demand is projected to be 2,500 MLD by 2035.

People of fishing villages, from Kanathur Reddikuppam to Kolkilmedu, have conveyed to the State government that it would "destroy their customary fishing grounds and undermine the spirit" of the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) rules. People of Kovalam Kuppam have even sought the intervention of the Union Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways in the matter as they contend that the reservoir would block the natural flow of the Buckingham Canal. Many residents used the Gram Sabhas organised on Republic

Day to reiterate their opposition to the project and submitted petitions in this regard.

It may be recalled that in the 1990s, the ECR project faced a similar opposition. Then too objections were raised citing likely damage to the environment and livelihood opportunities of people, including farmers. Now operational for nearly 30 years, the Chennai-Cuddalore stretch of the ECR is among the affluent areas of the State.

Defending the project in the Kovalam sub-basin, senior officials say it will serve as a flood buffer and avert sea water intrusion. In the last 25-odd years, a spike in real estate activity on the ECR and the OMR has shrunk the flood plains and swamps. It has reduced the flood buffering capacity of the Pallikarai swamp, according to an internal official document on the project. The project, which does not involve the acquisition of private land, has been mooted to address these problems. Apart from new fishing opportunities in the reservoir, the project envisages the removal of silt from the Buckingham Canal. This will, in turn, improve the flow of brackish water and floodwater, eventually creating a better fishing ground, say officials.

Notwithstanding the pros and cons of the project, all stakeholders should keep in mind that development comes at a price. At the same time, the authorities should ensure that such development remains sustainable without jeopardising the interests of people, especially vulnerable sections. And that would be the best tribute to Mamallan and other great Palava kings, who had excelled in water management even about 1,500 years ago.

Voters increasingly link their choices with policies, delivery

Data show rising women's participation and independent decision-making in voting; majority of the voters believe that their vote has a tangible influence

DATA POINT

Krishanghi Sinha
Kirti Sharma

On January 25, India observed National Voters' Day, which aims to promote electoral awareness and encourage informed participation. Close on the heels of the moment, let us take a close look at how voter participation and political behaviour have evolved over the past decade. Lokniti-CSDS survey data offer important insights into the stability of electoral turnout, the gradual rise in women's participation, and the shifting patterns of political autonomy and influence among voters.

Overall voter turnout in general elections has remained remarkably stable in the last three cycles. Lokniti-CSDS data show a turnout of 66.44% in 2014, rising modestly to 67.40% in 2019, and stabilising at 66.10% in 2024 (Table 1). This consistency reflects the institutional robustness of India's electoral system and the sustained willingness of citizens to participate. Women's turnout has historically lagged behind men's, but data over the past decade indicate a gradual and structurally significant narrowing of this gap. Women's participation rose from 65.54% in 2014 to 67.18% in 2019, before stabilising at 65.78% in 2024, a level still higher than a decade earlier and indicative of an enduring upturn momentum rather than a short-term fluctuation.

This trend reflects broader political and social transformations, including more sustained mobilisation of women through voter awareness initiatives, improved access to polling stations, and administrative reforms such as women-managed booths and streamlined facilitation processes, all of which have facilitated safer and more inclusive electoral spaces. The rise also points towards a gradual enhancement in women's political

autonomy and confidence, even as persistent gendered constraints remain visible in related indicators of political decision-making.

Lokniti's 2024 pre-poll findings indicate that a majority of Indian voters believe that their vote has a tangible influence on how things run in the country, with 56% expressing confidence in the impact of their ballot, and one in every five voters feeling that it makes no difference, as shown in Table 2. This strong sense of vote efficacy reflects sustained trust in electoral institutions and suggests growing expectations of accountability and increasing willingness among citizens, particularly young voters, to link their electoral choices with policy performance and delivery.

Women as prominent voters participate most where political decisions are visible and actionable. Findings from a Lokniti-CSDS study conducted in collaboration with the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), as highlighted in Table 3, underline that women's political interest is closely linked to the immediacy of governance. Nearly half of the women voters report moderate to high interest in local politics, where proximity to local government strengthens everyday political connection. This interest continues at the State level, with 44% of women expressing moderate to high interest in State politics and a substantial 38% at the national level. Together, the data patterns underscore a continuum of political engagement rather than fragmentation, and this engagement provides a strong base for expanding women's participation across higher levels of governance. Debates on voting behaviour often suggest that voters rely heavily on advice from family, spouses, or community leaders. However, Lokniti data from the 2014 and 2024 Lok Sabha elections show that while advice exists, independent decision-making remains predominant with variations across gender, location, and income groups.

In 2014, nearly six in every 10 voters reported deciding on their own and this remained almost unchanged at 59% in 2024. This persistence is closely linked to India's electoral framework. The secret ballot, introduced in 1951-52, institutionalised vote privacy. It was reinforced by the adoption of electronic voting machines (EVMs) in 2004 and later voter verifiable paper audit trail (VVPAT) systems in 2013, enabling voters to hear advice while keeping their final choice fully independent.

Gender-wise, men report higher levels of independent voting than women (Table 4) though the patterns remain stable over time. Among men, independent voting increases marginally from 65% in 2014 to 66% in 2024, while among women it rises from 51% to 52%. Dependence on spousal advice remains limited and does not show an upward trend. Similar patterns emerge across rural-urban settings. In rural areas, independent voting increases from 56% in 2014 to 60% in 2024. While among urban voters, independent voting remains high but dips slightly by 3% (62% in 2014 to 59% in 2024). Contrary to common assumptions, rural voters exhibit levels of independence similar to urban voters.

Lokniti data reveal a decade of continuity and gradual transformation in electoral behaviour. Turnout remains stable; women's participation has strengthened; and voters continue to express confidence in the impact of their ballot. Importantly, independent decision-making persists across gender, class, and rural-urban divides, highlighting the resilience of India's electoral institutions and the maturity of its democratic culture. As National Voters' Day reminds us of the value of participation, these patterns affirm that Indian voters are not only engaged but increasingly exercising their agency with autonomy and awareness.

(Krishanghi Sinha and Kirti Sharma are researchers with Lokniti, CSDS)

Analysis of voter behaviour

Data for the tables were sourced from Lokniti-CSDS. Views expressed in the article are personal and not of the institution. Figures in %



Table 1: Voter turnout in general elections (2014-2024)

Gender-wise	2014	2019	2024
Overall	66.1	67.4	66.44
Male	65.55	67.01	67
Female	65.78	67.18	65.54

Table 2: Voters' confidence in electoral influence (2024 LS polls)

Vote affects how things run in the country / makes no difference	%
Has impact	56
Has no impact	29

Table 3: Women's interest in politics (2019)

Level of politics	Not at all interested	Not very interested	Moderate/High interest
Local (Panchayat/Municipal)	27	25	46
State	28	26	44
National	30	29	38

Source: Women in Politics Study in collaboration with Konrad Adenauer Stiftung 2019. The rest of the women did not answer

Question asked: Women's interest sometimes varies across different levels of politics. Are you personally very interested, somewhat interested, not very interested or not at all interested in (a) local politics (Panchayat/Municipal corporation); (b) politics of your State; (c) national politics?

Table 4: Voting advice among Indian voters - 2014 vs 2024

Advice/opinion taken from	Overall	Male	Female	Rural	Urban
Decided on my own	58	59	65	51	52
Other family members	12	12	9	10	15
Husband/wife	7	7	3	2	12

Advice/opinion taken from	Poor	Middle*	Rich
Decided on my own	57	58	60
Other family members	12	14	12
Husband/wife	8	8	7

Note: The figures refer to post-poll period for 2014 and 2024. The total will not add up to 100 as advice from others not included in the table. Others include parents, community leaders, local political leaders, religious leaders, friends/ neighbours, co-workers/ colleagues, others can't say *MIDDLE INCOME

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO JANUARY 29, 1976

Plan for India's own communication satellite

Madras, Jan. 28: Prof. U. R. Rao, Director, ISRO Satellite Systems Project, Bangalore said here today that the Department of Space had plans for the design and development of an Indian-made communications satellite. It was now on the drawing board and could be launched with the French launch vehicle, "Ariane". It would be suitably positioned to cover the entire subcontinent. The time frame for launch is around 1980.

Disclosing this at a two-day seminar on "space communication" organised by the Electronic Engineers' Association, College of Engineering, Guindy, Prof. Rao said another major programme which had already taken off the ground was the design and development of a small satellite called Rohini weighing about 40 kgs. This would be utilised, along with the Indian Launch Vehicle SLV-3, for initially conducting technological experiments and subsequently for more meaningful scientific and application experiments. The first such satellite is expected to be launched in late 1978.

Closely following the successful launching of Aryabhata was an ongoing plan for the development of an Earth Observation Satellite (EOS) that would yield data relevant to the areas of hydrology and meteorology, he said. Explaining developments in space technology, Prof. Rao referred to the important role that satellites could play in national development.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JANUARY 29, 1926

Staggering profits in Calcutta jute industry

London, Jan. 28: Weekly *Forward* states that the report of Mr. Johnston, M.P., and Mr. J. F. Sime, Secretary, Dundee Jute Workers Union, upon their recent inquiries into the jute industry in India declares that the profits of jute mills in Calcutta are staggering, the total gain of shareholders for the decade ending 1924 being 300 million sterling or 90 per cent per annum on capital.

The average wage of 300,000 workers is at present 12½ sterling per annum. The report describes their housing conditions and says that the death rate among children under ten years is 50 per cent. It speaks of the absence of even primary education among child-workers.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Number of buses per lakh population in T.N.'s major cities

18 Tamil Nadu's major cities operate with just 18 buses per lakh population, far below the benchmark of 60 set by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, as per the 'Tamil Nadu Urban Mobility Charter 2031'. It attributes the gap to the misallocation of infrastructure spending. PTI

Energy capacity added by China from all sources in 2025

543 gigawatts. China added record amounts of wind and solar power capacity in 2025, while coal and gas power also surged, according to data released by its National Energy Administration. That included 315 gigawatts of solar power and 119 gigawatts of wind power. AFP

Number of jobs cut by Amazon in its latest round of layoffs

16,000 Amazon is slashing about 16,000 jobs in the second round of mass layoffs for the e-commerce company in three months. The tech giant has said it plans to use generative AI to replace corporate workers. PTI

Estimated number of casualties in Russia's war on Ukraine

2 In million. A report from the Centre for Strategic and International Studies warned that the number of soldiers killed, injured or missing on both sides of Russia's war on Ukraine could hit 2 million, with Russia suffering the largest number of troop deaths by any major power in any war since World War II. AP

Funds to be allocated for Delhi-Shimla-Dharamshala flights

31 In crore. The Himachal Pradesh government has decided to operationalise regular flight services on the Delhi-Shimla and Shimla-Dharamshala routes and provide financial assistance of ₹31 crore per annum to ensure their sustained operation. PTI

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Can the ED file writ petitions before Courts?

What high-profile case is at the centre of the challenge against the Enforcement Directorate's jurisdiction? What has been the Kerala government's defence? Why is the outcome of this case significant for the balance of power between Central and State authorities in India?

EXPLAINER

Aaratrika Bhaumik

The story so far:

In January 20, the Supreme Court agreed to examine whether the Enforcement Directorate (ED) is entitled to invoke the writ jurisdiction of constitutional courts to seek relief. A Bench comprising Justices Dipankar Datta and Satish Chandra Sharma admitted separate petitions filed by the Kerala and Tamil Nadu governments challenging a Kerala High Court ruling that upheld the agency's right to do so. Taking note of the substantial question of law raised by the Opposition-ruled States, the Bench directed that the matter be listed for hearing after four weeks.

When can courts issue writs?

In India, the Supreme Court is vested with the power to issue prerogative writs under Article 32 of the Constitution, while High Courts exercise a similar jurisdiction under Article 226. These writs trace their origins to English common law, where they evolved as extraordinary remedies issued by the sovereign in situations where ordinary legal remedies were unavailable or ineffective.

The Constitution recognises five such writs – habeas corpus (to secure the release of a person from unlawful detention), mandamus (to compel a public authority to perform a statutory or public duty), prohibition (to restrain a lower court or tribunal from acting beyond its authority), certiorari (to quash an order of a lower court or tribunal for lack of jurisdiction or illegality), and quo warrant (to question the legality of a person's claim to a public office).

While Article 32 enables the Supreme Court to issue writs primarily for the enforcement of fundamental rights, Article 226 vests High Courts with broader authority, allowing them to issue writs not only for enforcing fundamental rights but also "for any other purpose", including the enforcement of legal rights and the review of administrative action. However, the grant of such writs is discretionary, and courts may decline relief where an effective alternative remedy is already available.

Further, under Article 361 of the Constitution, a writ of mandamus cannot be issued against the President or the Governor of a State with respect to the exercise and performance of the powers and duties of their office. A writ also does not ordinarily lie against private individuals or bodies, except in cases where the state is alleged to have acted in collusion with a private party in violation of constitutional or statutory provisions.

Why did Kerala approach the SC?

The dispute traces its origin to a September 26, 2025 ruling of a Division Bench of the Kerala High Court, which held that the ED, established by the Union government under Section 36 of the Foreign Exchange Management Act, 1999 (FEMA) pursuant to a June 2000 notification, is a statutory body entitled to invoke the writ jurisdiction of High Courts under Article 226 of the Constitution.

The ruling arose from a writ petition filed by the ED challenging the Kerala government's decision to constitute a Commission of Inquiry (CoI) in connection with the diplomatic gold smuggling case. The case relates to the seizure of 30 kg of gold, valued at ₹14.82 crore, from diplomatic baggage arriving from the United Arab Emirates at the



In rage: A United Democratic Front protest march demanding Kerala CM Pinarayi Vijayan's resignation over the gold smuggling case in 2022. FILE PHOTO

Thiruvananthapuram International Airport on July 5, 2020. The National Investigation Agency subsequently registered a case under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967, alongside parallel proceedings initiated by the ED under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002 (PMLA).

The case later emerged as a flashpoint between the Centre and the State after Swapna Prabha Suresh, the prime accused, released an audio clip alleging that ED officials had coerced her into implicating persons holding high office in the State. Similar allegations were subsequently made in a letter by a co-accused. Acting on these allegations, the Pinarayi Vijayan government had tasked the inquiry commission to probe if there was a conspiracy afoot against the State's leaders and, if so, to unearth the identity of those behind the plot.

The ED, thereafter, through its Deputy Director, approached the High Court challenging the May 7, 2021, notification constituting the CoI. It sought a writ of mandamus to call for the relevant records and a writ of certiorari to quash the notification on the ground that it was wholly without jurisdiction and contrary to law.

However, the Kerala government questioned the ED's locus to maintain a writ petition, contending that it is merely a department of the Union government and not a juristic person or body corporate capable of suing or being sued. It further argued that the agency's only available remedy lay under Article 131 of the Constitution, which vests the Supreme Court with exclusive jurisdiction to adjudicate disputes between the Centre and the States. To buttress its contention, the State also relied on the Supreme Court's 2003 ruling in *Chief Conservator of Forests, Government of Andhra Pradesh versus Collector*, which had deprecated the practice of Centre and State governments filing writ petitions against

each other before High Courts.

What did the High Court rule?

In August 2021, a single judge of the High Court rejected the State government's objection to the maintainability of the ED's writ petition, observing that ED officers exercise statutory powers and that the agency cannot be treated as merely a department of the Union government. The State's appeal against this decision was dismissed by a Division Bench in its September 2025 ruling.

The Bench, comprising Justices Sushrut Arvind Dharmadhikari and Syam Kumar V.M., reiterated that the ED is a statutory body and that its officers are designated statutory authorities under Sections 48 and 49 of the PMLA. Rejecting the State's contention that the agency lacked juristic personality and the capacity to sue, the Bench observed that such an objection amounted to a "trivial defect" and was "a matter of form and not substance", which could not defeat the ED's statutory right to seek recourse under Article 226 of the Constitution.

What have Kerala and Tamil Nadu argued before the Supreme Court?

In its appeal before the top court, the Kerala government objected to the High Court's characterisation of its challenge to the maintainability of the ED's writ petition as a "trivial defect". It pointed out that the Supreme Court, in *Chief Conservator of Forests*, had held that the capacity of a legal entity – natural or artificial – to sue or be sued is a matter of considerable importance and that proceedings would fail if the necessary party lacked such capacity.

The State further contended that the Deputy Director of the ED, being only an officer and not a juristic person, lacked the locus to file a writ petition. "Hence, he also could not have filed a writ petition. Therefore, the finding of the High Court that the Deputy Director of Enforcement

has locus standi to institute the writ petition is erroneous... Neither the provisions of the 1999 Act nor the PMLA confer any legal personality on the ED so as to entitle it to be treated as a juristic person competent to sue," the petition stated. Tamil Nadu, supporting Kerala's challenge, submitted that it had been placed in nearly identical circumstances. It alleged that the ED had indulged in a "gross and blatant abuse of the process of law" by filing a writ petition before the Madras High Court in connection with proceedings relating to alleged illegal mining in the State. In a separate appeal before the Supreme Court, Tamil Nadu argued that the Kerala High Court's ruling had "emboldened the ED to venture a similar line of action" before the Madras High Court in its case.

What are the possible implications?

"It is contested whether the ED can be placed on the same footing as statutory bodies such as the Securities and Exchange Board of India or the Reserve Bank of India, which are juristic entities with perpetual succession and an express statutory capacity to sue and be sued", Alok Prasanna Kumar, co-founder of the Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy, told *The Hindu*. He noted that the ED is widely regarded as an instrumentality of the Union government, prosecuting cases on its behalf rather than functioning as an autonomous legal entity. Mr. Kumar further pointed out that the ED does not have any independent legal rights vis-à-vis State governments. "State governments do not owe any 'public duty' to the ED that could justify the issuance of a writ of mandamus or certiorari against them. At best, the allegation may be that a State has encroached upon the powers of the ED as an arm of the Union government. Such a claim would have to be pursued as a Centre-State dispute under Article 131 of the Constitution, over which the Supreme Court has exclusive jurisdiction", he said.

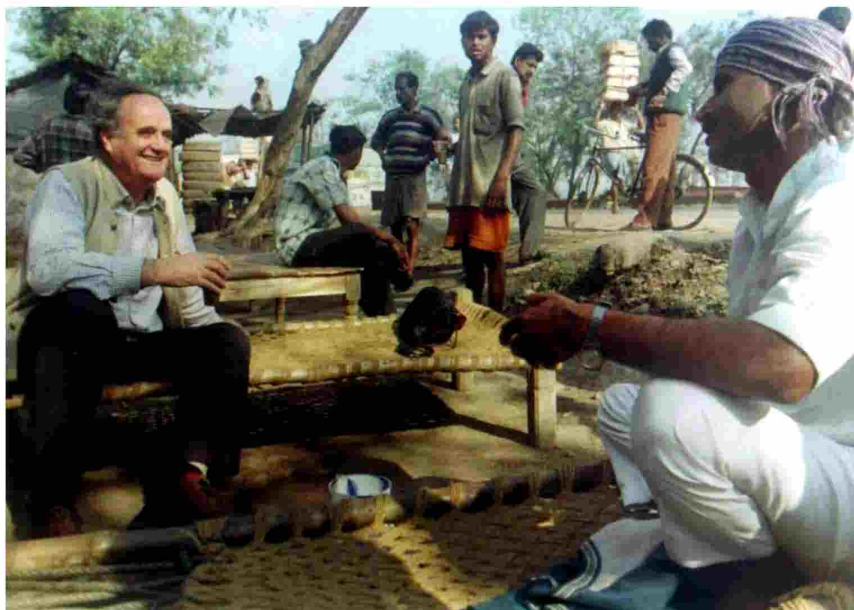
THE GIST

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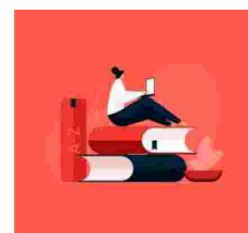
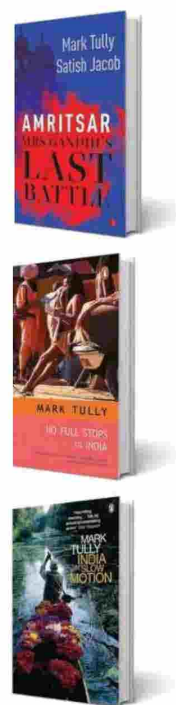
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Burning ember: Former BBC journalist Mark Tully chats with a truck-driver at a highway teashop in Dankuni, 20 kilometres northwest of Kolkata, on February 18, 2002. AP



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

S. Upendran

What is the meaning of "to burn the midnight oil"? (P. Jaya Ramalah)
When someone "burns the midnight oil", he/she stays awake late into the night. The person does this in order to study or do some work. If you are in the habit of watching television late into the night, you cannot say that you have been burning the midnight oil!

Many students start burning the midnight oil a week before the exams. My boss has given me a new assignment. I expect to be burning the midnight oil for the next week or so.

This expression came into existence much before electricity was discovered. In the old days when scholars wished to read or study late into the night, they made use of lamps. And what did they need in order to keep the lamps burning? Oil, of course! So when a person said he was burning the midnight oil, he meant he was working by the light of an oil lamp. Even today, in many States in our country, thanks to the erratic power supply, students literally burn the midnight oil!

Are the words "rational" and "rationale" pronounced the same way? (M. Charles, Pondicherry)
No, they are not. The "a" in the first syllable of "rational" is pronounced like the "a" in "rat", "bat" and "cat". The "tion" is like the "tion" in "election", "selection", and "vacation". The final "a" is like the "a" in "China". Some people reduce the word to two syllables by dropping the vowel in the second syllable. The main stress always remains on the first syllable.

Let's talk about this in a rational way. "Rationale", which means the reason on which a system is based, consists of three syllables. The first two syllables sound like the first two syllables of "rational". As for the "a" in the final syllable "ale", the English tend to pronounce it like the "a" in "palm", "balm", and "calm". The Americans, on the other hand, pronounce it like the "a" in "cat", "bat", and "hat". The main stress in this word is on the final syllable "nale". Seema didn't understand the rationale.

What is the difference in meaning between "regret" and "repent"? (N. Ramana Kumari, Adilabad, A.P.)
When you regret something that you have done, you feel sad and disappointed that you have done it. I regret I wasn't there to help you. Hema regretted losing her temper. He regretted not studying. "Repent", unlike "regret", is usually used in formal contexts, especially in religious ones. When you feel sorry for something bad that you did in the past, and you wish to make amends for it.

When do we use the word "sic"? (The word "sic" which is pronounced like "sick") is used quite often in comic books. The word is always placed within brackets after someone's quote. The use of the word "sic" indicates that although the quote looks odd in that it contains a mistake, the fault is not yours, but that of the person whom you are quoting. Published in The Hindu on June 15, 1999.

Finding his mark: Tully's books chronicled India on the move

As readers mourn the passing of "Two-lee Sahib", we read his books, 'No Full Stops in India' and others. The veteran journalist reported for the BBC between 1965 to 1994 on momentous events including the liberation of Bangladesh and the assassination of Indira Gandhi

Suhasini Haider

For decades, Mark Tully, the BBC correspondent in India, who made his home here, was the man who brought news of India, not only to his listeners in the U.K. and elsewhere, but to Indians themselves. This was not because there was any dearth of journalists, daily newspapers and periodicals in India that could chronicle the times, but because the state controlled the airwaves, both television and radio.

The BBC, available on shortwave radio, was one of the only alternatives to a nation obsessed with the news. Tully, who passed away on January 25, had lived in India as a child, and benefitted from the times he reported for the BBC (1965-1994), for a number of reasons. To begin with, those were times of momentous, nation-altering events in the region he covered: Bangladesh's liberation, Pakistan Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's hanging, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the U.S.-Pakistan funding of the Mujahideen to defeat them.

Emergency, and after

In India, he covered the Emergency (he was expelled by PM Indira Gandhi for his reportage for more than a year before he returned); Mrs. Gandhi's assassination and the anti-Sikh riots; the assassination of former PM Rajiv Gandhi; the Babri Masjid demolition; and the liberalisation of the economy. It was a time when a foreign correspondent in the

subcontinent led a charmed existence – access everywhere, big stories to cover, an ease of conversation with the leadership at the top, and budgets that allowed, in fact, encouraged correspondents to "go to the ground".

Those were also times when India was emerging out of a post-independence shell and slowly moving towards its economic potential, which made every colourful story, from a local wedding to the Kumbh mela, one of great curiosity to his viewers and listeners abroad.

Tully's work at the BBC ended when he resigned in 1994, but he never stopped chronicling India through his books, with a reporter's eye that was inquisitive, perceptive, and replete with dry humour. A telling quote appears at the beginning of his most celebrated work, *No Full Stops in India* (1991). "How do you cope with the poverty?" Tully said he was asked most frequently by visitors to India. "I don't have to. The poor do," he replied, dismissing with his pithy response, the patronising attitude of many foreigners that Indians bristle at. While he never romanticised India's poor, Tully didn't make them an object of scorn or pity either.

Amritsar: Mrs. Gandhi's Last Battle (1985), that he co-authored with his BBC colleague Satish Jacob, is a granular account of the Punjab insurgency and the Indira Gandhi government's decision to storm the Golden Temple in Operation Bluestar. The authors began working on the book before Mrs. Gandhi was assassinated on October 31, 1984, and it

came out as violence, including the riots in Delhi, and the crackdown by security forces in Punjab still roiled the situation. However, the authors were able to capture a long-term perspective for readers, not just the anger of the moment. Most of Tully's other books are collections of essays, reflecting on the issues he covered, like caste struggles, Naxalism, corruption and 'Babus', Hindu-Muslim tensions, the political rise of Hindutva, insurgencies in Punjab and the Northeast, and Sati and dowry deaths. While many of the themes are clichéd, his treatment was descriptive, not prescriptive, and hence less likely to offend.

India, in his heart

Above all, Tully focused on an India on the move – as is evident from the titles of his works. *No Full Stops in India* (originally called "The Defeat of a Congressman and Other Stories") was followed by *India in Slow Motion* (2002), written with his partner and fellow-journalist Gillian Wright. His other books include *India's Unending Journey*, *India: The Road Ahead* and *Non-Stop India*. The heart of India and the quasi-fictional *Upcountry Tales: Once Upon a Time in the Heart of India* both focus on Uttar Pradesh, where he spent much of his time reporting. Criticism of Tully, including extreme versions of it, when he was chased by a mob outside the Babri Masjid calling for his death, centre on his reporting of only "negative" stories about India, but then that is the nature of

the news business. When asked in an interview for a 1992 *LA Times* profile entitled "The BBC's Battered Sahib", he said, when you work as a journalist, you get "shot from all sides".

Fly on the wall

Through all of his work Tully remains, in his words, "only a bloody journalist" – intrigued by the subjects of his reporting, but removed and dispassionate, as a fly on the wall. Where he deviates is in his obvious affection for the land he adopted, and in his preference for an India that is less-polarised, that celebrates the values of secularism and inclusivity. While he hardly wrote any books about India post-2014, he was known to express his disappointment over government constraints on journalists, including raids on the BBC some years ago, as well as on the "spread of religious hatred", but said that he remained optimistic that Indian traditions of pluralism would endure.

Fitting then, that at his funeral at a Delhi crematorium this week, Vedic chants mingled with ease to strains of the hymn "Abide with Me". Recounting his childhood in the 1930s growing up in a British home in Kolkata, Tully has written about his English nanny, who scolded him when she found he was learning to count in Hindi, as she saw it as her responsibility to ensure her charge didn't "go native". Nearly a century later, it is clear that the nanny failed brilliantly, to the immense benefit of his readers, who are today mourning the passing of "Two-lee Sahib".

THE DAILY QUIZ

Anton Chekov, Russian playwright and master of the modern short story, was born on this day in 1860. Work your brain cells with this quiz on the celebrated author

Vighnesh P. Venkitesh

QUESTION 1

While Chekhov is celebrated for his literary work, what was his original profession?

QUESTION 2

The opening of Chekhov's first major play in 1896 was a failure, but later productions became extremely successful. What was the name of this play?

QUESTION 3

In Chekhov's short story *The Bet*, what does a banker and a lawyer place a wager on?

QUESTION 4

Which work by Chekhov won him the prestigious Pushkin prize in 1888?

QUESTION 5

Name the tool that is associated with Chekhov as a metaphor for foreshadowing in screenplays.

СТО ЛЕТ СО ДНЯ РОЖДЕНИ



Visual Question:

Chekhov's short story *The Lady with the Lapdog* was set in this building.

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz:

- The working title Austen gave to *Pride and Prejudice*. **Ans: First Impressions.**
 - This 19th-century novelist's work influenced Austen's ironic treatment of social manners. **Ans: Fanny Burney's 1782 novel Cecilia**
 - This person bore the financial risk for the publication of the first edition of *Pride and Prejudice*? **Ans: Jane Austen, who published it under a commission arrangement, retaining the copyright and receiving profits after expenses.**
 - The credit on Austen's first book *Sense and Sensibility*. **Ans: It was credited anonymously as "By a Lady".**
 - The now-acclaimed opening line of the book. **Ans: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife."**
- Visual: Identify this 1985 television adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* that aired on Doordarshan. **Ans: Trishna.**
- Early Birds: Dilbar Poonja| M. Suresh Kumar| Abhay Krishan

Word of the day

Metonymy:

a word that denotes one thing but refers to a related thing

Usage: Washington is a metonym for the U.S. government.

Pronunciation:

newsth.live/metonympro

International Phonetic Alphabet:

/ˈmɛ.tə.nɪ.m/

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- 2) The Hindu
- 3) Business line
- 4) The Indian Express
- 5) Economic Times
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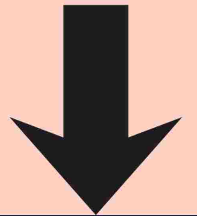
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OUR VIEW

MY VIEW | MYTHS AND MANTRAS



India-EU trade accord: What to watch out for

While the FTA holds promise, three aspects will determine its performance: manufacturing, mobility and non-tariff barriers. But before that, the deal must leap through multiple hoops

India's recently concluded free trade agreement (FTA) with the EU, almost two decades in the making, has injected fresh energy into the country's geo-economics. It offers strategists on both sides greater latitude to pursue higher economic and perhaps even geopolitical ambitions. In a best-case scenario, it could act as a bulwark against global hegemony sought to be exercised by a third party. While the FTA is more symbolic than an economic reality at this point, it has three critical aspects that will determine its performance: manufacturing, mobility and non-tariff barriers. The first is a no-brainer: the deal is visibly designed to boost the factory sector in both economies. India's enduring concern has been to safeguard its sprawling base of labour-intensive manufacturing, any threat to which could have a wider fallout; lower EU import duties on Indian apparel, textiles, footwear, etc., could well give this segment a leg-up. Broadly, though, making the most of easier EU-market access would need our manufacturers to sharpen their competitive edge and get past a maze of restrictive entry rules. India's tariff relief has nicely been calibrated in highly guarded sectors for gradual exposure of local players to European competition (with a low-duty quota for high-end vehicle imports, for example). By and large, a wider opening of our market to EU machinery, electrical equipment, aircraft and other items is a nod to Brussels' need to keep factories humming. In case either side has second thoughts, the FTA allows a general review five years after it goes into force.

An interesting part of this agreement is its mobility pact, which promises freer EU entry for Indian workers and students. The latter stand to gain the most, given the US's harsh

turn on immigration; the enrolment of Indian students in US universities over the peak season of August-September 2025 dropped by nearly 75%. Since state-run UK institutions charge foreign students higher fees to subsidize locals, the allure of EU universities would rise. Worker mobility, however, might be held back somewhat by local political sentiment. The missing link in mobility seems to be tourism. Indian tourists contribute significantly to the EU economy. Yet, Europe remains tightfisted with visas. Perhaps our negotiators should bring this up during the next stage of FTA talks.

For all the euphoria over the accord, three elephants still loom in the room. The first is the EU's carbon border adjustment mechanism (CBAM), a protectionist measure on which India only secured a promise of equal treatment as a trade partner on any leeway given. As for the levy, the CBAM can have been kicked down the road, with talks to be held later. The second is a more familiar non-tariff barrier: the EU's sanitary and phytosanitary rules that often keep our farm exports out. An EU fact-sheet states that all Indian agri-products must comply with these "very stringent, science-based" standards. The third and most daunting challenge lies in the 'last-mile' path of the deal. Within the EU, the FTA must now jump through four hoops. First, a stage of legal vetting, with text-revision proposals requiring India's approval. After this, the document moves to the European Council for its nod, before which it cannot be signed by the two parties. In the next stage, the European Parliament must ratify what's signed. This political body can pose its own hurdles, as seen in the recent EU-Mercosur deal. Till the India-EU FTA crosses this Rubicon, let's hold off all celebrations.

Does the budget have room for greater spending and tax relief?

Tax collections lag estimates even as vital sectors call for bigger fiscal allocations and concessions



DEVINA MEHRA
is founder of First Global and author of 'Money, Myths and Mantras: The Ultimate Investment Guide'. Her X handle is @devinamehra

On the surface, India appears to have the ultimate Goldilocks economy: one of the highest GDP growth rates in the world with historically low inflation—exactly what any government would want. In theory, this should give the government tremendous flexibility and room in the upcoming budget. However, drill down a little deeper and gaps begin to appear that will result in some furrowed brows.

As per the statistics ministry's first advance estimates for 2025-26, India's real GDP is estimated to grow at 7.4%, which makes India arguably the world's fastest growing major economy. However, nominal GDP, or GDP in current rupee terms, is projected to grow only 8%. This is against a two-decade average of approximately 12%.

While the headline GDP number talked about is always the real growth rate (GDP at constant prices), most concrete and measurable numbers in the economy, from corporate profits to tax collections, are tied to nominal GDP growth. As mentioned above, this has been anaemic at 8%.

When the budget was presented last year, the nominal GDP growth rate was estimated at 10% plus. Based on this, corporate tax collections were budgeted to grow at 10.7% and GST at 10.9%. Surprisingly, and this is something I pointed out in this column at the time, in spite of hefty personal tax cuts,

the mop-up from these taxes (or 'non-corporate tax' as per budget documents) was budgeted to grow at 14.4%. The only explanation I could come up with was that the finance ministry was expecting hefty inflows from capital market related taxes. The securities transaction tax (STT) was estimated to rise by 40%. As I had said then, "While the regulator may be talking against excess speculation, many including the government seem to be banking on it."

Now with a slowdown in nominal GDP as well as a weaker-than-expected performance of the stock market, tax collections have been running way below the budgeted numbers. In spite of giving substantially lower refunds, even total net tax collections have grown only 8% from April 2025 to 11 January 2026, versus the 11% budgeted. If this trend continues for the rest of the months of this fiscal year, there will be a shortfall of over ₹1.3 trillion in tax collections against the budgeted number.

Meanwhile every participant in the Indian economy has given a wish list to the government, which typically includes either some tax concession or increased government spending in their area. In reality, the government has very little leeway for tax cuts or increased spending. Given the sluggish tax collections, there is simply no room available for concessions, unless it lets the fiscal deficit balloon. The latter may not be a palatable option.

The other thing to remember is that for the last few years, Indian GDP growth has been mainly dependent on government spending. Capital expenditure by the government has gone up nearly five times in the past decade. Of course, as this newspaper pointed out a few days ago, not all of it has been productive. For instance, while an airport has been built every 50 days for the last few years, many of these are underutilized or under-used; 15 new airports are underutilized and nearly 50 have less than five flights a day. Hence, I am sure there is scope for some cutting in government

expenditure, but it will nevertheless have a sobering impact on GDP growth.

And since it is budget season, there are always questions about my wish list. Unlike most others in my business, my list typically does not centre around the corporate world or capital markets. To my mind, the priorities the government should focus on are education, health, employment and research. These are not glamorous and the results don't show up in a single year. But spending on these heads compounds over time. These are the building blocks for a great country and economy.

For instance, India spends only 3% to 4% of its GDP on education. The target of 6% is still a long way off and rare is the budget whose education spend is even in line with nominal GDP growth. For perspective, China spends 6% plus and given that its GDP is roughly five times ours, the amount is seven-and-a-half times ours.

Now for health. As per survey data and research studies, India has the highest number of undernourished and anaemic children in the world, with about one-third being underweight and more than two-thirds being anaemic.

Even if our focus is solely on economic growth rather than society, remember education and health are the building blocks needed for us to have people who are employable. Our demographic dividend can give us returns if and only if we find jobs for our young people, which in turn means that they must have education and skills. Not to forget that this bulge of working-age Indians is available only for a limited period of time before India's population plateaus and then begins to decline.

Research is where we went above and beyond in the early years of the Republic, but have now fallen far behind with only 0.6% of GDP being spent on R&D. China spends 25 times the amount we do on research. In a fast-changing world, we need more emphasis and spending on this. The finance minister sure faces a tough ask this time.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

The scope of America's global hegemony is admittedly great, but its depth is shallow, limited by both domestic and external restraints.

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MY VIEW | WORLD APART

Is the world trapped between two big rival hegemonies?

RAHUL JACOB



is a former Financial Times foreign correspondent

More than three decades ago, the legendary Warren Buffett returned a call to a fact-checker, explaining what he meant when he used the term "elephant-bumping affairs." Buffett was gently deriding talkations such as the World Economic Forum (WEF) and CEO summits hosted by business magazines. I was then working for *Fortune* magazine in New York and was the fact-checker Buffett called. I couldn't help smiling as he remarked that these summits were where large egos went to bump into others of their tribe. That early lesson from a man who was a role model of self-deprecating humility for me made me sceptical of Davos, where the WEF holds its annual huddle. This was only heightened when I attended the WEF's satellite summits in India and China. These reinforced what Buffett said, but with a corollary: Such events make it possible for busy people to take a brief holiday while seeming busy.

But, this year's WEF was different. There

was plenty of news, ranging from US President Donald Trump's disavowal of the use of force to take over Greenland to Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney's overpraised speech calling out US hegemony. There has been a change, of course, in leadership at the WEF itself with the resignation last April of founder Klaus Schwab after whistleblowers reportedly accused him of research manipulation and financial impropriety. Schwab and his wife were cleared of the charges, but Larry Fink, BlackRock founder and WEF co-chair, now seems in control. Fink muscled about moving it from Davos to Dubai or Detroit. Surely Delhi, at least in the interest of alliteration, deserves to be on that list, but he only mentioned Jakarta in Asia.

At the centre of this circus, inevitably, was Trump. He walked back his threat to invade Greenland and impose higher tariffs on NATO allies opposed to that idea. Davos and its aftermath are all about predictions, so let me make one. January 2026 will be remembered as the point when Trump's authority started to unravel. The term TACO (Trump Always Chicksens Out) has never seemed more apt. He tends to change tack when the US stock market tumbles, which appeared to be the proximate cause for his rollback of outlandish tariffs announced on Liberation

Day in April as well as his decision to sound more conciliatory on Greenland. Machiavelli's much quoted line that a ruler is better feared than loved might have to be reworked for the Age of Trump.

Like the MGM lion that roars at the start of a film from this studio, Trump often comes across like a parody US president, adapted for the small screens of smartphones. While the hypocrisy of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 was at least once dressed up with highfalutin talk about installing democracy, US attacks on Nigeria and Venezuela in January came without much attempt at justification. Subsequent meetings in the White House with oil majors to coax them to invest in Venezuela only underlined that this was a resource grab. The chief of Exxon, however, termed the country "uninvestable." January does not just mark the first anniversary of the most tumultuous US presidency ever, but also a rise in TACO readings, with many arguing that the words

of a leader who made his name as a TV show host are mostly bluster.

Overshadowed at Davos by Trump and Carney was Chinese Vice Premier He Lifeng. He referred to US-China trade talks as a prime example of cooperation and called for fair treatment of Chinese companies overseas.

This is rhetoric more muted than the bluster from the US, but even more potent. Ahead of lecturing Davos about middle powers needing to stand up to the US hegemon, Canada's Carney had reached an agreement with Beijing that involves slashing tariffs for the first 49,000 Chinese electric vehicles (EVs) sold in Canada from 100% to 6%. This week, UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer is slated to visit Beijing to put UK-China relations on a different path.

Perhaps major middle powers such as Canada, the UK and even India should read closely the details of China's current five-year plan; Beijing seeks to dominate the commanding heights of green technology

such as batteries and EVs, while ceding little space to developing countries to build market share in low-end electronics, toys and garments. China's share of global container shipments reached 37% for the first three quarters of last year, while its trade surplus for the full year hit \$1.2 trillion. Its response to US tariffs has been to decimate manufacturing in developing countries. The head of an industry body in Jakarta estimated that the textile sector alone in Indonesia had lost 300,000 jobs to cheap Chinese imports.

The trouble is that Trump's mostly successful attempt to control the news cycle pushes China's hegemonic behaviour to the sidelines. Robin Harding, Asia editor of the *Financial Times*, spent time in Beijing in November asking economists and business leaders what the world could sell China. The answers were mostly patronising. Soybeans and iron ore, said one. Higher education said another, but only because Peking University and Tsinghua are hard to get admission to. Unable to think of much else, they suggested that Europe allow Chinese companies to set up more factories there. This attitude of "What's mine is mine and what's yours will be mine" should be condemned, but don't expect to hear that at Davos.

China-US rivalry is hurting developing countries even as Trump's bluster hogs the global limelight



| GUEST VIEW

MINT CURATOR

How India can sustain its growth amid dramatic structural breaks

The Economic Survey delves into key challenges facing our economy as we confront unprecedented and shifting conditions



V. ANANTHA NAGESWARAN
is chief economic advisor to the Government of India

The Economic Survey for 2025-26, being released on 29 January, comes at an extraordinary time for the world. Global politics is in flux. Most agree that the world order they were comfortable with is no longer relevant.

Beyond that, agreement ends. There is little clarity on what might replace it, or whether such clarity will emerge gradually or through a catalytic—or even cathartic—event.

Meanwhile, India has been patient, absorbing the pressure and quietly going about its goal of economic transformation, lifting aspirations and delivering on them. This is the backdrop in brief for the Economic Survey.

This fiscal year has been another good one for economic growth and macroeconomic stability. As of now, estimated growth in real terms is 7.4%. India has sustained growth since the pandemic and has roughly halved the Union government's fiscal deficit as a proportion to gross domestic product—based on the projected 2025-26 budget deficit announced in February 2025—even while significantly ramping up public infrastructure investment. In other words, deficit reduction has been accompanied by an improvement in the quality of fiscal expenditure.

Fiscal prudence, conservatism and economic growth earned the country three credit-rating upgrades last year. India looks set to build on this record and enjoy a longer period of non-inflationary growth that has eluded it in previous cycles. That the banking sector is healthy and capital markets remain enthusiastic about funding startups are additional support factors. The geopolitical environment, however, guarantees a rough ride.

Since the beginning of 2025, the price of one dollar in Indian rupees has gone up by more than 6%. Over this shorter horizon, several other emerging-market currencies have performed better. However, when the frame is widened to a six-year window beginning February 2020, most major emerging-market currencies, including the Indian rupee, have weakened against the dollar by a similar magnitude. Countries that run current account deficits are inherently vulnerable during periods of geopolitical discontinuity, as cross-border capital flows become sensitive to political signals. Money is no longer neutral.

Countries that have built a strong manufacturing base, export manufactured goods and run external surpluses have enjoyed strong and stable currencies in the post-Bretton Woods era. But they did so at a time when the climate was not a pressing concern and energy-transition considerations were distant. They were also not required to reckon with a hyper-competitive manufacturing powerhouse like China, which posted a trade surplus exceeding \$1 trillion in 2025.



At the same time, manufactured goods and primary as well as intermediate inputs have become part of the strategic balancing that countries engage in. As a result, indigenization has acquired an urgency that did not exist even half-a-decade ago. Further, rapid advances in artificial intelligence over the last year have raised new questions for a nation that needs to generate at least 8 million jobs annually.

These themes frame the issues that the Economic Survey for 2025-26 wrestles with. In addition, the questions that it attempts to answer include: Has India done enough to lift its growth rate and sustain it? How should India go about pursuing the twin imperatives of indigenization and enhancing export competitiveness? How does one achieve a structural reduction in the cost of capital, which is an important input cost?

The state has to organize and equip itself differently than before to respond to these questions and deliver on development in the backdrop of an unprecedented global environment.

Generally, analyses in the public domain focus on the role of public policy in addressing national priorities. Democratic governments indeed have a large share of responsibility in shaping the vision and guiding its realization. But nation-building is a collective endeavour. Wealthier nations did not reach their present position on the strength of the state alone; corporate leadership also played a role that extended beyond narrow balance-sheet con-

siderations. Can, and will, India's private sector leadership rise to the occasion?

While it is generally true that leaders inspire people, the converse is equally true and possible. Citizens have an important role in the nation's progress. Each takes a cue from the other. The trade-off between instant and delayed gratification matters in individual and public affairs.

The choices people make about the food they eat, the data they consume, the respect they accord public goods and the fiscal support they expect from the government dictate the policy choices the government makes. These expectations and their fulfilment, or lack thereof, influence not only the nation's short-term growth trajectory, but also its long-term prospects.

The Economic Survey aims to inform the public about the state of the economy and stimulate discussion on the issues confronting both the governed and the governing, the paths that lie ahead and the ones they must decide to treat. Given the depth and breadth of topics to be covered, the Economic Survey this time is longer than usual. It is also organized differently from previous editions.

India offers unparalleled scope for policymakers, students, teachers and practitioners to contribute to and learn from its exciting growth prospects. We hope that the latest edition of the Economic Survey will serve as both a milestone and signpost in this journey.

| GUEST VIEW

South Korea has sprung to the cutting edge of AI regulation

Seoul's new law aims to make AI deployment sustainable and safe



CATHERINE THORBECKE
is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering Asia tech.



South Korea is the first country to enact a comprehensive national AI law. istockphoto

Nearly a decade ago, long before ChatGPT wowed the world with its humanlike conversational abilities, Google DeepMind's artificial intelligence (AI) system stunned South Korea when it beat legendary Go player Lee Sedol during a televised tournament in Seoul.

The Go master and 18-time world champion of the centuries-old strategy game later retired, calling AI an "entity that cannot be defeated." The spectacle was a warning, with then-president Park Geun-hye declaring Korean society was "inimically lucky" to have learned about the nascent technology's importance "before it is too late."

That early shock has since morphed into one of the fastest surges in AI use anywhere in the post-ChatGPT era. And Seoul wants to turn that momentum into something rarer: durable public trust. It has become the first country to enact a comprehensive national law with its so-called AI Basic Act taking effect last week.

As the US and China compete to build the best models, South Korea is stress-testing a more immediate question: how an advanced, hyper-connected economy can roll out AI rapidly without letting scams, deepfakes and slop wallow public trust. Seoul is betting that rules don't have to kill adoption, but legitimize it.

The rest of the world will be watching closely. The nation has also become a live demo of how quickly the technology can spread throughout the real economy when conditions are right. Microsoft's AI Economy Institute called South Korea "the clearest end-of-year success story" in its *Diffusion Report* this month, citing the sharpest spike in adoption in the second half of last year.

Since October 2024, Generative AI usage grew by 25% in the US and 35% globally. In South Korea, it jumped more than 80%. Microsoft attributed this surge to improvements in the Korean-language capabilities of large language models. It also pointed to the viral South Korean Ghibli moment in April 2025, when global users were mesmerized by ChatGPT's image generator. The one-time trend exploded rapidly in South Korea but resulted in last year's adoption of the technology.

And Microsoft argued that government policy—including the passage of the AI Basic Act—helped speed integration across schools, workplaces and public services.

The result is a societal leaning into the revolution with unusual enthusiasm. The nation has the second-highest number of paying ChatGPT subscribers, behind the

US. And at just 16%, South Korea had the lowest percentage of respondents who said they were "more concerned than excited" about the rise of AI in daily life—less than half the global average of 34% and far below the US's 50%, according to Pew Research Center data.

But these superlatives come with outside exposure to the downsides. By some measures, the country also consumes the most amount of 'AI slop.' And well before Elon Musk's Grok triggered global backlash over non-consensual AI nudes, South Korea was already grappling with a deepfake porn crisis.

Many governments, spooked by a hype super-cycle and fears of falling behind geopolitical competition, are hesitating to regulate. The stated aim of Seoul's law is to lay "a foundation of trustworthiness" for AI's role in society, not after the damage is done, but before it scales.

Inspired by a similar law enacted by the EU, but taking effect earlier, South Korea's rules require stronger human oversight and disclosures when AI is used in sensitive domains, from loan screening to nuclear facility management. They also require labelling tools such as watermarks for machine-generated material that can be hard to distinguish from reality.

Critics argue that the laws are vague, risk chilling innovation and could hit startups harder than Big Tech, which can absorb compliance costs. Some of that concern is fair, and so far, the government has appeared sympathetic to local industry feedback. But Seoul deserves credit for acting before a backlash becomes irreversible. With 98% of the population online and the world's highest density of industrial robots, the country is unusually well-positioned to turn widespread adoption into tangible economic gains.

That also makes it a useful test case for policymakers elsewhere, who are stuck between falling behind and confronting a mounting list of societal concerns.

The point of AI guardrails is not to slow deployment, it is to make it sustainable. When it comes to such a transformative technology, the bigger constraint may not be regulation but trust. If Seoul can scale AI while holding the line on deception and abuse, it will show other jurisdictions how to do both.

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After the applause: Now for the EU pact's real challenge

SHISHIR PRIYADARSHI



is president, Chintan Research Foundation, and former director, World Trade Organization.

Trade agreements are usually judged on the very day they are announced, even though their legal finalization and ratification can stretch on for months. Markets react, officials celebrate and headlines proclaim new eras of partnership long before the hard work begins. The same goes for the India-EU free trade agreement (FTA), labelled the "mother of all deals," now that leaders have announced the successful conclusion of negotiations. The enthusiasm is understandable. The pact is economically weighty. It reportedly envisages phased tariff reductions across a large share of bilateral goods trade, frameworks for regulatory cooperation, disciplines on sustainability and supply-chain resilience and standing institutional mechanisms to manage standards and technical barriers. For India, it promises improved access to a high-income market for pharmaceuticals, engineering goods, automotive components, textiles and apparel, processed foods and specialty chemicals—sectors where EU demand is

large but regulatory thresholds exacting.

For the EU, the deal opens wider opportunities for automobile and auto-component makers, renewable-energy developers, wines and spirits producers, machinery firms, luxury brands and infrastructure operators seeking scale in a fast-growing market. Linking two blocs that together account for roughly a quarter of global output, it is among the most consequential bilateral trade initiatives of recent years.

Yet, attention will soon shift from celebratory communiqués to administrative reality. The history of trade diplomacy is sobering: many FTAs hailed as transformative delivered far less than promised because implementation lagged ambition. If India and the EU want this pact to be an engine of durable integration, they will have to treat execution as a strategic project in its own right.

Few agreements will be more technically demanding. The EU has the world's most sophisticated regulatory framework, with dense rules covering chemicals, food safety, data protection, carbon accounting, sustainability reporting, labour processes and productivity. India, on its part, is a continental-scale market with multiple regulatory layers across central ministries, state governments, port authorities, customs zones and sectoral

regulators. Bridging these systems will take more than just parliamentary approval.

For Indian exporters, the biggest hurdles will often lie not in tariffs, but in conformity assessments, certification timelines, traceability requirements and documentation standards. EU companies expanding or investing in India face a mirror image: land acquisition rules, sub-national regulations, environmental clearances, tax administration, etc. If such frictions persist, preferential tariffs will only partially offset them.

What separates successful trade partnerships from mediocre ones is the institutional machinery that follows signature. Several priorities stand out. We will need infrastructure related to standards: testing labs, accreditation bodies and certification agencies. Rules of origin will be another critical area. If compliance is too burdensome, firms will not use preferences.

Sustainability rules, carbon-border measures, data governance and chemicals regula-

tion evolve continuously. Joint working groups that keep pace with these shifts will determine whether firms adapt smoothly or confront disruptions. Finally, there will be trade frictions. But these must be resolved through technical consultations between regulators and not via arbitration panels.

Attention must now turn to the economic governance and implementation of the India-EU free trade deal

Industry too, has homework to do. Indian firms must upgrade compliance systems, invest in traceability, adopt digital documentation and treat regulatory excellence as a competitive asset rather than an imposition. Large businesses may manage this readily, but smaller exporters may struggle unless supported by export-promotion councils, chambers of commerce and public schemes.

How the pact is executed will shape perceptions of India's wider trade strategy. After years of caution, New Delhi has shown an inclination to open its market, albeit in phases. If this deal delivers visible export growth, investment inflows and supply-chain integration, it will strengthen the case for further liberalization through other

deals. If not, scepticism will return quickly.

Whether Indian pharma and textile firms gain durable footholds in Europe, whether engineering exporters plug into continental supply chains and whether European clean-energy companies, machinery producers and automakers translate market opening into long-term investment in India will not be decided by the FTA. It will be determined in certification laboratories, port terminals, regulatory offices, state secretariats and corporate compliance departments.

The stakes for Europe are equally high. Brussels increasingly views trade agreements as a way to diversify partners, secure clean-energy supply chains and embed sustainability norms abroad. That agenda cannot be realized through legal texts alone; it demands years of technocratic engagement.

The India-EU FTA now enters its harder phase. Success will be measured in shipment volumes, clearance times, investment decisions and factory expansions. If both sides treat implementation as secondary to diplomacy, the deal will underperform. But if they treat it as a flagship economic-governance project, it could become one of the most consequential trade partnerships of this decade. The applause will soon subside. That is when the real work must begin.

thehindubusinessline.

THURSDAY • JANUARY 29, 2026

Major breakthrough

India-EU FTA holds out promise

After two decades of tedious negotiations, it is truly an achievement for India and the European Union (EU) to have finally concluded their free trade agreement negotiations; the deal is expected to come alive by early 2027. What remains to be sorted out is 'legal scrubbing' — which implies not just honing the language of the agreement for precision, but also securing more clarity on the 'standards' or non-tariff barriers set by EU for goods imports.



The fact sheet issued by the Indian side on Tuesday suggests major market access gains for India. But the EU's factsheet refers to certain concessions it has secured with respect to 'standards' and services, which are not clear at this stage. Indeed, the goods market gains for India should be weighed against the costs imposed under the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism. The EU has not budged an inch. Under this, hard to abate sectors such as iron and steel, aluminium, cement and fertilizer will have to abide by EU emission laws by reducing emissions and convincingly documenting the same. This move is expected to raise costs by 15-20 per cent, which could offset gains from the tariff cuts.

Meanwhile, the deal (where EU will eliminate tariffs on 90.7 per cent of India's exports with immediate effect) betters market access for India's labour intensive sectors, which could account for 40 per cent of exports to EU. In the case of textiles and garments, India (\$7.2 billion exports to EU in FY25) will now be better placed to compete with Bangladesh, Pakistan and Turkey, which have trade pacts with the EU. India has opened up its tariffs with immediate effect on 49.6 per cent of tariff lines (much lower than EU's offer), while on another 39.6 per cent of EU imports there is a 5-10 year transition to move to zero tariff. This transition period is fair, as India is cutting its tariffs from steeper levels than the EU. Notably, agriculture and dairy have been kept out. So, this looks like a good deal for India on goods market access, even after accounting for what has been conceded on cars, some agri-processed goods, machinery and electrical equipment, aircraft, medical equipment, plastics and pharma.

In services, however, the EU claims that India has gone further in giving concessions than to "any other trading partner", including UK and Australia. It has asserted strict enforcement of sanitary and phytosanitary rules and IP rights. Disconcertingly, technical barriers to trade include environment, workers' rights, labour rights and women's empowerment. It is not clear whether these inclusions have been agreed upon, or are a work in progress. India needs to negotiate this clutter. There is a broader economics of FTAs that needs to be factored in. Indian businesses must be able to produce at scale and competitive costs to take worthwhile advantage of any FTA. While there have been improvements in logistics, it is important that industries operate in a hassle-free plug and play environment. The Centre's job starts now.

OTHER VOICES.

The Guardian

A catastrophic Tory legacy has cut millions adrift

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's latest report on poverty in the UK, published this week, should be read first and foremost as an indictment of all Conservative governments between 2010 and 2024. During almost a decade and a half of Tory rule, the JRF estimates that no progress at all was made in reducing overall levels of relative hardship. No surprise perhaps. Through wide-ranging, ideologically driven welfare cuts, ministers actively sought to make life harder, not easier, for many of the least well-off. The grim legacy of that approach is that in 2023-24 — the last dataset available — about one in five people were in relative poverty, defined as less than 60% of median income. But it also turns out that 6.8 million people were struggling to survive on far, far less than that, having effectively been economically cut adrift. Some 3.8 million people experienced destitution in 2022. LONDON, JANUARY 27



AMOL BAXI

India's social sector has significant fund requirements. Per recent data, India's social sector expenditure (across education, healthcare, water and sanitation, and others for Centre and States: Economic Survey FY25) is estimated at approximately ₹26 lakh crore.

As highlighted in Bain & Company's India Philanthropy Report 2025, there is an estimated funding gap of ₹14 lakh crore annually (almost the entire current bank credit outstanding to the infrastructure sector), expected to reach ₹16 lakh crore by 2029.

Further, it has been estimated that to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, developing countries would have to increase spending in key verticals such as healthcare and education alone by 75 per cent (G20 Independent Experts Group).

Recognised as an indirect engine of growth, the social sector is vital for inclusive and human development. Considering the importance, the Central and State governments have increased their social spending expenditure (SSE) in recent years.

Per the last Economic Survey, SSE as a percentage of total expenditure (Centre + States) increased from 23.3 per cent in FY21 (pandemic year) to around 26.2 per cent in FY25 (with education and health constituting approximately 58 per cent).

During the period, the SSE grew at a CAGR of 15 per cent. The trend is expected to continue, considering its importance. The social sector remains a consistent focus in Budget documents.

LOW SPENDING

Notwithstanding growing emphasis, India's spending on the social sector remains at relatively low levels (7.8 per cent of GDP as against 13 per cent requirement). Financing of social infrastructure (capex) remains a problem due to various reasons (such as low user charges).

This has resulted in the government taking several measures over time. These include the inclusion of social infrastructure in the MoF harmonized list of Infrastructure; mandating it in bank priority sector lending (PSL), introducing Viability Gap Funding (VGF), establishing the Social Stock Exchange (for equity and bond solutions), encouraging Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) through the New Infrastructure Pipeline (NIP), and introducing Partial Credit Enhancements (PCEs) to facilitate infrastructure projects access bond markets.

Despite various initiatives, external funding in social infrastructure remains constrained, and the sector remains



THE HINDU

Financial institution for social infrastructure?

SOCIAL THRUST. Financial institutions focus entirely on physical infrastructure verticals, even as the funding needs of social sector need to be met through new financial innovations

largely publicly funded out of budgetary allocations and budgetary support. Further, data from lending institutions point to continued overemphasis on more established infrastructure verticals (such as power, telecom, and roads). Bank credit (outstanding) to the infrastructure sector presently stands at around ₹14 lakh crore (RBI) and remains heavily skewed towards traditional verticals. This has been a noted issue (Economic Survey 2023-24). The problem becomes more acute considering the limited resources of the government and efforts to reduce the fiscal deficit.

Even in Development Finance Institutions (DFIs), the trend remains the same. This is despite the emergence of new domestic and multilateral DFIs in recent years.

To take the example of the recently established National Bank for Infrastructure and Development (NaBID), as of September 2025, over 70 per cent of its lending portfolio comprises roads, renewables, power and T&D sectors. Social infrastructure (including water and sanitation) made up only approximately 4 per cent.

Even in the New Development Bank

Despite various initiatives, external funding in social infrastructure remains constrained, and the sector remains largely publicly funded out of budgetary allocations

(the BRICS multilateral DFI established in 2015), in its annual portfolio review, acknowledges that while it has financed over \$10 billion in India (across 28 projects), there remains tremendous scope for improvement in lending in the 'high impact' social and digital infrastructure sectors in India, which currently remains underfunded.

While the government has initiated other measures to boost social infrastructure financing, such as the SSE, it is currently at an early stage and primarily tries to solve the equity puzzle (including zero-coupon zero-principal bonds, much akin to donations) of development financing.

Other measures, such as the RBI's PSL, also seek to redirect the flow of credit to sectors crucial for 'social economic development. However, these are not enough.

Furthermore, DFIs (excluding sectoral ones) have holistic mandates to improve development financing across broad-based infrastructure sectors. Therefore, the need to chase more established sectors for lending may be driven by the incentive to pursue safer and time-tested havens, resulting in a relative neglect of social sector verticals.

The Union government can look to set up a dedicated DFI for the social infrastructure sector (while also in-parallel harmonising definitions of 'social infrastructure' across different forums) for specialised focus. This will help in channelling the huge fund requirements through a focused entity to deal with social infrastructure projects.

Sectoral DFIs are not new, and there

already exist sector-specific institutions, such as the NABARD (for agriculture), NHB (for housing) and PFC (for the power sector). If the government can have dedicated institutions for lending to agriculture or power, then why not the social sector? Scholars have also recently pointed out the need for even a manufacturing DFI.

A dedicated DFI for social infrastructure to address the unique complexities of the social sector may thus provide the much-needed focus while also facilitating the mobilisation of innovative finance mechanisms, which is the need of the hour.

While no doubt much has been discussed about DFIs, which have been around since the early post-independence period and often described as institutions set up to address 'market failures', a specialised sectoral institution that can leverage upon the government's equity to meet the funding requirements of the social sector can prove beneficial.

However, as India moves towards becoming a developed country by 2047, the government's role must also gradually shift from being the primary provider of capital to a facilitator focusing on further improving the bankability of social sector projects (through the resolution of socio-economic bottlenecks), leaving capital markets and specialised institutions to deal with funding complexities.

The writer is a Visiting Fellow at the Research and Information Systems for Developing Countries (RIS), New Delhi. Views are personal

India-EU FTA: Farm, 'Make in India' need guardrails

Keeping the dairy sector out is good news; domestic reforms are vital for manufacturing and MSMEs to leverage the deal

Anson CJ

The conclusion of the India-European Union Free Trade Agreement (FTA) marks one of India's most consequential trade decisions in recent decades, linking the world's fourth-largest economy with the second-largest economic bloc.

Yet, beneath the headline gains — 99 per cent preferential access for Indian exports, ambitious services commitments, and labour-intensive sectoral boosts — lie critical questions, particularly for Indian agriculture, the dairy sector, and the long-term trajectory of the 'Make in India' programme. The FTA is best understood not as an unequal triumph, but as a calibrated compromise that demands vigilant implementation.

Indian agriculture stands to gain selectively from the agreement. Enhanced access to tea, coffee, spices, fruits, vegetables, and processed foods could significantly improve export competitiveness, especially for high-value and niche products. The EU's large consumer base, premium pricing, and preference for traceability-driven supply chains offer Indian agribusiness an opportunity to move up the value ladder rather than remain a bulk exporter.

However, the gains are structurally uneven. The EU's agricultural sector is

among the most heavily subsidised globally under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Even with tariff liberalisation, Indian farmers face formidable non-tariff barriers — stringent sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) standards, residue limits, carbon footprint compliance, and sustainability certifications, which may impact small and marginal farmers more.

NON-TARIFF BARRIERS

The agreement's promise to address non-tariff barriers through regulatory cooperation is welcome, but experience suggests that regulatory asymmetry often persists despite formal commitments. India's decision to exclude dairy, which supports over 80 million households, from market access commitments is perhaps the most politically and economically prudent aspect of the FTA.

Yet, this safeguard should not be mistaken for permanent insulation. Trade agreements increasingly exert indirect pressures through regulatory harmonisation, sustainability norms, and future review clauses. Over time, India may face demands to align animal welfare, carbon, and food safety standards with EU benchmarks — standards that could raise costs for small producers unless backed by public investment.

The real challenge, therefore, is not protection alone, but domestic reform:



EU-INDIA. Landmark deal struck

improving productivity, cold-chain infrastructure, value-added dairy exports, and branding of indigenous products. Strategic insulation must be paired with long-term competitiveness, lest dairy become a future bargaining chip in subsequent negotiations.

The FTA is explicitly framed as supportive of the Make in India initiative, and in several respects, it is. Preferential access for Indian manufacturing — textiles, leather, engineering goods, and gems and jewellery — can incentivise domestic production for EU markets. Integration into European value chains may also facilitate technology transfer and quality upgrading.

However, the agreement's calibrated auto liberalisation reveals a structural tension. While EU automobile access is quota-based and limited to higher-end vehicles, it could gradually reshape India's market dynamics. Without parallel strengthening of domestic

component ecosystems, MSME suppliers, and R&D capabilities, there is a risk that India becomes a high-value import market rather than a manufacturing hub.

Moreover, the emphasis on services and skilled mobility — while a clear strength for India — could inadvertently reinforce a dual-track economy: globally competitive services alongside a manufacturing sector still struggling with scale, logistics, and compliance costs. The India-EU FTA reflects India's evolving trade philosophy: selective openness with strategic safeguards. By protecting dairy, limiting sensitive agriculture, and sequencing liberalisation, India has avoided the pitfalls of premature exposure. At the same time, the agreement looks India into high-standard trade disciplines on sustainability, digital trade, and carbon regulation, particularly through CBAM-related provisions.

Whether this proves transformative or constraining will depend less on the text of the FTA and more on India's domestic preparedness — institutional capacity, farmer support systems, MSME upgrading, and regulatory agility.

For agriculture and dairy, the FTA offers opportunity tempered by caution. For Make in India, it provides scale — but only if matched by domestic reform.

The writer is Assistant Professor, Bayd Tandon MCC Business School, Madras Christian College, Chennai

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

CHINADAILY

UK should discard dual-track approach

United Kingdom Prime Minister Keir Starmer's visit to China this week comes at a key juncture in the evolving relationship between the two nations. As the first British prime minister to visit China since 2018, his trip underscores a growing recognition in London of the importance of improving ties with Beijing. The UK government's recent approval for the construction of a new Chinese embassy in London, a project that had been delayed for years, suggests an intent to reset bilateral relations between 2010 and 2024. During almost a decade and a half of Tory rule, the JRF estimates that no progress at all was made in reducing overall levels of relative hardship. No surprise perhaps. Through wide-ranging, ideologically driven welfare cuts, ministers actively sought to make life harder, not easier, for many of the least well-off. The grim legacy of that approach is that in 2023-24 — the last dataset available — about one in five people were in relative poverty, defined as less than 60% of median income. But it also turns out that 6.8 million people were struggling to survive on far, far less than that, having effectively been economically cut adrift. Some 3.8 million people experienced destitution in 2022. LONDON, JANUARY 27

For free trade

The conclusion of negotiations on the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between India and the European Union is a historic milestone. Creating a trade bloc of nearly two billion people and accounting for about 25 per cent of global GDP, the pact signals India's renewed commitment to a predictable, rules-based global trading system at a time when protectionism is resurging elsewhere. The pact, after it is signed, is expected to help India diversify its

export markets. India will gain preferential access to European markets across 97 per cent of tariff lines, while the EU will receive tariff rationalisation on over 92 per cent of India's tariff lines. The agreement is likely to benefit India's labour-intensive sectors and ease movement of professionals. Overall, the India-EU FTA reflects a decisive shift away from protectionist impulses towards freer trade.

M Jayaram

Shivdharma (TN)

Freebies folly

Taking the cue from your Editorial (January 26), it is imperative to highlight the dangerous trajectory of State finances driven by the politics of freebies. What is being offered as short-term relief or populist largesse is, in reality, a long-term burden on the economy. The cost is twofold: swelling fiscal deficits and shrinking capital outlay. When debt outpaces revenue — whether at the state or national level — the inevitable consequence is inflation. To service this debt,

governments borrow more, and the mounting interest payments further erode public resources. If restraint is not exercised, the macroeconomic fallout will be disastrous. Rising deficits, shrinking investments, and spiralling inflation will not remain confined to individual States — they will engulf the entire nation.

Roy Marathe

Thiruvananthapuram

Crop rotation matters too

Apropos 'Beyond paddy: Experts call for Crop diversification to save soil &

water' (January 28). Soil health is the major parameter for crop yield and quality, apart from irrigation and manuring practices, which are part of GAP.

In addition to crop diversification, crop rotation also plays a crucial role and is found to be a success in Telangana. Agri universities and KVAFS must get down to the field and provide real-time guidance to farmers on crop rotation based on market demands.

Rajiv Magal

Halekote Village (Karnataka)

Governance unplugged

Infrastructure delivery systems have improved

Arihant Kumar

Since Independence, infrastructure has shaped India's idea of progress. The vision was clear: railways would bind distant regions, highways would carry commerce across States, dams would anchor energy and irrigation, and power lines would bring light to the farthest villages. As projects grew larger, they also grew more entangled.

Land waited for clearance, clearances waited for designs, designs waited for utilities to shift, and utilities waited for approvals buried in another office, another jurisdiction, another file. Each delay had a reason, each reason had an owner, and yet no one truly owned the outcome. For years, many projects lived fragmented lives which were reviewed in isolation, explained in hindsight, and delayed in perpetuity.

FOCUS ON DELIVERY

What was missing was not intent or investment, but a forum where interlinked constraints could be seen together, resolved together, and driven to closure. It was this quiet but consequential gap in project governance that the PRAGATI-led ecosystem set out to fill. PRAGATI arrived not as a new layer of review, but as a junction where parallel tracks finally met. Conceived in 2015, it carried a deceptively simple idea: that monitoring must lead to decisions, and decisions must end in delivery. Chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, it brought together Union Secretaries and State Chief Secretaries, aligning those who held the levers of action around a single, shared view of nationally significant projects and their bottlenecks. In that room, delay could no longer hide behind language. Milestones were examined, issues made visible, and questions asked directly. Most importantly, responsibility carried a name, a timeline, and a date for return.

Still the real story of PRAGATI does not unfold only during these high-level reviews. It lives in the quiet, persistent work that precedes and follows them. This preparatory discipline, institutional memory, and follow-through is provided by the Project Monitoring Group (PMG), the operational backbone of the ecosystem.

Implementation bottlenecks are no longer buried in correspondence or annexures; they are formally logged,



PRAGATI. Plugging the gaps in project governance. GETTY IMAGES

time-stamped, and assigned clear ownership to the concerned stakeholder with defined timelines for resolution. Transparency is embedded by design. Central ministries, State governments, district administrations, and project proponents see the same information simultaneously, can generate documents, upload updates, and track progress to closure.

This shared visibility fundamentally alters accountability. Role-based dashboards provide personalised views, allowing officials, from senior leadership to district administrators, to see precisely what requires attention within their mandate. Automated alerts, reminders, and compliance tracking ensure that issues do not fade with time but return to the table again and again, until resolved. Meeting agendas, minutes, and review documents are generated directly from the data, reducing routine reporting effort and sharpening the focus on decision-making. As a result, most issues are resolved quietly through this technology-enabled coordination, while more complex, inter-ministerial bottlenecks are escalated through a calibrated framework up to the apex platform.

Today, more than 3,000 projects, worth over ₹85 lakh crore, move through this ecosystem. For citizens, the impact is not abstract. It is felt in the bridge that finally opens, the train that runs on time, the airport that no longer exists only in announcements. Each completion quietly restores faith that the State can keep time, that public money can become public value. As India looks ahead, capital will matter, ambition will matter but delivery will matter the most. And delivery cannot depend on heroic individuals or episodic interventions. It must be embedded, routine, and resilient.

The writer is Lead and Senior Assistant Vice President, Project Monitoring Group (PMG)

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

January 29, 2006

PSU insurers to overhaul Mediclaim as losses mount

The popular health insurance cover — the Mediclaim Policy — offered by the four public sector non-life insurance companies is set for a major overhaul. Stung by the massive losses on the health portfolio that exceed premium collected, the Government-owned insurers are working out major changes in the cover including fixing minimum and maximum amount of sum insured that would be available.

Dell Computers looking at manufacturing unit in India

Global IT major Dell Computers is looking to further its engagement with India and even thinking in terms of a manufacturing unit that would be based in a location that has both seaport and airport close by. According to the sources, the company was scouting for place around South India.

Cummins pact with Tatas to expand venture

Diesel engine maker Cummins Inc said it has signed an agreement allowing its joint venture with Tata Motors to expand engine production in India. The joint venture, Tata Cummins Ltd, will fund the \$60-million expansion from ongoing cash flow and joint venture debt, Cummins of Columbus, said in a statement.

Perils of gender rules in FTAs

UK, EU AND BEYOND. Taking on gender commitments with little domestic implementing capacity can be a disaster



SANGEETA GODBOLE

The fine print with respect to regulations is not known in the recently 'concluded' free trade pact between India and the EU. In this respect, India's experience with respect to its FTA (free trade agreement) with the UK is instructive.

The India-UK FTA has been lauded for its broad commitments on gender. CETA Chapter 23 on Trade and Gender Equality in the India-UK CETA (Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement) is a novelty. For India, this is a first. It is to be viewed as a cautionary tale. It is disturbing that gender-related clauses find a mention in the 'trade and sustainable development' chapter in the India-EU pact, according to the EU documentation on the same. It remains to be seen what this really entails.

At the outset, it must be remembered that the single most important motive behind any FTA is improving market access. An FTA while signed by governments, is implemented on the ground only by private sector businesses. Setting them up for standards and regulation they are hardly capable or willing to use can only reverse whatever gains they may make out of preferential market access they obtain.

A chapter, like Chapter 23, is included in a few recent FTAs signed by India. The UK's trade agreements include standalone gender chapters in its EFTA (European Free Trade Association), Australia, Japan and NZ FTAs. However, except perhaps for New Zealand, gender related provisions outside this chapter are nowhere as broad and comprehensive as with India.

The language of the Trade and Gender Equality chapter seems positive and quite harmless at first reading. Mostly cooperation based, best effort, hortatory language with dispute settlement (DS) chapter expressly non-applicable. However, commitments on gender move into eight other chapters, four of which — Digital Trade, Financial Services, Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) and Government procurement — are themselves subject to dispute settlement. These render the relevant gender provisions squarely into the DS jurisdiction.



WAY TO GO. Gender empowerment can best be served outside FTAs and their business-regulatory pressures

For instance, Art 7.5 (8) of the TBT chapter includes a clause with a very specific commitment on incorporating the UNECE Declaration on Gender Responsive Standards in the working of national standard-making bodies. This commitment includes balanced gender representation and leadership in standards-making bodies and mandates collection and analysis of gender-based data with specialised tools. Gender responsive standards are to be framed and implemented based on such gender-based data.

Including a gender lens in the process of standards is undoubtedly desirable. Including such commitments in a key chapter like TBT is invitation to trouble. These TBT-gender provisions could provide an effective tool to either stymie

The women empowerment agenda is essentially domestic. Any cooperation with any other trading partner in the gender arena is best kept out of contentious and legally binding waters of an FTA

imports or stymie Indian industry to enhance exports.

THE BARRIERS WOMEN FACE

The Digital Trade chapter includes articles to address barriers faced by women to participate in digital trade. Why does India require UK's cooperation to identify and address barriers faced by women in accessing digital trade? What if India is unable, by UK's ideas, to address certain barriers?

Taking commitments in FTAs with little domestic regulatory and implementing capacity is nothing short of a recipe for disaster. Conversely, if India has made consistent efforts for women's empowerment in consonance with their requirements, which provision of the FTA text would that relate to? In India gender main-streaming can mean adequate and clean toilets for girls in schools, and clean cooking fuel and toilets in homes in the rural areas.

Government schemes relating to post and anti-natal care, safe motherhood, children's nutrition, Anganwadis — which part of the FTA text could that speak to? The same holds true for strong affirmative action for women's

participation in municipal councils, State governing bodies. In effect, multi-directional efforts taken by government of India for women's empowerment may hardly be recognised by any FTA, and its effects unaccounted in terms of women's welfare, since it does not directly imply an equal access to international markets.

The women empowerment agenda is essentially domestic. Any cooperation with any other trading partner in the gender arena is best kept out of contentious and legally binding waters of an FTA, where disputes will be decided by international panels.

The EU has now established the office of a Chief Trade Enforcement officer, whose sole business is to ensure that commitments taken by partner countries are met. EU companies, industry associations and even NGOs can complain and the CTEO takes action. Gender empowerment can best be served outside FTAs and their business-regulatory pressures. Broad, nice-sounding texts on social issues can only create unpleasant surprises for India and its business community.

The writer is a former trade negotiator and ex-Indian Revenue Service (IRS)

Energy, critical minerals to drive India-Canada trade

Lou Del Bello
Preeti Soni

Energy and critical minerals will be the cornerstone of the new trade ties between India and Canada, a top Canadian minister said, as the two countries rekindle their relationship after a prolonged diplomatic rift.

India's expected growth in energy demand is a "great opportunity" for the North American nation, which holds large supplies of oil, gas and critical minerals, Energy and Natural Resources Minister Tim Hodgson told Bloomberg Television at the India Energy Week in Goa on Wednesday. "We produce 6 per cent of the world's oil today and India gets less than 1 per cent of its oil from Canada," he said. Increasing that share to a more reasonable level would make both countries stronger, more resilient and secure, he added.

India and Canada first clashed in 2023 when former Prime Minister Justin Trudeau accused India of orchestrating the assassination of Canadian citizen and Sikh activist



WIN-WIN. Canada's Energy Minister Tim Hodgson gung-ho about trade ties with India. BLOOMBERG

Hardeep Singh Nijjar. After years of strained relations, the two sides are now open to cooperating again as US President Donald Trump ramps up economic pressure on them.

"We used to be in a world where we sought to integrate with our closest trading partners, and we now find that that integration is used for coercion" or tariffs are used to gain leverage, Hodgson said.

Canada now needs to "rewire its economy" and build relationships

beyond those with its neighbours, he said. Canadian officials are liaising with international partners to create new frameworks for critical minerals trade, including to facilitate off-take agreements and strategic stockpiling. That could include providing its "highest quality" uranium to help India achieve its goal of building 100 gigawatts of nuclear capacity by 2047.

AMPLE LNG SUPPLIES

India could also benefit from the ample LNG supplies that Canada can now provide through its 12 million-tonne-a-year plant that started production in June, and which is expected to grow to a capacity of 50 million tonnes.

Companies like Shell PLC, Petronas, Korea Gas Corp. and China's CNOOC Ltd "find our LNG to be competitively priced."

"Today, bilateral trade between Canada and India is only \$30 billion," Hodgson said separately in a panel discussion at the event, adding that Canada's Prime Minister Mark Carney expects that to double by the end of the decade. BLOOMBERG

On businessline.in

EU-India FTA: A mixed blessing for MSMEs

Tariff reductions apart, greater access to European markets will increasingly depend on the ability of MSMEs to meet environmental and technical standards, say Sathish Basu and Subash S

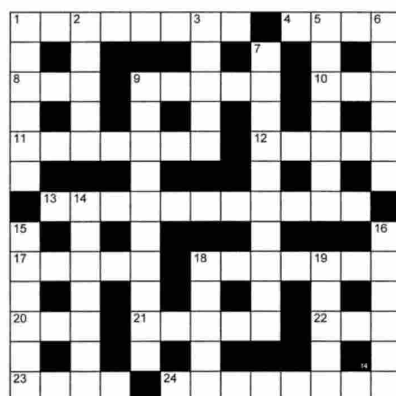
<https://tinyurl.com/2Sskud5e>

India imposing import duty on pulses isn't a protectionist move

It represents a calibrated intervention that recognises food security is inseparable from farmer viability, and that open trade must be balanced against domestic market stability, argue Anvesha Dey and Jaiprakash Bisen

<https://tinyurl.com/bd5bn4w8>

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2607



EASY

ACROSS

1. Member of Ancient Order (8)

4. Practise boxing (4)

8. Forelimb (3)

9. In the style of (5)

10. Pot-cover (3)

11. Attack against a person (7)

12. Come off in scales (5)

13. Intendured to a master (11)

17. Explode (5)

18. Astonishing (7)

20. Possess (3)

21. Native pigment (5)

22. To freeze (3)

23. Mend holes in socks etc (4)

24. Sets alone and apart (8)

DOWN

1. Soft, hanging loose as flesh (6)

2. Transfer money (5)

3. Thing written in record (5)

5. Act of plundering (7)

6. Steering-apparatus (6)

7. One leading wasteful life (10)

9. A wandering of the intellect (10)

14. Accompany one in dance (7)

15. Out of the country (6)

16. Departure (6)

18. Remains from burning (5)

19. A fool (5)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

1. One has the care of growing trees and a large kangaroo (8)

4. Mast, yard or boom of lustrous mineral (4)

8. In particular, Marines have to get guns (3)

9. Is following fate turning right (5)

10. Virginia makes such a hat legally adequate (3)

11. Electric cell for an artillery unit (7)

12. A bit of snow starts freezing on Windermere (5)

13. Having indentures showing price pendant demanded (11)

17. Body starts to rust like this and will break in pieces (5)

18. Incredible to find New Zealand adopting the agami like this (7)

20. Admit it's one's personal property (3)

21. Pigment may be used for money (5)

22. There's too much formality in rocks (3)

23. Repair holes with a mild expletive (4)

24. Sets one apart from site also prepared for it (8)

DOWN

1. With too much flesh, flog half and put the baby out (6)

2. Terms of reference may merit sorting out (5)

3. One's appearance on the stage may be written up (5)

5. Plunder the pile lag assemblies (7)

6. It may change one's course, taking fish with hesitation (6)

7. Recklessly wasteful profit to be made with a broken leg (10)

9. Mental lapse made rating go wrong at taking one on (10)

14. Husband or wife to leave last three of children to be raised (7)

15. Do a bar tour overseas (6)

16. The way out is material: it's up to the South (6)

18. Mortal remains fought over by England and Australia (5)

19. This board prompts the speaker to make a fool of himself (5)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2606

ACROSS 1. Qualified 5. Bar 7. Amid 8. Overdraw 10. Tenacity 11. Mild 13. Ritual 15. Scorch 18. Fox 19. Makeover 22. Emigrate 23. Flue 24. Dye 25. Pertinent

DOWN 1. Quarter 2. Alien 3. Invite 4. Dart 5. Barrier 6. Rowed 9. Scrap 12. Scree 14. Textile 16. Harvest 17. Falter 18. Field 20. Valve 21. Crop



Opinion

THURSDAY, JANUARY 29, 2026

Put assets to work

Capital recycling should anchor the Budget's growth strategy; the stop-start approach must end

GIVEN INDIA'S AMBITIOUS growth targets, vast infrastructure needs, and the limits of debt-financed expansion, the forthcoming Union Budget should learn more decisively on disinvestment and asset monetisation. The case for doing so has been reinforced by recent experience. The strategic disinvestment policy announced by the government in 2021-22 was a clear shift as it distinguished between strategic and non-strategic sectors, and promised minimal state presence in the former and exit from the latter. Four years on, progress has all but stalled with the disinvestment programme delivering a weak showing year after year. This underperformance has prompted policy think tanks to push for a reset, including proposals to accelerate privatisation and deploy the proceeds more strategically. Among the ideas doing the rounds is the creation of a dedicated "wealth fund" to channel disinvestment receipts into new infrastructure and productive assets, rather than treating them as routine budgetary fillers.

Disinvestment and asset monetisation are not merely tools to plug revenue gaps. Properly deployed, they signal a shift in how the state manages its balance sheet. Instead of locking scarce capital into underperforming or non-core public enterprises, the government can unlock value and redeploy resources towards delivering public goods more efficiently. When executed with clarity and discipline, these measures can fund infrastructure creation without adding to the debt burden, strengthening fiscal sustainability at a time of global uncertainty. India's record on privatisation, however, has been uneven. Beyond marquee successes such as the strategic sale of Air India, broader efforts have struggled to gather momentum. Plans to monetise government-owned hotels such as Ashok or divest stakes in several public sector undertakings (PSUs) have repeatedly stalled, reflecting hesitation, execution challenges, and political caution. The result has been a stop-start approach that has diluted credibility and investor confidence. A more ambitious and structured push in the Budget could alter this trajectory. Such signalling would reassure investors that privatisation is not episodic or opportunistic, but part of a coherent long-term strategy.

Asset monetisation under the National Monetisation Pipeline offers a complementary route. By leasing operational infrastructure assets—highways, power transmission lines, ports, and rail assets—to private investors, the government can raise capital while retaining ownership. This approach not only generates upfront resources but also brings private-sector efficiency and managerial discipline to assets that are often underutilised. Crucially, it expands the investable pool for building new infrastructure, creating a virtuous cycle of capital recycling. A sharper focus on disinvestment and monetisation delivers multiple dividends. Proceeds from asset sales and leases are non-debt capital receipts, offering fiscal headroom without burdening future generations. Divesting non-core PSUs frees up capital for priority areas such as energy transition, digital infrastructure, and climate resilience. A credible privatisation pipeline can also boost investor sentiment, attract long-term foreign capital, and deepen domestic financial markets.

Concerns around job losses or loss of national control cannot be dismissed lightly. But they can be addressed through transparent valuation, robust regulation, and well-designed social safeguards for affected workers. Disinvestment need not be an ideological sell-off; it can be a pragmatic instrument for more efficient and inclusive growth. The upcoming Budget offers a chance to reframe India's fiscal playbook. By prioritising disinvestment and asset monetisation, the government can unlock dormant value, fund public investment without stretching the balance sheet, and lay firmer foundations for sustained growth. In an era of constrained public finances, capital recycling is no longer optional—it is essential.

Mrs Watanabe gets a makeover in FX anime

FOR DECADES, THE enduring image of the Japanese FX trader has been Mrs Watanabe: the well-heeled housewife who controls the family finances, and uses them to dabble in currency trading while her husband is at work. The stereotype has been out of date for years. In Japan, as elsewhere, housewives are a near-extinct breed with most households dual-income. Perhaps it's time for a new face of FX investment. Step forward Kurumi, the pink-haired college student protagonist of a new anime based on retail-currency trading.

Kadokawa, the entertainment conglomerate giant part-owned by Sony Group, said last week it was adapting FX Senshi Kurumi—chan (FX Fighter Kurumi—chan), a manga first published in 2021 after starting off life on a web comic site. The announcement couldn't have been better timed, coming in one of the most exciting weeks in the yen market in recent memory, as the currency strengthened amid speculation of coordinated intervention by the US and Japan.

The anime won't air until later this year. Once I tracked down the manga, I found it made currency trading look anything but cool. Mild spoilers: In the first few pages, Kurumi's mother takes her own life after accumulating \$125,000 in losses investing in FX during the 2008 financial crisis. Our protagonist, then a teen, vows to win back the amount and becomes a self-taught currency trader once she's old enough to open an account. But battling flat markets, margin calls, and her own obsessive personality, she's sucked into a world of gambling where a single trade can make or break her.

It does an admirable job explaining the terminology of long and short positions and currency pairs. I wondered if Kurumi—chan might be a reflection of a surge in FX trading among young people. Certainly, there is interest. Advertisements for online retailers are common, and the government's NISA tax-free account has significantly raised interest in investing overall in a country where the value of cash deposits are now being inflated away.

With online gambling and prediction markets illegal in Japan, foreign exchange is one way to have a flutter; I often see young investors on their laptops in cafes and co-working spaces. Manga often reflect such changing times. *How Heavy Are the Dumbbells You Lift?*, a series about guys who take up weight training, became a hit in the 2010s, as fitness fads began to focus less on just losing weight and more on gaining muscle. Yet when it comes to FX, the data don't seem to back up my suspicions. The *Nikkei* reported that in the past 15 years, the under-30s have gone from making up 50% of retail traders to just 17% in 2024. In contrast to both Kurumi and Mrs Watanabe, in reality most FX market participants are older men. An SMC Consumer Finance survey found just one-third of men in their 20s were investing at all, and less than 20% of women. Mostly that was in stocks and index funds, with currencies a distant seventh place, only slightly above sneakers and trading cards.

Kurumi—chan might just be more of a reflection of the incredible breadth of manga and anime. Japanese creators have developed the ability to dramatise any subject matter: bread-making, knitting, poker, camping, fishing, cooking, and even male-on-male romance tales written primarily for women. One of the first manga I ever read was *Hikaru no Go*, a best-seller revolving around the ancient strategy board game Go. Kurumi—chan creates drama through the movement of candlestick charts as the protagonist doubles down on ever-more-risky bets. But it's not too late. Kurumi—chan might make FX trading seem daunting, but it can inspire a new following nonetheless. *Hikaru no Go* created a surge in popularity for the board game; the volleyball series *Haikyuu!!* is credited with a flood of kids taking up the sport.

Let's hope so. Not only would it be good for more young Japanese to get a taste of trading, The Mrs Watanabe moniker is well past its sell-by date.



GEOROID REIDY
Bloomberg

TAXING THE RICH

PROGRESSIVE TAXATION IS A STRATEGY THAT HAS POWERED ERAS OF NOTABLE SOCIAL & ECONOMIC ADVANCES

An annual Davos call

AMID MOUNTING CONCERNS that the wealthiest in society are buying political influence, nearly 400 millionaires and billionaires from 24 countries urged world leaders to raise taxes on the super-rich. In an open letter published in conjunction with the recent World Economic Forum meeting in Davos, global leaders are urged to close the growing gap between the ultra-rich and everyone else.

Prominent figures like musician Brian Eno, film producer and philanthropist Abigail Disney, and actor and director Mark Ruffalo signed the petition. It claims that extreme wealth is causing social exclusion, contaminating politics, and escalating the ecological catastrophe. Interestingly, despite the growing number of signatories each time, it's essentially a routine annual call in Davos.

Of course, some politicians hold similar opinions. Take Bernie Sanders, for instance. Sanders took a radical stance in a 2023 interview, saying that the government should confiscate the remaining funds once you reach \$999 million. His opinion that the ultra-rich shouldn't exist in a society with such severe economic inequality is reflected in this. Earlier, to cover all of Americans' out-of-pocket medical expenses, three US senators—Bernie Sanders, Ed Markey, and Kirsten Gillibrand—introduced a 60% tax on the windfall income rises of billionaires during the pandemic in 2020.

Kamala Harris as well. During her 2024 presidential campaign, Harris supported President Joe Biden's proposed tax increases in his fiscal year 2025 budget. A 25% minimum tax on all income, including "unrealised gains" or asset growth surpassing \$100 million, was one of the proposals. This is known as the billionaire



ATANU BISWAS
Professor of Statistics, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata

minimum tax. US Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez wore a floor-length white gown with the words "tax the rich" printed in large red letters on the back during the 2021 Met Gala. And Zohran Mamdani, the recently elected mayor of New York City, has reignited the discussion about wealth and taxes with his plan to increase income taxes by 2% for citizens who make more than \$1 million annually.

Book-length discussions about the topic are also available. Morris Pearl and Erica Payne's *Tax the Rich: How Lies, Loopholes, and Lobbyists Make the Rich Even Richer* (2021) is the most well-known recent book. It's an insider's guide to how the US tax system favours the wealthy, outlining loopholes and promoting reform. Kenneth Scheve and David Stasavage's 2016 book, *Taxing the Rich: A History of Fiscal Fairness in the United States and Europe*, is another important work that examines the historical development and decline of progressive taxation.

As Pearl and Payne noted, one of the main issues is that the public is unaware of the loopholes. Additionally, since the government taxes wealthy and working people differently, they are unable to utilise them even if they are aware of them. Millionaires are becoming wealthy

while the working class is becoming poorer as a result of this disparity. They debunk the fallacies that shield the ultra-wealthy from paying their fair part and make a strong argument for progressive tax reform using a combination of astute economic understanding supported by statistics and examples and ardent campaigning. Examined is the US Gilded Age. Social and economic tensions resulted from the highest level of wealth concentration during this time. In order to lessen these differences, progressive tax laws and policies were eventually implemented, establishing a standard for upcoming generations.

In a similar vein, comparatively high taxes on the wealthy were a feature of the post-World War II economic boom. This provided funding for a wide range of public services and investments in infrastructure, healthcare, and education. This historical background reminds us that progressive taxation is a tried-and-true strategy that has powered eras of notable social and economic advancement rather than being an unproven notion.

Scheve and Stasavage, however, contend that governments tax the wealthy because people feel that the state unfairly favours the wealthy, not because ineq-

uality is high or growing. A new Oxford report titled *Resisting the Rule of the Rich: Defending Freedom Against Billionaire Power*, released in Davos, links inequality to political power asymmetry. Note that Donald Trump assembled the richest cabinet in US history last year after being re-elected as president, with an estimated joint worth of \$7.5 billion. The Oxford report stated, "Billionaire fortunes have grown at a rate three times faster than the average annual rate in the previous five years since the election of Donald Trump in November 2024." Also, according to the World Inequality Report 2026, which was released by the Paris-based World Inequality Lab led by economist Thomas Piketty, the richest 10% of global earners make more money than the rest 90% put together.

However, there are opposing viewpoints. Critics claim that Sanders' wealth tax idea, or "Tax the Rich", could backfire, particularly when it comes to encouraging entrepreneurship and innovation. This may eventually deter the development of revolutionary companies like Apple or Tesla. Critics worry that these policies would eventually stifle the kind of risk-taking that propels economic expansion.

In 2019, Abigail Disney gladly accepted a title such as "Class Traitor" from the economic rights group United for a Fair Economy. However, understandably, not all extremely wealthy people would share this perspective. For instance, Elon Musk is an outspoken opponent of higher taxes on the wealthy. The richest person on the globe believes that such a "billionaire's tax" doesn't really benefit the populace. In an interview with *TIME* a few years ago, he stated, "I think the government is inherently not a good steward of capital." The argument would go on.

Will reforms unlock insurance potential?



ASHVIN PAREKH
Managing Partner, Ashvin Parekh Advisory Services LLP

THE SABKA BIMA Sabli Raisla (Amendment of Insurance Law) Act, 2025, passed by both houses of Parliament in December, represents a selective implementation of the 2024 draft proposals. The amendment to the law was largely designed with an ambitious government objective of insurance for all by 2047. Considering the exclusion of vast proportion, the amendment was aimed at providing the necessary supply of insurance cover and products by augmenting the capacity of providers through the FDI route with limit expansion from 74% to 100%. The reforms associated with demand creation and affordability of insurance are yet to be worked out.

While the amended law delivers critical reforms on foreign investment liberalisation, regulatory empowerment, and to a certain extent operational efficiency, it has deferred or excluded several transformative provisions demanded by the stakeholders, and in many cases determined by the policymakers' understanding of the industry. One such reform was the composite insurance licensing envisaged by policymakers. There was the licensing of captive companies. The major reform associated with opening the agency distribution channel with an open architecture approach and making it attractive for foreign strategic investors is also dropped from the original draft. This article discusses the reforms and their likely impact on industry.

The central reform increases the FDI cap to 100%, formalised in the new Section 3A of the Insurance Act. The provision addresses longstanding capital constraints and operational flexibility for foreign partners in joint ventures (JVs). At a hypothetical estimation, the potential flow of FDI in the life, general, and health insurance sectors could be around ₹2.5 lakh crore (\$30 billion), at market value

case of all existing JVs. The fresh FDI from new strategic investments flowing from foreign insurance firms, who could possibly look at entering the Indian market, is anyone's guess. The question in the minds of industry experts and players is whether this order of FDI will actually flow in.

In order to take the new reforms to possible entrants, work had begun almost two years ago. The regulator and the policymakers, along with the industry leaders, held roadshows and discussions in several countries in late 2024 and early 2025. The existing foreign partners in their JVs in India were also approached, and aspects of proposed regulation and ease of entry were presented. The potential flow seemed to be very encouraging. After the roadshows, however, one could expect a certain order of curtailment and dislike from interested parties as what was promised in the draft has not been delivered.

Let us now examine the ground reality. When the FDI limit was raised from 26% to 49%, the actual FDI inflow was at best about 12% of the potential. Several limitations such as Indian ownership and management control were deterrents to the inflow. Then the FDI limits were enhanced to 74%. Once again, the gap between the actual flow and the potential was very large. What ground realities are at play that cause this gap? The most critical is the fundamental truism that insurance is to be sold; it is a push product. Distribution is more critical in the working of an insurance company than manufacturing. For distribution, the foreign entities need good Indian partners, the financial conglomerates in India or those corporates

who have a large customer base across the country. This is because insurance has contributed to the success of the existing JVs. Banks, non-banking financial companies, or business house-owned financial conglomerates who promoted insurance firms jointly with their respective foreign partners have performed well. In these partnerships in the last 25 years, the foreign partners did not have a significant role and many of the original promoters have exited the market. The Indian partner in case of the top life, general, and health insurers now manage the companies or have a substantial say in their working. It is

very unlikely that the foreign partner will contemplate acquiring equity from their Indian partner who is contributing substantially to the business value. Even the new entrants will come to the market after they identify their Indian distribution partner. Unfortunately, there are very few Indian promoters available.

Let us now look at the critical omissions in the Act compared with the draft amendment Bill, 2024. The first major strategic retreat is composite insurance licensing. The ability for a single insurer to operate across life, general and health segments under unified regulatory treatment in the absence of any pre-emptive or background to the reform was attributed by the industry to the possibility of creating a platform for the public sector life company to acquire the four public sector general insurance entities. Little is known about the purpose of the provision in the draft Bill and its omission in the Act. Under Section 2(A) of the Act, by way of a linguistic formulation, the government in consultation with the regula-

tor may notify a composite class of insurance contracts. However, the government has chosen not to implement composite licensing immediately. The other proposal of making agency channel from dedicated to open-architecture approach has also been omitted. This will dislodge some foreign entities from entering the market but protects the interest of existing ones. Then again, the proposal of broader financial product distribution by insurers has been significantly diluted. The 2024 draft proposed permitting insurers to distribute financial products such as mutual funds, loans, and credit cards creating integrated financial services propositions. The Act restricts the expansion. The new Section 6D defines "insurance business" as the "business of effecting insurance contracts, and includes any other form of contract as may be notified by central government".

Based on the public announcements made by the leadership at the regulator's office, in the span of last three years there have been almost 30-plus applications for new insurance companies. Quite a few of them had elements of FDI in it. As we understand, only a handful have been approved by the authority. Perhaps there is no clarity on the fit and proper aspect of the proposed promoters. This has created uncertainty in the minds of foreign investors who are looking at the sector, particularly after the FDI reform. Both policymakers and the regulator could perhaps clarify the kind of promoter entities who could enter the market.

The amended Act has paved the way for foreign entities to place their bet on the insurance market in India. Much needs to be done in promoting the reform and on the part of the regulator to design conducive regulations.

Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

India-EU trade

Apologies of "Trade without walls" (FE, January 28), the conclusion of the India-EU free trade agreement is a timely signal of confidence in open, rules-based commerce. Yet the real test will lie in how effectively its gains are translated on the ground. Lower tariffs and wider market access will help exporters, but small firms may struggle to meet stringent standards

and compliance costs. The government must therefore focus on trade facilitation, faster customs processes, and support for those units to upgrade technology and skills. Clear guidance on rules of origin and carbon-related norms is equally important to avoid disputes. Our services and mobility, transparent and predictable via frameworks will determine credibility. —SM Jeeva, Chennai

AI and retirement

Apologies of "Retire is wrong about AI and retirement" (FE, January 28), Elon Musk's vision of an AI-abundant future negating the need to save is economically naïve. Even if AI drives unprecedented productivity, basic economic principles, like funding longer lifespans and human-centric care, remain. Saving is not just a hedge against scarcity, but against

uncertainty itself. True optimism lies in preparing for multiple futures, not banking on a singular utopian outcome. Whether AI elevates growth modestly or spectacularly, personal responsibility for retirement endures. The most prudent innovation is the wisdom to plan for both promise and unpredictability. —K Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru

Write to us at letters@expressindia.com

{ OUR TAKE }

Leader with strong grassroots connect

Ajit Pawar's untimely demise leaves a vacuum in Maharashtra politics

The death of Ajit Anantrao Pawar, 66, Maharashtra's deputy chief minister, in an air crash on Wednesday is likely to have an impact on his Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) and the NCP (SP) controlled by his uncle Sharad Pawar, and Maharashtra, perhaps even national, politics.

A deputy CM in six governments, Pawar was a politician from the old school — much like his uncle — and for close to five decades, bestrode local politics in Maharashtra like a colossus, marrying mass-connect with a strong dose of realpolitik to not just always stay relevant, but to also, almost always, be on the winning side. Like many local politicians, he was embroiled in many corruption cases (making him a lightning rod for targeted attacks by rivals, including the Bharatiya Janata Party at one time), and his earthy sense of humour meant that he was no stranger to controversy, but he also acquired the reputation of being an able administrator. He understood Maharashtra's finances, and had a strong hold over it than most others, presenting 13 state budgets as the finance minister. And he rarely lost an election; for years, he was happy to be his uncle's protégé, but while the senior Pawar (and later his daughter Supriya Sule) worked and walked the corridors of power in Delhi, Ajit Pawar quietly built a strong base in Maharashtra. That made him a power to reckon with in state elections, and a partner worth wooing.

It was pragmatism (and a desire, once again, to be on the right side), that prompted him to split the NCP, a party he nurtured along with his uncle after their exit from the Indian National Congress in 1999; fittingly, given his reach in the state, he kept the name and symbol. But both factions fared poorly in two of the three elections that followed — the NCP in the 2024 Lok Sabha and recent local polls; and the NCP (SP) in the 2024 assembly and recent local polls.

His death poses an existential problem for the NCP. The recent local poll results were not kind to both it and the NCP (SP), and there was talk that the two could merge, and be part of the BJP-led Mahayuti in the state, a move that would have made the party and Ajit Pawar more powerful within the alliance. His passing disrupts that plan, and leaves the NCP bruised at a time when its base is under threat from an ever-expanding BJP. Even if a merger were to go through, the party will need a new leader in the state: Sharad Pawar is 85 and has hinted at retirement; Sule's focus has been Delhi and national politics; and none of the leaders who stayed with Ajit Pawar has the connect he had with the electorate.

Making music, the Arijit Singh way

Arijit Singh's rise as a singer has many twists and turns that can make for a Bollywood blockbuster. Growing up in Murshidabad, West Bengal, Singh was trained in classical music — and his guru barred him from listening to popular music — before he attracted national fame as a singer in a reality show in 2005, and later, as a Bollywood singer. In 2025, he was billed as the most popular star on Spotify with 151 million followers, more than what global stars including Taylor Swift and Ed Sheeran had. This had more to do with the *desi* music lovers, of course, but the numbers reveal the billing he had among lovers of a certain kind of music. Now, at 38, he has taken the music world by surprise, announcing that he was "calling it off". He clarified that he "won't stop making music", though he would not be singing in films.

This is rare in India, where film music has long been the barometer for popularity as a singer — which is perhaps why none of the major singers have ever quit films at their peak, or even after. And singing and composing in India have been silos breached rarely, unlike in the West. Technology has transformed the entertainment industry, and the emergence of new platforms has radically altered the rules of the game. Singh's decision — he hopes to explore a career as an independent composer — may also be provoked by the changes in Bollywood, where songs are now on the periphery. As an established voice — he is popular on streaming platforms as well as on the concert stage — Singh has a captive audience, and his international collaborations suggest that he should be able to transcend his core *desi* fan base and find new listeners. That said, Singh deserves applause for leaving the comfort zone and leaping into the unknown.

UGC regulations against caste bigotry need tweaks

The Promotion of Equity in Higher Educational Institutions Regulations 2026 have multiple shortcomings that can fail the efforts to end discrimination on educational campuses

Recognising the sad evidence on caste discrimination that had led to suicide by SC/ST students — at AIIMS in 2008 and, later, at other higher education institutions — the ministry of education had asked the UGC to frame regulations against discrimination. This led to the UGC (Promotion of Equity in Higher Educational Institutions) Regulations 2022. Meanwhile, the mothers of Rohit Vemula, and Payal Tadi who lost their children, filed petitions in the Supreme Court for strict implementation of the 2012 regulations. The Supreme Court asked the UGC to share the status of implementation. In response, the UGC informed the apex court that, among other things, it was revising the 2012 regulations to improve its provisions. It invited feedback on the revised regulations in January 2025, which were then notified this month. Unfortunately, the revised regulations, instead of making improvements, diluted the 2012 regulations. The regulator did make some improvements, but the mechanism for sensitisation against

discrimination on education campuses, but it also left behind significant shortcomings that needed correction.

First, its definition of higher education institutions (HEIs) is confusing. At one place, it refers to all HEIs. But when it comes to the definition, it says "higher educational institutions are those universities and colleges which are covered under section 3 of the UGC Act 1956" — that is, about 1,168 universities and 45,473 colleges. By implication, it excludes the 23 IITs, the 21 IIMs and around 12,002 standalone institutions. Both IITs and IIMs are institutions of National Importance; the former have been established under the Institute of Technology Act 1961, and the latter are governed by the 2017 IIM Act.

Similarly, the standalone institutions, namely polytechnics, teacher training, and nursing institutions, and independent bodies recognised by AICTE, NCTE, and INC. The IITs, IIMs and standalone institutions need not be recognised under section 3 of the UGC Act. They are directly funded by the ministry. This means that the revised 2026 regulations presumably exclude a vast section of educational institutions. Since all these are under the ministry of education, it would be better if all educational institutions in the country were brought under the ministry's regulations.

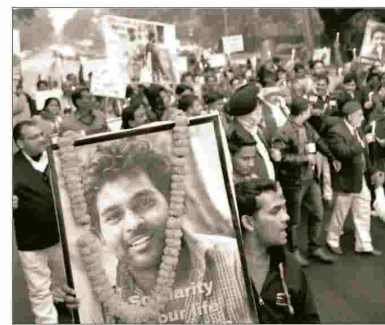
The second-most serious limitation of the proposed regulations is that the 2012 regulations did not specify the forms of

discrimination. The 2012 regulations, initiating the Untouchability Offence Act 1955, and Atrocity Act 1989, list about 28 forms of discrimination related to admission, evaluation, teaching, sports, social life, hostel, and dining halls, among others. Given the deep-rooted nature of untouchability, the Untouchability Offence Act 1955 identified about 17 and the Atrocity Act 1989 about 40 forms of discrimination. Going against the spirit of the 2012 regulations, for reasons best known to it, UGC leaves this task to the equity committee, saying that it had to prepare and disseminate an illustrative list of acts that shall be construed as discrimination. It is difficult to imagine that the equity committee possesses adequate understanding of the deep-rooted discrimination embedded in untouchability.

The Supreme Court, while referring to this complexity at the time of the framing of the Atrocity Act 1989, observed, "The offences of atrocities are committed to humiliate and subjugate the SCs and STs with a view to keep them in a state of servitude. Hence, they constitute a separate class of offences and cannot be compared with offences under the Indian Penal Code." It involves deep contempt, hatred, most sickening, pernicious, and meanest behaviour. One example from a survey at IIT Mumbai gives an idea of the sick minds of the caste discriminators. To Dalit girls, a high caste student said, "Quota se aye ho kya kaise aye ho? (Are you here through quota



Sukhadeo Thorat



It is hard to imagine that Equity Committees will possess adequate understanding of the discrimination embedded in untouchability. HT ARCHIVE

or from a brother?"). Because of its wretched nature, the forms of discrimination are specified by the government in the two Acts. The equity committee in the education institution is not competent to specify the many forms of discrimination. Besides, if identifying these is left to individual education institutions, the forms of discrimination will differ and create legal confusion. Therefore, the UGC should follow the procedure adopted in the 2012 regulations and specify the forms of discrimination, which will be uniformly applicable to all educational institutions in the country.

Another limitation of the 2026 regulations relates to the composition of the equity committee, whose task will be to enquire into the complaint and recommend action to the head of the institution. Strangely enough, the head of the institution has been made ex officio chair of this committee. The head of the institution will, thus, sit on

both sides of the table — as one who participates in making recommendations, and as the person who makes the decision based on these recommendations. This will cause a conflict of interest. The head of the institution, who takes the final decision, should not be part of the recommendation committee.

Lastly, about the SC/ST/OBC representation in the committee, it mentioned only about their "representation", which is unfair. It should be at least 50% of the committee to enable them to have an effective say in decision-making.

The UGC must remove these anomalies in the new regulations for true promotion of equity in educational institutions and to deliver justice to the parents who lost their children to the evil of caste discrimination.

Sukhadeo Thorat is former chairman, UGC. The views expressed are personal

Xi purges to conquer in party vs PLA clash

By removing General Zhang Youxia, vice-chairman of China's Central Military Commission (CMC), and General Liu Zhenli, chief of the CMC Joint Staff Department and member of the CMC — China's senior-most military officials — Chinese President Xi Jinping has definitively set to rest rumours circulating for over a year that his position has been undermined and is threatened. The rumours pointed to opposition from the upper echelons of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The dismissals also confirmed more recent rumours that generals Zhang and Liu were being investigated. The official confirmation on January 24, nevertheless, surprised observers. The announcement by the spokesman of China's ministry of national defence was categorical and crisp. It stated that generals Zhang and Liu "are suspected of serious violations of discipline and law" and that the Communist Party of China Central Committee (CPC CC) had decided to place them under investigation. There was no mention of corruption, implying that the charges could be considerably more serious. The PLA Daily editorial of January 24 clearly suggested this. There was no mention of Zhang continuing in the politburo. The gravity of their "crimes" will be known only after the results of the investigation are released, possibly before the major political plenary sessions in early March 2026.

With the removal of Zhang and Liu, the CMC is left with two members instead of seven. Xi Jinping continues as chairman. The other is Zhang Shengmin, who was appointed a vice chairman in November 2025 to replace General He Weidong after he was dismissed from the PLA and expelled from the CPC in October 2025. It is the first time since the CMC was reconstituted in 1982 that it has been decimated like this.

After Xi brought the military under the purview of the CPC's anti-corruption watchdog body, the central discipline inspection commission (CDIC) in March 2013, nearly 200 officers up to and above the rank of major general have either been dismissed or dismissed. At least 50 senior PLA officials at the vice admiral or lieutenant general level and above have been removed. An additional 12 PLA Navy (PLAN) officers at the rear admiral level or above have been, or are removed to have been, dismissed. But the removal in October of CMC vice chairman

General He Weidong and now, generals Zhang and Liu, are significantly different. In addition to being the senior-most military officers, each was a handpicked personal appointee of Xi.

Zhang is a military princeling and a second-generation friend of Xi. Their fathers were friends and served as commanders in the Red Army, and both families have roots to Shaanxi province. Because of their friendship, Xi ignored the CPC's age eligibility criteria and retained Zhang in the politburo and the CMC. He Weidong and Xi were also friends and drank wine together. He Weidong was posted in the Zhejiang and Fujian provinces, and He was posted at nearby military stations. After Xi was appointed president, he brought He to Beijing and helicopter him into the CMC as vice-chairman and appointed him a member of the CPC politburo.

More importantly, Xi whittled down the PLA's influence by drastically reducing the PLA's representation in the CPC CC. With the removal of He and Zhang, the PLA currently has no representation in the politburo. Though Zhang Shengmin was elevated as vice chairman of the CMC in place of He Weidong, he was not appointed a member of the politburo. Furthermore, the PLA representation in the CPC CC that totalled 42 is now well under half. It is not clear whether Xi intends to fill these vacancies at the next party congress in 2027 or induct individuals in the interim. In any case, Xi has clearly signalled that the party is superior and the PLA must be "absolutely loyal" and obedient to the Chairman of the CMC and the party.

Also on January 24, the PLA Daily published a very strongly worded editorial that indicated Zhang and Liu faced serious charges. It declared they had "seriously betrayed the trust and expectations of the Party Central Committee and the PLA". The editorial also said that the Party's military commission, severely trampled on and undermined the Chairman of the Central Military Commission's responsibility system, "undermined the Party's absolute leadership over the military and threatened the Party's ruling foundation" and "seriously damaged the image and prestige of the Central Military Commission". They were accused of having "an extremely negative impact on the Party, the country, and the military". The editorial added that investigating and punishing generals Zhang and Liu will "further rectify the political situation, eliminate ideological poison and malpractices" and promote "the rebirth of the People's Liberation Army, and inject strong impetus into the development of a strong military".

The removal in quick succession of China's top military leadership raises numerous questions, not least about political stability in China. The removal of Zhang and He Weidong, who shared a close relationship with Xi and had nothing to gain from his ouster, raises doubts about whether Xi has become less trusting with just a year to go before the 21st Party Congress and potential opposition to his continuing for a fourth term.

Jayadeva Ranade is president, Centre for China Analysis and Strategy, and a former member of the National Security Advisory Board. The views expressed are personal



Jayadeva Ranade

{ DROUPADI MURMU } PRESIDENT, INDIA

Uncertainties arising from ongoing conflicts have also strained global stability and economy. Even amid these challenging circumstances, India continues to move ahead rapidly on the path of development

Addressing joint sitting of Parliament ahead of the budget session



Why industry loves the India-EU free trade deal

The India-Europe Union Free Trade Agreement (FTA) is more than the culmination of a long and complex negotiation. It signals a conscious shift in how India is positioning itself in a changing global economy. At a time when trade is increasingly shaped by geopolitical uncertainty, supply-chain stress and strategic realignment, this partnership stands out not just because of its scale, but because of its purpose. It brings together two large and deeply complementary economies that together account for one-fourth of global GDP and lays the groundwork for building a sustainable, future-ready economic relationship.

What makes this agreement the "mother of all partnerships" is that it is not built around narrow transactional gains. It is a comprehensive in design and long-term in ambition. By covering trade in goods and services alongside investment, digital trade, sustainability, mobility, and technology cooperation, it creates an economic framework far beyond a simple tariff exchange. This matters for the Indian industry because competitiveness today is no longer defined only by access to markets. It is defined by the ability to operate within stable, trusted, and resilient networks that span production, innovation, and skills.

At its core, the agreement offers Indian businesses something increasingly scarce in the global system — predictability. Preferential access to a large and rules-based market allows firms to move from short-term gains and take long-term decisions on investment, exports, capacity, and partnerships. This is particularly important for labour-intensive sectors including textiles, gems and jewellery, leather, footwear, electrical machinery, chemicals, auto components etc. These sectors form the backbone of employment and would substantially gain from improved access to European markets, creating many more quality jobs. But the deeper opportunity lies in helping Indian firms, including the MSMEs, to move beyond competing solely on cost and into more durable, value-driven relationships meeting global standards. This is where global value-chain integration becomes central. Both Indian and European companies are actively diversifying supply chains to reduce concentration risks and build resilience. India, with its scale, aggressive reform agenda and improved industrial infrastructure, is well placed to emerge as a trusted production and innovation partner of Europe,

becoming an indispensable node in global value chains.

Technology cooperation quietly underpins much of this shift. The agreement creates the conditions for deeper collaboration in areas such as clean technologies, digital infrastructure, artificial intelligence, semiconductors, agriculture technology and advanced electronics. Here, Europe's strength in innovation and India's ability to scale form a natural complement. For the Indian industry, the opportunity is not just to adopt advanced technologies, but to participate in their co-development, localisation and deployment. Such collaboration can accelerate India's movement into higher-value manufacturing and technology-intensive sectors, while giving Indian firms a stake in shaping future industrial ecosystems.

Equally important is the impact on services and human capital. Where India's demographic advantage becomes a strategic asset. As one of the youngest large economies in the world, India brings a deep pool of skilled professionals across technology, engineering, research, health care, and business services. The agreement improves the ability of this workforce to connect with Europe's ageing but innovation-driven economies through greater certainty around services access and mobility.

Another defining feature of this partnership is the growing convergence on security and defence. For the Indian industry, this opens opportunities for collaboration in advanced defence and dual-use technology ecosystems, and integration into trusted supply chains for strategic goods. This would strengthen domestic industrial capabilities while reducing vulnerabilities in an increasingly challenging global environment.

Further, this FTA is especially significant as it strongly feeds into India's own goal of becoming a developed economy with inclusivity. It goes to the heart of industrial transformation, bringing together scale and strategy, technology and talent, access, and resilience. If implemented with focus and supported by domestic capacity building, it has the potential to shape India's industrial trajectory for decades — positioning Indian industries not on the margins of global trade, but firmly at the centre of resilient, high-value and future-ready economic networks.

Chandrajit Banerjee is director general, CII. The views expressed are personal



Chandrajit Banerjee



With the removal of He and Zhang, the PLA has no representation in the politburo. REUTERS

Market signals

Global factors will continue to drive markets

January this year saw a ratcheting up of geopolitical tensions by United States President Donald Trump with demands on Greenland. The uncertainty on global trade also increased as a result. The threats and the uncertainty have had a textbook impact on global assets. Gold and silver have seen big rallies. The yellow metal is up 20 per cent and silver an incredible 59 per cent in the first four weeks of 2026. Meanwhile, bond markets in Japan and the US have experienced sharply bearish moves and stock markets have range-traded, while investors crossed their fingers and hoped for an easing of tensions.

Wall Street is bracing itself for the possibility that investors in Europe and Japan will start selling a chunk of the US government debt they hold. If investors do decide to divest US treasuries, this would further push up US bond yields and make it more expensive for America to service its enormous debt of over \$30 trillion. It would also make it more expensive for corporations to raise dollar-denominated debt, or for individuals to service American mortgages. Traditionally, gold and other precious metals are seen as havens for capital in uncertain times, and the last year or so certainly fits that description. Bullion has been in a dizzying bull run after the Trump administration took charge in January last year. Since then, gold is up 65 per cent and silver a whopping 150 per cent (silver is an essential commodity for the electronics industry).

Indian investors are in a difficult spot, given the uncertainty. In January to date, the benchmark Nifty saw a small correction of around 3.3 per cent after gaining 9.8 per cent in 2025. The rupee has also been under continuous pressure and foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) have steadily reduced exposure to Indian equity. Since January 2025, FPIs sold equity assets of over ₹2 trillion. Dalal Street has remained afloat only due to net inflows of over ₹3.5 trillion into domestic-equity mutual funds. Most of that money has come from retail investors. The inconsistent and unreasonable policies of the Trump administration have also led to a decline in the dollar, which is down by 13.7 per cent against the euro since January 2025. Combined with the rising yields on US debt, this puts more pressure on the US, a net importer. The rupee has also lost significant ground since January last year and is down 8.5 per cent against the dollar and about 20 per cent versus the euro. In the given global economic environment, and particularly the trade position with the US, the Reserve Bank of India has done well to let the rupee depreciate. It will not compensate for the tariff disadvantage but will give the best possible chance to Indian exporters to compete.

In terms of stock markets, the data indicates India's equity bourses have been buoyed up purely by domestic funding, mainly by household savings. However, their investment tends to dry up and reverse if there is a sustained period of equity underperformance, or a sharp decline in stock-market values. A bear market could well be on the cards, given the tense geopolitical situation and investors should be prepared to deal with that contingency. Thus, what happens in the Indian stock markets in the coming weeks will largely depend on global factors. It would also be interesting to see if the upcoming Union Budget can lift the mood in the stock markets.

Creating employment

India-EU FTA can increase labour-intensive exports

The India-European Union (EU) free-trade agreement (FTA) opens up a large opportunity for India's labour-intensive sectors. Industries such as textiles, clothing, footwear, leather, marine products, and plantation goods stand to benefit the most because they face relatively high tariffs in the EU. Unlike capital-intensive manufacturing, these sectors are deeply employment-oriented and dominated by micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) clustered across the country. From Tiruppur's knitwear units to leather hubs in Kanpur and Agra, and from seafood exporters along the eastern coast to plantation products in the south, the employment linkages are extensive and could help in recovering the losses incurred by higher US tariffs. In FY25, India's exports to the EU stood at around \$76 billion, a figure comparable to shipments to the US, which were about \$87 billion. The EU is the largest export destination for textiles and apparel after the United States (US), with shipments from India valued at \$7.2 billion.

Market access to the EU, therefore, will benefit exports and job creation. The textile and apparel sector alone directly employs an estimated 45 million people, and improved access to the EU market could raise capacity utilisation across key MSME clusters, translating export growth into employment gains. Prior to the FTA, the EU imposed tariffs of up to 12 per cent on textiles and apparel, up to 17 per cent on leather and footwear, and as high as 26 per cent on marine products; these duties will now be eliminated. The higher tariff structure has historically eroded India's competitiveness in Europe, particularly in the face of Asian rivals with preferential access. In this context, tariff liberalisation under the FTA could narrow a longstanding disadvantage and allow Indian producers to compete on more equal terms, especially in price-sensitive segments. The scale of the opportunity is significant.

However, tariffs are only one part of the story. Non-tariff barriers in the EU, including stringent product standards, traceability requirements, and sustainability norms, could pose challenges for Indian exporters, particularly MSMEs. Compliance with environmental, labour, and quality standards requires investment in technology, certification, and process upgrades, which many small firms are currently ill-equipped to make. Thus, the challenge for India is to translate this access into actual employment-intensive growth. It will be important to push domestic reforms. Investment in infrastructure for product compliance, like testing labs, certification facilities, and quality control systems, will be critical. Lowering logistics costs through better management at ports, faster Customs procedures, and improved connectivity will also be key to making Indian exporters competitive in a demanding market like the EU. Equally important is aligning skilling and training programmes with export requirements. Labour-intensive sectors cannot scale up sustainably unless workers are trained to meet global standards in quality, safety, and environmental practices. Without such alignment, the FTA may benefit a limited set of large exporters while leaving smaller firms behind.



Taking the FTA agenda forward in 2026

Moving ahead with participation in next-generation FTAs, supplemented by substantive domestic trade policy reforms, must be India's focus

The conclusion of negotiations on the India-European Union (EU) free trade agreement (FTA) is very creditable, given that bilateral talks were ongoing, though intermittently, since 2007. Notwithstanding the fact that the FTA negotiations were accelerated over the last year owing to geopolitical pressures, it must be acknowledged that India has widened the scope of its FTA partners to include both developed and developing countries. Evidence of increased breadth — and, to some extent, depth — of provisions is also apparent in recent FTAs. The FTA with the United Kingdom, in particular, with almost 90 per cent tariff-line liberalisation, the inclusion of environmental and labour standards, and the opening up of select sensitive sectors, albeit under tariff rate quota provisions, is indicative of a positive change in India's FTA engagement. Reportedly, the just-concluded India-EU trade deal shares these desirable characteristics and high ambition. It is now imperative that India take this trade strategy forward.

Foremost, the remaining formalities for signing the FTA with the EU should be completed in the next few months. This will ensure that its ratification by the EU parliament, which is usually a year-long process, gets completed within the coming financial year. Speed is desirable as the imperatives for market diversification away from the increasingly uncertain US market remain persistent and strong. Secondly, there should be a clear delineation of the

task ahead to realise fully the benefits of preferential market access offered by the FTAs signed in recent years. It is necessary to recognise that comparator developing economies like Vietnam have a first-mover advantage in many of these markets. For example, Vietnam's lead over India in the two countries' respective shares in Australia's total apparel imports has widened since 2022, the year when India signed the Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement with Australia. Continued sector-specific efforts and broader trade policy measures, therefore, remain critical for enhancing manufacturing and hence export competitiveness. Ensuring regulatory ease, facilitative Customs procedures and lower import duties on critical inputs need to be on the immediate trade policy agenda. This should be of particular importance for sectors with export and employment potential. It is hoped that the forthcoming Budget will take forward, in a comprehensive manner, the process of tariff reduction as initiated in the last two Budgets. These policies together with

a long-overdue review of the 2016 modal bilateral investment treaty will also assist in attracting export-oriented foreign direct investment as targeted in some of our recent FTAs such as with the European Free Trade Association and New Zealand.

Thirdly, India also needs to participate in next-generation mega-regional trade agreements. Having accomplished bilateral FTAs with developed econ-

STRAIGHT TALK
AMRITA BATRA

Now, for an investment protection guarantee

Prime Minister Narendra Modi may have correctly declined to acknowledge US president Donald Trump's claims of ending war between India and Pakistan during Operation Sindoor. He may, however, have the maverick leader to thank for concluding the "mother of all free trade agreements" between India and the European Union (EU). This free trade agreement (FTA) opens European markets to Indian exports and Indian professionals and students in such a capacious manner that you wonder why it took two decades of shadow-boxing for the deal — it has a way to go before becoming a formal agreement — to be inked.

Mr Trump undoubtedly concentrated minds among vacillators on both sides of the Suez. Had he not virtually repudiated his nation's commitment to Europe and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Nato) with his ambitions for Greenland at Davos, Brussels may not have suddenly understood the merits of aligning with a middle power that also faces exclusion from the American market for mostly spurious reasons. Though, as commentators have pointed out, the deal can hardly be considered a handy substitute for an India-US FTA, it does, together with the defence and stability pact, offer good news in terms of geopolitical signalling and market access. The bloc remains India's largest trading partner for goods and one in which the country enjoys a trade surplus. In reality, however, the optics are somewhat over-

played; the FTA and the defence and security partnership amount to half the work that's needed to be done for both countries to derive optimum benefit. Middle class consumers of media such as this newspaper may be looking forward to cheaper wine, whisky, chocolate and high-end cars. But the deeper question is how far this FTA can go towards galvanising the economy and generating the jobs India's youth so desperately need.

Provided that the red tape enabling access to preferential tariffs is kept to a minimum, makers in employment-intensive sectors such as leather, chemicals, textiles and garments, toys, and gems and jewellery could well enjoy expanded markets in Europe. For a meaningful momentum shift it is well recognised that India needs an exponential expansion in manufacturing. But the absence of a robust investment protection agreement that will encourage European firms to set up base in India to serve both domestic and global markets remains a point of concern. This agreement has been in the works since 2022, five years after India unilaterally terminated almost all its bilateral investment treaties.

Investment guarantees are becoming critical to foreign direct investment because of the demonstrably capricious nature of Indian policy-making and judicial pronouncements. Among others, arbitrarily imposed quality control orders, Vodafone's travails in India, and most recently the Supreme Court's ruling on Tiger

SWOT
KANIKA DATTA

omies like the UK and Australia and having navigated the diverse interests of the 27-member EU, India would now be better prepared to negotiate entry into the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

With the formalisation of a dialogue partnership with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) and the EU in its November 2025 Melbourne summit, the CPTPP has emerged as the new axis for rules-based trade. There is now a coalition of the two most trade-intensive blocs in the world with the CPTPP. In addition, its member economies from the other two blocs — North America and Mercosur — such as Canada, Mexico, Chile, Peru and soon-to-be-member Uruguay, make CPTPP potentially the most capable of garnering collective action and cooperation against challenges to global trade and institutions.

A mega-regional trade agreement has the added advantage of cumulation of value addition (VA), facilitated by flexible rules of origin (RoOs). This is an enabling factor for participation in GVCs for member economies. RoOs in CPTPP, for example, allow regional cumulation of value addition. Raw materials/components processed in/ across member countries can qualify for "originating" status and hence preferential treatment by the exporter member economy. While yet at the ideation stage, potential extension of VA cumulation across the two dialogue partners (Asean and EU) could lead to the emergence of the CPTPP as a dynamic, global hub for rule-based economic integration. India should, therefore, not delay any further an announcement of its intent to participate in the CPTPP.

It is also interesting to note that the CPTPP is a living agreement. A review of its terms and provisions has to be mandatorily undertaken every five years to maintain its relevance and high standard. The terms of the agreement were designed a decade ago while it was still a US-led TPP. These were modified only to a limited extent after the US withdrawal to give it the contours of CPTPP in 2018. The first review, initiated in 2023 and concluded in 2025, has recommended updating and revising a majority of the provisions of the agreement. This is not surprising, given the dramatic shifts in the global trade environment in the interim period. CPTPP members have committed to completing the revision process in 2026. India should closely track these evolutionary changes to preferential participation in this ever-expanding mega-regional trade agreement.

Also, it is important that India's decision to participate in the CPTPP should be independent of China's absence in the mega-regional trade agreement. China was among the early applicants for CPTPP membership, followed soon — in the same month in 2021 — by Taiwan. China's membership in the CPTPP has, so far, been delayed owing to the "Auckland principles" that necessitate an established record of the applicant country's compliance with trade commitments, the ability to meet the agreement's high standards, and consensus among CPTPP members for consideration of its application. So far, the accession process has not followed a sequential order for the consideration of applications. Later applicants such as Uruguay and the UAE are now under consideration for initiation of the accession process in 2026. However, circumstances may not remain the same for long, given how the world is rushing to resolve trade disputes and sign trade agreements with China.

Overall, taking forward participation in bilateral, regional, as well as mega-regional trade agreements, supplemented by substantive domestic trade policy reforms, should be India's FTA agenda in 2026.

The author is professor, School of International Studies, JNU. Her book *India's Trade Policy in the 21st Century* was published by Routledge, London, in 2022. The views are personal.

Great power begins at home



DAMMU RAVI

There is no dearth of literature on the projection of India's imminent rise in the 21st century. Beyond the familiar far, Eswaran Sridharan, a much acclaimed political scientist, attempts a critical analysis of the under-explored shades of India's rise. His current assignment as director and chief executive officer, University of Pennsylvania Institute for the Advanced Study of India, lends him a vantage of further deeper insights on the subject.

This collection of papers approaches the subject by analysing the evolution of India's political development, which he sees as having an impact on its external projection. He presents, at the start, a factual perspective that the fragmentation of

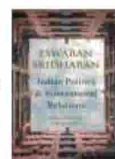
the Congress Party from the 1970s onwards led to the emergence of several political parties, both at the Centre and regional levels. He attributes these divisions primarily to the lack of inter-party democracy and the break in holding simultaneous elections at the Centre and states. In contrast, the author observes, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has a multilevel organisational structure from the village and district level, while at the state and national level inter-party elections take place regularly and leadership succession is usually decided by consensus and is uncontented.

The data used to analyse various trends in the country is somewhat dated but helps to highlight a few insightful trends. The economic reforms of 1991 are said to have unleashed a potent middle class that is ever-expanding in tune with India's economic growth. The general outlook of this cohort seems to suggest greater inclination towards the BJP with high expectations. At the same time, identity politics based on region, lan-

guage, religion and caste is on the rise, resulting in coalition-driven political arrangements. It is encouraging that political coalitions accommodate these diverse groups, including minorities, Dalits, tribals and so on. The growing polarisation of society as a consequence of communal politics is, however, a serious concern. The author's suggestion of introducing "proportional representation" does not appear to be a feasible alternative, even with state guarantees, given the internal complexities of Indian society. Therefore, we should reconcile to the fact that coalition politics will remain central to Indian politics for much of the 21st century. The book draws attention to the common criticism that the international order for Third World countries is characterised more by hierarchy than anarchy, while their internal order is just the opposite. These informal hierarchical realities of power differentiation are said to constrain freedom of action and generate systemic pressures to modify behaviour in accordance with interests of

the more powerful. This perspective is in sync with Mohammed Ayoub's conceptualisation of subaltern realism in South Asia, drawing attention to how the neglect of the domestic variables in the nation-building process affect conflict and order. It is important to understand, according to Eswaran, that the domestic processes have a strong bearing on bilateral relations in the sub-continent.

The author also draws attention to the India-Pakistan conflict by analysing scholarly viewpoints. He reasons that the two nuclear powers engaging in conflict actually detracts from their stature. India getting boxed in South Asia (minus China) diminishes its leverage in international fora, while Pakistan's economic potential retards. John C Mathew III's relative gains sensitivity theory that lays emphasis on the importance of absolute gains more than relative gains could be a useful barometer to assess each other's gains in economic and security spheres. Mircea



Indian Politics & International Relations: Underexplored Issues and Approaches by Eswaran Sridharan Published by Permanent Black 388 pages ₹1,200

Maritz's advocacy for both countries to undertake common economic projects and institutionalise a bilateral dialogue, not necessarily involving Kashmir, but ultimately leading to resolving it, is forward-looking. This view is in sync with Dale C Copeland's theory of trade interdependence inducing peace and stability.

Eswaran opines that India's rise to Great Power status is a long way ahead, even though it commands significant clout on the global stage. In the Global South its extensive developmental assistance has earned it significant goodwill. Although India almost fits John J Mearns's definition of a Great Power — "Le enjoying relatively strong military, economy, industry, technology as well as geographical features such as size, resources and water bodies" — the changing geopolitical shifts impose limitations on its rise. Resistance from the established hegemonic powers will be natural. India lacks status quo-altering capabilities;

India's military hardware is not indigenous; economically it is vulnerable to global supply chain disruptions in the absence of a strong manufacturing base. As a growing power, India would need to take advantage of the vast opportunities that the big powers offer, which is that its diplomatic positions on international issues mostly remain nuanced. Eswaran points out that India's rise is taking place against the backdrop of a much faster rise of China. India's strategy should be to narrow this gap through faster economic growth and that of China in the intervening period.

Eswaran's scholarly book concludes that in the foreseeable future India will be a leading power. However, among the several variables to which he alludes in the context of India's rise to great power status, one is how it manages South Asia — whether it can be conflict-free and economically integrated on the lines of the European Union. Perhaps the universally acclaimed principle that the rise to greatness actually begins at home is also true for nations.

The reviewer is a retired foreign service officer, dammuravi@gmail.com



A thought for today

I hope that the people who use this bridge in years to come will remember how it was built, and who built it

THE BRIDGE ON THE RIVER KWAI, film

Be On The Job

Post-EU FTA, here's what India should do to become world's preferred exporter of skilled manpower

Two days after India and EU announced their FTA, how far are we from cheaper European wine, chocolate and cars? At least a year, as we said yesterday, but the wait could get longer. That's because this 'Mother of All Deals', or MOAD, will be implemented only after it's greenlit by European Council and European Parliament. Which is easier said than done. Consider what happened with EU's other recent FTA with South America's Mercosur bloc. Signed on Jan 17, it ended in limbo just four days later, when European Parliament sought legal opinion on its parts – a process that can take up to two years.

Since MOAD is a comprehensive agreement, covering not only goods and services but also the movement of workers, it might encounter resistance in some countries. It's a fact that Europe's mood on immigrants has soured over the past decade, and while illegal Indian emigrants mostly aim for US, there's a steady flow into EU too. This is a point of action for COL. By committing to stop illegal emigration, it can make a strong case for the inflow of authorised workers that Europe needs in large numbers. As European Central Bank President Christine Lagarde said last year, without foreign workers Germany's GDP would have been 6% less than its 2019 level. A McKinsey report also estimates that inclusion of 'ethnolcultural minority employees' in the workforce can give a \$120bn boost to EU's economy.

Job vacancy rates have grown by 70% across EU since 2020, and 75% of employers can't find workers with the right skills. This is not only because Europe's population is ageing but also due to workers' reluctance to pick up new skills. As a result, there are acute shortages of both white- and blue-collar workers – from heavy truck drivers to doctors, and mechanics to nurses and software developers.

India should aim to become the biggest exporter of skilled manpower to fill these gaps. Dedicated ministries at the Centre and in the states could keep track of high-demand skills, arrange training programmes, and oversee the outflow of workers from India. Of course, grand as this plan is, it could trip on EU's red tape and Trump's tantrums across the pond. But paralysis brought on by uncertainty can't serve as policy for India. We've got a good EU deal, at least on paper, and it's time to begin the homework for it.

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Cry Me A Bridge

Mumbaikars grapple with yet another ghastly designed flyover. Engineering failures no longer explain these

Is India's richest city also its most corrupt? Less than two years after the infamous Gokhale Bridge scandal, the metropolis has served up yet another road construction that defies all explanations except the shabbiest. A new flyover in Mira-Bhayander has four lanes suddenly shrinking to two. No words can really express how shocking the visuals are. But MMRDA says, don't be shocked. It assures that this jump-cut enables "smooth crossing" of a busy junction. Mumbaikars have obviously disagreed. They cannot see how this design helps either traffic management or road safety. That the authorities are defending it as a planned engineering decision suggests the problem runs deeper than it appears, ghastly as the appearance is.

Revisiting to the Gokhale Bridge scandal of 2024, where a 2-metre gap was revealed at the sky-junction of two flyovers, as if vehicles were expected to leap from one to the other. And 2025 saw Palava Bridge being closed no sooner than it was opened, because the road surface started crumbling. It would not be any consolation to Mumbaikars, but similar shenanigans are being reported from other parts of the country as well. The 2024 monsoon saw 12 bridges collapse in Bihar within 20 days. Last year, the state was back in the headlines for a 60-foot-long, 10-foot-wide structure linking the mainland along Kari Kosi river to floodplains that remain underwater from May till winter. Last year also saw a Bhopal marvel, with a 90-degree turn. No words for that, either.

What's going on? Why does no one in govt stop such abominations before they are completed? Why does public outrage count for so little? At the core, just like adulterated foods and fake drugs, this is a political economy problem. Profiteers don't fear punishment – because they are in it with those who are supposed to guard public interest. Here's the thing, though. Not fixing quality control problems ensures India always remains an also-ran.

SIR, what's in a name?

Basu by any other would be as verBose

Bachi Karkaria



SIR is questioning folks from single-engine states with singularly 'illogical consistency'. Take West Bengal. Having already summoned a Bharat Ratna Nobelman, a cricketer who scalped 462 wickets for India and a diplomat who lied for his country – last week's targets were those whose surname 'differed' from that of their grandfather. Reportedly SIR's AI aide hadn't been 'taught' that the original had been simplified by colonial masters; their tongues twisted on such honorifics as 'upadhyay'. So, Gangopadhyay became Ganguly, while Bandyopadhyay/Mukhopadhyay/Chatterjee became Banerjee/Mukherjee/Chatterjee.

But it's not as simple as that. The artistic, individualistic Bengalis had to add another layer. Or several. 'Ganguly' is as often spell 'Ganguli'. The Bando/Mukho/Chatter-ai suffixed their with the North-Indian 'ji', joint entrance exam 'jee' or even haw-haw 'jee'. The confusion gets more confounding. You have to remember which Mukherji/jee/jee has dropped the middle 'h', and which Banner... has likewise dispensed with the second 'n'. There even was WC Bonnerjee.

Since this diversely eminent race has so many Who's Who, it's a nightmare recalling who's spell how. Fortunately there aren't too many like the purist who shudders noticeably at 'Rabindranath Tagore'. With low disdain and high dudgeon, he corrects the uninitiated with, 'Eesh! Oodibaba! It is Robinodnath Thakur!'

It should be simple turning every 'a' into 'o', right? Wrong. Only dyed-in-the-ool pronounce Kolkata correctly, as 'Kool-katata'; non-natives mangle it to 'Calcutta'. 'Kama' is 'Kaw-mole'. Btw, her's male. Like a 'boy'. Every 's' becomes 'sh', and the 'v' a 'bh', though with inexplicable perversity a legitimate 'bh' somersaults – as in 'Velpuri'.

"Enjoying the cool breeze on the Howrah breeze is like a joke. Not so?" becoming 'y' – and vice versa! Pity Jug Suraiya. One day he strode up to the doctor's assistant, jabbed his name on the list, and demanded, "Why have so many patients come after me been sent in while you've kept me waiting?" The assistant retorted, "Saar, so many times I called out your name, 'Yug Shoorji, Yug Shoorji!'"

Alec Smart said: "Did European Council Prez tell Indis after FTA, 'Now our stuff will Costa you less?'"

XI IN CHINESE CHECKERS

Is China's boss sacking generals because he's in full control or because he's an ageing leader with no succession plan & therefore a target of challengers? Remember, even Mao was challenged

Vijay Gokhale



There is broad speculation about the reasons behind President Xi Jinping's actions last week that sent shockwaves through the global strategic community. The sacking of People's Liberation Army (PLA) generals, Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli. Zhang was not simply vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), the apex military organisation headed by President Xi Jinping, but was regarded as a close ally.

At the 20th communist party congress in 2022, Xi appointed two vice-chairmen and four members to the seven-member CMC. Both vice-chairmen and three of four members, including the defence minister, have since fallen in what is being touted as an unprecedented military purge. As of today, just one original member remains standing.

Speculative reasons range from rumours that Zhang attempted an abortive coup d'état, to his detention for high corruption. Speculation swirls around whether Xi is acting from a position of dominance or weakness. The official version is couched in Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) turgid language. Zhang, apparently, 'seriously fuelled political and corruption issues that affect the party's leadership over the military and endanger the party's ruling foundation'. Official mouthpiece Liberation Army Daily likened Zhang to a 'toxin' that had to be incised if the body politic were not to 'rot'. Western media is giving wide publicity to CCP's version of events leaked through 'sources'. But should CCP's version be taken at face value?

Propaganda to craft false narratives in pursuit of domestic or international goals has been a hallmark of CCP's operating style, as its manipulation of Western media eager to publish any news on China. There are few, if any, sources of information in China that can independently corroborate CCP's version of events. In consequence, the world thinks, because China says so, that General Zhang was attempting to undermine Xi's legitimate authority – in the same way as CCP led the world to believe Marshal Lin Biao died in a plane crash while fleeing China in 1971 after an abortive coup against Mao Zedong. That the 1989 Tiananmen incident was an abortive attempt by General Secretary Zhao Ziyang to undermine CCP's rule under Deng Xiaoping, and that Bo Xilai, Xi's political rival in the run-up to the 2012 leadership contest, was unfit for high office having abetted the murder of a British national.

In each instance, the underlying narrative is that a renegade senior party leader unlawfully challenges the top man in ways detrimental to the latter's legitimate hold on state power.

History tells us differently. CCP has never been a potential beacon of marching behind an untested and leader. Mao Zedong, among others, was a powerful leader, was repeatedly challenged, notably by defence minister Peng Dehuai and others in 1959-1961 over Mao's disastrous Great Leap Forward policy.

Deng Xiaoping's authority was also challenged by: not one but two, putative successors over political liberalisation. There is no reason to suppose that Xi is not confronting similar threats in his 15-year reign.

CCP's version should be set aside unless there is corroborating evidence from independent sources. More likely, the current dominant leader is following his predecessors in crafting a narrative that preserves his authority and shows his action as necessary and justified.

From the Indian perspective, as China's neighbour, these recent developments are important and worth pondering on two counts: first, does the current military purge show that Xi is in full political control or is he weak? Second, does the decimation of CMC's ranks imply, as some in the West are speculating in the context of the Taiwan Strait, that PRC is not in a position to undertake military conflict or action.

On the question of Xi's political standing, conventional wisdom is that the purge demonstrates his absolute power. Like Stalin in the 1930s, so the argument goes, Xi purges loyal subordinates from time to time, to terrorise the rank-and-file into total loyalty. But, is the opposite case not equally possible? If Xi were in absolute control and the 2022 party congress marked his total capture of elite politics, as Western media reported, then what explanation might there be for

the purge of five of his six appointees to CMC?

If these men are corrupt, how did so many of them slip through the cracks in his anti-corruption campaign, the longest and most ruthless since 1949? If these men are undermining the party, then what does it say for the resilience of the strict cage of political institutions and rules he has built to enforce discipline and loyalty? And, if Zhang is selling nuclear secrets, what does it say about the trustworthiness of Xi's intelligence networks?

On the contrary, the extent of the purge tends to suggest that Xi's authority is likely being challenged and that his internal surveillance systems are not foolproof. He is weaker than he seems. As he grows older, and with no clear succession plan in sight, these challenges will, likely, mount.

On whether the military purge weakens Beijing's capacity to launch military action, again, history could be a guide. Despite the massive internal disruption caused by the Great Leap Forward in 1960-1962, China still attacked India. In 1969 it initiated the border war with Soviet Union despite several top-ranking PLA leaders being imprisoned or in exile during the Cultural Revolution.

In 1979, PRC initiated the Sino-Vietnamese conflict despite a bitter domestic power struggle, an untested military and a collapsing economy.

Beijing launches conflict with political, not military, objectives at the forefront. In each case one of the underlying reasons was to divert attention away from internal politics. Vigilance must, therefore, be heightened, not relaxed, by China's neighbours at such times.

On both counts, a much closer watch on internal developments is, therefore, warranted. Depending on western interpretations to comprehend what is happening inside China may not be the wisest course of action.

The writer served as India's foreign secretary & India's envoy to China



Carney's Truth To Power, India's Vindication

Indians have grown up living with the falsehood of international rules-based order. New Delhi was the original middle-power coalition builder. Reviving that project will be tough, but time for a new global architecture is now

Pankaj Saran



"A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when we understand that the old is dying, but the new cannot yet be born, and we must live with the half-dead between. This is the time of the long-suffering, finds utterance. These lines could aptly apply to Canadian PM Mark Carney's speech in Davos. Canada has warned, and we can say welcome to the real world Mr. Carney. You have risen from the ashes of Banting like a Phoenix.

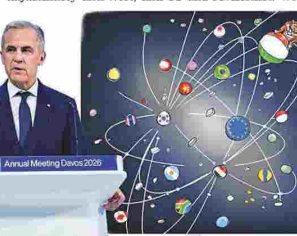
The speech is music to Indian ears. Generations of Indians have grown up living with the falsehood of international rules-based order, hegemony and big power rivalry, strategic autonomy, variable geometry and issue-based coalition, all listed in the speech. They're also familiar with what it means for countries "in-between" to come together to secure and fight for their interests.

Carney's talk of global disruption and breakdown and call to arms hits the same geopolitical sweet spot that India's marshalling of the voice of Global South did in the aftermath of Ukraine war. There're moments in history when some leaders and nations read the world right and speak up. The voice of Global South then received a spontaneous response because it was both a protest against the resurgence of major-power confrontation and an anguished cry for the real problems of the majority to be heard. India's move was seen by many middle powers in the West as trade unionism and not with deep suspicion. China did not like the time and presented itself as its natural leader. We should hope that it does not now identify itself as a middle power in the churning waters.

In the bipolar and globalisation era India's advocacy of South-South cooperation had received a quiet burial. It was considered old-fashioned. Admittedly India and others in the South were exhausted trying to make this a reality. Carney is not quite talking of

South-South cooperation but the approximation remains – a compact for a world minus the hegemons.

The speech is a textbook case of the messenger being the message. The fact that a Western nation, a Nato member, and torchbearer of the "rules-based international order" has stood up in Davos, invoking the principle of sovereignty is the real story. If such a speech was made by a middle power from the developing world, such as India, it would first have been criticised by Indian pundits themselves as being unjustifiably anti-West, anti-US and revisionist. We



would have been at the receiving end of a fresh dose of American tariffs.

When it comes to strategic autonomy or building coalitions, India has been ahead of the times. The original middle-power coalition will always be remembered as India, Indonesia, Egypt and Yugoslavia. Much later India, Brazil and South Africa got together as powers who believed they could strike what Carney has called, like the Buddha, the "third path".

The formation of Brics in 2006, before China became a hegemon is another example. Its dramatic expansion two years ago was nothing but a celebration of middle

powers. In a parallel undertaking, India has significantly strengthened its relations with middle powers like France, Germany, Italy, Spain, the Nordics, UK, Australia, Japan, Korea and Indonesia. The renaissance in India-EU relations is the latest manifestation of this.

The Canadian prescription is worthy of follow-up. We have to see to what extent it's an outpouring of a nation humiliated or an enduring shift driven by cold logic. We see Canada's predicament being played out in our neighbourhood. The likeness is particularly striking in the dynamic between India and Nepal that is laced with overlapping geographies, culture, an open border and not least, personality traits of leaders. Nevertheless, it requires a brave man to speak truth to power.

There's of course a certain inconsistency between Carney's actions and words. While berating hegemony and big powers, he did not hesitate to court one to spite another, as seen in his visit to China a few days before his Davos speech. It's far from settled that China is a more benign hegemon than US. The other challenge in making the middle-power project a success in this day and age is that many middle powers are heavily dependent and integrated with big powers. Hegemonic behaviour is typified by the willingness to weaponise strengths and dependencies. A project to liberate middle powers from such shackles will be a generational one. In the transition period, hegemons will act to divide and rule, for that is the way to preserve their dominance.

Middle powers have differences among them too. Canada, for example, is a staunch opponent of permanent membership of UNSC for four other middle powers.

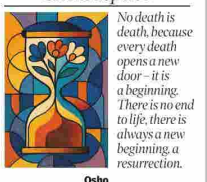
All told, the point that the world order as we knew it is over is true, as is the point that those who are not on the table will be on the menu. The time for building a new architecture could not be more opportune. India has no choice but to participate with full vigour.

The writer served as India's deputy national security adviser

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacred space



Swadharma And Inner Voice Of Clarity

Ganesh Kolambakar

Our spiritual journey begins with the call to live in harmony with dharma. Although dharma is often translated as righteousness, this captures only a fraction of its deeper meaning. Righteousness suggests a moral code, but dharma in Indian tradition, refers to the sustaining order of life, principles that uphold balance within an individual and the universe. It is a universal compass that guides collective harmony yet within this cosmic framework lies another essential dimension. Each person carries an inner calling that reveals their most authentic way of living. This inner truth is known as swadharma.

Much of our stress and confusion arises not because life is inherently complex but because we try to live by standards that do not reflect who we truly are. When we understand swadharma, we begin to listen to the

quiet guidance within, a voice that brings clarity, balance, and authenticity amid noise of modern life.

Swadharma is not shaped by convenience or preference. It is the expression of one's true nature, formed by conscience, inner clarity, and deeply held values. Dharma is not derived from scriptural wisdom, while swadharma emerges from quiet centre of one's being. Krishna's counsel to Arjuna makes this distinction unmistakable. It is better to follow one's own swadharma, even imperfectly, than to perform another's dharma flawlessly. This teaching affirms that genuine meaning in life comes from living in accordance with one's inner truth rather than adopting ideals that do not belong to one's nature.

The essence of dharma is eternal, yet its social expressions naturally evolve

with time. Scriptures acknowledge that the external forms of dharma adjust to needs and capacities of each age. Customs and norms that once benefited society may not carry the same relevance in the modern world. Swadharma, grounded in personal conscience, responds to the shifts in time. It may not always align with rigid traditions, yet it never violates timeless values at the heart of dharma.

Truth, compassion, love, and responsibility continue to express themselves uniquely within each individual. Swadharma emerges from one's core values, and it evolves as a person matures. As understanding deepens and satva becomes stronger, inner clarity grows. What felt true in earlier stages of life may transform as consciousness expands and balance of gunas shifts.

Swadharma emerges from one's core values, and it evolves as a person matures. As understanding deepens and satva becomes stronger, inner clarity grows. What felt true in earlier stages of life may transform as consciousness expands and balance of gunas shifts.

Just as life's duties change with age and experience, expression of swadharma adapts to one's evolving awareness. It is not fixed but becomes more refined as one becomes inwardly aligned. Because swadharma reflects inner nature, it differs from person to person.

It is not about seeking external validation for courage and protection of justice, while a sage's swadharma may express itself through nonviolence and spiritual insight. Both paths are sacred because they arise from the integrity of one's being. The Mahabharata reminds us that dharma is subtle and cannot be defined uniformly for all. What is dharma for one may be adharma for another when viewed through the lens of their unique nature and responsibility.

Living by swadharma is not about following rigid rules but discovering a way of being that resonates with one's innermost truth.

Warp & Woof of the New Trade Design

Growth spur if key fixes in FTA are made

Textile exporters are at the forefront of beneficiaries from the India-EU trade deal. The relief comes as a challenging point for the industry, which is facing 50% tariffs in the US, its biggest export market. GoI is offering labour-intensive industry financial relief. But the US tariff action has brought home the need to diversify its exports in terms of export destinations. The obvious candidate, the EU, previously had higher duties on textile imports from India, which will now be brought to levels faced by principal competitors Bangladesh and Vietnam. Tariff equalisation in the EU was a tough but necessary condition—the trade deal was decades in the making—but several other hurdles confront Indian exporters eyeing a larger share of the EU textile market.

The main impediment is sustainability conditions imposed by the EU, which will involve fresh investment by Indian exporters. Investments will have to be made at all levels of textile value chain, which could affect competitiveness of MSMEs. The industry faces a supply chain that is fragmented across states and adds to logistics costs, unlike China, which has adopted an integrated approach to textile manufacturing. India also needs to make a bigger push into man-made fibres, where taxes have kept input costs elevated. The EU trade deal may fall short of transforming India's textile industry into large manufacturing units unless supportive infrastructure and capital are easier to access.

The deal, however, offers the Indian textile industry a mechanism to transform technologically and climb the value chain. Levelled tariffs are a starting point for a sustainable growth path. The industry is one of the biggest employment generators and is primed for expansion through foreign investment. With access to the EU improving, the growth trajectory should shift upwards for India's textile sector. India must have an early harvest plan for EU textile exports and build on its inherent strengths. The sector's linkages to agriculture contribute to its need for self-sustaining expansion.



The salaried class is reshaping the economy and expects GoI to focus on its demands this budget

Let's Begin with the Middle



Anil Padmanabhan

India's economic narrative is usually framed in extremes. At one end lies the persistent challenge of poverty and informality. At the other end are celebratory headlines about its growing tribe of billionaires and high-end consumption. The most consequential shift of the last decade, though, is unfolding in the middle.

IT data reveals a structural transformation among India's salaried class: the number of salaried taxpayers in the ₹10-15 lakh and ₹15-20 lakh income slabs has grown by roughly 600% over the 9 years ended 2023-24. What was once a narrow upper-middle cohort in 2014, in absolute terms, has become a mass segment today. As a result, the geometry of India's salaried taxpayer base is gradually undergoing a change, transforming from a pyramid to a bulging diamond.

This is not merely a story of higher wages. Instead, it marks the emergence of a formal, asset-owning middle class at scale—a development with far-reaching implications for India's consumption patterns, savings, investments and political economy. The sharp rise in middle-IT filers is among the clearest indicators of income mobility in recent years. Tax filings show substantial growth across brackets between ₹5-10 lakh, but acceleration in the middle slabs is particularly striking.

Take the ₹10-15 lakh bracket: number of filers has risen more than 6-fold, from around 8.3 lakh to over 50 lakh. This upward migration signals that millions of salaried workers are crossing key income thresholds. What is notable is that average sal-



Lakshmi's da house

aries within these rapidly expanding slabs have remained stable, or have marginally declined. In the ₹10-15 lakh category for instance, the average salary edged down slightly from ₹12.1 lakh to ₹12.06 lakh.

Clearly, growth is being driven by new entrants clustering near the lower end of these brackets and pulling down the average even as the cohort expands dramatically.

The economic consequences of this shift are significant. ▶ **Earn more, spend more** As households move up the income ladder, discretionary spending expands. This is apparent in the premiumisation trend across consumer goods—from smartphones and appliances to branded retail and travel. India's consumption engine is increasingly being powered not just by HNIs, but by a large and growing middle cohort with both purchasing power and aspiration. It is not surprising, then, that companies are reorienting towards the so-called 'mass premium' consumer.

▶ **Investment spike** Perhaps the most underappreciated impact of this expansion is its role in accelerating household financialisation. Historically, Indian savings were dominated by physical assets—gold and real es-

tate—and conservative instruments like FDs and insurance. The range of financial products was limited, and participation in capital markets was narrow.

Not any longer. As salaried households scale income slabs, their surplus grows, enabling diversification into equities, MFs and pension-linked products. Direct accounts have multiplied more than five times in a little over the last 6 years, and SIPs have become a defining feature of middle-class wealth accumulation. In effect, India's middle class is no longer merely consuming; it is increasingly investing.

▶ **Risk appetite** This expanding cohort is also structurally distinct from earlier middle-class formations because it is firmly embedded in the formal economy. Salaried taxpayers borrow through formal channels, pay EMIs, invest through regulated instruments, and depend on macro stability to protect their assets. In turn, this creates a stakeholder class with a direct interest in economic reforms that reduce friction: ease of doing business, predictable taxation and infrastructure build-out and inflation control.

Given this growing risk appetite, it's no coincidence that a significant share of the new entrepreneurial class—including many founders powering the unicorn economy—comes from this cohort.

▶ **Political heft** The middle-income base expands, its electoral weight will grow, particularly in urban constituencies. With impending delimitation, the proportion of parliamentary seats linked to urban and

semi-urban India is likely to grow, further amplifying the political voice of this cohort.

Middle-class voters prioritise economic stability, job creation, inflation control and credible public services. They are less tolerant of policy volatility and more aligned with growth-oriented governance, providing a counterweight to populists. They will shape the contours of India's policy debate over the next decade.

For political parties still operating with older redistributive frameworks, the warnings are sharper: the electorate is changing faster than their imagination. India's most important economic development in the last two decades has been the silent, but decisive, expansion of the salaried middle. They are transforming consumption, accelerating financialisation and creating a new stakeholder polity.

For PMs, this expanding salaried middle will be difficult to ignore in the future. This is a constituency that is formally employed, financially invested and increasingly asset-owning—with EMIs to service, portfolios to grow, and inflation to fear. They have more skin-in-the-game. Hence, they have less tolerance for fiscal populism, and demand for stability and opportunity.

Consequently, the next round of reforms promised by Narendra Modi and Nirmala Sitharaman will also be judged with new metrics by the bulging centre of India's new diamond of salaried taxpayers—especially on what they do to improve ease of living.

The writer is an independent journalist

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Funding Unspent is Spending Denied

GoI is projected to save ₹70,000-75,000 cr in the current fiscal year due to significant under-utilisation of budget allocations across key ministries and flagship welfare schemes. These unspent amounts—arising from slow execution under programmes, such as Jal Jeevan Mission, Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana and Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana—provide fiscal space to absorb higher subsidy costs and offset modest tax shortfalls.

This, however, is a recurrent feature of the public finance system. Earlier, central funds flowed via state treasuries or to implementing societies, involving approvals, parked balances and frequent delays. To address this, GoI reformed fund flows through Single Nodal Agency (SNA) framework, integrated with Public Financial Management System (PFMS) and RBI-managed SPARSH platform. Funds are now released on a just-in-time basis, digitally tracked end-to-end, with state treasuries largely confined to accounting oversight. The intent is to minimise idle balances, enhance transparency and enable real-time monitoring. Yet, transitional challenges—technical integration issues across platforms, multi-layered approvals and limited administrative capacity at state and district levels—continue to delay utilisation. Capacity gaps, audit-related risk aversion and coordination failures between Union ministries, states and implementing agencies compress spending windows.

The macroeconomic costs of such delays are substantial. Unspent funds could finance infrastructure, water, housing and rural connectivity—sectors with high multiplier effects. Idle balances represent not fiscal savings but lost opportunities to raise productivity, improve living standards and strengthen long-term growth prospects.



JUST IN JEST

Ursula von der Leyen's valuable lesson for our netas when they go abroad

Lose the Suit, Go for Couture Diplomacy

Daadi-nas and Gen Zs alike were impressed with Ursula von der Leyen turning up at the Republic Day jamboree in a Rajesh Pratap Singh Banarasi brocade bandhgala. With its deep purple-maroon base and gold zari floral motifs, it was the kind of garment that makes even the most hardened bureaucrat from Brussels look like she's wandered out of a Mughal miniature. It was less 'European Commission president' and more 'Empress of a neo-Baroque'. This is the culture of diplomacy: leaders dressed not in drab suits like they do in Davos, or in Armani-flop-flops like the Tech Bros still do in the Valley, but in the full regalia of silk armoury. Imagine the G7 summit as a global costume ball.

Our leaders, too, should return Von der Leyen's gesture. Instead of wearing the same old black waistcoat-safed kurta or handloom tunics, they should wear flamboyant 'traditional' couture of the country they are visiting. Lederhosen, complete with suspenders and alpine hats, when in Germany. A bowler hat when in Britain, and a beret in France. A Spanish shawl should have our netas in Flamenco ruffles. In Japan, they could don samurai armour, ensuring that negotiations are conducted with the gravitas of a Kurosawa epic. In Scotland, a kilt, of course. Because nothing builds trust like the possibility of a gust of wind revealing more than fiscal transparency.

Let's Not Stretch Those Taxes



Dhiraj Nim

A sharp decline in India's tax buoyancy in FY26 has tightened trade-off for GoI between growth support and fiscal discipline. But big questions are why tax buoyancy has declined so sharply and whether this holds lessons for FY27. The answers may indicate a need for more conservative tax policy in the future.

India's long-term tax buoyancy typically hovers around 1, meaning aggregate taxes usually grow in line with nominal GDP. A buoyancy factor below 1 indicates that economic growth is not translating into tax revenues in proportion.

When tax buoyancy falls short of the target in any year, it creates fiscal stress. All else equal, GoI can either rein in spending or relax fiscal deficit. FY26 has become such a year.

In February 2026, GoI assumed gross tax buoyancy of 1.1 for FY26. However, buoyancy has dropped to 0.5-0.6, implying a tax gap of around 0.6% of GDP compared to the target. This shortfall means that, even with a large central bank dividend, GoI will

need to cut spending to meet the fiscal deficit target of 4.4% of GDP.

Two factors explain part of the slowdown in tax buoyancy.

▶ **Nominal GDP growth** has weakened due to low inflation. Real GDP grew at 8% in the first half of FY26, but the GDP deflator rose only 0.7%. Lower inflation reduces the value of the tax base and drags tax revenue growth.

▶ **GoI provided tax relief.** The personal IIT cut announced in February 2025 is likely to reduce fiscal revenue by ₹1 in annually. The impact of the GST cut that took effect in September 2025 is harder to quantify, but given sluggish nominal GDP growth, it is unlikely to reverse the trend.

These two factors, however, cannot fully explain the sharp fall in tax buoyancy. Real tax growth has fallen faster than nominal tax growth, which shows that inflation alone cannot account for weak collections. The decline in tax buoyancy is also broad-based, extending beyond corporate taxes. GoI lowered tax rates. In addition, a third, largely overlooked reason in India's context may lie in the interaction between financial and fiscal cycles. A financial cycle captures the movement of variables, including bank credit, equity prices and property prices. Recent public finance research identifies financial cycles as major contributors to volatility in fiscal cycles, especially

in economies with rapidly deepening or mature financial systems.

In India, Covid synchronised resets of financial and business cycles. After lockdowns ended, economic growth surged, with equities, property prices and bank credit following suit. The post-pandemic economy displayed strong momentum in the property sector, rising household debt, and higher consumption. The reverse also holds—worsening financial cycle can dampen pockets of economic activity even if overall real growth stays satisfactory.



Gum control

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Financial deepening accelerated. When financial and business cycles rise together, they amplify each other. During these joint upturns, economic agents experience stronger sentiment and wealth effects, driving them to riskier investments and higher consumption. The reverse also holds—worsening financial cycle can dampen pockets of economic activity even if overall real growth stays satisfactory.

The writer is an economist, ANZ

India's financial cycle weakened in 2025, with all three major financial variables softening, even as real GDP growth strengthened. This divergence raises the question of whether financial conditions have begun to influence fiscal revenues. Analysis confirms this suspicion.

In models that included financial conditions alongside nominal GDP, tax buoyancy attributed solely to nominal GDP fell by 20-40% compared with models that excluded financial variables. This indicates that part of buoyancy usually linked to nominal GDP reflects the economy's financial cycle. In other words, tax buoyancy relative to nominal GDP is lower than we tend to think. This pattern holds for both direct and indirect taxes. As expected, equity markets exerted a smaller influence on taxes compared with property prices and bank credit.

If financial conditions do not improve in 2026, tax growth may continue lagging nominal GDP growth, keeping buoyancy below its long-term average. With such a risk, the planned shift to a medium-term debt target will demand stronger fiscal credibility to signal discipline amid bond market pressures.

After a significant miss in FY26, conservative tax forecasts will be essential to reinforce that intent.

The writer is an economist, ANZ

How to Get Intercontinental



Sumant Sinha

Exports account for about 22% of India's GDP. Anything that enhances it, presents significant potential to boost domestic incomes and create employment. So far, India has been concluding trade agreements with individual countries—the UAE, Britain and New Zealand. With the India-EU FTA, it now steps onto a larger stage.

The EU offers unparalleled access to one of the world's most sophisticated markets. It is already India's largest trading partner in goods. In 2024-25, bilateral trade in goods reached \$136.5 bn, while services trade crossed \$80 bn. The latest FTA deepens this relationship by granting preferential market access to over 90% of Indian exports by value, across a combined economic space accounting for roughly a quarter of global GDP.

Official estimates suggest exports worth nearly \$75 bn are now poised for accelerated growth, with labour-intensive sectors set to gain significantly from immediate tariff reductions on nearly \$33 bn of exports. These are not abstract gains. Export-

led growth in these sectors supports large-scale employment, particularly for women, artisans and semi-skilled workers, and strengthens regional manufacturing clusters across India.

For SMEs, scale and predictability of EU market access can be transformative. MSMEs often struggle with lack of order aggregation, but with limited access to large, stable markets. Preferential access, combined with stronger regulatory cooperation and streamlined customs procedures under the FTA, can help these firms scale exports, invest with confidence and integrate more deeply into GVCs.

The agreement also reflects calibrated trade-offs. India has agreed to a phased, quota-based liberalisation of automobile imports, while securing reciprocal access for India-made

vehicles in the EU. If managed well, this can strengthen 'Make in India', enhance consumer choice and encourage tech transfer provided domestic manufacturing competitiveness continues to improve.

Perhaps the most consequential dimension of the India-EU FTA lies beyond traditional trade metrics. The EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) embeds climate considerations directly into trade by placing a carbon cost on emissions-intensive imports such as steel, aluminium and cement. Inclusion of forward-looking CBAM provisions in the FTA covering dialogue, technical cooperation, recognition of carbon pricing mechanisms and targeted support marks an important shift from unilateral regulation to structured engagement.

For India Inc, this creates both challenge and opportunity. Carbon-linked trade measures can raise near-term compliance costs. But they also reward early movers in clean energy adoption and low-carbon manufacturing. India has some of the world's lowest clean energy costs and highest availability. These position us well to compete in the emerging trade environment. We have

more to gain than to lose. More importantly, the India-EU partnership brings together complementary strengths. Europe offers advanced tech, innovation and climate finance. India offers scale, manufacturing capability and a fast-growing clean-energy market. Larger markets incentivised investment and partnership.

A step change in EU-India business partnerships in areas such as solar manufacturing, batteries, electric vehicles, clean technologies and semiconductors is expected. This will help build resilient alternatives to concentrated GVCs while supporting India's energy transition and job creation in future-facing industries.

The FTA is a central pillar of India's broader strategy to diversify trade partnerships. But announcements are only the starting point. Its success will ultimately be judged by outcomes: more jobs, stronger small businesses, higher farmer incomes, cleaner industries and greater resilience in a volatile global economy.

This agreement binds India more closely with a major economic partner that values stability, rules and long-term cooperation. If implemented with focus and follow-through, it can help India secure growth that's not just faster but also more diversified, more sustainable and more inclusive.

The writer is chairman, CEO, ReNew



THE SPEAKING TREE

Don't Forget To Laugh

NARAYANI GANESH

We love to make a dohlist of all the problems we face, whether it's a nagging ones or the larger, more daunting ones. Dwelling on problems does not make them go away; or they do not become less problematic.

First, you need to know that everything you call a problem is not really one. 'If you break your neck, if you have nothing to eat, if your house is fire, then you've got a problem. Everything else is an inconvenience. Life is inconvenient. Life is lumpy. A lump is not a problem, a lump in the throat, and a lump in the breast are not the same kind of lump. One needs to learn the difference,' said author Robert Fulghum.

He couldn't have put it in better terms. Or as it is said, you think you have so many problems. But when faced with serious ill-health, everything else drops off, and you focus only on your health that is of paramount importance.

Perhaps the thing is that just like everything else in life, problems and their intensity are all relative. It all depends on what you are going through at the moment, your resources, your support system, relationships with friends and family, and your own mental and physical health. Also, what seems like a terrible issue today, turns out to be funny years later when you think back. But at that time, it had reduced you to tears. That's why you say, 'life is an illusion. It is Divine play.'

Don't take yourself or life too seriously. Else, you may forget to laugh.

STEP UP TO THE PLATE

Nusara

Bangkok

In a city where Bangkok's food scene stretches effortlessly from good street food to boundary-pushing fine dining, Nusara sits confidently at the top end of the spectrum. Opened in 2020 by chef Thitit Tatt Tassanakajon and his brother Tan, this intimate, 10-seat restaurant is both a love letter to their grandmother and a bold statement of modern Thai cuisine. Chef Tan draws on family recipes and royal Thai cookbooks from the likes of King Rama IX, reworking them with precision and contemporary flair. The result is a deeply rooted yet forward-looking, much like Bangkok itself. Signature dishes such as the vibrant blue

swimming crab curry with crispy rice noodles deliver punchy, unmistakable Thai flavours, while mains are served family-style, honouring local dining traditions. The experience is elevated further by the setting: olive-green interiors, gold accents and mesmerising views of Wat Pho, best enjoyed with a glass of Krug on the terrace. Service, led by Tan as maître d' and sommelier, is polished yet warm. Nusara manages something rare in Bangkok's crowded dining landscape: refined luxury, with a personal, heartfelt and unmistakably Thai.

The writer is a food critic, Bangkok Post

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Chat Room

The Prezzure's On You, Don

Apr 2025 Re-Globalisation 2025 by Shishir Priyadarshi (don 28) may be premature to comment on the impact of the India-EU free trade agreement (FTA) concluded on Tuesday on the complex global economic policy push and pulls. But one thing that is certain, is this could not have happened at a better time for India's global economic interest or for the EU, which could give out a message loud and clear that one individual, even if he is the president of the strongest nation in terms of the strength of currency or the number of nuclear warheads owned, cannot hold the economic activities globally in well to do long periods of time.

M C Warrior
Mumbai

The Editorial Page

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

IN 1932

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

Baramati tragedy, churn in its wake

THE TRAGIC death of Ajit Pawar, Deputy Chief Minister of Maharashtra, in an air crash Wednesday leaves an empty space, bringing to an abrupt end the career of a politician of his time. As one of the different parties — from Congress to the Sharad Pawar-founded NCP to the NCP splinter he reentered into the BJP-led NDA — and as six-time Deputy CM and eight-term MLA, Ajit Pawar embodied the dominant strand of a pragmatic politics that criss-crosses ideological red lines, while keeping alive a direct connect to the ground. His death also forecloses the possibilities that still lay ahead, perhaps, for the man who wanted to be chief minister. The churn in Maharashtra that began with the splitting of the NCP and Shiv Sena into two parties each, and that rearranged the two main coalitions, MVA and Mahayuti, is not yet done. Municipal polls nearly a fortnight ago saw the two NCPs join hands for the civic elections in Pune and Pimpri-Chinchwad, amid talk of tensions within the Mahayuti.

From the time he entered politics, getting elected to the Lok Sabha in 1991 from Baramati, a seat he later vacated for Sharad Pawar to settle down in state politics, Ajit Pawar earned a reputation, amid allegations of corruption, as an administrator who got things done, and as a finance minister who underlined fiscal discipline. He was also known for his unflinching bluntness and impatient streak courted controversy — be it his swearing-in as Devendra Fadnis's deputy, after the 2019 assembly polls, in a hurried early-morning ceremony in Raj Bhavan to form a government that lasted 80 hours, or his comments during a period of acute water shortage that were seen to be off-key. Power came to him as a family bequest, but at the same time, as uncle Sharad Pawar started spending more time in national politics in Delhi, he moulded it in his own image in western Maharashtra's sugar belt. 'Ajit dada' kept the organisation intact, engaged with milk unions and sugar cooperatives and coordinated with other players and parties. When the NCP split in 2023, the majority of NCP workers saw their future with him. His faction's performance in the 2024 assembly election seemed to cement his claim to leading the real NCP.

With his premature exit from the political field, Ajit Pawar joins leaders like Madhavrao Scindia, Y S Rajasekhara Reddy, Pramod Mahajan, and more recently, Vijay Rupani, all gone in their political prime. In a party and polity dominated by family and personality, he leaves behind the question of the future of the NCP. His going will sharpen the tumult in the fluid politics of his state, his party — and his family.

UGC regulations force a needed reckoning

THE UNIVERSITY Grants Commission's new regulations against discrimination in higher education — the UGC (Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions) Regulations, 2026 — are significant and welcome. They have sparked protests on the grounds of overreach and there are accusations that it ignores upper-caste concerns. Yet, the context that produces them shows why they are much needed. UGC data provided to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Education in 2025 shows that over the last five years, the number of reported caste-based discrimination on educational campuses has gone up exponentially — from 173 in 2019-20 to 378 in 2023-24. It makes the regulations, which replace those from 2012, both urgent and necessary. If the 2012 regulations officially recognised social discrimination, the new ones call out caste discrimination in classrooms by its name and move the needle by institutionalising mechanisms of redress.

Certainly, the framework they put in place is not beyond critique. Despite Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan's assurance that misuse will "not be allowed against anybody", there will be challenges. The inclusion of Other Backward Classes (OBC), while welcome, will need to be addressed with rigour. Concerns have also been raised about the possibility of false complaints of discrimination, and over the feasibility of timelines prescribed for inquiries, which may strain under-resourced institutions. The threat of punitive action for non-compliance, including derecognition, has stoked anxieties. For the regulations to succeed, checks and balances and safeguards against misuse, and a commitment to due process, will be critical.

The backlash against the regulations, however, cannot mask the reality that had forced an overdue recognition in the Mandal moment. The fact is that privilege reproduces itself through access, language and cultural capital, that inequality is often due to historical exclusion. Ever since the implementation of affirmative action, classrooms have become more diverse. But caste prejudice still operates in covert and less recognisable registers. The UGC's new regulations are not perfect, but they force a reckoning with that reality. Addressing entrenched inequities always provokes discomfort. But pretending they no longer exist would mean shirking the constitutional obligation of equality for all.

In age of hurry, the Wikipedia pause

FROM DECEMBER 1, 2025 to January 31, 2026, there was a row of words over a tiny preposition on a Wikipedia "talk" page. Two editors battled over whether the "into" in the Wikipedia page for the 2013 film *Star Trek Into Darkness* should be lower or upper case. It got nasty — over 40,000 words were exchanged before the upper-casiers won.

During its 33 years in the public domain, the internet has had several transformations, from the blog posts era to the social media era to the AI revolution. With each new iteration, information has become more bite-sized, more portable, more portable. Amidst this, Wikipedia, which turned 25 this month, seems like a throwback to the early internet. Not offering the eye-catching features of ever-evolving technology, but stolidly building a database of knowledge. What began as a website distrusted by serious seekers of knowledge, who viewed it as being synonymous with sloppy, low-effort work, now offers, as per a Nature investigation, accuracy comparable to that of Encyclopaedia Britannica.

In other ways, too, it is something of an outlier in today's digital landscape, with its volunteer-based, not-for-profit structure. Today, it has over 66 million articles in 342 languages. A study by SEO firm Graphite found last year that over 50 per cent of the internet has been taken over by AI slop. Amidst this, perhaps Wikipedia's model — ponderous and unhip in the age of flashier and faster chatbots — offers an opportunity to reflect on the value of slowness (as far as anything can be slow on the internet), even if that means engaging in a fight over a preposition.

Opposition within: Ajit Pawar-shaped hole in Maharashtra politics

A TRAGIC death by accident should not determine how politics shifts. But over the past three decades — more so over the past few years — the demands made by the enterprise called modern competitive politics that leaders have to necessarily risk not merely their well-being and privacy but also their lives — often literally — to meet them. In an sense, his death is a sad comment on the manner in which not just his party but all parties depend on top leaders even for a local election.

Ajit Pawar's sudden exit pushes both factions of the NCP into a turmoil and also changes many equations in state politics. After the Assembly elections last year, the Ajit Pawar faction of the NCP had emerged as the more popular one — forcing an existential crisis on the faction led by founder Sharad Pawar. During the recent municipal corporation elections, the two factions had initiated the process of rapprochement, portending a headache for the state BJP and bringing sleepless nights for the Opposition.

In his absence now, Ajit Pawar's own

faction will be in disarray. While many of his followers, as well as prominent leaders of his faction, are also emotionally attached to Pawar Senior, a smooth reunion is not guaranteed. Loyalty and personal attachment are not exactly values cherished by the new politics of Maharashtra. The compulsions of ensuring a share in power constitute the most important defining feature of political choices today. Ajit *dada* remained within this calculus of politics. His followers will now have to choose from three options. Run the party independently and evolve a space for it; go back to Sharad Pawar as their leader; or take shelter under the BJP's umbrella.

Usually, when a dominant party is in an ascendant position, the first possible response to it comes through the formation of a regional party. In Maharashtra, the four players that emerged from the ravages of the NCP and the Shiv Sena have been struggling to occupy that space.

Both Ajit Pawar and Eknath Shinde sought to assert a separate identity even while subscribing to the political anthem of Modi-led development. So far, though, they were unable to take a regionalist stance upfront. Both were also seeking to win the Maharashtra votes that matter in state politics. But with a dominant state BJP, they made limited headway. Ajit Pawar also sought



SUHAS PALSHIKAR

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to carve out ideological autonomy by repeatedly indicating that he was not interested in minority-bashing like the senior partner. Overall, after joining the Mahayuti, Ajit Pawar was adopting the strategy of running with the hare and hunting with the hounds.

Under pressure from the BJP, he was struggling to develop his party machinery and his overtures to the other NCP faction were a sign that all was not well between the two allies. Like the Shiv Sena led by Shinde, Ajit *dada*'s NCP was realising that the BJP wouldn't easily cede the regional space nor allow it to consolidate the traditional social space. The coming together of the two NCPs might have helped but now things will hang in an uncertain space of emotion and harsh calculation. The irony and tragedy of the moment is that even the veteran leader Sharad Pawar will find his party vacillating between opening up to power-sharing and the challenge of standing as a party.

When Ajit *dada* chose to join the Mahayuti, the move was seen as helping the BJP. Yet, paradoxically, the separate existence of his party, its decent performance in the Assembly election and the bitter spat between Ajit *dada* and the BJP during the recent urban local elections ensured that in a state where the Opposition has disappeared, there remained some power centre that occa-

sionally countered the dominant party. With Ajit Pawar's departure, it is uncertain if that countervailing power within the Mahayuti — an opposition within the ruling coalition — will hold on or wither away.

Ajit *dada* leaves behind a few pockets of electoral strength, as was evidenced by the last Assembly elections. There are quite a few locally powerful players who will now be at liberty to make their own choices. Ajit *dada* also leaves behind a large number of non-ideological but keen youngsters eager to "make it" in public life. His close association with many organisations, platforms and Maratha voters in particular was another asset that Ajit *dada* held over his rivals. This vast repository of resources will now be competitively wooed, persuaded and sought out. In all likelihood, it will seamlessly move closer to the BJP.

For the past 10 years, Maharashtra's politics has been on a cusp. As it pursued its aim to emerge as the only dominant pole, the BJP not only decimated its national competitor — the Congress party — but also wiped out regional space. Developments have repeatedly punctuated this turn of politics. Ajit Pawar's tragic death has ensured that politics in the state will become more contingent and unpredictable, at least for the time being.

Written, based in Pune, taught, Political Science

Urban is the new political, better cities need good politics



AMRITA SHAH

LAST MONTH marked 20 years since the launch of the Jawahar Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM). The anniversary of one of the earliest in a slew of 21st-century Indian urban regeneration programmes passed by unnoticed, in contrast to the extensive coverage of the recent municipal corporation elections in Mumbai. While Indians have always been fascinated by elections, the predictable hoopla around them has turned Indian politics into a roll call of adversarial encounters.

This article is an attempt to break out of the stranglehold of current politics and the news cycle to stretch the framework of what we understand as political. I am referring to the important phenomenon of urbanisation.

Since 1980, the world has been on an unprecedented drive towards urbanisation with 55 per cent of the world's population now inhabiting urban spaces. Prodded by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, post-liberalisation India, too, initiated a series of urban upgradation policies. The 1993 Mega-cities scheme, JNNURM (2005), the 2015 Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) and the Smart Cities Mission (SCM) were landmarks in the process.

From 1990 when it comprised 25 per cent of India's population, the urban population has risen to a third and is expected to rise to 40 per cent by the end of the decade.

This is a dramatic reorientation for a primarily agrarian society and a country famously said by Gandhi to live "in her villages". How has this shift affected the national consciousness? What has been the impact on our social mores, on our youth? On our aspirations? On phenomena such as, for instance, communal violence which is associated with urban spaces?

These are just a few of the many significant questions thrown up by the urban shift that need attention. But the shift has even more significant political implications.

Over 500 million Indians live in towns and cities today. But it is not only its substantial size that gives the urban population an increasing influence in the national scenario. It is the adoption of the urban as an ideal that gives the city its surging power. I am not talking about

numbers and election outcomes but about the power of the conceptual.

To understand this better, one needs to first understand how the city has evolved. Once perceived as simultaneously a site of economic opportunity and a space of progressive possibilities, working-class empowerment and bourgeois refinement, the city has acquired a more singular purpose today. The primary impulse shaping the contemporary city according to urban scholars is the goal of attracting global capital, either as investment or as circulating capital from mobile populations. This has given rise to a model adopted by cities, regardless of size, featuring gentrified colonies, privileged business enclaves, extravagant urban beautification projects, new highways for cars, elite cultural festivals and so on. The purchase of rural land by non-residents has further spread the reach of the urbane.

This top-down approach, favouring the wealthy, the cosmopolitan and the entrepreneurial at the cost of other parts of the citizenry is accompanied by a brutal urgency and normalised as an essential feature of the prevailing economic model.

The Nehruvian vision of dams and heavy industry, which displaced communities of tribals and farmers, has been succeeded by the glass tower-and-highway, corporate-friendly path taken by post-liberalisation India. The latter has a greater reach and a more sweeping mandate that is opening up new fault lines closer to home.

In the last few weeks alone, we have seen agitations against the commercial exploitation of the Aravalli hills, concern over the Great Nicobar Island Development Project and complaints of poor pay and endangerment by gig workers against service aggregators.

The project of urbanising India is not about a material transformation alone but about a new political consensus privileging market-led development that in turn reshuffles existing priorities and redefines the relationship of the citizen to the state, perpetuating a new understanding of democracy. The urban is the new political and needs to be reckoned with.

The writer researched global urbanisation at the Institute for Public Knowledge, New York University. She is also the author of *Ahmedabad: A City in the World*

Birds, ants, trees are nature's workers, let's listen to them



AREFA TEHSIN

AS LONELY as a tree, someone recently remarked during a conversation. But is a tree — rooted, breathing, hosting entire worlds — lonely, wondered. And if it is not lonely, then are we? Or, is loneliness a modern myth?

There are growing scientific theories and philosophical explorations on shared consciousness. The concept has existed in religions and indigenous cultures for centuries — the non-dualism of Advaita Vedanta, the interbeing and Sunyata of Buddhism, the Wahdat al-Wujud (Unity of Being) that is one of the core ideas of Sufism. I distrust anything that sounds too cosmic, too New Age, too eager to comfort. Shared consciousness? Universal fields binding all beings? I am tempted to roll my eyes and ask for peer-reviewed journals. But once in a while it does make sense. The recent debate on the Aravallis — on whether low hills are dispensable — made me question my scepticism.

The Aravallis around Udaipur have been an extension of who I am: The weekly family outing to their streams, the summers spent in their forests. The Aravallis are old. Old enough to know better than to expect gratitude. Older than the Himalayas, older than our arguments. The low hills with no interest in grandeur, but, perhaps, its biggest mistake. Existence in the new world order must justify itself constantly. The bigger a building or statue, the greater the declaration of pride. The Aravallis stand apart from this attitude. They have been ecological shock absorbers for a civilisation riding without brakes. What makes the Aravallis especially tragic is that they were never asking for reverence. No temples on every peak. No pilgrimage circuits. Just the courtesy of being left alone.

We are told that development and ecology can coexist. To understand why this is so, let's look at a fragile life, take one single tree. It is a full-fledged republic. On its trunk, creepers climb with breathless ambition. They slowly tighten their grip, whispering sweet nothings about "mutual support". In time, the tree can barely breathe. This is "strategic partnership". Then there are parasites like fungi, insects and borers. They don't even pretend affection. They hollow the tree from inside until it collapses during an unremarkable storm. Sometimes, like institutions. Sometimes, like you and me. A tree also shelters birds. These are your opinion-makers. They conduct dawn-to-dusk debates, and occasionally forget why they started shouting. Lower down, ants march in disciplined lines, carrying crumbs 10 times their size. Nobody interviews them. These are your workers. Delivery executives cycling through heat waves while we argue about nationalism in air-conditioned rooms.

So how many worlds exist in the Aravallis? Thousands? Millions? Each hillock hosting overlapping republics. Some noisy, some ancient, some newly arrived. Leopard corridors crossing human boundaries. Aquifers remembering rain from decades ago. Countless trees, rocks, streams, animals.

Loneliness, I think now, is a symptom of the disconnection we manufacture ourselves. What if we feel increasingly isolated because we are actively severing links with land, with non-human life, with memory? The Aravallis are custodians. And like all custodians, they are noticed only when something breaks. The tree was never lonely. We were. And in treating parts of our living world as dispensable, we are not asserting power, only announcing how profoundly alone we have chosen to be.

Tehsin is a Colombo-based author and environmentalist

40 YEARS AGO

January 29, 1986



US space shuttle explodes

THE US space shuttle, Challenger, carrying seven astronauts, including a woman schoolteacher, exploded shortly after take-off, space agency officials said. The officials said it was feared that all on board the shuttle vehicle had been killed. Mission control said the space vehicle exploded and pieces came down in the water about 14 km downrange from the launch site. Rescue ships went to the scene. The explosion occurred four minutes into the flight after what appeared to be a flawless launch.

Threat to kill diplomat

SIKH EXTREMISTS have threatened to as-

sassinate a senior diplomat at the Indian high commission in London. At the same time, it was disclosed that a hired assassin who allegedly shot dead a leading Sikh moderate last week had tried to strike again. General security measures for about 60 Indian diplomats in London have been stepped up following information that extremists may try "something spectacular" against the high commission and members of its staff.

Gorbachev to visit India

THE SOVIET leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, is paying an official visit to India towards the end of March, according to well-placed sources. While the exact dates are to be

announced by the two governments in the course of the next few days, indications are that Gorbachev's visit will last four or five days. He is expected to have extensive talks with the Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, on a range of issues. The Prime Minister has already met Gorbachev on two previous occasions.

Surprise shower in Delhi

AN UNEXPECTED shower towards late evening sent Delhiites rushing for their raincoats and heavy woollens. According to the weather office, the rain was a result of low pressure formations all over south-west Rajasthan. More rain has been predicted in the days to come.

Ruling party's historic opportunity: Frame future without grievance, with pride



THAROORTHINK
BY SHASHI THAROOR

INDIA has long prided itself on being a civilisation rather than merely a nation-state. Our identity is not confined to the lines drawn on a map in 1947, but stretches back millennia, encompassing the wisdom of the Vedas, the compassion of the Buddha, the syncretism of medieval saints, the inclusive governance of Ashoka, Harsha and Akbar, and the pluralism of our modern republic. To invoke this civilisational heritage is not only legitimate — it is essential. But the manner in which it is invoked matters profoundly.

Pratap Bhanu Mehta has recently observed (*IE*, January 2) that the ruling establishment's recasting of contemporary politics as an epic struggle between Hindus and Muslims represents both a moral and political failure. In this imagination, he argues, "politics becomes myth, victimhood becomes virtue, and the past substitutes for the future". Civilisational self-assertion reduces complex social and political failures into a battle of imagined good and evil, "turning conflict into destiny." This prompts me to ask: Why can't we, instead, reclaim civilisational self-assertion as a force for inclusivity, acceptance, and the common good?

India's civilisation has never been monolithic. It is a tapestry woven from countless threads — Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, tribal, secular, Western and Indic. To reduce this vast mosaic to a binary struggle between Hindus and Muslims is to betray the very essence of our civilisation.

Civilisational pride should remind us of our capacity to absorb difference, not to weaponise it. The genius of India has always been its ability to accommodate diversity: To allow multiple faiths to flourish, to let languages proliferate, to welcome outsiders and make them our own. This inclusivity is not weakness; it is strength. It is what enabled India to endure invasions, colonisation, and

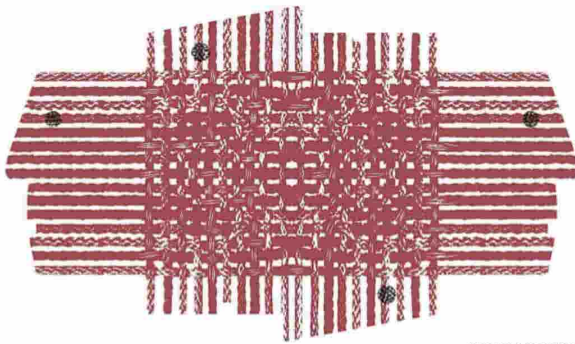


ILLUSTRATION: C.R. SAKUMAR

modernisation without losing its soul.

When politics is recast as myth, it ceases to be about solving problems. Roads, schools, hospitals, jobs, and justice — all are de-prioritised in favour of symbolic battles. Victimhood becomes a badge of honour, and the past is endlessly rehearsed as grievance rather than inspiration. This is a dangerous diversion. A nation cannot be governed by evoking historical wrongs. Civilisational self-assertion must not become an excuse to bypass the hard labour of governance. It must inspire us to build better institutions to face the challenges of tomorrow, not to divert the public by scapegoating minorities.

Civilisational self-assertion can be constructive if it is rooted in the right understanding of our civilisation. Let us assert the civilisation that gave the world the concept of *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*, the world is one family. Let us assert the civilisation that produced Akbar's *dharm-dhatu*, the principle of universal peace. Let us assert the civilisation that nurtured Kabir and Nanak, who spoke of unity beyond religious divides. Such self-assertion does not deny difference; it embraces it. It turns inclu-

sivity into democratic diversity.

The ruling party has a historic opportunity. It can choose to define civilisational pride as exclusionary, or it can choose to define it as inclusive. The former leads to division, resentment, and unrest; the latter to unity, progress, and greatness.

Imagine a ruling ethos that channels civilisational self-assertion into building institutions that reflect our pluralism. That articulates a vision that celebrates Hindu heritage while also honouring the contributions of Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Parsis, Jews and others. That celebrates history by invoking the past not to settle scores but to inspire the future. Such governance would not only strengthen India's democracy, it would strengthen its own legitimacy. It would prove that civilisational pride can coexist with civic responsibility.

What does it mean to build a shared civic future? It means creating institutions and processes that accommodate differences of worship, of cultural expression, of political opinion. It means ensuring that every citizen, regardless of faith, feels equally valued. It means investing in education, healthcare, and infrastructure, so

India's civilisation has never been monolithic. To reduce this vast mosaic to a binary struggle between Hindus and Muslims is to betray the very essence of our civilisation

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

India-EU pact

AS TWO of the world's largest democracies, India and the EU are championing a multipolar world order (*Made in India & Made in Europe*, *IE*, January 28). They are the "third pole" that prevents the world from being caught in a binary US-China struggle. Their shared commitment to a rules-based order makes them natural allies in international forums like the G20 and the UN. Beyond the boardroom, the Migration and Mobility Partnership is making it easier for students, researchers, and professionals to travel between the two regions.

Samiksha Mishra, Jammu

THE FUTURE of global commerce now points to a hybrid order. Multilateral institutions act less as prescriptive rule-makers and more as directional beacons, mapping safe passage through volatile trade currents (*Made in India & Made in Europe*, *IE*, January 28). In this landscape, bilateral agreements, such as the emerging India-EU pact, could serve as a template that can be fine-tuned as per shifting economic realities. The age of one-size-fits-all trade governance is likely yielding to a regime of trade-centric diplomacy.

RNarayanan, Navi Mumbai

Reforming healthcare

POOR QUALITY of care now causes more deaths than lack of access (In healthcare, it's time to shift focus from numbers to quality, *IE*, January 28). From inadequate training of providers and irrational use of medicines to weak adherence to clinical protocols, the system often fails patients at the point where it matters most. The consequences are especially harsh for rural communities and disadvantaged groups. The Lancet Commission's call for a shift from target-driven expansion to accountability-driven excellence deserves urgent attention. Strengthening primary care, reforming financing and governance and empowering local institutions are essential steps towards a citizen-centred system.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali



GOURAV VALLABH

INDIA'S ECONOMIC story over the past decade is often told through quarterly GDP prints. That view, however, is incomplete. What stands out is not just the pace of growth but its nature. The economy has transitioned from a fragile one to one anchored in capital expenditure, digital rails, and institutional resilience. There has been a strong push to expand state capacity, build public goods, and make them more accessible. Yet, the real test lies in leveraging these foundations for sustained productivity and inclusive gains.

The most underappreciated shift in the labour market is the scale of formalisation. Payroll data show about 2 million net additions per month in recent years, a clear sign that digitisation and tax reforms are nudging firms into the formal net. Headline unemployment stabilising near 5 per cent adds to this sense of durability. However, formal jobs alone are not enough if productivity remains uneven. The rise in female labour force participation to nearly 40 per cent is encouraging, but much of this is still in low-paying or unpaid work. The focus must shift to job quality — to skill certification and apprenticeships.

Few policy successes are as apparent as electronics manufacturing. In a decade, India moved from importing most of its mobile phones to producing nearly all of

Welfare systems should increasingly act as launchpads, linking beneficiaries to skilling, micro-credit, local manufacturing clusters, and urban employment corridors

them domestically. Electronics exports have surged nearly elevenfold in 11 years, supported by record public capital expenditure in FY25. But this success exposes a limitation. Manufacturing's share of GDP remains stuck below 16 per cent, and electronics alone cannot carry the burden of employment generation at scale. Labour-intensive sectors such as textiles and toys have not yet seen the same breakthrough. Logistics costs remain higher than global peers and state-level execution varies widely. Aligning state incentives, simplifying compliance for MSMEs, and accelerating freight and port efficiency are essential if the electronics play-book is to be successfully copied.

Improvement in ease of doing business is one of the enablers of India's recent investment cycle. Pruning of outdated laws, rollout of digital clearances, and faceless compliance have reduced friction. The fact that GST now covers 14 crore businesses underscores how administrative simplification has widened the formal base. Yet, for many small and mid-sized enterprises, the reality remains mixed. Regulatory overlap between the Centre and states, frequent rule changes, and legacy labour and land constraints continue to raise the cost of expansion. The next phase of reform must ensure that businesses' ex-

perience aligns with policy goals and headlines. The goals of predictability over novelty must be realised by effective implementation and careful monitoring.

India's poverty reduction story over the past decade is transformational, with more than 248 million people exiting multidimensional poverty. However, the uneven recovery between premium and mass-market consumption cannot be ignored. Premium consumption has surged while mass-market demand has recovered more slowly. This is often framed as rising inequality but is better understood as a sequencing issue in development. The next phase must focus on income mobility, not just income support. Welfare systems should increasingly act as launchpads, linking beneficiaries to skilling, micro-credit, local manufacturing clusters, and urban employment corridors.

The last decade was about fixing the plumbing, building digital systems, physical infrastructure, and fiscal capacity. The next should be defined not just by landmark reforms but also consistent execution, especially at the state and municipal levels. The test ahead is whether private enterprise, local governments and institutions can fully exploit it. If they do, growth will be faster, broader and more inclusive.

The writer is part-time member, EAC-PM, and a professor of Finance. Views are personal

A Bollywood exit, but not the end

sion to accept. But look beneath the surface and this choice signifies, like his location, not the abandonment of music, but a seizing of the reins. It is an assertion of creative control over how his song sounds, rather than how it fits a "situation" in a film, soothes a composer's ego or meets a producer's demand to make it a streaming hit and go viral on social media platforms such as Instagram.

Stepping away from the system and its complications does not interrupt Singh's music. It will, perhaps, result in something enhanced, away from the industry's demands

In a marketplace that is all about metrics and formula, where remixes rule the roost, even Singh's songs had begun to sound monotonous. One felt the artistry, but there was also a predictability. Just listen, however, to "Barkha", Singh's composition under his record label Orlyon Music by Arijit Singh, and you enter a slower-moving world. A gentle rain song written by Irshad Kamil, it easily outshines many film songs of today. It shows

Stepping away from the system and its complications does not interrupt Singh's music. It will, perhaps, result in something enhanced, away from the industry's demands

how something simple can move one's heart. It boasts talent and versatility and a voice rooted in Hindustani classical music — a combination that has allowed Singh to find an emotional relationship with a wide spectrum of audiences.

Born to a Sikh father and Bengali mother, Singh trained in Hindustani classical music. He always wanted to be a composer and music producer. He had found some attention through a reality show as a singer but becoming a composer was not going to be easy in a cut-throat industry. He assisted composer Pitam and sang scratches for other singers before his debut, "Tum hi ho" (*Aashiqui 2*, 2013) topped the charts, followed by "Kabira", "Phir le aaya dil", "Channa meya" and "Kesariya", among others.

He is to become the most followed artist on music platform Spotify.

When Grammy-winning British popstar Ed Sheeran wanted to collaborate with Singh, the two made "Sanam tera" together, he visited Singh in Murshidabad, willing to travel the distance. Seated on his scooter, the two zoomed around the bylanes of the town Singh grew up in, where he learned music, where he still takes the cycle rickshaw from the railway station after a long concert tour, where his kids go to school and where he protects himself. We will miss his voice in films, of course. But Singh's departure carries the promise that something brilliant may just be round the corner.

The writer is senior assistant editor, The Indian Express.
suanshu.khurana@expressindia.com

New UGC regulations make the invisible visible



SATISH DESHPANDE

THE EXPRESSION "the elephant in the room" has an interesting entry in Wikipedia that links it to (among others) the writers Fyodor Dostoevsky and Mark Twain. It is used to refer to "an obvious problem or difficult situation that people do not want to talk about". Judging by the reports of widespread protests against it, the University Grants Commission's "Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Regulations, 2026" seem to have ended the long *agnavayas* of the social discrimination "elephant".

Until the 2010s, no national policy document on education ever mentioned discrimination in the sense that the 2026 regulations use. The Radhakrishnan Commission on university education (1948-49) uses it, but in a sense that would be called "reverse discrimination" today, to object to a reservation policy involving "the rationing of seats among members of different communities" in effect in the (then) Madras state. The Kotah Commission only uses the word to speak about unfair treatment of different levels of teachers, or in the older sense of considered judgement. In these two documents, concern for social justice is expressed in a mostly economic sense.

Though it came much later, the Yash Pal Committee (2009), too, uses "discrimination" only to speak of unfair distinctions made between different kinds of universities. The 1986 National Policy of Education does not use the word at all. It is only in 2012, in the UGC Regulations on equity in higher education (which the current regulations replace) that social discrimination first finds official mention.

The absence of discrimination from early official policy documents is not surprising for two reasons. The first is that post-independence policy focus was on enabling access to education. Discrimination within higher education was not an issue because (barring exceptions) it was confined to a tiny, socially homogeneous, privileged minority. The vast majority of India's newly created citizens — especially women, lower castes, tribals, the poor, the disabled, and even most upper-caste men — were unable to access higher education in any meaningful sense.

The second reason concerns the ideological strategies of the nationalist movement. Led almost entirely by affluent upper-caste Hindu men, Indian nationalism sought to downplay divisions and inequalities in the effort to unite the masses for nation building. Divisions were repositioned as "diversity" — something to be celebrated — and inequalities were renamed "backwardness" — something that the "weaker sections of society" unfortunately suffered from.

This nationalist ideology lost credibility from the late 1960s onwards. By the 1970s, issues of caste, communal and gender discrimination and oppression began to become visible. Moreover, beginning in the 1990s and into the 2000s, higher education experienced a truly astonishing expansion of enrolment, which, together with the extension of reservation to the OBCs, completely transformed its social composition. But it was not until the 2010s that discrimination in higher education received sustained attention.

In the space of less than two decades, Indian higher education has gone from being a relatively smooth homogeneous space dominated by a privileged minority, to becoming a vast, socially diverse mass of young adults. Conflicts around discrimination are part of the spectrum of social frictions that such momentous and rapid changes inevitably bring.

The new regulations must be welcomed not for what they do or don't do but for the crucial shift they mark, perhaps unknowingly. Whatever be its sins of omission and/or commission, the new statute signals the end of the era of regrettable "backwardness" and "diversity" as euphemisms for social discrimination of various kinds. These euphemisms either simply masked discrimination (diversity) or made it out of nature, a crime without a perpetrator (backwardness). This allowed for the deliberate misrecognition of policies aimed at redressing discrimination (like reservation) as welfare policies. More crucially, it made the agents, the doers of discrimination, vanish from view.

Making a complex, entrenched problem like social discrimination visible is a necessary step without which solutions, even partial ones, are impossible. It is certain to make our immediate future more contentious and fraught. The only thing worse than taking this step forward is to not take it. Despite its vexations, a visible elephant is infinitely better than an invisible one.

The writer is an independent scholar based in Bengaluru



SUANSHU KHURANA

AT THE eastern edge of the Bhagirathi, where it flows unbridled, sits Jagan — a tiny town in West Bengal with open drains and significant out-migration, well removed from Mumbai's glamour. This is where 38-year-old musician Arijit Singh chooses to live — away from studios and labels, and their relentless executives — in an old-fashioned home with walls decorated with his children's handprints. It is where his mind and music breathe.

When the most popular playback singer of our time, whose textured timbre has been intimately woven with love and loss in contemporary Bollywood for over a decade, retires from playback at the peak of his career, it feels like a hard deci-

DEFENCE

Discombobulator: The system that a US likely used in Venezuela attack

Amrita Nayak Dutta
New Delhi, January 28

PRESIDENT DONALD Trump said last week that American forces had used a weapon called "the discombobulator" during the military strike on Venezuela on January 3, in which the country's leader Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, were captured. Speaking to *The New York Post*, Trump stated that the weapon was designed to disable enemy defensive infrastructure, and he was "not allowed" to talk about it. The President had earlier told *NewsNation*, a US news channel, that a "sonic weapon" had been used in the operation. However, there is still no clarity about what the discombobulator used by the US in the latest operation comprises.

The discombobulator

Experts told *The Indian Express* that the discombobulator may or may not be a single weapon and could comprise more than one capability. It could have jointly disabled Venezuela's military defensive systems in a highly defended area. The discombobulator could also have included systems that produce high-pitched sounds and blinding effects to temporarily deafen, blind, or disorient people during an operation.

All of these systems could have been deployed individually or in combinations to achieve the desired effect of disorienting people and disabling military defences.

Systems that disorient people

● **Active denial system:** Also called a heat ray, it is a directed energy weapon that can deeply penetrate skin to create a burning sensation. This can force people to flee, and trigger confusion and panic.

SOPHISTICATED SYSTEM

● The discombobulator used by the US could have disabled military defensive systems and disoriented Venezuelan soldiers. ● Experts suggest that a discombobulator may not be a single weapon and could comprise more than one capability.

known as sonic cannons, these systems can emit a highly directional, piercing sound, which is loud enough to disorient people by causing nausea, vertigo, and confusion. ● **Visual dazzlers:** These are high-intensity, pulsing laser weapons, which can cause a blinding impact on a person, rendering them disoriented on a battlefield. Reports from Venezuela spoke of soldiers bleeding, vomiting or being incapacitated, likely to be caused by the use of high-intensity acoustic waves.

Systems that disable equipment

A discombobulator could also involve a range of electronic warfare systems that can jam air defences, including radars and sensors. The US created the Counter-electronics High Power Microwave Advanced Missile Project, which can render electronics ineffective by projecting microwave pulses. In the past, the US has also carried out sophisticated cyber operations. Cyber attacks are part of the 'suppression of enemy air defences' missions.

Graphite munitions, non-lethal weapons to disable power grids, can also be a part of a discombobulator. The US uses a programme called Suter, which is integrated into the country's aircraft. It attacks enemy networks and communications, including air defence networks. Operators running Suter 1 can see what enemy radar operators are looking at. Suter 2 seizes control of enemy networks and can direct their sensors. Suter 3 penetrates links to surface-to-air missile launchers.

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CULTURE

How Sufi poet Bulleh Shah blended religious beliefs and challenged orthodoxy



MANRAJ GREWAL SHARMA

LAST WEEK, a shrine of the 17th-century Sufi poet Bulleh Shah was vandalised in Mussoorie, Uttarakhand, sparking outrage and calls for the protection of Sufi heritage.

The reactions underscored the cultural relevance of Bulleh Shah, one of Punjab's greatest Sufi poets, who is often likened to Rumi. He preached the primacy of *ishq* (universal love) above all religions, rejecting caste, creed, religion and gender. As Punjab's poet and writer Dr Gurbhajan Gill notes, Bulleh Shah was a secular voice whose famous *kafi* (a type of Sufi poetry) captures his philosophy: "Masjid dha de, mandir dha de, dha de jo kafi dhanda. Par kisi da dil na dhavin, Rabb dilan vi rehinda (Break down the mosque, break down the

temple, break down everything that can be broken, but do not break a human heart, for that is where God resides)."

Dr HS Bhatia, former Dean (Languages) at Amritsar's Guru Nanak Dev University, says his core messages were love, tolerance, compassion and concern for humanity. Fluent in Persian and Arabic, he wrote in simple Punjabi, laced with cultural nuance.

Roots in present-day Pakistan

Born in 1680 in Kasur in present-day Pakistan, his real name was Abdullah Shah. His ancestors hailed from Uch Gilaniyan in Bahawalpur, but scholars trace his birth to the Pandoke Bhatian village where his father, Shah Mohammed Dervish, was a teacher. An upper-caste Syed man, the preacher was well-versed in Arabic, Persian and the Quran. Bulleh Shah pursued higher education in Kasur, a key learning centre, under Hazrat Gulam Muratza, who also taught the renowned Punjabi poet Waris Shah, his contemporary. Bulleh Shah later studied in Batala under the Qadiriya Silsilah (school), a branch of the Sunni Sufi order founded by



Bulleh Shah's vandalised shrine in Mussoorie. ANI

Abdul Qadir Gilani in 12th-century Baghdad.

Caste, religion, patriarchy

Professor Sukhdev Singh Sirsa, formerly of Punjab University's Punjab Department, describes Bulleh Shah as a "seeker" who rebelled against caste, religion and patriarchy.

After studying at Batala, he came to Lahore to seek the guidance of Shah Inayat Qadri, a liberal philosopher. Bulleh Shah's family, owing to his exalted Syed lineage, opposed his decision to take Qadri as his teacher, since he hailed from the Arain caste of vegetable growers. Lore has it that Bulleh

ATC capacity and fatigue risks

Air Traffic Control (ATC) infrastructure and manpower also came in for pointed scrutiny. The committee described ATC as the "backbone of aviation safety" and warned that controllers at busy airports are handling dense traffic loads without proportionate increases in staffing. Fatigue and workload stress, especially during peak hours or poor weather, were cited as factors that can heighten the risk of human error.

The panel called for accelerated recruitment of controllers, improved rostering to prevent fatigue, and faster modernisation of communication, navigation and surveillance systems. It also highlighted the need for system redundancy and smoother civil-defence airspace coordination.

The aircraft's parts strewn around the crash site. ANIL HORIZON

The report

● The panel was set up after the deadly June 2025 crash of an Air India plane headed to London from Ahmedabad. ● It said that growth without parallel strengthening of oversight, ATC systems and operator discipline — especially in private aviation — increases systemic risk.

Learning from past crashes

Referring to previous accidents, the committee said investigation findings repeatedly point to human factors, training quality and decision-making under pressure. It stressed that safety recommendations from probe reports must be tracked to ensure implementation rather than remain on paper.

A centralised monitoring mechanism for compliance with safety advisories was suggested. The report noted that infrastructure at smaller airports must keep pace with the surge in operations under regional connectivity schemes. Runway safety areas, navigational aids and emergency response capabilities, it said, require upgrading alongside traffic growth.

Warning on growth vs safety

Overall, the Sanjay Jha-led panel warned that India's status as one of the world's fastest-growing aviation markets must be matched with "equal, if not greater, emphasis on safety." It said that growth without parallel strengthening of oversight, ATC systems and operator discipline — especially in private aviation — increases systemic risk.

The report

The panel was set up in the wake of the deadly June 2025 crash of an Air India plane headed to London from Ahmedabad. It underscored that growth without parallel strengthening of oversight, ATC systems and operator discipline — especially in private aviation — increases systemic risk.

sees God in Krishna and Rama. Bulleh Shah adores Muhammad not as a messenger of God but as incarnation of God."

Legacy in Punjab and beyond

No wonder that when Bulleh Shah died in 1758, the clergy denied him space for burial. Dr Bhatia says trans persons and singers buried him outside Kasur. Today, his tomb in Pakistan draws the devout across the world, and the local elites seek burial sites close to him. Filmmakers and singers across borders have been inspired by his *kafis*. Artists have composed songs such as *Bulla Ki Jana Main Kaun, Dama Dum Mast Kalandar, Mera Piya Ghar Aaya, and Chhaiyya Chhaiyya*. A biopic is currently under production in Pakistan. There are awards in his name.

Bulleh Shah would have been unmoved by both the fandom and the vandalism. As he wrote: "Mitai tu mitai hona, kaadhi bulle balle (from dust you will become dust, why this hallaballoo)?"

The writer is Resident Editor, Chandigarh

THE ASIAN AGE

29 JANUARY 2026

Ajit Pawar demise is a sombre turning point

The tragic demise of Maharashtra's deputy chief minister, Ajit Pawar, in a plane crash at Baranatti marks a sombre turning point in the state and national politics. As the dust settles over the charred remains of the Learjet 45 involved in the tragedy, the state mourns a leader who was often described as the "perpetual Deputy CM" — a man of administrative grit whose influence over the cooperative sector and the state's treasury was unparalleled. His detractors saw in him an autocratic style, while his admirers praised him as a decisive leader who cut through red tape to deliver results.

For decades, the Pawar name has been synonymous with power in Maharashtra. Known affectionately as "Dada", Ajit Pawar's sudden exit leaves a massive vacuum that complicates the already fractured legacy of the clan.

Within the Ajit Pawar-led NCP, the question of leadership now looms large. While his sons, Parth and Jay, have been active, they lack the "Dada" persona — that blend of accessibility, blunt honesty and iron-fisted control over local cadres that their father possessed.

The split between Ajit and his uncle, Sharad Pawar, was a deep-seated tension in the family. With Ajit gone, the "rebel" faction faces an existential crisis. Will the MLAs who defected with him drift back to the senior Pawar's fold, or will they seek a new identity under the Mahayuti alliance?

The involvement of a Learjet 45, mid-size business jet aircraft, in this tragedy adds a layer of bafflement. Produced by Bombardier, the Learjet series is known for its safety records.

Sharad Pawar, the patriarch who has weathered every political storm, now faces a personal and political challenge. While the rivalry was fierce, the blood ties remain. The recently concluded civic elections in Pune and Pimpri-Chinchwad in January 2026 served as a pilot project for reconciliation. The sight of Ajit Pawar and Supriya Sule sharing a stage to release a joint NCP manifesto was more than just a "seat-sharing" arrangement — it was a public signal that the family had resolved its internal frictions. Before the crash, there was a deafening buzz about a formal political reunion. This tragedy might either trigger a sentimental reunification of the NCP or lead to a final, messy disintegration of the influence of the clan.

The involvement of a Learjet 45, mid-size business jet aircraft, in this tragedy adds a layer of bafflement. Produced by Bombardier, the Learjet series is known for its safety records. The details emerging from Baranatti Airport suggest a harrowing final few minutes. Prima facie reports indicate that the pilot encountered a technical snag during the initial landing phase. The aircraft reportedly abandoned its first approach, circled the airport, and crashed during a second attempt. In private aviation, the pressure to meet tight political schedules can sometimes lead to operational risks that the aircraft, despite its engineering brilliance, cannot overcome.

As Maharashtra enters a period of mourning, the investigation must go beyond the cockpit. We need to know if the pressures of a hectic political schedule compromised safety standards.

The tragedy has left the "Pawar brand" at a crossroads. The family and political factions may unite, but the administrative vacuum left by Ajit Pawar — the man who knew every file and every worker by name — is a gap that no political merger can easily bridge.

India-EU FTA sets a template

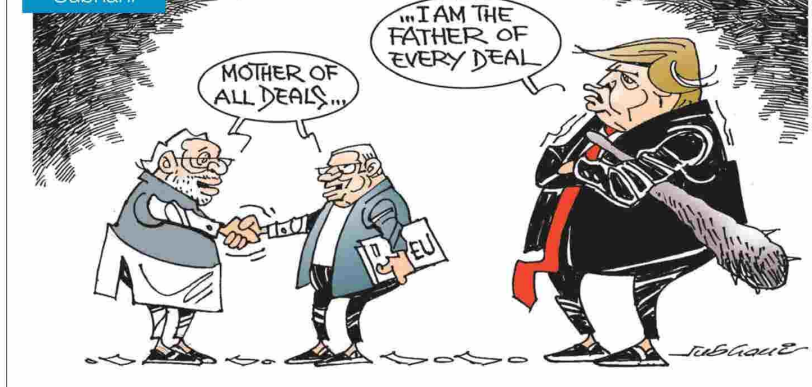
The free trade agreement between India and the European Union, which was billed as the mother of all agreements, signals the beginning of a new era — as suggested by Prime Minister Narendra Modi — at least for the Indian economy. For this was the agreement that got bogged down for over a decade owing to insecurities and impracticalities exhibited by both the parties — India was hesitant over that threat the European car makers pose to the nascent Indian automobile sector while Europe was reluctant to compromise on its climate concerns.

Nevertheless, both India and EU shed obduracy to bring out a fairly balanced trade deal that protects their core interests. It is a "win-win" deal that safeguards the interest of Indian farmers and small businesses, while opening up a huge market for European wines, spirits, beer, olive oil, processed foods and some fruits. The India-EU deal could serve as a template for New Delhi's trade negotiations with other countries, including the United States.

The India-EU free trade deal reaffirms global faith in the free trade regime, especially when the United States, long considered the vanguard of laissez-faire economy, shuts itself in a cocoon. It creates a free trade market consisting of two billion people — representing a fourth of global population and nearly a fourth of the world economy. The deal also has a great synergy with Europe offering technology and India bringing to table its vast talent pool.

It may be just a matter of time that the United States, too, clinches a deal with India. But having signed free trade deals with various countries, Indian businesses must shed their jugged mentality and focus on manufacturing products that compete with the best of the best in the world in quality. For centuries, India was known for its fine products. Now it's time that we revive our past legacy.

Subhani



Will EU's big India trade deal sideline US tariffs?



K.C. Singh

The European Union's top leaders, for the first time, were the chief guests at India's Republic Day celebrations on January 26. Ms Ursula von der Leyen is the president of the European Commission. Her organisation functions as the EU's executive branch, proposing laws, managing policies and enforcing the European Union's law.

Accompanying her was Antonio Costa, the Indian-origin president of the European Council, which defines the EU's overall political direction and priorities, bringing together the heads of state but without enjoying any legislative power. It handles high-level decision-making, including the appointment of the president, Ursula von der Leyen. That explains why they were jointly invited, as their coordination is necessary to take forward any important new proposals.

The timing of the visit is crucial, considering the prevailing global environment, which was succinctly captured recently by Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney in his Davos speech. He said the global order faces a "rupture", caused by US President Donald Trump's disruptive approach to global trade, diplomacy and the rules-based international system. India has borne the burden of 50 per cent tariffs on most Indian exports to the US. The threat of further escalation lingers due to the US alleging India-Iran commercial ties, especially oil imports. The India-US trade deal has continued to get delayed, as the United States keeps introducing new irritants.

The EU also has entered a new uncertain phase after initially humouring President Donald Trump into approving a new trade deal. The discord arose over President Trump's claim on the Denmark-controlled massive landmass called Greenland. Prior to his

US treasury secretary Scott Bessant hinted at the lifting of 25 per cent tariffs on India for buying Russian oil, while noting that their European allies were signing a 'big trade deal' with India

"EU and India are committed to acting together as anchors of stability in an increasingly fragmented and multipolar world". He also described three core outcomes. One, the Free Trade Agreement, which Mr Costa describes as "offering partnerships instead of tariffs". Ms Leyen called it the "mother of all deals". It certainly creates a new trading bloc, covering a combined population of two billion people.

The second outcome is a new "Security and Defence Partnership". Against the backdrop of President Trump's constant deriding of Europeans for their low defence spending and over-dependence on America, the EU is at last moving towards a more unified defence. It creates an ideal basis for defence technology sharing and co-development. Cooperation also covers maritime security, defence industry, cyber and hybrid threats, space and counter-space.

The third outcome encompasses a Joint Comprehensive Strategic Agenda towards 2030. It covers energy connectivity (via sea, land and air) and mobility. The last relates to migration and the movement of skilled labour. With the anti-immigration grant Make America Great Again (MAGA) targeting of mostly non-white individuals, including H-1B visa holders, Europe may well be a more welcoming destination. The simplification of the Schengen visa regime is to be examined.

Pilot European Legal Gateway Office is named as an institution to facilitate migration enquiries. Interestingly, many themes that the Trump administration has contemptuously sidelined are listed for action. The importance of the Paris Agreement to handle climate

change is restored. The target to keep global warming below 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels is underscored. A task force on Green Hydrogen and a Wind Business Summit are envisaged. A vast range of subjects are listed for cooperation. These, inter alia, are: supply chains for agricultural and critical minerals; energy security; smart and sustainable urbanisation; industrial decarbonisation; space; and high-performance computing.

The Free Trade Agreement stands approved but can only be signed after the EU completes legislative procedures. That may not happen before the end of 2026. Work is also to start on an Investment Protection Agreement (IPA).

The joint statement also notes the two sides discussing ongoing conflicts and international stand-offs. In Ukraine, "comprehensive, just and lasting peace" is endorsed, using dialogue and diplomacy. The sanctity of the UN Charter and international law is emphasised. Regarding Gaza, it shrewdly refers to the UN Security Council Resolution 2030 of November 17, 2025, which suggested the Board of Peace and Stabilisation Force. However, the statement seeks its implementation "in its entirety". This is intended to contain President Trump's more expansive interpretation, to use the board for global peacekeeping, which only the UNSC is authorised to undertake.

On the Iran issue, again dialogue and diplomacy is advised without recommending any specific course of action for avoiding military confrontation.

The EU's summitary already being impacting America's policy towards India. US treasury secretary Scott Bessant hinted at the lifting of 25 per cent tariffs on India for buying Russian oil, while noting that their European allies were signing a "big trade deal" with India. If this happens it will corroborate the Chinese lesson that standing upright and political juggling back may be the only way to trump today's America.

The writer is a former secretary in the external affairs ministry. He tweets at @ambksingh.

LETTERS

MERIT COMES FIRST

New UGC Rules, 2026, provide legal protection against any unfair or discriminatory treatment towards SC, ST and OBC. However, the draft bill fails to specify under which law the government will protect the rights of more qualified, intelligent and knowledgeable candidates from the general category if they face unfair or discriminatory treatment. It appears that this attempt to introduce and amend the existing regulations is aimed at gaining political advantage in the upcoming Uttar Pradesh elections next year. The new law/regulations will likely exacerbate inequality in the higher education system, perpetuate a discriminatory environment, disadvantage deserving candidates and discourage meritorious students.

Yugal Kishore Sharma
Faridabad

TAIWAN WAR NEXT

CHINA'S HIGHEST-RANKING general after President Xi Jinping one of the few PLA commanders with real combat experience and long-standing personal ties to Mr Xi has reportedly fallen in the latest and most sweeping purge of the Chinese military leadership in decades. The investigation of Gen. Zhang, alongside fellow Central Military Commission member Liu Zhenli, for "serious violations of discipline and law" completes Mr Xi's three-year dismantling of the PLA's top command under the banner of anti-corruption, a campaign unmatched since Mao's era. If both are removed, the seven-member CMC that commands the million-strong PLA will shrink to just Mr Xi and the internal watchdog Zhang Shengmin concentrating military authority in unprecedented fashion. While corruption is the official charge, observers suspect deeper strategic fault lines, particularly over assessments of the PLA's readiness for a Taiwan operation, which US intelligence believes Mr Xi wants to keep viable by 2027.

Amrakes Kumar
Hazaribagh

HALWA FOR MASSES

THE FINANCE MINISTER always hosts the budget ceremony before presenting the Union Budget. While the halwa is distributed among finance ministry officials, the Indian public expects to get a portion of it in the form of concessions and tax rebates. The expectation is different from each section of the society, but no one wants higher taxes. Price stability and reduction of unemployment is another area where everyone wants improvement. Healthcare is costly and needs more funds. Senior citizens expect more care from the government. Can the PM give a taste of halwa to the masses?

D.B. Madan
New Delhi

THE ASIAN AGE

KAUSHIK MITTAL

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K. SUBHASREE

Printer & Publisher



John J. Kennedy

Newspapers as part of education: Will Rajasthan move set off a trend in India?

A recent decision by the Rajasthan government to make reading of newspapers mandatory in government schools may seem ordinary at first. Ten minutes in the morning assembly. Two newspapers — one Hindi, one English. A few new words and a brief discussion on current events. However, behind this small reform lies a powerful idea — education must prepare students not only for exams and jobs, but for responsible citizenship in a democracy.

The practice itself is not new. For decades, many schools followed newspaper reading informally. Students often read headlines during assemblies, reflecting an instinctive belief that current affairs mattered. What makes the Rajasthan initiative significant is its formal mandate. By institutionalising the practice, the state affirms that civic awareness is not optional, but central to schooling.

In recent years, education policy in India has focused heavily on employability, skills and rankings. While important, these cannot be the sole aim of education. A technically skilled yet socially indifferent youth is poorly equipped to serve society. This is where regular newspaper reading matters.

Newspapers expose students to real events — parliamentary debates, social movements, court judgments, global conflicts, economic decisions and everyday struggles. They help students see society not as a textbook idea, but as a living reality which is unfolding each day. In a democracy, awareness is essential. Citizens have

rights, they also have duties. Voting, questioning authority, engaging in public debate, and holding institutions accountable require basic political knowledge. For first-time voters especially, political awareness is crucial. Without it, choices are often driven by emotion, identity or misinformation, rather than informed judgment. Reading newspapers from a young age will help students understand how policies affect lives and how decisions taken today shape tomorrow.

One of the worrying trends from many campuses today is political indifference. Many students feel politics is dirty, irrelevant or not worth engaging with. This cynicism does not emerge naturally; it grows from a lack of exposure and engagement. When political discussions are discouraged in schools and colleges in the name of neutrality or discipline, students grow up without the ability or the confidence to form independent opinions. Democracy weakens as a result. Educational institutions must therefore encourage informed debate and dissent. Avoiding so-called "controversial" topics may seem safe, but it comes at a cost. Students need spaces where they can discuss current events, debate ideas and even disagree, of course, peacefully and respectfully. Newspapers offer a safe entry point. An editorial discussion or a debate on a policy issue teaches students that disagreement need not lead to hostility, and that democracy thrives on dialogue.

At the heart of social and political awareness lies critical thinking. Reading news regularly trains students to

compare perspectives, question narratives, and identify bias. It encourages them to ask: Why is this happening? Who benefits? Who is left out? Such skills are vital in an age of social media, where misinformation spreads faster than facts. Without critical thinking, students become easy targets for propaganda and polarisation.

Understanding social realities also requires historical and contextual knowledge. For instance, issues like caste inequality, gender discrimination and regional disparities cannot be understood in isolation. Newspapers often link present events to historical injustices and constitutional principles. Awareness about leaders like Dr B.R. Ambedkar and the struggles that shaped India's Constitution helps students appreciate why certain protections and policies exist. Ignorance of this context breeds prejudices and simplistic opinions. This becomes particularly important in debates around reservation and social justice. Many students oppose affirmative action without really understanding its historical necessity or contemporary relevance. Regular engagement with news exposes them to data on underrepresentation in education, bureaucracy and the judiciary. Informed opinions emerge only when students understand both privileges and disadvantages. The idea of "merit" itself cannot be understood without social awareness. Merit is often shaped by access to good schools, supportive environments and economic stability, not just by individual effort. Newspapers help students see how systemic barriers affect opportunities.

Without this understanding, public debates become shallow, unfair and divisive.

Classroom learning must connect with what students see in real-world developments. As current affairs enter classrooms, learning becomes meaningful. Discussions on elections, budgets, social movements or court verdicts could build empathy and tolerance, helping students see how theory meets practice and how their lives are linked to larger social processes. Experiential learning, research shows, deepens this awareness. Volunteering, community engagement and service-learning expose students to social realities firsthand. Paired with informed reading, these experiences turn knowledge into understanding and concern into responsibility. Educational institutions carry a moral responsibility to acknowledge this duty by institutionalising a practice that once depended on individual schools or committed teachers, reviving an older educational wisdom suited to today's democratic needs. Ten minutes with a newspaper may be among the most valuable lessons a school can provide.

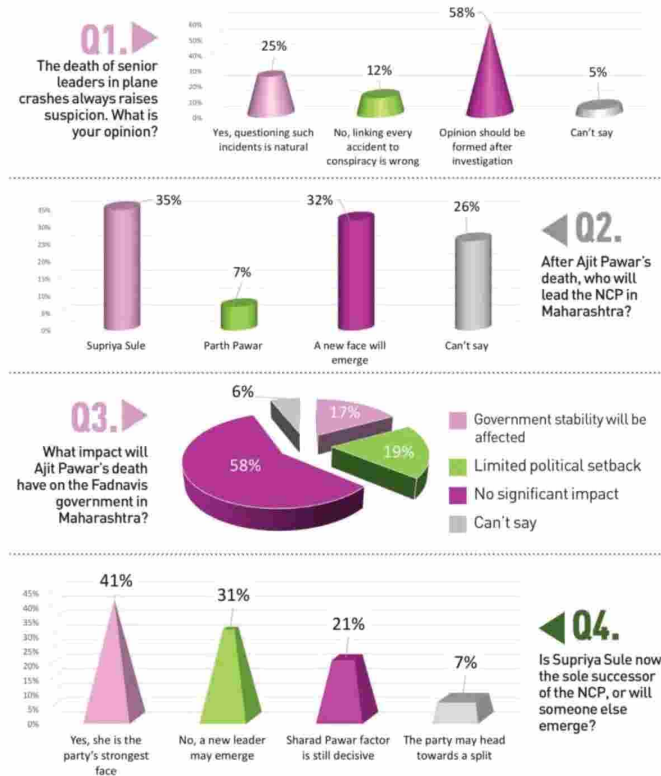
The writer is retired professor and former dean of the School of Arts and Humanities at Christ University in Bengaluru

THE DAILY GUARDIAN SURVEY ON LEADERS' FATAL PLANE CRASHES

58% want investigation first; 25% see suspicion natural.

An India News Survey on leaders' fatal plane crashes shows public caution. Most respondents prefer opinions after investigations, reject conspiracy theories, and see

limited political impact in Maharashtra. While Supriya Sule leads succession choices, many expect new leadership.



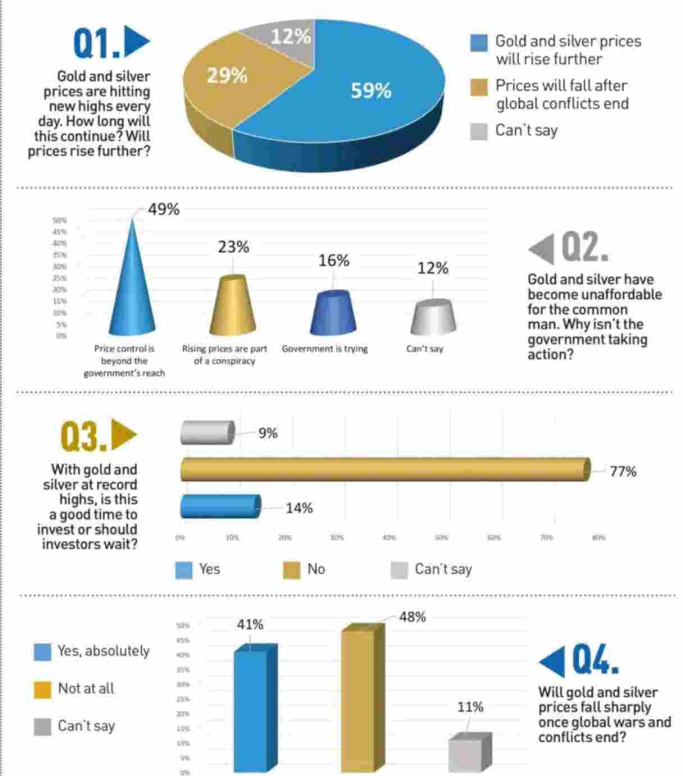
THE DAILY GUARDIAN SURVEY ON GOLD & SILVER HITS NEW HIGH

59% expect gold and silver prices to rise further; 29% foresee a fall after conflicts end.

The record surge in gold and silver prices is reshaping public expectations and investment behaviour. An

India News survey of 164 respondents shows 59% expect prices to rise further, while 77% still advise against

investing, citing high risk, affordability concerns, and ongoing global uncertainty.



AAIB to investigate Baramati plane crash

CONTINUED FROM P1

Aviation (DGCA) relating to the aircraft and the crew. As part of the investigation, radar data, CCTV footage, Air Traffic Control (ATC) recordings and hotline communications will be analysed, while statements from eyewitnesses and relevant personnel will be recorded.

Ajit Pawar was travelling from Mumbai to Baramati when the chartered jet crashed during the landing phase earlier in the day. The aircraft involved was a 16-year-old Bombardier Learjet 45, bearing tail number VT-SSK and serial number 45-417. The twin-engine light business jet, commonly used for corporate and VIP travel, was part of a 17-aircraft fleet operated by VSR.

Preliminary inputs

indicate that the jet encountered difficulties while attempting to land, though investigators have cautioned that the exact sequence of events is still under verification. Airport staff and emergency responders reached the crash site shortly after impact and found the aircraft completely destroyed, with no survivors.

Aviation authorities have secured the area and initiated a preliminary assessment. The investigation will focus on crew communications, aircraft systems and prevailing weather conditions at the time of landing to determine the cause of the crash. Meanwhile, Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis announced a state holiday and three days of mourning following the demise of the Deputy Chief

Minister. He said the decision on Ajit Pawar's last rites would be taken after consultations with the family.

Ajit Pawar was the longest-serving Deputy Chief Minister of Maharashtra in non-consecutive tenures, having held the post six times under governments led by Prithviraj Chavan, Devendra Fadnis, Uddhav Thackeray and Eknath Shinde.

He is survived by his wife Sunetra Pawar, a Rajya Sabha MP, and his sons, Parth and Jay. With a political career spanning over three decades, Pawar remained a central figure in Maharashtra politics, including his role in the split of the Nationalist Congress Party in July 2023 and the subsequent formation of the state government in alliance with the BJP.

Ajit Pawar killed in Baramati plane crash

CONTINUED FROM P1

described Pawar as a hard-working and resilient leader whose loss had left a void in Maharashtra's leadership.

Pawar's last rites will be conducted with full state honours on Thursday at 11 am. His mortal remains have been kept at Vidya Pratishthan ground in Baramati for the public to pay their last respects. Chief Minister Fadnis, Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde,

Governor Acharya Devvrat, Sharad Pawar and several senior leaders visited Baramati to pay homage. Family members, including Pawar's wife Sunetra Pawar and cousin Supriya Sule, were seen grieving as condolences poured in.

Union Civil Aviation Minister Ram Mohan Naidu Kinjarapu said a transparent and accountable investigation would be conducted into the crash. Preliminary information suggested poor visibility

at the time of landing. According to the minister, air traffic control had sought confirmation from the pilot about runway visibility, following which the aircraft attempted a second approach before the accident occurred. The Directorate General of Civil Aviation and the Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau have dispatched probe teams, which are examining flight data, crew records, ATC communications and maintenance documents

of the aircraft operator. Political leaders across party lines expressed shock and sorrow. Shiv Sena (UBT) chief Uddhav Thackeray remembered Pawar as a steadfast leader and an excellent colleague, saying his departure had created a leadership vacuum. Congress leaders Digvijaya Singh, Ramesh Chennithala and others called for a thorough investigation, while leaders including Rahul Gandhi, Mallikarjun Kharge, Amit

Shah, Akhilesh Yadav and several Union ministers paid tributes. Ajit Pawar was the longest-serving Deputy Chief Minister of Maharashtra in non-consecutive terms, having held the post six times under various governments. Known popularly as "Dada", he was recognised for his straightforward style and firm grip on administration and finance. He is survived by his wife Sunetra Pawar and sons Jay and Parth Pawar.

Row in Parl as Opp'n opposes new rural jobs law during President's speech

CONTINUED FROM P1

150th anniversary of Vande Mataram, the 350th Shaheed Diwas of Guru Tegh Bahadur, the birth anniversaries of B R Ambedkar and Birsu Munda, and the centenary celebrations of Bharat Ratna Bhupen Hazarika.

President Murmu, addressing members of both Houses assembled in the Lok Sabha chamber, outlined the government's vision for social justice, inclusive growth and a developed India. She said nearly 25 crore people had been lifted out of poverty in the past decade and highlighted the expansion of social security schemes to about 95 crore citizens.

The President also recalled key national commemora-

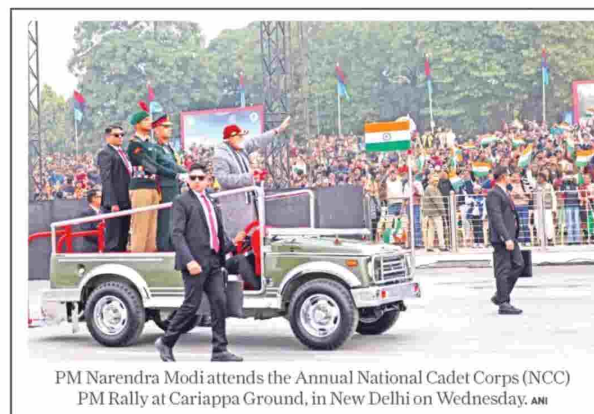
tions over the past year, including tributes to Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Guru

President Murmu, addressing members of both Houses assembled in the Lok Sabha chamber, outlined the government's vision for social justice, inclusive growth and a developed India

Tegh Bahadur, Birsu Munda and Bhupen Hazarika, saying these events strengthened the spirit of unity and inspired progress towards a developed India. Earlier, President Murmu

was accorded a Guard of Honour on her arrival at Parliament. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Vice President C P Radhakrishnan, Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi and Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge were present during the address. Both Houses also paid obituary tributes, including to former Bangladesh Prime Minister Khaleda Zia.

The Budget Session will have 30 sittings spread over 65 days and will conclude on April 2. Parliament will adjourn for a recess on February 13 and reconvene on March 9. The Economic Survey is scheduled to be presented on January 29, followed by the Union Budget for 2026-27 on February 1.



PM Narendra Modi attends the Annual National Cadet Corps (NCC) PM Rally at Cariappa Ground, in New Delhi on Wednesday. ANI

At the time of destruction, wisdom turns...

CONTINUED FROM P1

and "return home", he was therefore killed. With elections in Bengal just two months away, you are attempting—true to your mindset—to exploit this divine calamity to defame the BJP. The country looks upon such petty thinking with contempt.

In plane crashes, leaders such as Sanjay Gandhi, Madhavrao Scindia, GMC Balyogi, YS Rajasekhara Reddy and Bipin Rawat have lost their lives. Just last year, 175 passengers died in an Air India crash. Will you search for political conspira-

cies in every such tragedy? Shame on such thinking.

In the present case, the DGCA has constituted an inquiry committee. At the very least, wait for its report. Otherwise, your statement may well prove to be the final nail in the coffin of your political decline. This episode has also exposed the immaturity of Akhilesh Yadav, who only yesterday claimed that only Mamata Banerjee could take on the BJP and that the INDIA alliance should accept her leadership. Similarly irresponsible remarks have also come from Independent Congress leader Pappu Yadav from

Purnia and former SP MP HT Hasan in the context of this tragedy. Such accidents are not unprecedented in India. Yet, even before the inquiry report is released and before the family has been met, Mamata Banerjee's culture-like attack on a dead body is utterly condemnable.

In my view, after this grave allegation by Mamata Banerjee, the inquiry committee should summon her and probe the matter thoroughly to ascertain the truth—whether such a statement stems from a conspiracy or is merely an outrageous coincidence.

Trump signals military pressure, keeps door open...

CONTINUED FROM P1

said Washington remained open to talks if Iran reached out under clearly defined conditions. Earlier this month, US special envoy Steve Witkoff outlined those terms, including a ban on uranium enrichment, the removal of enriched uranium, limits on Iran's long-range missile stockpile and an end to support for regional proxy forces. Iran has rejected these conditions, despite expressing readiness to negotiate.

Trump also referred to US strikes carried out in June, claiming they had "obliterated" Iran's nuclear capacity by hitting three facilities, though the full impact on Tehran's enrichment programme remains unclear. He linked his stance to his first-term decision to withdraw from the 2015 nuclear deal and pursue a policy of "maximum pressure" through sanctions.

Despite the rhetoric, Trump has not yet decided whether to authorise further military action. Axios reported, even after previously warning of consequences if Iran continued its crackdown on protesters. He is expected to hold further consultations with his national security team this week, with military options set to expand following the arrival of the USS Abraham Lincoln aircraft carrier in the region.

Trump also said he had authorised Israel to strike Iran during a 12-day conflict last June to prevent an Iranian missile attack, underscoring his administration's strategy of coupling military pressure with the possibility of diplomacy.

BEYOND THE BALANCE SHEET: WHY THE GLOBAL FUTURE BELONGS TO THE HAPPINESS INDEX, NOT GDP

OPINION

SUDHIR S. RAVAL



For nearly a century, the world has been under the spell of a single, cold metric: Gross Domestic Product. While GDP has meticulously tracked the exchange of coins and the churning of industry, it has remained tragically blind to the pulse of the people—ignoring the stress of our cities, the health of our environment, and the depth of our social bonds. As we navigate the complexities of the 21st century, a profound paradigm shift is emerging. We are finally realizing that true national success cannot be found on a balance sheet; it is found in the lived experience of the citizen. The era of economic output at any cost is ending, making way for a future where the Happiness Index—a measure of human flourishing and ecological harmony—becomes the ultimate compass for global progress.

For decades, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has stood as the unchallenged ti-

tan of national success. Governments, economists, and international bodies have religiously tracked its fluctuations, treating its growth as the ultimate barometer of human progress. Yet, as the 21st century unfolds, a profound paradigm shift is underway. A growing chorus of scholars, policymakers, and citizens worldwide is questioning GDP's reign, advocating for a more holistic, human-centric measure: the Happiness Index. This isn't merely a philosophical aspiration; it's an evidence-backed imperative, signaling a fundamental re-evaluation of what constitutes a truly prosperous and sustainable society.

THE GDP DILEMMA: MEASURING EVERYTHING, UNDERSTANDING NOTHING GDP, at its core, is a measure of economic activity—the total monetary value of all finished goods and services produced within a country's borders in a specific time period. It was never designed to be a measure of well-being. As Nobel laureate Simon Kuznets, one of its principal architects, warned as early as the 1930s, "The welfare of a nation can scarcely be inferred from a measure of national income."

His caution proved prescient. GDP grows with

wars, natural disasters, and even environmental destruction, as reconstruction and clean-up efforts add to economic activity. It ignores income inequality, the depletion of natural resources, the value of unpaid labor, and, crucially, the mental and physical health of a population. A society could have soaring GDP figures yet be riddled with stress, pollution, and social fragmentation—a hollow prosperity. The pursuit of GDP growth, often at any cost, has contributed to climate change, resource scarcity, and a growing global mental health crisis, making it increasingly clear that a singular focus on this metric is unsustainable and potentially detrimental to long-term human flourishing.

BHUTAN'S AUDACIOUS VISION: GROSS NATIONAL HAPPINESS

Decades before the concept gained global traction, the small Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan dared to challenge the economic orthodoxy. In the 1970s, its visionary Fourth King, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, famously declared that Gross National Happiness (GNH) was more important than Gross National Product. Bhutan's GNH framework is not merely a slogan; it's a meticulously developed policy tool based on four main pillars and nine domains. The four pillars of GNH are:

1. **Good Governance:** Ensuring fair and effective public administration.
2. **Sustainable Socio-economic Development:** Balancing economic growth with environmental and so-



cial well-being.

3. **Preservation and Promotion of Culture:** Protecting and nurturing Bhutanese identity.
4. **Environmental Conservation:** Safeguarding the country's natural heritage.

These pillars translate into nine domains: psychological well-being, health, education, time use, cultural diversity and resilience, good governance, community vitality, ecological diversity and resilience, and living standards. Bhutan has integrated GNH into its national planning, budgeting, and policy-making processes. Every proposed policy or project is screened through a GNH lens to assess its potential impact on people's well-being. This proactive approach has allowed Bhutan to maintain its pristine environment, preserve its unique culture, and foster a society where collective happiness is a tangible policy goal, not just an abstract ideal. While not without its challenges, Bhutan serves as a living laboratory demonstrating that a nation can

consciously prioritize human well-being over purely material accumulation.

THE GLOBAL MOVEMENT: FROM SCANDINAVIA TO LATIN AMERICA

Bhutan's pioneering spirit has inspired a global movement. The annual *World Happiness Report*, first published in 2012 by the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network, now systematically ranks countries based on subjective well-being data. It uses the *Cantril Ladder* survey, asking individuals to evaluate their life on a scale from 0 to 10. This subjective self-assessment is then statistically explained by six key variables:

1. **GDP per Capita:** Accounting for the role of basic economic security.
2. **Social Support:** The availability of someone to count on in times of trouble.
3. **Healthy Life Expectancy:** Measuring physical well-being.
4. **Freedom to Make Life Choices:** The autonomy

individuals have over their lives.

5. **Generosity:** The inclination to donate to charity, reflecting social trust.
6. **Perceptions of Corruption:** The level of trust in government and business.

The consistent high rankings of **Nordic countries** like Finland, Denmark, and Iceland are not coincidental. These nations exemplify societies where robust social support systems, high levels of trust, good governance, and a strong sense of autonomy converge to create environments conducive to high subjective well-being. Their success shows that prioritizing collective well-being through secular, democratic frameworks leads to happier populations. Beyond the Nordics, countries like **Costa Rica** in Latin America have also garnered attention for their high happiness scores despite relatively lower GDP per capita. Costa Rica's strategic investments in public education, healthcare, and environmental conservation, coupled with its aboli-

tion of its army, reflect a deliberate choice to prioritize human development and ecological balance over militaristic or purely industrial pursuits. These examples underscore that while a certain baseline of economic security is necessary, it is the quality of social structures, environmental health, and personal freedoms that ultimately dictate a nation's happiness quotient.

THE PRAGMATIC CASE FOR PRIORITIZING HAPPINESS

Shifting focus from GDP to a Happiness Index is not merely an ethical choice; it is a pragmatic necessity for the 21st century.

- **Sustainability:** Happiness metrics inherently encourage policies that are sustainable. A focus on healthy life expectancy and environmental quality necessitates investments in public health, green energy, and conservation, which GDP often overlooks or even counts as "costs."
- **Social Cohesion:** Variables like social support, generosity, and low corruption are direct indicators of social capital. Governments that prioritize these foster stronger, more resilient communities, reducing internal conflict and increasing collective problem-solving capacity.
- **Mental Health Dividend:** The global rise in mental health issues has significant economic and social costs. Policies aimed at improving subjective well-being directly address these challenges, leading to more productive workforces and healthier societies.
- **Informed Policy-Making:** A comprehensive

happiness index provides a more nuanced feedback loop for policymakers. It helps identify critical areas where people are truly suffering, allowing for targeted interventions that genuinely improve lives, rather than blindly chasing abstract economic growth that may not trickle down to the individual.

THE ROAD AHEAD: A GLOBAL CALL TO ACTION

The journey towards a world that prioritizes happiness over purely economic output is complex but essential. It requires a fundamental re-calibration of our values, moving beyond the materialist obsession that has dominated global policy for too long. International organizations must amplify the importance of the Happiness Index in their development goals. National governments must integrate well-being indicators into their national budgets and policy assessments, emulating Bhutan's courageous leadership.

The message is clear: the future belongs not to the nations with the largest balance sheets, but to those with the happiest, healthiest, and most engaged citizens. By embracing the Happiness Index as a primary parameter, the world can collectively embark on a path towards a more equitable, sustainable, and genuinely prosperous future—a future where human well-being is not just an afterthought, but the very purpose of governance. The time for this paradigm shift is not tomorrow, but now.

Sudhir S. Raval is a Consulting Editor at the ITV Network

Bangladesh's February Poll: A high-stakes test for a nation in transition

OPINION

DR. ANCHITA BORTHAKUR

As Bangladesh moves toward its parliamentary election on 12 February 2026, the country finds itself at a defining political juncture. This *Jatiyo Shangad* election will be the first national election since the dramatic mass uprising of mid-2024 that brought an abrupt end to the long rule of former PM Sheikh Hasina. More than a routine democratic exercise, the February poll is widely viewed as a roadmap for the future direction of the Bangladeshi state—its institutions, constitutional framework, and its capacity to reconcile justice with inclusion after a turbulent transition.

The election is being organised under an interim caretaker administration led by the Nobel laureate Dr. Muhammad Yunus, who assumed office after the collapse of the previous government. Tasked

with restoring order and steering the country back to democratic rule, Yunus has promised a fundamental political "reset." Central to this effort is the decision to pair the general election with a nationwide constitutional referendum based on the July Charter, a sweeping reform blueprint negotiated among more than 30 political parties and alliances.

A TRANSITION BORN OUT OF UPHEAVAL

The background to the February vote is inseparable from the events of 2024, when protests initially triggered by the reinstatement of a controversial quota system for public sector jobs—escalated into a nationwide mass uprising. Students, opposition parties, and civil society groups converged in unprecedented numbers, and the state's violent response proved politically fatal for the Hasina government. The subsequent dis-

solution of parliament and installation of a caretaker regime marked one of the most dramatic ruptures in Bangladesh's post-independence political history. Throughout 2025, the interim government struggled to stabilise a deeply polarised polity while laying the groundwork for elections and reforms. In addition, political competition intensified, new actors entered the arena, and unresolved questions about accountability for past abuses loomed large. It is against this backdrop of uncertainty, expectation, and unresolved grievances that Bangladesh approaches the forthcoming February polls.

The February 2026 election is unlike any election held by Bangladesh in recent decades. Most notably, it will take place without the participation of the Awami League, which has been barred from contesting the upcoming election due to its alleged role in the 2024 violence. For supporters of the ban, this exclusion represents long-overdue accountability for years of authoritarian governance; while for the critics, it raises troubling questions about political inclusivity and the long-term consequences

of sidelining a party with a substantial support base. This absence has fundamentally reshaped the electoral landscape of the country at present. The principal beneficiary has been the resurgent Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which has regained momentum following the return of Tarique Rahman after seventeen years in exile and the death of BNP President and former PM Khaleda Zia in December last year. The BNP has framed the February election as an opportunity to "reclaim democracy," positioning itself as the main national alternative capable of leading a post-Hasina order.

At the same time, Jamaat-e-Islami, banned from elections since 2013, is preparing a strong political comeback. Its re-entry has altered electoral calculations, particularly in alliance politics. Adding to the volatility is the emergence of the National Citizen Party, formed by leaders of the student protest movement. Despite symbolising generational change, the NCP remains confined to an urban activist base and has been weakened by internal rifts over its proposed alliance with Jamaat. Beyond party competition, the February

election is also significant for its logistical and symbolic innovations. For the first time in Bangladesh's history, overseas citizens—estimated at nearly 15 million people—will be able to vote through a postal ballot system. Importantly, diaspora voting has the potential to reshape electoral outcomes while reinforcing the idea that migrant workers, whose remittances underpin the economy, are stakeholders in the country's democratic future.

THE REFERENDUM FACTOR

However, what truly sets the February vote apart is the simultaneous constitutional referendum proposed by the current interim administration. Voters will be asked to decide on proposals that include the creation of a bicameral parliament, reforms to the Election Commission and constitutional bodies, and binding commitments on governance, representation, and checks and balances. Supporters argue that these measures could finally dismantle the winner-takes-all politics that have repeatedly fuelled authoritarianism and instability in Bangladesh. Critics, however, warn that asking voters to endorse far-reach-

ing constitutional changes amid a highly polarised environment carries risks. Some analysts fear that the process could entrench new forms of exclusion if major constituencies feel marginalised, while others worry that complex institutional reforms are being rushed without sufficient public deliberation. Whether the referendum strengthens democratic legitimacy or deepens divisions will depend heavily on the credibility of the electoral process itself.

HIGH EXPECTATIONS ON FRAGILE GROUND

The stakes surrounding the February election are heightened by Bangladesh's broader socio-economic context. Inflation remains elevated, placing pressure on household budgets, while labour unrest and factory closures have exposed vulnerabilities in the export-driven economy. Yet there are also signs of cautious optimism. International financial institutions have noted that Bangladesh's economy has shown resilience despite political turmoil. At the same time, attacks on ethnic and religious minorities have surged during the transition, raising concerns about

law and order and the state's capacity to protect vulnerable communities. According to the MEA, over 2,900 incidents of violence against minorities have been documented during the tenure of the current interim government. Bangladesh also experienced a series of attacks on its cultural sphere, with music concerts cancelled amid mob vandalism, including during *Pubeta Baisakh* celebrations, while prominent cultural institutions, such as Chhayangan and Bangladesh Uddi Shilpigothi, were also targeted. In another development following the death of Sharif Osman Hadi, a senior leader of Inqilab Mancha, demonstrators vandalised the offices of prominent Bangladeshi newspapers *The Daily Star* and *Prothom Alo*—a rare occasion in Bangladesh's history. These recurring episodes of political violence and targeted attacks have exposed the fragility of the transition.

A DEFINING MOMENT FOR BANGLADESH

Ultimately, the February 2026 election will determine whether the upheaval of 2024 leads to a more accountable, plural, and institutionally resilient political order—or whether

it ushers in a new cycle of instability and exclusion in the country. Many citizens view the February election as a rare opportunity to reset the rules of the political game and prevent a return to one-party dominance. A credible, peaceful, and broadly accepted vote could undoubtedly consolidate the interim government's reform agenda, legitimise constitutional changes, and restore public faith in democratic institutions. A disputed electoral process, by contrast, would threaten to reverse the tentative gains achieved during the transition and weaken trust in democratic institutions.

For Bangladesh, February is not merely about choosing a new parliament. It is about deciding whether the promise of people-powered change can be translated into durable democratic renewal, or whether the country remains trapped in its familiar pattern of polarisation and political rupture. The outcome will shape not only the next government, but the trajectory of Bangladesh's democracy for years to come.

** Dr. Anchita Borthakur is a Researcher at the Chintan Research Foundation (CRF), New Delhi.*

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Curbing acid attacks

Supreme Court pushes for stronger deterrence

THE Supreme Court's suggestion that acid attacks should be treated on the lines of dowry deaths—in which the onus of proving innocence lies on the accused—deserves serious consideration by the Centre and other stakeholders. Such attacks have few parallels in terms of brutality: they are meant to disfigure, silence and socially alienate the victims—most often women. Yet, despite their heinous nature, these crimes rarely provoke sustained public outrage or swift legal action. Survivors are left to endure years, sometimes decades, of trials and appeals, as illustrated in acid-attack survivor Shaheen Malik's case, which has been dragging on since 2009. Here, justice delayed is far worse than justice denied; it's justice held to ransom as perpetrators roam freely while victims relive their trauma endlessly.

The SC has called for "extraordinary" punitive measures, including retributive (instead of reformatory) punishment, thus sending a clear message that the existing legal and institutional response to acid violence is failing survivors. Deterrence matters in crimes driven by vengeance and entitlement. Proposals such as attaching the assets of convicts to compensate victims reflect a pragmatic approach, acknowledging that rehabilitation is as critical as punishment.

Equally significant are the backlog figures. Hundreds of cases are pending in high courts, making a mockery of constitutional guarantees of speedy justice. The SC's directive for time-bound, out-of-court trials is welcome, but its implementation is the real challenge. Beyond punishment, the apex court's push to recognise acid-attack survivors as persons with disabilities under the law is both humane and sensible. Survivors often suffer permanent physical impairment, psychological trauma and loss of livelihood. Access to disability welfare schemes and medical care is not charity—it is a means of picking up the pieces with dignity.

Eminence on hold

Flagship schools expose execution gaps

PUNJAB'S Sikhiya Kranti was projected as a turning point for government education. It was a campaign that would combine upgraded infrastructure with improved learning outcomes. But the non-functioning of two Schools of Eminence in Ludhiana exposes a contradiction: reform driven more by visibility than by preparedness. These schools, envisioned as flagship institutions for meritorious students from modest backgrounds, have buildings in place but lack teachers, laboratories and basic academic infrastructure. Years after construction, classrooms remain empty. This is not an isolated lapse. Across Punjab, chronic teacher and principal shortages have been reported.

Hurried inaugurations that often precede readiness on the ground seem to have taken precedence. The emphasis on ceremonies and plaques has drawn political criticism, with opposition parties calling Sikhiya Kranti a publicity exercise. Even within the education system, teachers have flagged how routine academic work and enrolment drives were disrupted during the 54-day campaign. Such concerns underline a deeper issue: education reform cannot be reduced to infrastructure rollouts or festival-style launches. There are also signs of policy inconsistency. Admissions policies and alleged discrimination within Schools of Eminence reveal unease among teachers and parents. When elite tracks are created within government schools without adequate staffing or clarity, the promise of equity—central to public education—risks being diluted.

Government transitions cannot be an excuse. Projects initiated under previous governments must be completed with urgency, not allowed to drift in administrative limbo. Children cannot afford political pauses. Each academic year lost weakens trust in the government school system and pushes families towards private alternatives. If Sikhiya Kranti is to live up to its name, the state must reallocate its priorities—from optics to outcomes. Filling vacancies, ensuring operational readiness and instituting accountability are less visible than inaugurations, but far more transformative.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, FRIDAY, JANUARY 29, 1926

Political prisoners and exiles

ON Tuesday, the Legislative Assembly once again passed a resolution demanding the unconditional release of political prisoners who have not been convicted of any offence; the trial under the ordinary law of the land of those of such prisoners against whom the Government thinks it has sufficient evidence to justify their going to court; and the removal of all difficulties in the way of the return to India of all Indian exiles who may be or may have been suspected of being concerned in revolutionary activities or other activities regarded by the Government as prejudicial to the interest of India. While we congratulate the Assembly on its passing this resolution, which, as far as it goes, undoubtedly represents the unanimous opinion and sentiment of political India, we must be permitted to express our regret at one very glaring omission in the resolution. We refer, of course, to the case of those political prisoners who may have been convicted by a court of law, but who in all other respects stand on the same footing as some of the exiles, whose restoration to the country was rightly demanded by the Assembly. The case of these prisoners was covered by the original resolution moved by Mr. Shafie, but was excluded from the amendment of Mr. Goswami, which the House accepted in preference to the former. The exclusion is all the more extraordinary because Mr. Goswami in his speech declared that he agreed fully with the original resolution. His only difficulty, it appears, was that Mr. Shafie had brought within the scope of one resolution two different issues, affecting two distinct classes of prisoners.

Litmus test for India-EU bonhomie

Sustaining deeper ties will entail compromises on both sides in the long run

SUSHMA RAMACHANDRAN
SENIOR FINANCIAL JOURNALIST

INDIA and Europe seem poised to bridge a gap that has yawned for decades. There has been greater confluence with the UK, given the colonial history and ease of communication in the English language. A shared language has equally helped in promoting a close relationship with the US, along with a highly educated diaspora.

As for Europe, there have been sizeable investments from multinationals, but the inflows have been far lower than to China. Economic ties have also faced the hurdles of the European Commission's complex bureaucracy and rigid regulations. Even so, trade between India and the European Union (EU) has grown rapidly over the years.

Latest official data shows that the annual India-EU merchandise trade was \$136 billion in 2024-25. This is even higher than the \$132-billion trade recorded with the US. The EU is India's biggest trading partner, yet there has been far more media hype over the much-awaited pact with the US than over the one with the EU. This is primarily due to the tariff drama of US President Donald Trump, who has been using a trade instrument as a blunt weapon of foreign policy.

At the World Economic Forum summit in Davos last week, the buzz was over Trump's summary dismissal of Europe over a wide range of issues, from Greenland to the role of NATO. Equally, there was buzz over Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney's call to middle powers to create a new world order. It is at this juncture when the post-WWII rules-based international



ALLIES: The unveiling of the India-EU free trade agreement could not have been more timely as Europe is looking to reduce its economic dependence on the US. REUTERS

system seems to be overturning that EU leaders descended on New Delhi for a high-profile summit along with being honoured guests on Republic Day. The unveiling of a free trade agreement (FTA) at this stage could not have been more timely as Europe is clearly looking to reduce its economic dependence on the US. New ties are being forged rapidly as the India trade pact comes on the heels of the EU tying up a deal with Latin America's biggest trade bloc, Mercosur.

It is not just Brussels that is investing heavily in new relationships. New Delhi is also looking to diversify markets in the wake of the punitive tariffs imposed by the US. There is a mutual recognition of the value of a close partnership. This is being expressed in the conclusion of not just a trade agreement but also a security and defence partnership. It would be only the third such pact signed by the EU, the other two being with Japan and South Korea. As such, it sends a powerful message in an era of fast-changing global alliances.

At the same time, sustaining

effort at flexibility.

Going forward, the first area of conflict could be the European Commission's bureaucracy, legendary for its tangled web of rules. In fact, some Brexit supporters had cited the EU's regulatory complexity as a reason to exit the economic bloc. There is no doubt that in contrast, the FTA with the UK moved much more quickly despite several changes at the top during the negotiations. Boris Johnson was the Prime Minister when the talks commenced, while it was Keir Starmer who ultimately signed the pact.

Thus there are potential irritants, especially over a wide range of non-tariff barriers. The most contentious is the carbon border adjustment mechanism (CBAM) that could affect the ultimate cost of myriad Indian exports, particularly steel, aluminium and cement. This runs counter to studies showing that the environmental impact of such emissions is minimal. According to an UNCTAD report, the value of the CBAM in mitigating climate change is limited as it would cut only 0.1 per cent of global CO₂ emissions.

Both Brussels and New Delhi must go all out to reduce the red tape.

deeper India-EU ties will entail compromises on both sides in the long run. The newfound warmth has emerged after many years of frostiness. It must be recalled that the current FTA has been under discussion for as long as 18 years. Talks were even suspended in 2014 and then resumed in 2022. The reason has been rigidity on both sides, with red lines being drawn firmly without any

Another issue that is critical for India is greater ease of movement for skilled professionals. While the US has benefited greatly from relaxed entry policies for highly educated personnel, Europe has fallen behind in this respect. This is despite the fact that countries like Germany are now keen to lure high-tech professionals, especially in the wake of the curbs on H-1B visas. The new mobility agreement that is being put in place may ultimately correct this lacuna, though the focus is largely on students and research.

The need to appreciate India's red lines in terms of market access will also be an important factor in expanding economic ties. Dairy and agriculture have always been contentious issues between the two sides. The EU has often taken a sharply divergent position at the World Trade Organisation on agriculture, including the need to protect livelihoods of farmers surviving at subsistence levels, even though huge subsidies are given to rich farmers in developed economies. A greater understanding of these issues is needed on multilateral platforms.

It is thus worthwhile to recognise that the present bonhomie in India-Europe relations will be tested on the ground in the coming days. Among the positives, the free trade pact has been finalised due to a determined effort to be more flexible, considering the external headwinds on the trade front. Even India has had to recognise that providing greater market access can yield rich dividends in terms of enabling matching access to a huge market of developed economies.

Yet both sides must reduce the red tape for which Brussels and New Delhi have a well-deserved reputation. In the backdrop of a changing world order, one hopes efforts will be made to do everything needed to upgrade the economic and strategic relationship. It is only this firm resolve that will ensure a brighter outlook for India-Europe ties.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

India, European Union can help heal a fractured world. — Ursula von der Leyen

The magic of Beating Retreat

KOMIL TYAGI

THE astounding flypast, impeccably marching contingents, daredevil motorcyclists, energetic bands and swiftly swaying theme-based tableaux—I was talking about Republic Day in one of my classes. Then I made a mention of the Beating Retreat ceremony.

"Beating Retreat, eh what?" Appallingly, the question was posed by an 18-year-old. When prodded, the entire class was equally clueless! I thought it was just a lapse on their part. I posted messages only to discover that many people were oblivious of its existence or importance.

To a young nation that lives off the Internet and social media, the Beating Retreat is conducted on the evening of January 29 every year; it officially denotes the end of Republic Day festivities. The panoramic view—the Raisina Hill, the towering North and South Blocks of the Central Secretariat and the Rashtrapati Bhavan—is just picture-perfect!

Conceived in the 1950s, the Beating Retreat has continued to charm audiences. Queen Elizabeth II attended the ceremony during her first visit (1961) to India after Independence.

The chief guest (President of India) arrives escorted by bodyguards. The trumpeters of the Brigade of the Guards present the national salute, followed by the playing of the National Anthem by the bands, and the Tricolour is unfurled at Vijay Chowk.

As the sun's rays disperse, the combined bands of the Navy and the Air Force make an entry. The Drummer's Call (a solo performance) is a visual treat. A sense of gratification overpowers the audience as the National Flag is lowered.

The collective heartbeat drops as all flags are slowly brought down, and the President declares the ceremony closed. The bands march back to the musical rendition of "Saare jahan se achha..." and the horse-mounted troops of the President's Bodyguard arrive to give the final salute of the day. The retreating bands and troops, the fading music, the failing light—all leave an indelible mark.

It's been years since I heard a commentator's words, "Ye aashvamedha ki taap hai, ye gantantra ki chhaap hai", but they continue to resound in my mind. The event also delivers the message that we must not forget to complete what we begin. Endings are as important as beginnings. And what's better than a ceremonial goodbye? So dear readers, especially the young ones, grab that seat and do not miss the Beating Retreat this time.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Need rules-based global order

Apropos of 'NDS confirms the Trumpian playbook', the recently released US National Defense Strategy highlights a disturbing uncertainty in global geopolitics. The strategy appears overly transactional, weakening long-standing alliances, leaving Europe insecure while Asia faces ambiguity. The emergence of loosely defined initiatives like the Board of Peace raises concerns about clarity, commitment and inclusiveness. Global peace cannot be shaped by impulsive or personality-centric policies. For nations like India, the situation underlines the importance of strategic autonomy and cooperation among middle powers to preserve stability. A rules-based international order, mutual trust and collective responsibility are essential to address security challenges.

CHARU SHARMA, HOSHIAPUR

Autocrats will get a free hand

Refer to 'NDS confirms the Trumpian playbook'; the National Security Strategy (NSS) is a signpost to guide US diplomats towards a united vision for Washington-defined foreign policy goals. Its latest version has set the cat among pigeons as far as anxieties around NATO and other global associations like Quad and AUKUS are concerned. If, as the NSS says, the US intends to push a "burden-sharing network" to force all its allies to assume responsibility for stability in their regions, it might end up bolstering the sense of impunity with which autocrats worldwide flout territorial and human rights norms in their quest for power.

SS PAUL, NADIA

Globalisation getting diversified

Apropos of 'India-EU pact', the Free Trade Agreement entails not only commercial interest, but also a strategic intervention in a fractured global economy. It also sends out a message to the world: Globalisation is not disappearing, it is diversifying. The deal sends a signal to Trump that India would not jeopardise its economic interests to succumb to his tariff tantrums and threats. With necessary caution, India has opened its markets only to about 30% of European goods initially. There are tangible gains with imports of European goods made cheaper and smooth access to Indian exports in European markets.

GURPREET SINGH, MOHALI

Europe wary of Indian standards

It refers to 'India-EU pact'; the agreement has brought the two continents closer and will serve as a broader strategic partnership encompassing trade, investment, defence cooperation and supply chain resilience. A binding constraint for Indian exporters remains the standard of the products that Indian exporters often struggle to meet as the EU market is governed by stringent sanitary and phytosanitary measures. The signing of a security and defence partnership will further strengthen greater collaboration in maritime security.

HARBINDER S DHILLON, NANA

Govt hospitals without facilities

Refer to 'No ICU at Malerkotla hospital, HC seeks affidavit on facility in all districts'; lack of essential medical facilities and diagnostic infrastructure at government hospitals in Punjab is a matter of serious concern. MRI machines are available in only six districts out of 23 as per the affidavit filed in the high court. District hospitals handle referral and emergency cases; without machines and equipment, it is impossible to treat the patient. Ironically, the Punjab government has come out with a full front page newspaper advertisement of 'free treatment for Rs 10 lakh for every family in Punjab in the best private hospitals'. Whom does this benefit—the private players; the government coffers and the public continue to lose, as always.

ASHOK KUMAR, BY MAIL

Bearing pain in silence

Apropos of 'Evidence presented to suggest nothing happened, HC told'; 10 years after the Muthal rape case during the Jat reservation agitation, the High Court now professes good intention, but it is a lost cause already. Incidents of molestation at Muthal were no less despicable than the vandalism at Rohtak. Whispers of gruesome assault on women commuters on highway were rife but no complainant came forward due to the fear of facing indignity. As a result, no investigating agency could report truth for lack of evidence. Families and the women who had to go through the horrifying moments were compelled to suffer in silence. The best that the State can do now is to ensure no such ravages take place again.

YOGINDER SINGHAL, LADWA

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit. These should be cogently written and can be sent by e-mail to: Letters@tribuneindia.com

Train to Begumpura — culture of Dera Ballan



SANTOSH K SINGH
SOCIOLOGIST AND AUTHOR

THE conferment of the prestigious Padma Shri award on Sant Niranjan Dass of Dera Sachkhand, popularly called Dera Ballan, of Jalandhar by the Central government has understandably brought the dera into national limelight. Punjab has deras, big and small, in thousands, but this dera in particular has wielded great prominence and influence in the region for many decades.

The last time it hogged the headlines was when one of its saints, who was visiting Vienna in Austria in 2009, was shot dead, leading to massive protests and uproar back home. One of the saints who escaped the murderous attack was Sant Niranjan Dass, the current *gaddi-nashin* or chief of the dera.

The dera of Ballan, also known as Dera Sachkhand, was founded by Baba Pipal Das around the early 20th century. In its more than a century of existence, the dera first emerged as a centre of the propagation of the teachings

and *Bani* of the 15th century *Bhakti* saint-poet Ravidas, and later and more recently as the Ravidassia movement.

The credit, however, for converting this nondescript village-based place of worship to the epicentre of identity assertion around the figure of Guru Ravidas goes to Sant Sarwan Das, who became the chief of the dera after Baba Pipal Das. Sant Sarwan Das was revolutionary in his zeal and commitment to spread education among his people, who largely belonged to the community of *chamar* caste, which worked on leather and was considered untouchable in the traditional caste hierarchy. Ravidas too belonged to that community and, hence, this association.

Much of the philanthropic initiative in the area of education and health, in particular, for which the dera is known today is because of Sant Sarwan Das and his visionary spiritual and political philosophy that 'aligned itself with and drew inspiration from BR Ambedkar's politics and Babu Mangoo Ram's *Ad-Dharmi* movement.

Since its inception, the dera largely worked within the Sikh *rahit maryada* and, at the same time, propagated the *Banis* of Guru Ravidas. Given the egalitarian and inclusive epistemic cosmos of Sikhism and the holy book, *Guru Granth Sahib*,



POLITICAL CAPITAL : Dera Ballan chief Sant Niranjan Dass meets PM Narendra Modi. TRIBUNE PHOTO

that included verses from many *bhakti* saints coming from lower castes, the syncretic and co-existent religious landscape of Punjab looked in harmony with its diversity and pluralist ethos.

But things changed with time. Practices defied theory. Despite the unambiguous anti-caste and egalitarian temperament, caste-like formations emerged within Sikhism. Separate *gurdwaras* emerged in villages. The rise and mushrooming of deras followed. For, they experimented and nurtured counter-perspectives to the mainstream. The dera of Ballan too progressively took

At 33%, Punjab has the highest SC population. But this number hides a reality — the fragmented status of Dalit politics in the state.

that route, leading to strained relationships. More importantly, it also drifted from the *Ad-Dharmi* template that emphasised larger Dalit formation rather than the exclusive Ravidassia framework.

The Vienna incident of 2009 was the culmination of these strains that had been building for many years. Post Vienna, in the aftermath of the killing of Sant Ramanand, the dera took some hard decisions. In 2010, it declared a separate religion called Ravidassia Dharma. It compiled a book of the *Banis* of Ravidas in the following year.

The book was announced to the world not from Jalandhar

but from Varanasi, where the dera has built a huge *Guru Ravidas Janam Asthan* Mandir at a place called Seergovardhanpur, close to the BHU campus.

It is believed that the place is the birthplace of *Guru Ravidas*. This project was initiated by Sant Sarwan Das in the 1970s and it has gained momentum since, with the assistance of the generous support from the Ravidassia diaspora in the decades that followed.

Each year, on the birth anniversary celebrations or *Ravidas Jayanti*, dera Ballan organises a special train journey by what it calls the *Begumpura Express* which takes the pilgrims from Jalandhar to Varanasi amidst the thunderous sloganising of '*Jo bole so nirbahi, guru Ravidas Maharaj ki jai*' (those followers are the fearless who hail *Guru Ravidas*).

The aggressive political positioning and posturing of the post-Vienna days gradually settled and the dera has become quieter and much mellowed now insofar as the movement for a separate Ravidassia religion is concerned.

But the influence and political capital that it commands from its followers, both locally and globally, have only grown. Understandably, political parties of all stripes have been making attempts to warm up to these deras.

The status of Punjab as a state with the highest SC population — roughly 33 per cent — makes the electoral worth of these deras all the more in demand.

This number, though, hides a reality — the fragmented status of Dalit politics in Punjab. Dera Ballan may be a prominent Ravidassia Dera, but there are many other Ravidassia groups that disagree with the politics of Dera Ballan, with many sticking to the *Ad-Dharmi* template of Dalit mobilisation (which proposes an inclusive umbrella organisation for the Dalits) rather than a separate Ravidassia identity.

Moreover, other Dalit groups, such as that of *Valmikis*, too have been alienated. The Congress's Channi experiment had backfired precisely because of over-dependence on Dera Ballan. The Congress clearly underestimated the fragmented reality of the Dalits in the state and misread the situation on the ground.

This year, *Ravidas Jayanti* falls on February 1. Dera Ballan and Sant Niranjan Dass will undertake the *Begumpura Express* again. The train will reach Varanasi. But when it will reach *Begumpura* — the utopia that *Guru Ravidas* imagined of a city without sorrow and discrimination — only time will tell.

Santosh K Singh is the author of *The Deras: Culture, Diversity and Politics*

China's anti-corruption machine tightens its grip



DEVENDRA KUMAR
CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE FOR HUMANITARIAN STUDIES, SHIV NAADAR UNIVERSITY

GEN Zhang Youxia, first-ranked Vice-Chairman of China's Central Military Commission and its senior-most general, has been placed under investigation for 'serious violations of discipline and law', along with another member, Gen Liu Zhenli. This leaves the commission with just two members — its civilian Chairman Xi Jinping and the second-ranked Vice-Chairman, Gen Zhang Shengmin, who is also in charge of anti-corruption in the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The senior Zhang was seen as a close family friend and ally of Xi and was retained in his position at the 20th Party Congress in 2022 despite having reached the retirement age. As speculation swirls about the reasons for his removal and about the implications for the PLA's operational abilities, it is important to understand the evolving nature of Xi's long-running anti-corruption campaign in order to make sense of the latest developments.

The Communist Party of

China's (CPC) anti-corruption watchdog, the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI), held its fifth plenary meeting from January 12 to 14, 2026. The meeting was attended by the senior leadership of the CPC, including its military leadership, comprising both Gen Zhang Youxia and Gen Liu.

The main message from the meeting was that the anti-corruption campaign would be carried out even more intensely. Xi Jinping's speech at the plenum conveyed the message through the new political slogan of 'three mores': to more resolutely and forcefully implement decisions of the central committee, to more scientifically and effectively cage power and to more firmly fight against corruption.

A decade-old campaign has evolved into a mechanism to tackle the persistent problems arising from the lack of political reforms of the CPC's Leninist organisational structure and, thus, its scope and utility have grown beyond merely targeting Xi's opponents.

Shifting forms

Few campaigns have persisted for so long in the CPC's 100-plus years of existence. The anti-corruption campaign launched in 2012 was expected to gradually lose steam. Instead, it has been institutionalised with sufficient flexibility to tackle new, emergent forms of corruption and its persistence is reflected in consistently



ZERO TOLERANCE: Central Military Commission's senior-most general, Gen Zhang Youxia (centre), is being investigated for 'serious violations of discipline and law'. REUTERS

higher numbers of senior cadres and lower-level officials coming under the CCDI's radar. The number of cases, in fact, rises in the run-up to the CPC's Party Congress held every five years.

However, the campaign is no longer dominated by Xi Jinping's efforts to consolidate and centralise power. It is evolving in its mechanisms and tactics to respond to the shifting forms and nature of corruption and becoming a part of the governance mechanism of the CPC. As a governance tool, anti-corruption campaigns help enforce the central leadership's vision and key decisions, polish the CPC's image among the population and the party leadership's relationship with its

While the CPC has innovated in terms of its tools and tactics, officials have been no less innovative in changing their methods and channels for corruption.

members and cadre. With the next Party Congress due in late 2027, the next two years are likely to see an intensification of the campaign.

One, the selection of leadership at local levels (county-level upwards) will begin this year, starting the process of selecting the delegates to the Congress. This process, aimed at 'promoting truly loyal, reliable, consistent, and responsible good cadres' is likely to be accompanied by an intense anti-corruption campaign, as was the case in the lead-up to the 19th Party Congress in 2017 and the 20th one in 2022.

Two, given the consistently high number of corruption cases, it is evident that corruption remains endemic to

the CPC. At the same time, even as financial corruption and violations of the party's regulations and conduct remain a focus, one of the major concerns is the implementation of central decisions at the local level.

As a vast and diverse country, the central leadership faces the problems of implementing its policies on the ground. As economic troubles persist and Xi approaches the end of his third term, the CCDI has expanded the scope of 'corruption' to encompass disobedience or failing to implement central policies. For a Leninist party such as the CPC, the disciplinary machinery is key, even for regular policy implementation and unifying the thinking across the hierarchy.

Three, while the CPC has innovated in terms of its tools and tactics, officials have been no less innovative in changing their methods and channels for corruption. While the 'eight regulations' aimed at rooting out extravagance and correcting official conduct implemented since 2012 remain at the core of the campaign and these have been backed up by regulations targeting different avenues facilitating corrupt behaviour, newer forms of corruption keep emerging.

One such mechanism under increasing scrutiny is 'family-style corruption' or, simply, using family members as cover to seek illicit gains — a form quite familiar in India. Difficult to detect, this form of cor-

ruption takes a heavy toll on the CPC's image and functioning, especially at local levels.

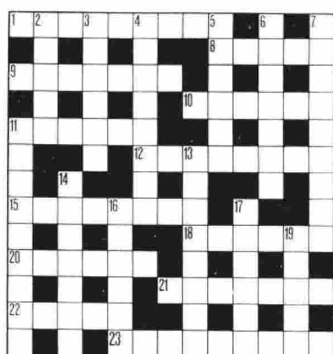
Xi's 'continuous revolution' Twelve years on and with thousands of cadres having fallen, the anti-corruption campaign has become Xi Jinping's version of the Maoist idea of 'continuous revolution'.

For Mao Zedong, the idea was to root out problems arising from what he perceived was the bureaucratisation of the CPC as a governing party. Xi, by contrast, sees bureaucratisation as a key remedy with anti-corruption as a tool to cure the problems arising out of the CPC's Leninist top-down organisational structure. In its second decade, the campaign is thus aimed at curing organisational issues rather than simply targeting deviations by individual officials.

In the absence of political reforms, the objective of 'putting power in the cage of rules' demands a continuously innovating anti-corruption campaign to handle ever-changing forms of corruption and innovation by cadres to evade the powerful CCDI. Xi's own version of 'continuous revolution' will continue even amidst rising economic troubles at home and external pressures.

Gen Zhang Youxia's fall suggests that no sector of the party-state apparatus — whether civilian or military — and no official, however high or close to Xi, will be spared.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1 Worship (9)
- 8 One more time (5)
- 9 Impedimenta (7)
- 10 Closing scene (6)
- 11 Table of fixed charges (6)
- 12 Smart aleck (8)
- 15 Go across (8)
- 18 Apt (6)
- 20 Evasive (6)
- 21 A smokeless explosive (7)
- 22 Blend gradually (5)
- 23 Western Europe's highest mountain (4,5)

Yesterday's Solution

Across: 1 Pounded, 4 Field, 7 Ohio, 8 Intrigue, 10 Draw a blank, 12 Pumice, 13 Almond, 15 Wellington, 18 Only just, 19 Bear, 20 Scrub, 21 At issue.

Down: 1 Proud, 2 Up in arms, 3 Dangle, 4 Firing line, 5 Edgy, 6 Die-hard, 9 Hatchet job, 11 Fortress, 12 Pomposity, 14 Alaska, 16 Nerve, 17 Slur.

DOWN

- 2 Tense excitement (5)
- 3 Take back (6)
- 4 A contest of strength (3,2,3)
- 5 Indigenous (6)
- 6 An unoccupied post (7)
- 7 Available if needed (2,7)
- 11 Delicious (9)
- 13 Disburse (5,3)
- 14 Quality of character (7)
- 16 High regard (6)
- 17 Maliciously destructive person (6)
- 19 Reveal a secret (3,2)

SU DO KU



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

6	5	1	2	4	9	8	7	3
7	8	2	5	1	3	4	9	6
9	4	3	6	8	7	5	2	1
3	1	4	8	9	2	6	5	7
5	9	6	7	3	1	2	8	4
2	7	8	4	5	6	3	1	9
1	3	5	9	2	4	7	6	8
4	2	7	1	6	8	9	3	5
8	6	9	3	7	5	1	4	2

CALENDAR

	JANUARY 29, 2026, THURSDAY	
■ Shaka Samvat	1947	
■ Margashirsh Shaka	9	
■ Margashirsh Parvatisht	16	
■ Hijari	1447	
■ Shukla Paksha Tithi 11, up to 1:56 pm		
■ Indra Yoga up to 8:28 pm		
■ Rohini Nakshatra up to 7:32 am		
■ Mrigshirsha Nakshatra up to 5:30 am		
Moon enters Gemini sign 6:31 am		

FORECAST

SUNSET: SUNRISE:	THURSDAY FRIDAY	17:57 HRS 02:14 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	18	09
New Delhi	18	07
Amritsar	19	05
Bathinda	19	04
Jalandhar	19	05
Ludhiana	19	08
Bhivani	20	03
Hisar	20	10
Sirsa	19	04
Dharamsala	20	0
Manali	12	-03
Shimla	16	0
Srinagar	07	-02
Jammu	19	07
Kargil	02	-10
Leh	01	-12
Dehradun	20	06
Mussoorie	16	0

TEMPERATURE IN °C

India and the European Union reached a free trade agreement after 18 years

On Tuesday, January 27, 2026, India and the European Union reached an agreement that had been under discussion for the past 18 years. The European Union comprises 27 countries. On the other side is India, which boasts a huge demand market with a population of 1.45 billion. Every prosperous country engaged in foreign trade is attracted to India's demand market. Therefore, India does not hesitate to strike trade agreements with various countries. Many countries around the world are troubled by US President Donald Trump's authoritarian policies regarding tariff wars.

This year, total Indian exports between India and the US have declined. Although it was said that the US tariff hike would have no impact on India's exports, it has. Given India's demand market, Donald Trump has occasionally expressed his closeness to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and India, continuing trade talks with India and talking about an agreement, but so far, this agreement has not been reached. The US wants to freely sell its agricultural and dairy products to India. Since India is an agricultural and farming nation, it cannot compromise the interests of its farmers and dairy producers. This is why a trade agreement has not yet been reached; only talks of continuing trade negotiations are being discussed. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has signed several trade agreements, highlighting India's diversified trade policy, but reaching a multilateral trade agreement with 27 European Union countries would be considered a major success. On the occasion of India's 77th Republic Day, India invited European Council President Antonio Costa and European Union President Ursula von der Leyen to India as chief guests to finalize the agreement. The agreement has been reached. Due to its widespread significance, this agreement is being called the "Mother of All Deals." The significance of the agreement lies in the fact that a trade agreement has been reached between approximately 2 billion people worldwide. 1.45 billion are from our country, while 45 to 55 million belong to European countries.

Our country's trade agreement with the European Union will come into effect in 2027. This agreement will undoubtedly boost the country's exporters. The European Union's member countries have entered into this agreement with an open mind. The Western world is experiencing an economic recession. The trade agreement with India has opened up a large market for their products. The beauty of this agreement is that it excludes grain products and dairy products. Thus, Modi's commitment to protecting farmers' interests is also fulfilled. The agreement has been called the "Mother of All Deals" because it marks India's agreement with 27 European countries in one go. This fulfills India's policy of diversifying its foreign trade. Clearly, Indian businesses will now receive demand from these countries, leading to greater profits. Furthermore, this agreement will provide us with another opportunity to increase exports, all under the framework of free trade. This is why this agreement is being widely praised. If this agreement reduces our dependence on the US, then the US and its President Donald Trump should consider reducing the impact of their tariff policies on India.

-Abhishek Vij

Protests against new UGC rules intensify

From New Delhi to several cities in Uttar Pradesh, including Lucknow and Bareilly, there is widespread uproar over the new UGC policy. This unrest is being fueled by upper-caste groups. They claim that the UGC has recently framed new rules in favor of Scheduled Caste students, and these rules are completely against the interests of upper-caste communities. While the Supreme Court and Chief Justice Surya Kant had suggested creating such a protective policy for Dalit students, the form it has taken is provoking anger among upper-caste groups. Upper-caste groups argue that this policy will promote caste discrimination and increase animosity between upper-caste and Dalit students. Let's look at some details of the policy. The policy states that if a Dalit student complains about any verbal or written abuse, or even indirect abuse, by an upper-caste student, a committee appointed by the UGC will take cognizance of the complaint and take punitive action against the upper-caste student. However, if the Dalit student's complaint is found to be false, they will not be penalized. The second point of contention is that the committee formed by the UGC to decide on the complaints does not include any upper-caste Hindu members; all members will be from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and other backward classes.

Therefore, while there is widespread unrest against this policy, it has also become a political issue. The District Magistrate of Bareilly has resigned over this matter, although he initially cited preventing Shankaracharya Avimukteshwarand's palanquin from proceeding to the Magh Mela as the reason for his resignation. Reports also suggest that a high-level UGC committee is reviewing the entire matter, particularly the composition of the decision-making committee. The ruling BJP is now in a difficult position, as withdrawing the policy could anger the Dalit and backward classes, while allowing it to continue in its current form has already led to widespread protests from upper-caste Hindus. Our view is that a middle ground will be found soon through discussions, and this issue will not be allowed to become a matter of political appeasement.

How sports shape character beyond the scoreboard

Sports are often viewed through the lens of competition, medals, and records. Wins are celebrated, losses analyzed, and champions idolized. Yet, the most enduring impact of sports lies far beyond the scoreboard. Across cultures and generations, sports have played a powerful role in shaping character, discipline, and social values.

From an early age, participation in sports teaches lessons that classrooms alone cannot provide. Discipline is one of the first. Training schedules, practice routines, and physical conditioning require consistency and commitment. Athletes learn that improvement is gradual and effort must be sustained, a lesson that translates directly into academic and professional life. Sports also cultivate resilience. Losses are inevitable, regardless of talent or preparation. Learning to accept defeat, analyze mistakes, and return stronger is a core aspect of athletic development. This resilience builds emotional strength, helping individuals cope with setbacks in life beyond sports.

Team sports, in particular, instill cooperation and empathy. Players must understand their roles, communicate effectively, and trust one another. Success depends not on individual brilliance alone but on collective effort. This understanding fosters respect for diversity and collaboration, skills that are essential in modern workplaces and communities. Leadership often emerges organically in sports environments. Captains and senior players learn to motivate teammates, make decisions under pressure, and take responsibility for outcomes. These leadership qualities are shaped through



Athletes have historically used their platforms to challenge discrimination, promote inclusion, and advocate for justice.

experience rather than theory, making them deeply ingrained and practical. Sports also promote fairness and integrity. Rules apply equally to all participants, and violations carry consequences. Athletes internalize the importance of playing by the rules, respecting

officials, and accepting decisions even when they disagree. These experiences reinforce ethical behavior and respect for institutions. Physical health benefits are obvious, but sports also contribute significantly to mental well-being. Regular physical activity reduces stress, improves mood, and builds self-confidence. For many young people, sports provide a constructive outlet for energy and emotion, reducing the likelihood of negative coping mechanisms. At a societal level, sports act as unifying forces. Sporting events bring together people across social, economic, and cultural divides. Shared support for teams or athletes creates moments of collective identity that transcend everyday differences. This unifying power is particularly visible during international competitions, where sports foster mutual respect among nations. Sports can also be vehicles for social change. Athletes have historically used their platforms

to challenge discrimination, promote inclusion, and advocate for justice. When sports figures speak, they often reach audiences beyond traditional political or academic spaces, amplifying important conversations. Importantly, the value of sports does not depend on reaching elite levels. Recreational and amateur sports offer the same character-building benefits without the pressure of professional competition. Participation itself—showing up, trying, and improving—is what matters most. In a world increasingly shaped by screens and sedentary lifestyles, sports offer balance. They reconnect people with their bodies, communities, and shared values. While trophies may gather dust, the character forged through sports endures. Ultimately, sports prepare individuals not just to compete, but to live well—teaching lessons of effort, respect, resilience, and teamwork that remain relevant long after the final whistle.

THOUGHT OF THE DAY

Do not wait for the perfect moment; take the moment and make it perfect.

-George Bernard Shaw

How small habits create long-term change

People often associate change with dramatic decisions—new careers, major moves, or sudden lifestyle overhauls. While these moments can be transformative, lasting change is more often built quietly through small, consistent habits. Over time, these modest actions accumulate, shaping lives in profound ways.

Habits function as the invisible architecture of daily life. They determine how time is spent, how energy is managed, and how challenges are approached. Because habits operate automatically, they require less mental effort than constant decision-making. This efficiency makes them powerful drivers of behavior.

Small habits are particularly effective because they lower resistance. A five-minute walk feels manageable, while an hour-long workout may feel overwhelming. Reading one page a day seems trivial, yet it often leads to longer reading sessions. By reducing the psychological barrier to action, small habits encourage consistency. Consistency matters more than intensity. Research in behavioral science shows that repeated actions, even minimal ones, strengthen neural pathways. Over time, these pathways shape identity. A person who writes a few lines daily begins to see themselves as a writer. Identity-based change is more sustainable than goal-based motivation alone.

Small habits also build momentum. Each completed action reinforces a sense of progress and competence. This positive feedback loop increases motivation, making it easier to expand habits gradually. What begins as a minor adjustment can evolve into a significant lifestyle shift. Importantly, small habits are resilient during difficult periods. Life disruptions often derail ambitious plans, but modest routines are easier to maintain under stress. This resilience ensures continuity even when circumstances are less than ideal.

Habit formation also highlights the importance of environment. Simple changes—placing a book on a bedside table, keeping healthy food visible, or setting reminders—support desired behaviors. By designing environments that make good habits easier, individuals reduce reliance on willpower.

Why slow living is becoming a modern necessity

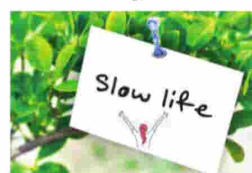
Modern life celebrates speed. Faster communication, faster transportation, faster results. Productivity is often measured by how much can be accomplished in the shortest possible time. Yet, amid this obsession with acceleration, a growing number of people are consciously choosing a different path—slow living.

Slow living is not about laziness or withdrawal from ambition. Rather, it is a deliberate approach to life that prioritizes quality over quantity, presence over pressure, and meaning over constant motion. As burnout, anxiety, and lifestyle-related illnesses increase globally, slow living is emerging as a practical response rather than a philosophical luxury.

At its core, slow living encourages individuals to be intentional with their time. Instead of filling every moment with tasks and notifications, people practicing slow living create space for reflection, rest, and connection. This shift often begins with small changes—unplugging from devices for a few hours, eating meals without distractions, or choosing walking over rushing whenever possible.

The workplace has become one of the main arenas where slow living is gaining relevance. Long hours, unrealistic deadlines, and constant availability have blurred the boundary between professional and personal life. Studies increasingly show that overworked employees are not more productive; they are more exhausted. Slow living challenges the assumption that constant urgency leads to better outcomes, emphasizing sustainable productivity instead.

Mental health is another major driver behind this movement. Fast-paced lifestyles leave little room for emotional processing. Stress accumulates silently until it manifests as anxiety or physical illness. Slow living promotes mindfulness—being fully present in daily activities—which has been shown to reduce stress and improve overall well-being.



Consumer culture also comes under scrutiny through the lens of slow living. Instead of frequent impulse purchases, the philosophy encourages mindful consumption. People are choosing fewer but higher-quality items, repairing rather than replacing, and supporting local producers. This not only reduces financial pressure but also contributes to environmental sustainability. Relationships, too, benefit from a slower pace. Meaningful connections require time and attention—two things often sacrificed in busy schedules. Slow living encourages deeper conversations, shared experiences, and emotional availability. These relationships, in turn, provide a sense of belonging that no achievement metric can replace.

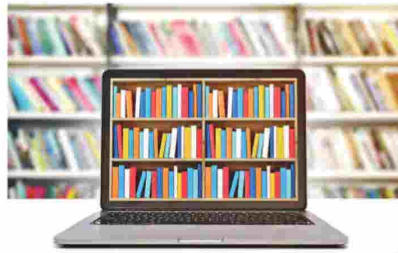
Importantly, slow living is not about rejecting modern life or technology. It is about redefining their role. Technology becomes a tool rather than a master. Social media is used intentionally rather than compulsively. Work is structured to support life, not consume it entirely.

Critics sometimes argue that slow living is a privilege unavailable to those struggling to meet basic needs. This concern is valid, but the principles of slow living—rest, balance, and intention—can still be adapted in modest ways. Even brief moments of pause and self-care can create meaningful change. As societies confront climate change, mental health crises, and economic uncertainty, slow living offers a counter-narrative to relentless acceleration. It reminds us that progress does not always mean moving faster. Sometimes, it means moving thoughtfully.

The quiet power of libraries in the digital age

In an era dominated by smartphones, social media, and artificial intelligence, libraries may appear like relics of a slower time. Yet, quietly and consistently, libraries continue to play a transformative role in societies across the world. Far from becoming obsolete, they are evolving into dynamic spaces that nurture knowledge, inclusion, and democratic access to information. Libraries have always been more than buildings filled with books. They are public institutions rooted in the idea that knowledge should be accessible to all, regardless of income, background, or social status. In many parts of the world, libraries remain one of the few spaces where people can walk in without the obligation to spend money. This simple openness carries immense social value, particularly in unequal

societies. With the rise of digital technology, libraries have adapted rather than retreated. Modern libraries offer free internet access, digital archives, e-books, and online learning platforms. For students from low-income households, libraries often serve as the primary gateway to digital resources. In rural and underserved urban areas, they bridge the digital divide by providing computers, training, and technical support. Beyond access to information, libraries foster critical thinking. Unlike algorithm-driven platforms that often reinforce existing beliefs, libraries encourage exploration across disciplines and viewpoints. Readers encounter unfamiliar ideas not because an algorithm pushed them, but because curiosity led them there. This exposure is crucial in cultivating informed



citizens capable of independent thought. Libraries also function as community anchors. They host reading clubs, cultural events, language classes, and workshops on everything from financial literacy to creative writing. For children, libraries provide a safe and stimulating environment that nurtures imagination and learning

outside formal classrooms. For the elderly, they offer companionship, routine, and mental engagement, reducing social isolation. One of the most understated roles of libraries is their contribution to democracy. Access to reliable information is fundamental to informed decision-making. Libraries curate verified sources, historical records,

and public documents, countering misinformation and disinformation that spread rapidly online. In times of political polarization, libraries remain neutral spaces committed to factual integrity rather than ideological agendas. Libraries are also increasingly supporting lifelong learning. As job markets change due to automation and technological advancement, people are required to reskill multiple times during their lives. Libraries respond by offering courses, certifications, and self-learning materials that empower individuals to adapt to new economic realities. Environmental sustainability is another emerging dimension of libraries. By promoting shared resources instead of individual ownership, libraries reduce consumption and waste. A single book or digital subscription accessed by

hundreds of people represents a powerful model of sustainable knowledge sharing. Despite these contributions, libraries often struggle with funding constraints and declining public attention. Their quiet efficiency sometimes works against them, making their impact less visible in headline-driven policy debates. Yet, wherever libraries are strengthened, communities tend to be more informed, cohesive, and resilient. In the digital age, the value of libraries lies not in competing with technology, but in humanizing it. They offer curated knowledge, ethical guidance, and inclusive spaces that algorithms cannot replicate. As societies grapple with rapid change, libraries stand as reminders that progress is most meaningful when it remains accessible, thoughtful, and shared.

Why public spaces matter more than ever

Public spaces—parks, streets, markets, libraries, and community squares—are often taken for granted. Yet, they play a critical role in shaping how societies function and how people relate to one another. In an age marked by increasing isolation, privatization, and digital interaction, public spaces are becoming more important than ever.



At their simplest level, public spaces provide areas where people can exist without obligation. Unlike shopping malls or private venues, they do not require spending money to participate. This accessibility makes public spaces deeply democratic. People of different ages, incomes, and backgrounds share the same environment, reinforcing the idea of collective belonging.

Urban parks offer a clear example of this value. They provide physical and mental relief from dense, crowded living conditions. Access to green spaces has been linked to improved mental health, reduced stress, and better physical well-being. Children benefit from unstructured play, while older residents find places for walking, social interaction, and rest.

Public spaces also encourage social cohesion. Casual encounters—short conversations, shared activities, and everyday observations—build familiarity among residents. These small interactions create trust over time, strengthening communities and reducing feelings of alienation. In neighborhoods with active public spaces, people are more likely to look out for one another.

Civic engagement is another important outcome. Historically, public squares have served as venues for discussion, debate, and collective expression. While political activity today often shifts online, physical spaces still provide visibility, accountability, and shared experience. Peaceful gatherings and cultural events help communities express identity and address concerns collectively.

Economic benefits also flow from well-designed public spaces. Local vendors, artists, and performers thrive where foot traffic is high. Markets and pedestrian streets support small businesses and informal

economies, offering livelihoods without high entry barriers. These spaces create economic activity while preserving social interaction. Design and maintenance significantly influence the success of public spaces. Safe lighting, seating, cleanliness, and accessibility determine who feels welcome. Inclusive design ensures that children, the elderly, and people with disabilities can use the space comfortably. When public spaces are neglected, they often become exclusionary or unsafe, undermining their purpose.

Technology, rather than replacing public spaces, can enhance them. Free public Wi-Fi, smart lighting, and community information boards can improve usability while preserving human interaction. The key lies in integrating technology without turning public areas into commercial or surveillance-driven zones.

Public spaces also contribute to resilience during crises. During natural disasters, pandemics, or heatwaves, parks and open areas become critical gathering points and relief zones. Communities with accessible public spaces are often better equipped to respond collectively to emergencies.

Despite their importance, public spaces face threats from commercialization, shrinking budgets, and urban congestion. Protecting them requires policy commitment and community involvement. When people actively use and care for these spaces, they signal their value to decision-makers.

Ultimately, public spaces reflect the health of a society. They reveal how much value is placed on inclusion, interaction, and shared life. As cities grow, public spaces become more fragmented, investing in public spaces is not a luxury—it is a necessity for social well-being.

Why local food systems are gaining global importance

Food travels long distances before reaching modern consumers. While this globalized system has increased variety and convenience, it has also exposed vulnerabilities related to sustainability, nutrition, and resilience. As a result, local food systems are gaining renewed attention across the world.



Local food systems emphasize producing, processing, and consuming food within a defined region. This approach shortens supply chains, reduces dependency on distant markets, and strengthens connections between producers and consumers. Farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture, and urban gardens are all examples of this growing movement.

One of the most significant benefits of local food systems is freshness. Locally grown produce often reaches consumers faster, retaining more nutrients and flavor. Reduced storage and transportation time also mean fewer preservatives and lower energy use, contributing to healthier diets and environmental sustainability.

Economic resilience is another key advantage. When people buy local food, money circulates within the community. Small farmers and food producers gain stable income, supporting rural livelihoods and local employment. This localized economic activity can be especially valuable during global disruptions such as pandemics or trade interruptions.

Local food systems also promote transparency. Consumers are more likely to

know where their food comes from, how it is grown, and under what conditions. This visibility builds trust and encourages sustainable farming practices. Producers, in turn, receive direct feedback, allowing them to adapt to consumer needs.

Environmental impact is a major consideration. Long-distance transportation contributes significantly to greenhouse gas emissions. Local systems reduce food miles and encourage seasonal eating, aligning consumption with natural cycles. Many local producers also adopt sustainable practices such as organic farming, soil conservation, and reduced chemical use.

Urban agriculture has become an important component of local food systems. Rooftop gardens, community plots, and vertical farming initiatives allow cities to produce a portion of their own food. Beyond nutrition, these projects create green spaces, improve air quality, and foster community engagement. Cultural preservation is another often-overlooked benefit. Local food systems help sustain

traditional crops, recipes, and agricultural knowledge that might otherwise disappear. Food becomes not just a commodity, but a reflection of regional identity and heritage.

Challenges remain, including scalability, affordability, and infrastructure limitations. Local food cannot replace global trade entirely. However, it can complement larger systems by increasing diversity and resilience. Hybrid models that combine local production with broader networks offer promising pathways forward.

As climate change, economic uncertainty, and public health concerns reshape global priorities, food security is becoming central to policy discussions. Local food systems offer practical solutions that align environmental responsibility with community well-being. Ultimately, strengthening local food systems is not about rejecting global connections. It is about restoring balance—ensuring that food systems remain resilient, transparent, and rooted in the communities they serve.

Why reading still matters in a world of short attention spans

The way people consume information has changed dramatically over the past decade. Short videos, rapid scrolling, and constant notifications now dominate daily life. In this environment, reading—especially long-form reading—often feels like a fading habit. Yet, its importance has not diminished. In fact, reading may matter more now than ever before.

Reading is one of the few activities that demands sustained attention. Unlike visual content that passes quickly, written text requires readers to slow down, process ideas, and imagine contexts. This mental engagement strengthens concentration and trains the brain to follow complex arguments, a skill increasingly rare in fast-paced digital environments. Beyond attention, reading builds depth of understanding. Headlines and short posts often simplify or sensationalize issues. Books and long-form articles provide nuance, historical background, and multiple



perspectives. Readers gain the ability to connect ideas across time and disciplines, fostering informed and thoughtful thinking.

Language development is another significant benefit. Regular reading expands vocabulary, improves grammar, and enhances writing skills. Exposure to well-structured sentences and diverse styles naturally sharpens communication abilities. This advantage is not limited to

students; professionals in every field benefit from clearer expression and comprehension.

Reading also strengthens empathy. Fiction, in particular, allows readers to inhabit lives and experiences different from their own. By engaging with characters from varied cultures, social backgrounds, and emotional landscapes, readers develop a deeper understanding of human complexity. This emotional intelligence

translates into better interpersonal relationships.

In terms of mental health, reading offers a unique form of calm. Immersing oneself in a book reduces stress by shifting focus away from immediate worries. Unlike passive entertainment, reading actively engages the mind while allowing emotional relaxation. Many people describe reading as a grounding practice in uncertain times.

Educational research consistently links reading habits with academic success. Children who grow up with access to books tend to perform better across subjects, not just language-based ones. Early exposure fosters curiosity, imagination, and problem-solving skills. However, it is never too late to develop a reading habit; adults who return to reading often rediscover these benefits. Digital technology has not eliminated reading; it has changed its form. E-books, audiobooks, and online publications have made reading more accessible. However, the challenge

lies in intentionality. Without conscious effort, digital distractions can interrupt deep reading. Creating dedicated time for reading remains essential.

Reading also supports democratic engagement. Informed citizens rely on credible sources, historical context, and critical analysis. Long-form journalism and non-fiction books provide the tools necessary to evaluate information critically, resist misinformation, and participate meaningfully in public life.

Despite its quiet nature, reading is a powerful act. It resists the pressure of constant immediacy and rewards patience. In a world that encourages skimming rather than understanding, choosing to read deeply is a form of intellectual independence.

Ultimately, reading is not just about acquiring information. It is about cultivating attention, empathy, and perspective. As attention spans shrink, the act of reading stands as a reminder that some things are worth slowing down for.



Telangana Today
FOR LOCAL TO GLOBAL NEWS

06

VIEWPOINT

HYDERABAD, Thursday, January 29, 2026



KEIR STARMER
British Prime Minister

“For years, our approach to China has been dogged by inconsistency blowing hot and cold, from Golden Age to Ice Age. But like it or not, China matters for the UK



DONALD TRUMP
US President

Hopefully Iran will quickly 'Come to the Table' and negotiate a fair and equitable deal - NO NUCLEAR WEAPONS - one that is good for all parties. Time is running out, it is truly of the essence



PINARAYI VIJAYAN
Kerala Chief Minister

It is the Congress which has appeased both minority and majority communalism and adopted a soft stand towards the BJP. Kerala developed significantly in last 10 years of LDF rule

Chinese military purge

Inscrutable are the ways of the communist dictatorships. The actions of such regimes appear particularly intriguing if they are driven by territorial ambitions and a desire to reshape the global order. A series of shocking military purges in China makes one wonder if there is anything more to it than meets the eye. While the outside world has no means to get a full picture of what is happening inside the tightly controlled regime, the information that has been trickling in speaks of a swift operation of summary dismissals of some top-ranking military officials on charges of corruption, political activity, and insubordination to President Xi Jinping. A brief official announcement recently said that two top army generals were being investigated for suspected serious violations of discipline and law, without giving details. The sudden ouster of Zhang Youxia, vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) and widely seen as a close lieutenant of the all-powerful president, has raised many eyebrows in diplomatic circles. Facing the axe along with him was Liu Zhenli, the head of the joint operations of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Following the latest purge, the CMC is now effectively down to two members - Xi himself, who is the chairman, and Zhang Shengmin, PLA's anti-corruption head. The latest military shake-up is the biggest in recent history, reminiscent of the infamous clean-ups of the Mao Zedong era. These purges are apparently designed to reform the military and ensure loyalty to Xi.

The latest purge can have repercussions on Taiwan, which China considers its own territory

They are part of a broader anti-corruption drive that has resulted in punishment for more than two lakh officials since the Chinese leader came to power in 2012. At least 17 Generals from the PLA have been removed so far. The latest purge can have repercussions on Taiwan, which China considers its own territory and has threatened to take control of the island by force. China also has increased military pressure and, last month, launched large-scale military drills around Taiwan for two days after the United States announced major arms sales to Taiwan. General Zhang, a celebrated war veteran, was made the vice-chairman of the CMC, an institution seen as Xi's eyes and ears in running the PLA's forces day to day. It is possible that Zhang's assessment of the PLA's operational readiness for a Taiwan invasion may not have aligned with Xi's deadline. Xi had doubled down on his Taiwan pledge, reiterating that China's 'reunification' is 'unstoppable'. Differences between Zhang and Xi over how to achieve this objective may have sealed the former's fate. His unceremonious removal means that no one is safe within the Chinese system. Zhang may now face a secret trial in the military justice system and is likely to be imprisoned. His downfall will ultimately have a big effect on the power elite in Beijing because it removes one of their safety boundaries.

US intervention in Venezuela raises urgent questions about sovereignty, law, and the risks of unilateral power



DR RAJU CHAKETTI

The US military operation in Venezuela culminating in the capture of President Nicolás Maduro constitutes a deeply unsettling rupture in contemporary international politics. Revived through the rhetoric of the Monroe Doctrine, the intervention reveals not a defensive impulse but a calculated assertion of dominance — one that has unsettled opinion even within the United States. Regardless of its official description, the episode represents a direct use of force against a sovereign state, compelling a reassessment of sovereignty, non-intervention, and the shifting contours of legitimacy in an increasingly unilateral world.

Regional Security Lens
Viewed through a regional security lens, Venezuela's sustained economic collapse and democratic decay have undoubtedly spilled beyond its borders. Large-scale migration flows, the deepening of illicit markets, and the entrenchment of transnational criminal networks have generated material, social, and political pressures across Latin America, rendering international attention both predictable and, to a degree, warranted. These cross-border effects have strained state capacities, complicated regional governance, and intensified securitised responses to migration and crime, particularly in already fragile institutional contexts. Yet concern, however justified, cannot be mistaken for authorisation. The presence of instability does not exempt external actors from the constraints of international law, nor does it absolve them of their obligation to respect sovereignty and non-intervention. To conflate regional disruption with a mandate for unilateral force is to erode the very norms that structure international order. Addressing Venezuela's transna-



tional repercussions requires collective, institutional, and rights-based engagement, rather than coercive measures that risk perpetuating instability while claiming to resolve it. The United States decision to deploy military force and to prosecute a sitting head of state in the absence of an explicit multilateral mandate constitutes a direct and troubling challenge to the post-1945 legal and normative architecture of international order. The United Nations Charter deliberately circumscribes the use of force, permitting it only in narrowly defined circumstances of self-defence or through collective authorisation, precisely to prevent the arbitrariness of power from supplanting law.

Selective Adherence
By circumventing these constraints, the intervention risks hollowing out the very rules that are routinely invoked to regulate and discipline the conduct of weaker states. Such selective adherence corrodes normative consistency and undermines the credibility of international law itself. Sovereignty, in this

context, cannot be treated as a conditional concession extended by dominant powers; it remains the foundational organising principle that sustains predictability, restraint, and a modicum of equality within an otherwise asymmetrical international system. Equally troubling is the way criminal justice has been fused with regime-change logic. The framing of Maduro as a transnational criminal — particularly through the language of 'narco-terrorism' — has facilitated a dangerous conceptual slippage between domestic law enforcement and interstate coercion. Such securitisation obscures deeper structural drivers of Venezuela's crisis,

A durable response to Venezuela's crisis lies not in theatrical coercion but in multilateralism — where dialogue restrains power and order prevails over domination

including economic mismanagement, sanctions-induced distortions, and long-standing social inequalities.

More importantly, it normalises the idea that legal indictment can serve as a pretext for military intervention. If accepted as precedent, this logic could furnish powerful states with a flexible instrument to delegitimise and depose adversarial governments under the veneer of legality.

Historical memory in Latin America renders these developments especially resonant. The region's experience with external intervention — often justified in the language of stability, order, or moral responsibility — has repeatedly produced outcomes antithetical to democratic consolidation and social peace. Contemporary invocations of hemispheric security and resource stabilisation echo earlier doctrines that conflated regional order with external tutelage. Unsurprisingly, the US operation has been met with widespread condemnation across the Global South, reinforcing perceptions of a selective and hierarchical international order.

Power-centred Politics

The aftermath of the intervention further underscores the fragility of coercive solutions. The sudden removal of an incumbent regime, absent a carefully negotiated and internationally supervised transition framework, risks deepening political fragmentation and social volatility. Power vacuums seldom yield democratic renewal by default; more often, they generate competing centres of authority, civilian insecurity, and long-term instability. The humanitarian costs of such disorder — borne disproportionately by ordinary citizens — rarely figure prominently in interventionist calculus.

What is at stake extends far beyond Venezuela. The episode erodes the normative barrier separating concern from coercion and diplomacy from enforcement, accelerating a drift toward power-centred politics in an already frayed global order. Once sovereignty becomes negotiable, rule-governed restraint yields to discretionary force. A durable response to Venezuela's crisis lies not in theatrical coercion but in the slower labour of multilateralism — where dialogue, humanitarian responsibility, and institutional recovery restrain power and privilege order over domination.

The Venezuelan intervention poses an unsettling test for the international community: whether norms sacrificed to expediency can coexist with claims to a stable and just global order. Sovereignty and non-intervention retain meaning only when upheld under pressure, for international legitimacy ultimately rests on such restraint.

(The author is Assistant Professor in Political Science, Department of Politics, Policy and Diplomacy Studies, School of Liberal Arts and Humanities, Woxsen University, Hyderabad)

Letters to the

Editor

Board of Peace

The Donald Trump administration has invited India, along with around 50 other countries, to join the Board of Peace, intended to facilitate Gaza's transition to normalcy. While the initiative may appear constructive on the surface, it warrants careful evaluation, especially in light of the Board's proposed structure and the prevailing global context. The framework assigns a decisive role to the US president, raising concerns about excessive centralisation of authority. Additionally, the Board's mandate remains ambiguous at a time when the US itself seems to be reassessing the post-World War II global order it once helped shape. Any attempt to expand the Board's role without a wider international consensus risks weakening established multilateral institutions. In these circumstances, India must remain firmly anchored to its principles of strategic autonomy and the pursuit of its national interest.

NAGARAJAMANI MV, Secunderabad

Bank strike

The United Forum of Bank Unions (UFBU) successfully conducted its nationwide strike on January 27, pressing for the implementation of a five-day workweek, which the government had agreed to during the 12th Bipartite Meeting with the Indian Banks' Association (IBA) in March 2024. This disruption of services has continued into the fourth day, following a three-day holiday period. The strike pattern adopted by these unions has remained unchanged for years, taking the public for a ride to create the desired impact. At some point, they should refrain from such pressuring tactics in the interest of customers, who are often described as the true stakeholders in any trade. However, on this occasion, the government must also accept responsibility for procrastinating on the implementation of the agreed five-day workweek schedule, which entails an additional 40 minutes of work on each business day.

VAITHIANATHAN SUBRAMANIAN, Madurai

Imperative precautions

The deadly and highly infectious Nipah virus has gripped West Bengal and Kerala. The government should start medical screening at airports to prevent it from spreading its tentacles. An advisory to put on masks and keep a tab on its symptoms should be issued as precautionary measures.

ABHILASHA GUPTA, Mohali

India-UAE ties

Although President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan's India visit was limited to three hours, it underscored the warmth in bilateral ties. India and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have a robust bilateral relation that is based on proximity, history, friendship and vision. In the past, New Delhi and Doha came up with a compact trade agreement that took them only three months to ink the deal. The Comprehensive Economic Agreement Partnership (CEAP) signed on February 18, 2022, was a watershed moment in bilateral ties. During the 10th Vibrant Global Gujarat Summit in January 2024, the mutual warmth stood out. Trade hinges on trust and confidence; it's not merely the money that talks. The game of economics is all about reciprocity. India is an oil deficit nation and but an agriculture surplus one, and the reverse holds true for the UAE.

GANAPATHI BHAT, Akola

India in the

hotspot

■ The New York Times

In Trump's shadow, India and EU expand trade ties

The leaders of the European Union and India announced a trade agreement on Tuesday after nearly two decades of negotiations, striking a deal that has become more urgent for both sides as President Trump continues to upend the global order and test longstanding alliances.

■ BBC

Grief after Indian politician killed in plane crash

India's Prime Minister has led tributes to Ajit Pawar, deputy chief minister of Maharashtra, who has been killed in a plane crash in the west of the country. Pawar and four others died after the chartered plane they were travelling in crashed at the airport in Baramati - Pawar's constituency - on Wednesday morning.

■ Al Jazeera

Grocery in 10 min: ...Riders must still fatally race

Just moments before, they were both navigating the busiest traffic hours at an intersection in Noida, a satellite city of Delhi, delivering groceries at the doorstep. The next thing he knew, Himanshu Pal, 21, stood there, helpless, looking over the body of his colleague, rammed by a car.



We love life, not because we are used to living but because we are used to loving.
Friedrich Nietzsche

Flight of tragedy: Zero margin for error in aviation

The Learjet aircraft crash near the Baramati airport in Maharashtra's Pune district that killed Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar along with four others has stunned the nation, with questions being raised over safety and security of aircraft operating on India's skyline. Pawar was travelling from Mumbai to the Pune district, where he was scheduled to address four rallies in connection with the February 5 zilla parishad elections. CCTV footage captured a massive fireball as the plane crashed near the threshold of the runway on its second attempt to land.

While preliminary reports from the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) indicate that poor visibility and technical difficulties during the final approach contributed to the crash, the exact cause remains to be ascertained. Dense fog covered the Pune-Baramati region in the morning, reducing visibility to extremely low levels, prompting a second attempt at landing. In the absence of an Instrument Landing System at the airport, the pilot had to rely entirely on manual and visual landing. Add to this the disadvantage of Baramati having a tabletop runway, which left almost no margin for error.

The Learjet aircraft that crashed was led by veteran Captain Sumit Kapur, who had over 16,000 flying hours to his credit, having previously worked with Sahara and Jet Airways. He had Captain Shambhavi Pathak as a co-pilot with nearly 1,500 hours of flying experience.

While questions are being asked, it becomes imperative to ponder over the underlying problems that aircraft have been facing and the frequency of air disasters. On June 12 last year, a Dreamliner bound for Gatwick-London, crashed after taking off from Ahmedabad, killing 260 people. Subsequent investigations revealed that the fuel control switches were moved to the "Cutoff" position. On August 7, 2020, 21 people died after an Air India Express flight overshot the "table-top" runway and fell into a gorge at Kozhikode in Kerala. According to data, there have been over 53 crashes between 2021 and 2025, involving training jets, small aircraft and chartered helicopters.

The question that baffles is, what's going wrong? This crash is another grim reminder of the inherent risk associated with air travel. Despite technological advancements and rigorous safety protocols, aircraft accidents still occur, often with devastating consequences. Aircraft safety is a multifaceted issue — from infrastructural challenges to outdated carriers. Some of the airports, especially in remote areas, are still grappling with runway limitations, outdated navigation systems, and insufficient air traffic control facilities.

Secondly, older models of aircrafts continue to be operational. For example, the Indian Air Force retired the iconic MiG-21 jet only in 2025, after 62 years of service. Due to the high rate of crashes, it was labelled as the "flying coffin". The Russians discontinued it in 1985. The ageing Jaguar fleet has been red-flagged, and the Learjet crash sparked debates over the safety of smaller jets. Safety audits of DGCA has pointed out several violations across major carriers.

Regardless of the specifics, such incidents underscore the importance of continually enhancing aircraft safety standards. Recurring air disasters reflect poorly on our aviation systems and protocols and call for continuous attention and upgrades. There is no denying that the government has taken giant steps in the aviation sector, including bringing about tighter regulations. However, air traffic volume and frequencies have shot up drastically in the past few years, posing newer challenges.

Such accidents shatter public confidence in the sector, and hence, there is a need to get to the bottom of this incident and carry out a rigorous and transparent investigation. There is no room for error in aviation.

OPEN SPACE >>

Ban social media usage for children under 16

The recent proposal by the Goa government to ban social media use for children under 16 years is a commendable step. Many children misuse mobile phones under the pretext of assignments, spending excessive time on platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram or visiting inappropriate sites that are not suitable for their age. Instead of focusing on their studies, children are spending hours chatting, playing games, and wasting precious time on social media. This addiction to mobile phones affects their sleep patterns and distracts their minds from academic responsibilities. Many children are developing eyesight problems due to prolonged screen time. Teachers often face difficulties managing students who are more interested in chatting with friends and engaging in distractions than studying and preparing themselves to become responsible adults. Additionally, children today tend to avoid meaningful conversations with each other, preferring to laugh and chat superficially. This trend negatively impacts their social skills and overall development. It is important to implement such measures to protect the well-being and future of our children.

RONNIE DSOUZA, Chandor

Social media ban at 16: Rule sans system

Before deciding what children should be kept away from, it may be worth asking what protections we have failed to sustain



PETER F. BORGES

>The writer is an Assistant Professor of Social Work, Goa University and Founder, Human Touch Foundation and Former Chairperson of the Goa State Commission for Protection of Child Rights

At last, a solution. Concerned about children online? Ban social media. Worried about cyberbullying, grooming, sextortion, exposure to harmful content, or the general sense that screens have taken over childhood?

Ban social media. It sounds decisive. Comforting. Almost efficient. One policy switch flipped in response to a very real anxiety. But child protection has never worked that way.

The appeal of decisive gestures. Bans have a certain appeal. They reassure anxious parents. They suggest control. They create the impression that something complex has been brought under check.

The concern driving the proposal to restrict social media use for children under 16 is not imaginary. Digital harm is real. Parents are struggling. Teachers are exhausted. Adults are often navigating technologies they never grew up with.

But reassurance is not protection. Protection is not defined by what we restrict. It is defined by what stands ready when restriction fails — because it always does. Goa once led this conversation.

It is important to remember that Goa was once seen as a pioneer in child protection. In the aftermath of the Freddy Peats case, the state enacted the Goa Children's Act, one of the earliest and most progressive attempts in the country to recognise child abuse, exploitation, and neglect in a comprehensive manner. At the time, it positioned Goa as a state willing to confront uncomfortable realities and build legal safeguards for children. That history matters. It shows that the intent to protect children is not new.

Over the years, while the Goa Children's Act remained on paper, the systems required to give it life were allowed to weaken. Institutions became understaffed. Preventive mechanisms lost momentum. Coordination between departments thinned.

Child protection does not collapse overnight. It erodes slowly — through delays, vacancies, and the normalisation of "managing somehow." The result is what we see today: a renewed focus on control measures, while foundational systems remain fragile.

Before banning, a basic systems question. If a child in Goa experiences online harassment, grooming, coercion, or exploitation today, where does that child go? Not in theory. In practice. As of now, Goa has been without a functioning Goa State Commission for Protection of

Australia invested for years in a dedicated eSafety Commissioner, nationwide digital literacy programmes, parental guidance frameworks, accessible mental health services, and trusted reporting mechanisms

Stricter oversight needed in p'yat functioning

I wish to draw attention to the alarming role being played by panchayats in enabling rampant illegal construction across Goa. What we are witnessing today is not accidental or isolated, it is the direct result of unchecked and irresponsible issuance of licences by panchayats, without due regard for legality, ecological balance, or the concerns of local residents. There appears to be little to no assessment of the long term ecological impact, leading to deforestation, water scarcity, loss of biodiversity, and irreversible damage to Goa's fragile environment. Local villagers and stakeholders are rarely taken into confidence before licences are issued, despite overcrowding, strain on infrastructure, and environmental degradation. Goa risks losing not only its natural heritage but also the faith of its people in democratic institutions. There is an urgent need for accountability, transparency and stricter oversight of panchayat functioning.

EVARISTO FERNANDES, Mercas

THE INBOX >>

Why target timings of only Christian weddings in Goa?

Calangute MLA Michael Lobo while speaking to some media persons on Tuesday was heard giving his own justifications with regards to Goa State Pollution Control Board's recent decision of not allowing music after 10 pm for Goan weddings by claiming that his government was not at all trying to target Catholic weddings but was only following the Supreme Court's order in Goa. Well, the Supreme Court has passed many other orders in the past i.e. it has told to demolish all illegal religious structures by the roadside, has asked the state government to establish a tiger reserve in Goa etc. But has the government implemented these orders so far? Then why the BJP government is hell-bent on selectively implementing only this particular order? The BJP is playing its own dirty communal politics. I think that if the minority BJP MLAs cannot force their own government to give some relaxations for our Christian weddings then they should immediately resign.

JERRY FERNANDES, Saligao

MMC must act against growing stray menace

I am writing this letter on behalf of the residents of Hill Apartments and the entire neighbourhood along our lane, to express our profound frustration and growing fear regarding the escalating stray dog menace in our locality. Despite the Supreme Court's directives issued last year providing a clearer framework for animal birth control and management, the Margao Municipal Council's response has been no response. While the authorities remain idle, the quality of life for tax-paying citizens continues to

plummet. The situation has reached a breaking point: Seniors and kids live in fear of the pack of dogs that occupy our building's main entrance path. This is a collective outcry from all residents living along this stretch who feel abandoned by the municipality. We understand the legalities surrounding animal welfare, but the MMC's mandate is to ensure the safety of its residents. We urge the MMC to initiate immediate and visible action, specifically intensified sterilization drives and the removal of aggressive dogs.

BRIAN DE SOUZA, Margao

Fire risk from carts using gas cylinders at Colva beach

I have noticed food carts on Colva beach selling hot food using gas stoves, to which I have two questions as there can be fire accident risk to tourists/locals in the vicinity. Have these carts using gas stoves got approvals from Tour-



Child Rights (GSCPCR) since May 2024. For over a year and a half, the statutory body meant to independently monitor child rights violations, hear complaints, and intervene in the best interests of children has not existed in operational terms. This is not an administrative gap. It is a structural absence.

For more than five years in the past, District Child Protection Units (DCPUs) — the backbone of implementation under the Juvenile Justice framework — were either non-existent or non-functional. Even now, their capacity remains weak, uneven, and insufficient for the scale of need.

DCPUs are meant to coordinate care, rehabilitation, psychosocial support, family interventions, and follow-up. When they are fragile, child protection becomes reactive rather than preventive.

Alongside this, Special Juvenile Police Units (SJPU) — mandated to deal sensitively and exclusively with children — remain overstretched, inconsistently trained, and often absorbed into routine policing structures. Expecting such units to suddenly manage digital enforcement or online harm response is unrealistic. This is not a question of intent. It is a question of capacity.

There is another uncomfortable truth: children do not disengage from digital spaces simply because adults instruct them to. They adapt. They borrow phones. They create secondary accounts. They move to quieter, less regulated platforms. When guidance systems and institutional support are weak, restrictions push behaviour underground — into spaces that are harder to monitor and less likely to trigger timely intervention.

Australia is often cited as a justification for restrictive approaches. What is usually left out is the groundwork that preceded those debates. Australia invested for years in a dedicated eSafety Commissioner, nationwide digital literacy programmes, parental guidance frameworks, accessible mental health services, and trusted reporting mechanisms. Even there, restrictions remain contested because of concerns about enforceability and unintended consequences. Australia's experience does not show that bans

work in isolation. It shows that ecosystems matter. Trying to replicate regulation without replicating readiness is not leadership — it is imitation.

What the timing reveals. What is striking is not the concern reflected in the current proposal — that concern is valid. What is striking is the urgency now, after years of institutional neglect. Vacant posts, delayed appointments, under-resourced protection units, and weak preventive programming did not provoke decisive action.

This suggests a response to exposure rather than a correction of root causes. Digital spaces often reveal failures that offline systems have long ignored. When those failures remain unresolved, regulation becomes a substitute for reform. That is policy theatre, not protection.

Children are not problems to be managed. Restriction-based approaches risk framing children as risks rather than rights holders. Today's adolescents inhabit blended worlds. Learning, friendship, creativity, identity formation, and even help-seeking occur online. Removing access without equipping understanding postpones engagement rather than preparing children for it.

Protection that lasts does not begin with exclusion. It begins with capacity-building — of parents, schools, institutions, and communities. That work is slow. Resource-heavy. Politically inconvenient. And it works.

Beyond the headline, the ban story will pass. The debate will move on. But children will still need systems that respond when harm occurs. Goa once showed leadership in child protection through the Goa Children's Act. That legacy deserves more than symbolic gestures. Protection cannot be switched on overnight. It cannot be borrowed without context. And it cannot compensate for systems that were allowed to weaken over time. Before deciding what children should be kept away from, it may be worth asking — calmly and honestly — what protections we have failed to sustain. Because when institutions are weak or missing, bans become symbolic. And symbols, however reassuring, do not keep children safe.

ism, FDA and Fire Department? Why are there no fire extinguishers and other fire safety equipment in these carts? With the recent fire tragedy at Arpora where 25 people sadly lost their lives, one would expect better/stricter conditions by the Tourism Dept, Fire Dept and the respective ministers who are responsible for the same; but it's unfortunate to say the complacent attitude still persists from the Goa Government. Also my friendly advice to the Colva Panchayat to learn lessons from Arpora Birch fire.

ARWIN MESQUITA, Colva

Brutal killing of 200 dogs in Telangana mockery of law

Recent news reports that there has been massive killings of stray dogs (amounting to over 1,000 in total) reported in Telangana, during January 2026. Is there law or Animal Rights Commission to regulate this brutal killing of animals? Animal rights activists reported that around 200-300 dogs were killed by poisonous injections in Hanamkonda and Kamareddy districts of Telangana. These acts were allegedly carried out by or under the direction of local village heads (sarpachas) to fulfill election promises to control the stray dog population. Following complaints from activists, police have registered FIRs against multiple village officials under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) and the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act. Immediate punishment is necessary by executing the law strictly. A recent, separate incident in MP involved over 200 birds (parrots, pigeons, sparrows) dying in the Khargone district in late December 2025 due to suspected food poisoning. In a different incident in 2021, 5 dogs were killed in an acid attack in Ujjain, MP.

RAJESH BANALIKAR, Arpora

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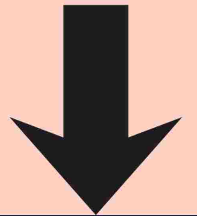
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Nagpur, Thursday, 29.1.2026

2

OPINION

A man of his word

Ajit Pawar's day used to begin very early. One could never predict where he might suddenly appear at dawn, or what inspection he might undertake. It was one such morning, after taking oath at Raj Bhavan, he had jolted Maharashtra. However, the shock that was delivered on Wednesday morning is one from which Maharashtra is taking a long time to recover. The entire state is engulfed in grief. A dynamic leader is lost. The aircraft crash that cost Maharashtra such a capable leader must be thoroughly investigated. It takes many years to create a leader of such stature.

Despite being in the political arena for nearly five decades, Ajit Pawar always upheld the sanctity of his word. "Dada says what he does, and what he does, he achieves, his reputation. If something was impossible, he would state it plainly. But once he gave his word, there was complete assurance that the task would be accomplished. That is why he was known as a "man of his word". While working, he never cared about which party someone belonged to. Even the most ordinary person felt a sense of closeness with him. Dada's was a different chemistry altogether.

In one interview, he had said, "I have always listened to my heart..." It was this very nature that changed the conventional norms of politics. Many political leaders would try and ensure that others don't read their mind. Dada, however, spoke directly, without mincing words or showing deference. What was in his heart was on his lips. He never worried about the price he might have to pay for it. In the Maha Vikas Adhikari (MVA) government, the Mahayuti, he never hid his forthright stand. He never indulged in politics of caste or religion. He understood the discipline of parliamentary democracy and firmly believed that the common citizen is the true master in a democracy. Like a capable statesman, he worked in a clear, no nonsense manner. And that is precisely why he became the beloved "Dada" of party workers.

Keeping one's word, nurturing workers with affection, and giving opportunities to those who could deliver - these traits earned Ajit Pawar a strong mass base. The post of deputy chief minister first came into existence in Maharashtra in 1978, with Barrister Nashikrao Tirkude as the first incumbent. In recent history, it often felt as though the post was created exclusively for Ajit Pawar, so many times did he occupy it. Whether the chief minister was Prithvi Chavan or Devendra Fadnis, Uddhav Thackeray or Eknath Shinde, Ajit Pawar left a distinct imprint as deputy chief minister.

Ajit Pawar's politics took shape in Baramati taluka, making him a leader rooted in rural Maharashtra. He never hid this rural identity; rather, he wore it with pride. He had many admirers of his oratory. Whether it was a speech or a press conference, he spoke in his characteristic rugged yet playful style. In the municipal corporation elections, he took the BJP head-on, posing a strong challenge in the Pune and Pimpri Chinchwad municipal corporation elections by centering the contest on development. Though he did not achieve the success he expected, he immediately began preparing for the Zilla Parishad elections.

A recent incident stands out. At the conclusion of the Pune Grand Cycle Tour, where Ajit Pawar was the chief guest, he remarked humorously, "The people of Pune gave an enthusiastic response to this cycling event. Of course, they did not give us a similar response in the municipal elections - that is a different matter." His sense of humour was exceptionally sharp. At a time when bitterness was increasing in politics and politics was being seen purely as a game of one-upmanship, Ajit Pawar's open-hearted candor was appreciated even by his opponents.

This distinctive personality of Ajit Pawar was shaped by his journey. He entered politics in 1982, starting from the grassroots, which gave him a deep understanding of ground realities. That era was different. He witnessed the politics of leaders like Vasantdada Patil, Shankarrao Chavan, Sharad Pawar and Barrister A.R. Antulgi. There were formidable opponents such as N.D. Patil, Ganpatrao Deshmukh, Bhai Vaidya and G.P. Pradhan. Sharad Pawar himself, who had challenged Indira Gandhi, sat in the Opposition after losing power. It was the final phase of Yashwantrao Chavan's life, yet his influence on Maharashtra's politics remained indelible.

Politics then was like a sporting contest - strategies were employed to win, but victory and defeat were both accepted with grace, and everyone continued to work for the people. Ajit Pawar witnessed politics inspired by the freedom struggle, and he also endured in the professionalised politics of the 21st century. Even while drawing inspiration from the past and facing a new era, people always remained the central focus for him. He had authority, yet there was also the reassurance that this was the same Dada who would rush to help even in the middle of the night. In 1991, Ajit Pawar was elected to Parliament for the first time. However, as Sharad Pawar wished to move to the Centre, Ajit Pawar vacated his Lok Sabha seat and entered the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly. This was the period of globalisation, when everything, including politics, was changing. Maharashtra saw its first Shiv Sena-BJP government, and the era of single-party dominance at the Centre came to an end. With the Pune-Mumbai Expressway, Pune and Pimpri-Chinchwad began developing rapidly. Ajit Pawar stood up to guide these cities in the right direction. Even his critics would agree that today's Pimpri Chinchwad city stands as a testimony to his vision and capability.

Ajit Pawar's political policies holding Sharad Pawar's hand. At that time, Sharad Pawar's name resonated across the nation. Becoming chief minister at the young age of 38, he had captured the nation's attention. Meanwhile, a young Ajit Pawar was learning the rudimentary basics of politics while still being in his native soil. From the Pune District Cooperative Bank to dairy unions, he steadily rose to the Lok Sabha, then to the State Legislative Assembly, and soon became a minister. In 1999, Sharad Pawar founded the Nationalist Congress Party among the young leaders who stood with him then, his nephew Ajit Pawar was particularly influential. In a short span, he consolidated his position within the party, gained a firm grip over administration, and emerged as a key leader in Maharashtra. In 2004, the NCP won more seats than the Congress, and Ajit Pawar played a major role in that victory. Despite having a towering leader like Sharad Pawar around, Ajit Pawar did not merely grow in his shadow; he carved out his own independent identity and developed a distinct personality. His understanding of Maharashtra was exceptional. His grasp of how to untangle complex files and get work done was astonishing. As a minister handling departments such as water, power, irrigation, agriculture, water supply, energy, irrigation and finance, he left a lasting mark, thanks to the immense energy he possessed and his efficiency.

During an interview with Lokmat, he was asked, "You don't seem to be nearing seventy. What is your secret?" he replied, "I wake up early, do a bit of exercise, eat sparingly, work all day and sleep peacefully." He added, "I never harbor hate for anyone in my heart. I get to work for people, and that makes me happy. This itself is my spirituality." On that occasion, Lokmat wished him well, saying, "You will live a hundred years and you will also become the chief minister of Maharashtra."

And then, on Wednesday morning, this shocking news came. If Ajit Pawar was unreachable for even 10 minutes, it would become news. That very Ajit Dada is now permanently "not reachable". Maharashtra has lost an extraordinarily capable and exceptional mass leader. On behalf of the Lokmat family, we offer our heartfelt tribute to Ajit Dada!

Dada, you missed the timing! A close, generous friend lost



Devendra Fadnis

When the news of a plane crash near Baramati reached me on Wednesday morning, I refused to believe something so catastrophic had happened. My heart wouldn't accept it until the doctors confirmed it. I was in constant touch with Supriya Tai, but eventually, the dreaded news arrived: Our beloved Ajit Dada was gone. I have lost a close, powerful and generous friend.

Though we worked very closely from 2019 onwards, we were always aligned on issues of development and state interest long before that. Leaders with true vision are rare, and Dada was one of them. I experienced firsthand what it means to be a leader who stands by his word. Dada taught us that no matter the crisis, your word has value, and sometimes, you must be prepared to pay the price for it. We had recently started a new political inning together, and I believed it would be a success, but Dada took a premature exit.

He always addressed me as "CM Saheb". In 2019, when he was deputy CM and I was the leader of Opposition, he would insistively call me "CM Saheb" in the House, before quickly biting his tongue and correcting it to "Devendra ji". While I often referred to him in the context of our political alliance, our friendship went far beyond politics. We shared late night sessions filled with conversation. Even then, he would have a list ready - a paper in hand detailing exactly what needed to be discussed. Once the serious business was over, the real 'Dada' would

emerge: Towering, open-hearted and carefree. Dada was a tall leader with an immense grasp of work. Starting his day at 7.00 am, he never stopped. In government, he was a master of the 'Yes' or 'No' style; he detested the 'we'll see' approach. This bluntness sometimes hurt people momentarily, but it built long-term trust. In the Cabinet, he was the person who studied every proposal. Out of 20 subjects, he knew exactly which point to raise in which file. We both shared a love for cricket - often checking scores mid-meeting - and a love for music. His sense of humour was unmatched; he could 'take a wicket' with a witty remark in the middle of the most serious discussion.

Dada was obsessed with construction quality. He personally supervised every brick of the Baramati Medical College. It is a cruel irony of fate that his mortal remains were brought to that very college. Only this past Tuesday, we were together in a Cabinet meeting. We discussed infrastructure and shared our frustration over delayed projects. When he heard how the PWD saved ₹764 crore, he was delighted. As a finance minister who constantly worried about the state treasury, he jokingly said, "Keep giving such sweet news in every meeting". He didn't tell us that he wouldn't be there to hear the next one.

After that meeting, we spent 45 minutes chatting in my office. Destiny is cruel. Dada, you were a man who was never late, who never missed a deadline. But this time, you missed the timing. This grief will remain forever that you took such an untimely exit.

The author is chief minister of Maharashtra.

An unfinished dream cut short in the skies



Rajendra Darda

What message destiny seeks to convey when the journey of senior leaders, armed with achievements as vast as the sky, is cut short mid-air, only fate knows. Sanjay Gandhi, former chief minister of Andhra Pradesh, Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy, senior Congress leader, Madhavrao Scindia, and now Ajit Pawar. The news of Ajit Dada's accidental death is profoundly heart-rending. Such an untimely end to a life brimming with determination and ambition is bound to shake the very core.

Ajit Pawar, with an exceptional grasp of the State's economy and social fabric, will remain etched in my memory for many reasons. From 1999 to 2014, during my tenure as an MLA and as a minister handling various portfolios, I interacted with him frequently and attended meetings with him on crucial issues.

Every time, the image of a leader deeply concerned about the State's welfare shone brighter in my mind. Many meetings related to my department were attended by him in his capacity as deputy chief minister/finance minister, leaving a lasting impression. Ajit Dada would get straight to the agenda, discuss precise points instead of indulging in digressions, and insist that meetings be decided very early and concluded within the shortest possible time. He would take swift decisions and

conclude meetings in just 15 to 20 minutes. Proximity and delay were simply not his traits.

I, too, benefited from this work style. Beyond the finance and portfolios he handled, he possessed a keen understanding of political departments as well. No officer or public representative could mislead him with incorrect information. If anyone dared to try, he would directly set the record straight and put them in their place. He would candidly say, "If a task cannot be done, one must say no upfront; I don't believe in keeping people hanging." Yet, if he gave his word, he would unfailingly honour it. He never assumed an air of knowing everything; instead, he listened carefully and understood the other side. In recent times, he had begun to soften the image of a stern, tough



A towering leader of Maharashtra, forever driven to move forward, blessed with foresight that always kept him ahead of his times, and one who strove relentlessly... will be with us no more

leader. He became more playful, sprinkling gentle humour into his speeches and winning people's hearts. This transformation he brought about in himself was astonishing - deeply pleasing to the public and instructive for political leaders. When I served as the state's education minister and took some bold decisions, he was the deputy chief minister and finance minister. One such decision was the verification of school students' strength. This made some political leaders uneasy, fearing repercussions for their schools. However, the highly positive response from the then chief minister Prithviraj Chavan and deputy chief minister Ajit Dada gave me the strength to implement the decision.

Whenever I took decisions in the

Power or no power, Dada was & remained a 'friend'



Nitin Gadkari

My friendship with Ajit Dada was beyond political differences. We worked together in the State Legislature for many years. We criticised each other politically, but it never created a distance in our friendship. It never happened that I insisted on a matter of public interest and Ajit Dada did not accept it; nor did it ever happen that Dada placed a subject of public welfare before me and I did not try to resolve it positively. Our friendship was devoid of politics.

Among the prominent political leaders who emerged from the developed cooperative sector of Western Maharashtra, Ajit Dada's name is of great importance. For nearly 40 years, he was active in politics and public life. He handled responsibilities as a minister for various departments in the state. He was obsessed with the development of Maharashtra. Political leaders often feel they must constantly speak sweetly to manage people and newsmen, fearing that being blunt might send the wrong message. Ajit Dada, however, was an exception to this rule. He was as much a plain speaker as he was an excellent administrator.

I liked his bluntness very much. If his opinion was positive, he would say so clearly. If a task could not be done, his nature was to say so plainly and be done with it. However, I have experienced many times that if he said 'yes' to a task, he would take the respon-

sibility to follow up and see it through to the end. Because of this leadership quality, a sense of trust was created towards him within the government and administration. His decision-making ability was proven time and again as he maintained a strong grip on the administration while making precise decisions for the public good. Furthermore, his people-oriented approach was always evident.

I experienced his working style while working on Maharashtra projects for the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI). When difficulties arose regarding land acquisition and other issues, he personally threw his full strength behind these projects, keeping the development of Maharashtra at the centre.

In politics, sometimes things work out, sometimes they don't. Sometimes the party is with you, sometimes it isn't. We didn't base our friendship on those factors. Therefore, whether in power or not, our relationship remained exactly as it was until the very last moment. I found it more important that we both nurtured a personal bond of friendship, setting aside our political postures and roles.

Ajit Dada was a great friend of mine, both within and beyond politics. He was a man of the very best. I found it more important that we both nurtured a personal bond of friendship, setting aside our political postures and roles. Ajit Dada was a great friend of mine, both within and beyond politics. He was a man of the very best. I found it more important that we both nurtured a personal bond of friendship, setting aside our political postures and roles. Ajit Dada was a great friend of mine, both within and beyond politics. He was a man of the very best. I found it more important that we both nurtured a personal bond of friendship, setting aside our political postures and roles.

The author is Union minister for road transport and highways.

A 'Dada' in truest sense of the word is gone



Eknath Shinde

Though Dada was my senior in years and experience, our time together in government was marked by an easy camaraderie that transcended hierarchy. When he died in that tragic accident, I lost not merely a colleague or friend, but someone who had been like an elder brother to me.

Punctuality, discipline and administrative skill were Ajit Dada's true identity. He remained exactly the same until the very end of his 40-year political career. His bluntness made him but someone who had been like an elder brother to me. Punctuality, discipline and administrative skill were Ajit Dada's true identity. He remained exactly the same until the very end of his 40-year political career. His bluntness made him but someone who had been like an elder brother to me. Punctuality, discipline and administrative skill were Ajit Dada's true identity. He remained exactly the same until the very end of his 40-year political career. His bluntness made him but someone who had been like an elder brother to me.

jokingly that Devendra ji works all day. Dada starts his work at the break of dawn and my work begins in the afternoon - that we three had divided the time among ourselves. But in truth, Dada's dedication began as early as 5 or 6 in the morning. During the Covid period, he would be personally present in the control room at the Mantralaya every single day.

Ajit Dada was, in the truest sense, an Ajatshatru - one without enemies. In Maharashtra politics, whether they were in power or in the Opposition, he was a friend to everyone. Political criticism always continues, but no one ever held a grudge against him. I will always remember him as a visionary, plain-speaking and highly studious leader.

Dada served as deputy chief minister eight times, and as a minister before that. He would proudly refer

to himself as the one who presented the Budget in the State Legislative Assembly for the longest period. Yet, there was no ego in his conduct or speech. We have all experienced his speed of work and decision-making as power. As finance minister, he possessed information about every department, yet he never broke the frame of protocol. Even while announcing policy decisions, he never seemed to ignore or dismiss anyone. He would present his views clearly and with authority.

As the state's finance minister, Ajit Dada made decisions with great skill to ensure the state's financial stability without letting development work stall. He preferred verifying practicalities over dreamy presentations or hearsay. Whenever a concept was proposed, he would force a 360-degree analysis of it - considering everything

from its long-term viability and future maintenance to whether it truly served the public interest and how many people would benefit. Because of his solid and prompt decision-making, legislators and State Legislators and aspiring young ministers in the Cabinet were always curious about his working style and daily routine. Being a senior, he never hesitated to pull them up or speak firmly when the situation demanded.

The entire state knows him as 'Dada' (big brother) - he truly was a 'Dada' of a man! The idea that Ajit Dada is no longer with us, and will not be seen again, is something the mind simply cannot accept. On behalf of Shiv Sena, I offer him my heartfelt tribute.

The author is deputy chief minister, Maharashtra.

Send your letters to the Editor, Lokmat Times, Lokmat Bhavan, Pt Jawaharlal Nehru Marg, Nagpur - 440012. E-mail: lteditngp@lokmat.com

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GK Editorial

Global strife

All the wrongs committed during previous decades are accumulating to produce a dynamic of greater disturbance

Long back an expert on international conflicts said something that applies to current state of global affairs perfectly. *We prepare for war for fifty years and at the end of it we wish for peace.* As Trump presides over the new phenomenon of disorder, a thunderous shaking of the global architecture for cooperation and resolution of contested matters, the world is speedily falling into an abyss of violent contestation. The post world war second arrangement to maintain global peace and order is finally under assault by the same power that contributed majorly to its making. Things seem to have come full circle. Who could have imagined, just some years back, that the USA will lay claim to Greenland in a way as Trump articulated. Who could have imagined that Europe and USA will lock horns and actively drift in opposite direction on an issue that wasn't an issue at all. The super power, post WWII, that bailed out a devastated post-war Europe, is now challenging the very foundations of political understanding that shaped US-Europe cooperation. With this, the fate of NATO is also coming under dark clouds. What a turn of events, all thanks to Trump!

With a new stitching together of military and economic tapestry one doesn't know what is in the offing. What can be predicted without any hesitation, and without employing any special wisdom, is that the old institutions are totally insufficient to prevent this falling apart of global order. The formation of new, and multiple, blocks is visible. First, it was Ukraine that dealt a severe blow to the existing order. Europe and US together locked horns with Russia. The shockwaves from this battle ground disturbed global economy and Europe's ability to defend its margins came under severe question. Then middle east erupted and a brazen display of military might overran all transnational formats of restraint. Gradually, it reached to this pass that new clouds of war are hovering on the global skies. New markets for war and new wars for market are taking shape. All the wrongs committed during previous decades are accumulating to produce a dynamic of greater disturbance.

REFLECTIONS

Only Exhibition

A culture of deep thinking is steadily being replaced by a culture of distraction

Social Media

Er. Rafi ul Sayeed
rafiulsayed11@gmail.com

There was a time when human progress was driven by patience, discipline, and intellectual perseverance. Knowledge was cultivated through years of study, experimentation, and quiet dedication. Scientists, thinkers, and innovators devoted their lives to discovery, often sacrificing comfort and convenience in pursuit of understanding. Their commitment laid the foundations of modern civilisation.

Today, that culture of deep thinking is steadily being replaced by a culture of distraction. Social media platforms, originally designed to connect people and democratise access to information, have increasingly become instruments of attention capture, validation-seeking, and superficial engagement. What was meant to empower society now often overwhelms it.

Across age groups and social classes, behaviour is increasingly shaped by trends, reels, and online approval. The impact is visible in families and institutions alike. Young people grow up internalising unrealistic lifestyles projected by entertainment culture, while adults feel pressured to maintain artificial social status through digital display. The result is a quiet erosion of creativity, critical thinking, and emotional depth. Scrolling replaces reflection. Consumption replaces curiosity.

Human behaviour itself is changing. Public spaces, homes, and workplaces are filled with individuals physically present but mentally absorbed in screens. Attention has fragmented, patience has declined, and the capacity for sustained thought is weakening. Society risks becoming a disconnected jumble of hyper-connected yet intellectually isolated.

History offers a striking contrast. The world remembers thinkers such as Aristotle, Al-Khwarizmi, Galileo, Newton, Edison, and Einstein not for their visibility, but for their contributions. Their influence came from depth of work, not public display.

More concerning is the spread of performative cul-

ture into institutions that depend on discipline and responsibility. Even professions traditionally associated with service and expertise are not immune to the lure of online validation. When public duty begins to compete with digital popularity, institutional values weaken and trust erodes.

There is a reason why leadership roles rooted in governance and administration rarely indulge in public exhibitionism. Their legitimacy comes from competence, accountability, and performance, not visibility. Where achievement is real, exhibition becomes unnecessary.

This transformation resembles a systemic infection of attention and consciousness. Like a virus in a computer system, it slows performance, disrupts functioning, and weakens structure from within. Societies, too, require safeguards.

The response must begin with education and family structures. Parents and teachers need to prioritise intellectual development, emotional maturity, and ethical grounding over digital popularity. At the policy level, there is a legitimate case for structured regulation — age-appropriate access, digital literacy frameworks, and behavioural safeguards — not as censorship, but as public health and productivity measures.

Such regulation is not a violation of rights. It is an investment in mental health, cognitive development, and societal stability. Every major technological shift in history has required ethical frameworks and regulatory balance. The digital age cannot be an exception.

If corrective measures are not taken, society risks entering a paradoxical future — technologically advanced, yet intellectually hollow, and materially rich, yet morally disconnected. The danger is not technology itself, but the unregulated dominance of it over human consciousness.

Without reflection, we retreat into a digital haze, where the digital age may not produce enlightened citizens — only a generation of distracted minds, moving endlessly through screens, but going nowhere in thought.

Greater Kashmir

Edit

Times of Ire: Bifurcation Debate

A decisive rupture with the past has occurred, disturbing assumptions once regarded as immutable



Transition

Prof. Ashok Kaul
ashokkaulbhu@gmail.com

The question of whether Jammu should be separated from Kashmir has returned with renewed intensity. What distinguishes the present moment from earlier eruptions of this debate is not its recurrence, but its altered moral and political tone. For the first time, visible differences have emerged from within the Valley itself. These internal divergences point toward a deeper political metamorphosis, one shaped by shifting power discourses in contemporary India. Whatever interpretations may follow, the transformation in political consciousness now seeking to unsettle inherited narratives cannot be separated from the governance experience of the past five years. A decisive rupture with the past has occurred, disturbing assumptions once regarded as immutable.

This shift becomes especially evident in the recent assertions of Sajad Lone, particularly in his invocation of *"Tut aurin tutin"*. The phrase does not merely signify defiance; it announces a willingness to fracture long-protected political certainties. Lone's articulation marks a clear departure from the traditional idiom of Kashmiri Muslim leadership within India. It neither negates the idea of India nor confines politics exclusively to the language of grievance. Instead, it attempts to negotiate patriotism without rejecting its necessity. In doing so, it unsettles not only separatist imaginaries across the Line of Control but also compels regional formations such as the PDP and the National Conference to confront the moral ambiguities that long sustained their political conduct. The era of tacit mystification and calibrated ambiguity appears to be receding.

The bifurcation debate thus re-enters public discourse not as a narrow administrative proposition but as an expression of unresolved historical consciousness. What appears outwardly as a territorial disagreement is, in essence, a struggle over memory, moral legitimacy, and the authority to define collective suffering. Beneath the sharpness of contemporary rhetoric lies the accumulated weight of experiences shaped by selective remembrance, uneven governance, and

enduring asymmetries of power. Political arrangements once treated as natural were sustained less by genuine consensus than by fragile compromises that deferred ethical reckoning. Geography was never the true axis of conflict. What remained unresolved was whose pain merited recognition, whose exclusion could be normalised, and whose grievances could be indefinitely postponed in the name of stability. Each return of this debate sharpens its moral urgency, reminding us that injustice left unaddressed does not disappear; it merely waits.

It is within this unsettled moral terrain that Sajad Lone's intervention must be situated. His statement does not simply add another voice to an already crowded political arena; it reopens a historical loop that began in the decades following accession. By questioning assumptions long shielded from scrutiny, he disrupts a political grammar sustained less by reflection than by habit, repetition, and inherited fear.

From the 1960s onward, numerical strength gradually became the organising principle of political representation within the state. Political legitimacy came to rest not on fairness but on arithmetic. Admissions to professional institutions and access to public employment were increasingly mediated through demographic calculation rather than open merit. Under successive Congress governments, particularly during the period of Mir Qasim, these practices were institutionalised under the vocabulary of reform and social justice.

Yet reforms celebrated as progressive produced deep structural distortions. A hierarchy of entitlement emerged quietly, marginalising minorities while presenting exclusion as administrative necessity. The Kashmiri Pandits, limited in number and lacking political leverage, became among the earliest casualties. Their representation in education and employment declined far beyond any defensible principle of proportionality. What they lost was not merely opportunity, but recognition as equal participants within the moral community.

Their grievances found little resonance in legislative forums and, therefore, within dominant political narratives. Without numerical strength or organised political shelter, their suffering could not be translated into the language of power. Institutions entrusted with safeguarding citizenship remained unmoved. Over time, marginalisation hardened into invisibility, and invisibility into moral absence.

History, however, rarely remains frozen. Decades later,

with the expansion of reservation policies across the country, sections of Kashmiri Muslims have begun articulating anxieties strikingly similar to those once voiced by the Pandits. Concerns over shrinking merit space, bureaucratic invisibility, and institutional marginality have re-entered public discourse — this time from within the majority community.

The sociological irony is unmistakable. Communities that once accepted exclusion as administratively justified are now encountering its emotional and ultimately unsettling consequences themselves. This reversal reveals a deeper truth: systems built upon selective justice do not remain confined to their original targets. Once institutionalised, exclusion expands, mutates, and ultimately unsettles even those who once benefited from its logic.

It is against this backdrop that Lone's critique of the political mystification following 1953 acquires deeper resonance. His challenge emerges not merely from ideological dissent but from accumulated political fatigue. It confronts a culture in which suffering was ritualised rather than examined, where grievance became performance while governance remained insulated from accountability.

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The era of tacit mystification and calibrated ambiguity appears to be receding.

Parallel to this trajectory lies the long-standing unease of Jammu. Its concerns regarding development, resource allocation, and political marginalisation predate the present moment by decades. The region has consistently argued that its economic contribution and strategic significance were subordinated to a Kashmir-centric political elite. Promises of regional balance were repeatedly deferred, often in the name of unity that, in practice, served only a narrow circle of power brokers.

Across regions and communities, therefore, the architecture of grievance reveals a striking continuity. Only its voice changes. The same institutional framework that marginalised the Pandits later generated resentment in Jammu and now produces anxiety among sections of Kashmiri Muslims. This continuity makes clear that the crisis is not fundamentally communal; it is institutional and moral.

This recognition becomes

sharper when placed alongside the experience of the Kashmiri Pandits. They were never granted the dignity of choice. Their displacement unfolded without dialogue, consent, or acknowledgment. Fear replaced politics, silence replaced recognition, and an entire community was rendered refugees within its own homeland. Their absence was normalised even as their trauma remained unresolved.

Yet the present moment also gestures toward new intellectual possibilities. Contemporary debates, including engagements with the work of Meera Nanda and reflections offered by scholars such as Ajay Gudavorthy, signal an effort to renegotiate questions of modernity, belief, and democracy within lived experience. These conversations seek to move beyond rigid ideological binaries and reopen spaces of political imagination long foreclosed by inherited dogma.

The older culture of performative grievance now appears exhausted. Its slogans no longer generate meaning with the same intensity. In its place is emerging a more grounded politics, attentive to everyday life, employment, education, dignity, and civic participation. The central question is slowly shifting from who governs to how life is lived under governance.

Belonging is no longer imagined solely through resistance. It is increasingly negotiated through presence, participation, and shared civic experience. The mystification that once enveloped political identity has begun to thin.

Within this evolving moral landscape, nationalism itself undergoes redefinition. It is no longer experienced merely as ideological assertion but as shared habitation. Loyalty need not be theatrical; belonging need not be uniform. Citizenship can be sustained through responsibility rather than performance.

Secularism, too, is being rediscovered not only as constitutional language but as social practice. It survives less through doctrinaire insistence and more through everyday accommodation. Indian society has endured not through absolute agreement, but through its capacity to live together amid difference.

What remains, therefore, is not certainty but conversation; not resolution but transition. Out of fractured silences may yet arise a more humane politics; one grounded not in absolutism, but in consent, recognition, and the shared ethics of habitation. The conversations, therefore, must continue.

Prof. Ashok Kaul, Retired Emeritus Professor of Sociology at Banarus Hindu University

Train to Shopian

Economic boon or ecological bane?

Rail Link

B.L. Saraf
bushanialsaraf@gmail.com

As a part of the growing railway network and other infrastructural activities in Kashmir, extension of railway line from Kakapora, Pulwama, to Shopian is under way. The project has evoked mixed reactions among the people who are likely to get affected on its completion. These reactions border on extremes. For some the rail line will bring prosperity to the area as it will facilitate economical, faster and round the year transportation of passengers and the goods — to and from Kashmir. They say it will be big boost for the horticulture industry which is the mainstay of the local economy, as it will help speed up and cost effective transportation of apple fruit to the markets across country. Many see it the other way round: they feel railway extension will mean an economic and ecological disaster for the area as layout of the track will result in cutting down of trees of fruit bearing and other kinds of trees. On the face of it, both arguments seem to carry merit.

It is true that today's available mode of transport is proving inadequate to the ever-growing needs

of passenger and goods movement. It is equally true that the rail connectivity has enhanced economic and social profile of the place it has touched and the areas it has passed through. It could be so in the case of Kakapora — Shopian rail project also. But then, here, one has to consider the terrain it will pass through, the sparse fertile agricultural land and above all the size and count of the acreage of orchards having apple trees will come under the track. According to an approximate estimate, about five lac apple bearing trees will get felled down, resulting in loss of fifty lacs of fruit boxes (ten boxes per tree), which in turn will translate into loss of millions of rupees to the small and medium apple growers and the fruit traders of the affected area. When put on a comparative scale, loss suffered will far outweigh the gain which may accrue to some on rollout of the rail project.

Then there is a third angle to the matter, probably the most significant one — ecological and environmental implications. It is a statement of fact that cutting down of lacs of green and healthy trees (fruit bearing or otherwise) impacts environment and creates ecological concerns of serious nature. Every infrastructure project has inbuilt tendency to

disturb ecology. How serious it could be, depends on the volume and size of the proposed project? Therefore it becomes important to engage local people in the decision making process before there is a movement on this account. In case the development is lop-sided it will be against the broader interests of the people in general. The reported alignment of the rail project is most likely to impact ecological imperatives adversely.

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A symbiotic and a beneficial relationship rather than a mutually destructive one is called for.

In the context of global climate change, often witnessed these days, any tinkering with J&K's fragile topography will spell disaster. If any proof is required in this regard, last year's frequent and unprecedented cloud bursts, landslides, floods and sunny winters may suffice. The National Highway requires a massive hit. That makes it imperative for all to have regard for ecological governance.

Undoubtedly, previous summer's experience of surface

road blockades and consequent delayed transportation of the perishable commodity like fresh fruit has brought added focus on the need of alternate and whether compliant mode of the transport. A railway, without any saying, could provide one. Seen in the context, importance of having railroad to reach apple orchards can't be underestimated.

It is desirable to protect local doctornic resources and ensure cost effective and all weather transport facility. Rail on the tracks will provide one such mode and ensure growth. But that growth has to be sustainable and people friendly. A symbiotic and a beneficial relationship rather than a mutually destructive one is called for. Being a native, I can say that given the terrain of the area, it shouldn't be difficult to find a mutually beneficial way to accommodate both the viewpoints. Parallel to the road joining Kakapora railway station and the proposed railway station in Shopian, many barren stretches of land are available, which with some additions and alterations can be utilized for the purpose. Both, the rail project and fruit trade must survive in a friendly environment.

B.L. SARAF, former Principal District & Sessions Judge

A deal to deepen trade as strategy

With India and the European Union (EU) signing the long-awaited trade agreement, the decks are now cleared for an expansive trade zone that covers around two billion people. Negotiations on the "mother of all deals" began almost two decades ago; the recent acceleration may have been a result of Donald Trump's tariffs that impacted trade relations of both the European bloc and India with the United States. The deal sends a signal to Trump at a time when India is holding talks with the US on a trade agreement. In European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's statement that trade is "increasingly weaponised", there may be a reference to the global disruptions caused by Trump's trade policies. The agreement presents a win-win situation for both camps as they try to offset the fallout of these disruptions.

The deal is expected to double the total value of goods the EU exports to India. It could give a \$3-5 billion boost to Indian exports to the EU in the near term. In 2024-25, the bilateral trade was worth about \$137 billion. India exported goods worth \$75.85 billion, while the import value stood at \$60.68 billion. Both sides have large economies, together accounting for about 25% of the global gross domestic product and a third of global trade. The EU will liberalise tariffs on 99.5% of Indian imports, and India will offer 92% of its tariff lines, covering 97.5% of the EU exports. Most of India's tariffs on machines, chemicals, and drugs are set to be eliminated. European cars, wines, medical devices, and machinery will become cheaper in India. Garment exports and the movement of service professionals from India to the EU will get a boost. India has taken care not to provide concessions in the sensitive dairy and farm sectors. The agreement will get operationalised in about a year after the due legislative procedures, even as challenges—including the EU's stringent environmental regulations—remain.

While the trade deal was the most important outcome from the India-EU summit, other key collaborations were also formalised at the event. The India-EU strategic partnership will improve cooperation in defence and security. Agreements to collaborate in other domains, including mobility, were signed. Together, these new partnerships will build upon existing cooperation in clean energy and climate action, digital technologies, space, and connectivity. Coming in the wake of Trump's plans for the US to acquire Greenland, and opposition from his European allies, the India-EU agreement also carries importance as a position and safeguard against economic coercion.

Policy freeze powers cycle of corruption

The Karnataka government's denial of corruption allegations in the Excise Department is neither convincing nor adequate. When Lokayukta traps reinforce repeated charges from trade bodies and opposition parties, the issue can no longer be dismissed as political noise. At the heart of the malaise is a reported scam that trade associations allege has reached Rs 6,000 crore over the last two years. A primary driver of this crisis is the 33-year freeze on new liquor retail (CL-2) and bar-and-restaurant (CL-9) licences to curb consumption. The moratorium has long outlived its purpose. Karnataka's population, urban footprint, and hospitality sector have expanded dramatically since then, but the licensing regime remains frozen in a different era. This artificial scarcity has turned licences into tradable assets, spawning a thriving black market, as the state forfeits revenue. This environment has also distorted business behaviour. With no new CL-9 licences available, entrepreneurs are pushed towards CL-7 hotel licences as a workaround, a process allegedly lubricated by massive bribes at every stage—from grant and transfer of licences to renewals.

The recent arrest of senior excise officers while allegedly accepting bribes to clear CL-7 licences lends credibility to claims of systemic rot. Equally troubling is the widely reported transfer racket, where lucrative postings are allegedly bought and sold. Officers who pay for postings are incentivised to recover their investment through predatory enforcement, weaponising provisions of the Excise Act to intimidate traders and extract bribes. Added to this are the repeated and unscientific duty hikes, resulting in adverse fiscal consequences; the department missed its 2024-25 revenue target by over Rs 3,000 crore. Beer sales have dipped by nearly 20%, and border districts are losing business to Andhra Pradesh, where a more transparent policy offers significantly cheaper liquor. Institutional decay compounds the problem. An archaic staffing pattern and large vacancies have left the department ill-equipped to manage a modern, complex market.

At this juncture, corruption charges demand more than denials. A credible investigation by the Lokayukta—under which the Anti-Corruption Bureau functions—is essential to establish facts and restore confidence. But accountability must be paired with structural reform: lifting the licence freeze through transparent, population-linked mechanisms; curbing discretionary powers; rationalising duties in line with neighbouring states; and insulating transfers from political and monetary influence. The Excise Department exists to regulate a sensitive commodity while safeguarding public revenue. Today, it risks becoming a symbol of institutionalised rent-seeking. Ignoring the warning signs will not make the problem disappear; it will only deepen public distrust and losses to the exchequer.

The India-EU agreement signals intent to navigate a disrupted, weaponised global trade environment

Karnataka's excise scam further exposes an outdated licensing regime that has enabled systemic graft

COMMENT

MUNIR AT DAVOS

The dark portents from Pakistan's military economy

The rise and rise of the Field Marshal signals a deepening influence, posing threats to regional stability

LT GEN BHOPINDER SINGH (RETD)

The annual World Economic Forum (WEF) jamboree at Davos is the playing field of political leaders, industrialists, policymakers, academicians, and economic commentators who debate, coordinate, and align economic opportunities. This year, India fielded its cabinet ministers for Electronics & IT, New & Renewable Energy, Agriculture, Civil Aviation, besides a host of chief ministers selling their respective states as investment destinations. In 2018, the Prime Minister himself delivered the keynote address at the plenary session and participated again (virtually) in 2021. This year, the participating Heads of State included the likes of Donald Trump, Emanuel Macron, Friedrich Merz, Mark Carney, and Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, along with their economic entourage.

The Pakistani delegation was led by its Prime Minister, Shehbaz Sharif. It had the usual composition of Finance and Revenue Minister, Foreign Minister, Federal Minister for Economic Affairs, Minister for Information and Broadcasting, et al. But one unusual but very prominent delegate who caught the global eye was Field Marshal Asim Munir. Serving military chiefs rarely attend such economic-investment engagements. The fact that his shadowy presence did not entail speaking assignments on any official WEF panels but only side talks added to the intrigue. So why was the uniformed general (albeit in civilian clothes with a rumoured but unproven) attending at all?

Traditionally, Pakistani military chiefs have had an outsized role in the beyond-mandated affairs of Pakistan. The latest optics of the Pakistani Field Marshal at Davos follows the equally surreal scenes of him alongside his Prime Minister at the Oval Office in Washington DC, a few months back, seemingly "peddling" rare metals to Trump, in a briefcase. The fact is, Munir is increasingly seen as the *de facto* custodian of security guarantees in restive Pakistan. Standing next to the political head, he adds heft to the assurances of stability that Pakistan seeks and pitches, be it on rare/rare minerals or for reassuring the investment environment at Davos. There-

fore, it could be argued that Pakistan has gone for the militarisation of its economic (read, survival) policy. The vice-like confluence of economic diplomacy, military influence, and resource control is complete and visible in the Pakistani narrative.

The indispensability and authority of the "uniform" in the supposedly democratic framework of Pakistani politics was personified by the obliging way the Pakistani Prime Minister directed Trump's attention by pointing towards Munir in the crowd. Trump acknowledged the Pakistani Field Marshal's unwarranted presence gleefully, suggesting that the American President clearly understood who the real McCoy in Pakistan was.



kistan was. Just months ago, speaking at the Gaza Peace Summit at Sharm el-Sheikh, Trump spoke about Munir (who wasn't present) by referencing him as "my favourite Field Marshal". It all harks back to the murky reality of US-Pakistan history, which insists that Washington DC has always had strong ties with Pakistani military leaders such as Field Marshal Ayub Khan, General Zia-ul-Haq or General Pervez Musharraf, and not with the democratically elected politicians.

Downsides of militarism

Trump's valourisation of Munir legitimises the theory of Pakistan emerging as a military-industrial complex or, at least, a military-business construct. The worst-kept secret of Pakistani generalists controlling the essential red lines of governance routinely gets the all-important approval of the United States. The hands of the over-entitled Pakistani military are deep into non-professional domains such as the Fauji Foundation with business interests in fertiliser, food, power, banking, cement, etc. All this leads to the military influencing economic/commercial policies, often to the detriment of free

and fair market forces. The political leverage the Pakistani military flexes can then be further abused towards preferentialism and exploitation, as it deems fit.

The perennial fear of security instability affords the Pakistani Field Marshal unmatched leverage with various powers beyond the Americans—the Chinese leadership needs to secure its substantial investment in the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the Arab sheikhdoms seek the help of the battle-hardened Pakistani military to meet their security needs, and other powers such as Turkey seek a market for their military hardware exports in Pakistan.

But there is always a long-term downside to the diminishment of civilian control and to the weakening of the institutions of checks and balances in a democracy. Serious investors are always worried about its fallout, particularly the unpredictability of regulations. Transparency takes a backseat, and unilateralism in societal affairs (as in the dark Zia era) comes with its own pernicious outcomes.

For India, a military-industrial Complex in Pakistan comes with dark portents. One of the outcomes is the endless "enmeshing" of India, to keep the Pakistani populace excited and supportive of the Pakistani military, which then uses the pretext to justify its own lion's share of the annual budgets. Real peace with India would be inimical to the Pakistani (military) establishment and, therefore, they keep the pot of terrorism and unrest on the boil. In such scenarios, threats from India can be exaggerated, leaving little room for prudent diplomacy. It is almost as if peace is dangerous to the framework of Pakistani governance, where the generals call the shots. A dangerous increase in the capital expenditure on weaponry keeps suppliers/allies like China and Turkey (even the US) on the right side of the Pakistani generals. The additional fear of regressing the national narrative towards puritanism and hyper-religiosity cannot be ruled out, as the "establishment" can simultaneously curvy favour with the headline elements of the Islamic world. Therefore, pictures emerging from the Oval Office earlier, or from Davos now, with the unwarranted presence of Field Marshal Asim Munir ought to worry Delhi. It is tantamount to democratic backsliding, and that can never work in favour of peace and stability in the long run.

(The writer is a former Lt Governor of Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Puducherry)

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

The season of empathy

A simple exchange of gifts shows how kindness can travel full circle

LT COL THOMAS VARGHESE (RETD)

Advent is meant to be a season of hope, peace, joy, and love. Yet in recent times, these themes often feel overshadowed by commercialisation—shopping sprees, plum cakes, wines, and festive dresses taking centre stage while the deeper purpose fades into the background.

This year, however, a simple fruitcake became an unlikely symbol of grace. My wife, a culinary expert, happened to receive a tin of hot cakes from Kerala last year, which she took out from her hidden stash. On tasting it, she rated it 5/5—the best fruitcake in recent memory. "The proof of the pudding is in the eating," we thought, and shared

the discovery with my sister, who lives in Kochi.

My sister, a retired teacher, has a new neighbour—a small family consisting of a couple, their daughter and her grandmother. The little girl is in a playschool and travels by the school bus every day. Jumping from the bus into the hands of her grandmother has been a daily delight for her.

However, on that day, she was crying and refusing to come out of the bus. It was learnt that the child had not received her Christmas gift from the teacher. The mother tried pacifying her, but it did not work.

It was a sheer coincidence that my sister had wanted to give that child a small Christmas gift. However, she had not been able to do so until then and was wondering how to send it. To her surprise, she happened to see the child's father returning from work. My sister hurriedly went out of her house carrying a small bag, stopped him

abruptly and said, "Sir! This is a small gift for your daughter." He was taken aback by the gesture and went home, only to see his daughter still crying. As soon as the child received the gift, the crying stopped and the little one began jumping around.

A little later, there was a knock at my sister's door. She saw the child, mother and grandmother. She invited them in, and before sitting down, the child extended a carry bag while the mother said, "A small Christmas gift for you."

The bag contained a tin of hotcake. It was a complete surprise for my sister, for she had never expected anything in return for the empathy she had shown. What a coincidence, all the way!

It is perhaps difficult for many of us to understand the dynamics of empathy; often, it is substituted by sympathy. Such empathetic behaviour could transform the world into "God's Own Country"—a world full of peace, love and joy.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Fences won't fix past mistakes

Appropos 'Fence all government vacant properties, revenue minister tells officials' (Jan 28), the government's move to fence vacant land parcels in Bengaluru is a classic case of shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted. For decades, vast tracts of valuable public land were left unprotected, enabling large-scale encroachment by developers, politicians, and other influential interests. By the time preventive measures are being enforced, thousands of crores worth of gov-

ernment properties have already been lost, converted, or litigated away. While fencing may prevent further encroachments, it does little to address past failures of governance, weak enforcement, and collusion. Bengaluru now requires not merely physical barriers, but a credible land audit, swift recovery mechanisms, and accountability to restore public confidence and safeguard remaining state assets.

N Sathasiva Reddy, Bengaluru

Prison reform

The editorial, "Uniformity is integral to prison reform" (Jan 28), is a timely reminder of the importance of maintaining uniformity and equality in the treatment of prisoners. Allowing home-cooked food for prisoners, both convicts and under-trial prisoners, would violate Articles 14 and 15 of the Constitution. It would give an advantage to prisoners who can get food from their homes in Bengaluru over those who cannot, for reasons such as not being from Bengaluru. The prison authorities

should provide quality and nutritious food to all prisoners and cater, as far as possible, to all food habits. There should be no discrimination on grounds of race, religion, caste, sex, or place of birth. It is not correct to think these prisoners do to mental jobs; these should be done by staff appointed for the purpose.

K R Jayaprakash Rao, Mysuru

Restore decorum

I refer to 'Karnataka: Congress, Opposition battle it out in Council' (Jan 28). The chaos in the Karnataka

Council reflects a worrying decline in legislative decorum. Debating a Governor's address—whether to thank or criticise it—must happen through dialogue, not disruption. Silencing elected members undermines democratic norms and weakens public trust in the House. Political differences should be argued, not shouted down.

Ariba Moideen, Bengaluru

Our readers are welcome to email letters to: letters@deccanherald.co.in (only letters emailed—not handwritten—will be accepted). All letters must carry the sender's postal address and phone number.

SPEAK OUT

The 2026 Assembly elections will be unforgettable for Prime Minister Narendra Modi; it is an NDA vs Tamil Nadu fight.



M K Stalin, Tamil Nadu CM

It's only hubris if I fail.

Julius Caesar

TO BE PRECISE

A four-lane flyover narrows into two lanes in Mumbai



IN PERSPECTIVE

Lit fests and the missing stories

Marginalised voices don't always make it to the line-ups. Change can begin with equitable access to English

RAVINARAYAN CHAKRAKODI

It is that time of the year again—the literature festival season. India celebrates the written word in every possible form by holding these events in many cities. The festivals shape a cultural trend, build public curiosity around books and ideas, and turn literature into a shared civic experience. In many ways, literature festivals now function like modern public squares—spaces where society gathers to listen, question, disagree, and reflect.

The festivals are enriching not merely because of the range of sessions they offer but because of the deeper questions they provoke about literature, representation, and democracy. They also reaffirm something we often forget: literature is far more than prose and poetry. It is an expansive universe that includes politics, journalism, cinema, sports, ecology, and the many disciplines that shape human life. Writing in any field that speaks to social realities is also literature. That is why festivals today host discussions not only on fiction and poetry, but also on public policy, climate change, migration, digital life, and the ethics of representation. Literature becomes a meeting point for ideas.

And this is where a troubling pattern emerges—where voices are heard, whose voices are celebrating, and whose voices are missing? When people speak admiringly of Gen Z as expressive, bold, and progressive in these literary gatherings, who exactly are they referring to? Not those children who are from the disadvantaged sections of society, not those in government schools, not young people living at society's margins. Too often, a small slice of urban middle-class youth is presented as if it represents an entire generation. This selective visibility becomes sharper in mainstream English literary spaces, where participation often depends on cultural capital—education, accent, networks, and access to English.

Indian literature is not a single stream. It is multilingual, layered, and deeply shaped by social realities. Many Indian-language traditions, including Kannada, Malayalam, Tamil, Telugu, Bengali, and Marathi, have long histories of social critique and inclusion. They have produced writers who speak directly about caste, labour, gender, hunger, migration, and injustice. But English literature showcased at many festivals remains dominated by the middle and upper classes. Even when festivals speak of diversity, representation can

become symbolic rather than structural.

The literature of the marginalised remains underrepresented in many mainstream festival line-ups. This absence is not because writings of the marginalised do not exist in English. Dalit texts exist in English translation, and Dalit authors write in English too. Yet they rarely receive sustained exposure on national literary platforms. The question is uncomfortable but necessary: are such voices excluded because they "have no voice"? Or because they do not fit the fluency norms and cultural codes of elite spaces?

A structural exclusion

If fluency becomes the gate, the failure lies not with the writers but with the education system that has historically withheld English from communities that need it most. This brings us to a crucial point: literature festivals must confront more directly: teaching English to the marginalised is not a luxury; it is a responsibility.

It is not enough to teach English as a subject. English must also become a medium through which Dalit, Adivasi, and disadvantaged students learn science, history, philosophy, politics, music, and economics. Only then can they write about these subjects in English and enter national forums, academic discourses, publishing networks, and literature festivals with confidence and authority.

For too long, English literature in India has been guarded—consciously or unconsciously—by elite and middle-class gatekeepers. Indian-language literatures are respected but often through polite admiration rather than equal platforming. Even when festivals invite writers from marginalised communities, they are sometimes positioned as "special sessions" rather than as central voices shaping the festival's intellectual agenda.

We speak at festivals about gender identity, climate, technology, popular culture, cinema, and global politics. Yet we often leave out the most transformative issue of all: education. If literature festivals aspire to be democratic cultural spaces, they must begin by asking: Where are the marginalised? Why do their stories not appear on our panels? Why are they not on our stages? Inclusion cannot be a decorative gesture. It must be structural.

And that inclusion begins long before the festival, inside classrooms, libraries, government schools, community reading spaces, and public universities. It begins with access, with English, with opportunity, and with voice. Only then will literature festivals truly represent the full spectrum of Indian life—not just everything and everyone, but also those who have long been left outside the gates.

(The writer is a professor and academic head at the Regional Institute of English South India, Jnanabharathi Campus, Bengaluru)

From boomtown to building traps: Noida's unfinished story



SUMIT PANDE

'Naveda, Naveda, Naveda,' bellowed conductors soliciting passengers to the 'killer' Red Line private buses that operated between Noida and Delhi's Connaught Place. Infamous for mowing down pedestrians with an uncanny regularity, the buses were phased out as connectivity between Delhi and its satellite towns improved, with the Delhi Metro spreading its tentacles far and wide over the last two decades.

Improved connectivity and a burgeoning population made housing, especially affordable housing, a promising proposition in Gurugram, Faridabad and Noida. While the first prospered due to its proximity to the Delhi airport, Faridabad, spread on either side of the Delhi-Mumbai railway line, evolved as an industrial town.

Noida (acronym for New Okhla Industrial Development Authority), a brainchild of the late Congress chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, Narain Dutt Tiwari, prospered (paradoxically to its name) as a residential town on the western outpost of the state, contiguous to Delhi.

For migrants pouring into the national capital for jobs and livelihood, Noida offered a viable residential option. You could live in Noida and commute to Delhi for work. Soon, *Dilli-walas*, who once considered all residential suburbs in Jamuna-*par* (across the Yamuna) as infra-dig, too crossed the bridge. If it took just 40 minutes to reach your shop in crammed Chandni Chowk, it made sense to shift to a gated condominium and take the Metro to the workstation.

For bureaucrats from UP and adjoining states looking for a second home their children could use while pursuing higher studies in Delhi, investing in a Noida property made sense as well.

Ergo, a development authority was set up to plan a new township. Sectors were demarcated, bungalows were propped up on floodplains, and infrastructure was laid out in neat grids.

The authority acquired more land from farmers in adjoining villages for low-rise residential complexes. Initially, only the Noida Development Authority constructed and sold residential units through a lottery system.

A boom in the housing industry, propelled by easy access and the lowering of interest rates on housing loans, brought private players into the fray. And they came in droves.

Property dealers became real estate magnates overnight. The UP government lowered the entry threshold for builders by offering land with an initial payment of just 30% of the estimated cost. In 2009, the Mayawati government made further amendments to the rules to allow allocation with a mere 10%.

The dream run continued as the builders sold not just homes but dreams. Dreams of having your own address in the *Rajdhani*.

A three-side open house for Mr Khosla. A pool-facing 3BHK for Mrs Arora. A duplex for Mr Banerjee. If you had a customer, the builders had a property.

People invested. They took loans, stayed in rented accommodation and paid EMIs in the hope of living under their own roof one day. Some got it, some continued waiting.

When the courts stepped in to question some of the largesse doled out by the UP government to the real estate sector operating in Noida, the markets collapsed. Builders had acquired large tracts of land by paying a nominal price, but projects remained pending on paper despite having mopped up crores of rupees in pre-launch bookings.

In one of the cases, that of Amrapali Builders, the Supreme Court of India intervened to hand over the project to NBCC (India) Limited. But there are a dozen others that remain pending.

In some cases, buyers have been handed possession of properties without the signing of a registered deed, which is a tripartite agreement between the buyer, the seller and the Noida authority. Since dues to the Noida Development Authority have not been cleared, the authority would not sign it.

The Noida landscape is dotted with many incomplete projects where land was acquired or dug up for the construction years ago.

The recent death of a techie who drowned in a swamp generated by one such 40-foot-deep pit dug up in 2021 for the construction of a multi-storied complex in Noida is symptomatic of erratic and haphazard urban town planning in India. The deceased was an engineer in his mid-twenties, returning home post-midnight after a long day at work when his car fell into the waterbody. In zero visibility induced by heavy fog and near-zero temperatures, he kept shouting for help for over an hour atop the roof of his car before the vehicle went under.

Interestingly, Noida does not have a civic

body. Or an elected municipality that could be held accountable by its residents. It is a unique arrangement where the development authority, helmed by a CEO, manages everything from horticulture and roads to garbage collection and development of new projects.

It is a city administered by three bureaucrats—the Gautam Budh Nagar district magistrate, the Noida Authority CEO and the police commissioner.

For many decades, the myth of losing power in Lucknow upon setting foot in Noida kept many chief ministers away from the richest city in UP. It finally took a politician-monk in Yogi Adityanath to break this superstition.

Noida, unlike Gurugram, has wide roads lined with trees, an effective drainage system and a decent green cover. Perhaps among the best residential suburbs in the National Capital Territory today.

With a little more conscientious planning, it could have been far better.

DHNS

Twenty-five years after the Kutch earthquake, a DH reporter who witnessed its aftermath recalls the terror of relentless aftershocks, the scale of human loss, and how the tragedy reshaped India's approach to disaster management

KALYAN RAY

The first night after I landed in Gujarat, a day after the Kutch earthquake twenty-five years ago, I could not sleep. The killer quake had flattened a large part of Ahmedabad. High-rise buildings had sunk into the ground with their occupants inside, and one could still hear their screams. I heard desperate cries for help from someone trapped inside a four-storey building buried underground. People were on edge as aftershocks—some of them quite strong—continued rocking the city every few minutes.

The earthquake occurred at 8.46 am on January 26, 2001. Its magnitude was 7.7 MW (6.9 on the Richter scale), and it lasted for about two minutes. The epicentre was at Chauhari village, located to the north of Bhachau in Kutch district, 65 km east of Bhuj and about 250 km west of Ahmedabad. Among other things, it is also remembered for the sheer number of aftershocks it generated. In the first fortnight after the earthquake, there were two major aftershocks of magnitudes of 5.9 and 5.3. There were 953 aftershocks in 2001, followed by 149 in 2002 and 53 in 2003.

By the time I returned to the hotel for the night's sleep—urgently needed as I was to travel to Bhuj the next day—Ahmedabad had experienced close to 200 aftershocks. The rocking continued throughout the night. Every few minutes, the hotel building would tremble, and I would sit upright, ready to jump out of the room at the first sign of a crack on the wall. After an hour or so, I gave up and came down to the ground floor near the reception, prepared to spend the rest of the night on a sofa.

The reception clerk on night duty understood my predicament. He offered me a bunk meant for hotel workers. Since it was on the ground floor and there were other staff members in the hall, I finally managed to sleep, hoping that if a big one came, at least a few minutes would be available to run to the street.

Fortunately, nothing untoward happened. The next morning I left for Bhuj. For the next two days, I slept in the back-seat of the car—the driver slept in the front—and survived on a few packets of biscuits and water as I travelled to some of the worst-hit areas, such as Bhuj, Anjar, Bhachau, Rapar and nearby villages. While travelling I picked up relief material from aid workers and distributed it to people who had received little support till then. I also worked as an interpreter for locals seeking help from foreign rescue teams.

At Anjar, a town known for vegetable dyes, knives and *bhandhni* textiles, there was a peculiar sight. A few shops were open, and they were selling nothing but cheap perfumes and deodorants. The air was so heavy with the smell of rotting bodies lying by the roadside that it was impossible to walk around unless the nose was wrapped in a handkerchief almost soaked in perfume. Corpses covered in cloth lay



Kutch, 2001: When the ground would not stop shaking

along the road. Anjar was also the place where a Republic Day procession of 300 children and their teachers was buried under debris when buildings on both sides of a lane collapsed on them. The majority died.

How many were killed in the Kutch quake? Initial numbers cited by the authorities were very high. A Union minister even claimed that over 100,000 people might have died. Figures released by government agencies in the first week of February were around 16,000, which later rose to over 20,000, based on police and hospital records. A subsequent verification process revealed many overlaps and duplication of figures. The final death count was fixed at 13,805, of which 12,221 were from Kutch district.

Bhuj was completely devastated. The air inside the walled city, which was once filled with the sounds of goldsmiths and jewellery workers, stank of rotting corpses on the road. The 281-bed district hospital collapsed, killing 11 staff members and 182 patients.

The military hospital provided emergency care. By afternoon, a tent was set up at Jubilee Ground, suturing material was gathered from another hospital, anaesthetics were made available, and surgeries began, which continued over the next four days.

By the following day, more doctors from other cities reached Bhuj, ready to offer their services. In the initial days, there were problems with the availability of medicines, but things improved gradually. More temporary hospitals were set up on the ground, and a prefabricated hospital was created. I spent the night at Jubilee Ground inside the car, which continued rocking throughout the night.

The tremor brought down electricity and telephone lines. It led to a rise in crime, and people struggled to communicate their well-being to their relatives in other cities. I met two brothers who travelled over 200 km in 12 hours just to make a single STD call to their family in Mumbai.

The quake also damaged many historical monuments. Morbi's famous Darbarah Palace, Mani Mandir, Nagar Darwaja, Wagamand and Green Tower—built by or associated with the royal family of Maharaja Waghji Thakur—were damaged substantially. So were the Shaking Minarets in Ahmedabad's Gomtiapur. Bhuj's Kutch Museum, which showcased the region's craft and culture, was badly damaged.

According to an estimate by INTACH, at least 10,000 historically important sites, including palaces, old *havelis*, wells, *chhatris*, places of religious significance, clock towers, gateways

and pavilions, located across 250 towns and numerous villages, were affected by the earthquake.

Lack of coordination among officials in the wake of such a devastating tragedy was visible almost everywhere in the initial days, though things improved later. Communities came together to help each other.

The experience of the Bhuj quake was instrumental in conceptualising the National Disaster Management Authority and the raising of the National Disaster Management Force, along with the enactment of the Disaster Management Act, 2005, to provide legal backing to the two bodies. Gen N C Vij, who as Southern Army Commander played an instrumental role in the relief and rehabilitation work, was tasked with creating a dedicated authority to deal with all types of disasters.

Unhappy with the relief and rehabilitation work by the Keshubhai Patel government, the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government at the Centre dispatched a young leader by the name of Narendra Modi to oversee the operations on the ground. Modi met journalists in Ahmedabad and assured them of help and support while they travelled to Kutch. Within a year, he became the chief minister of Gujarat—and the rest, as they say, is history.

Bridging India's medical divide

LAKSHMI ASHWINI GOWDA

In the architectural blueprint of India's Universal Health Coverage (UHC), there lies a silent, structural fault line—the rural-urban medical divide. While metropolitan centres boast robotic surgeries and medical tourism, rural India lacks even a basic antipyretic for a common fever. To bridge this chasm, India must move beyond battles over medical "mixopathy" and embrace clinical pragmatism. Empowering India's eight lakh AYUSH doctors to prescribe a carefully curated list of 47 essential allopathic drugs is not merely about "integration"; it is about decolonising healthcare delivery.

At the heart of this argument is a policy proposition. The 47-drug framework outlined here is offered as a practical, tightly regulated solution to India's rural primary-care deficit. The principal objection to such reform is patient safety. But this proposal is neither reckless nor expensive. It does not argue for unrestricted allopathic practice by AYUSH doctors. Instead, it advances a clearly defined "restricted clinical privilege", centred on a vetted list of 47 essential medicines. This proposed safety shield includes basic, life-saving drugs such as antipyretics to prevent febrile seizures. Under the framework, every prescription would be governed by strict Standard Treatment Guidelines (STGs) and backed by a mandatory six-month online bridge course in pharmacology. The online format allows for scalability, standardisation and verifiable certification, while enabling doctors to remain at their rural postings. The intent is not to dilute medical standards but to formally design a primary-care tier that protects rural citizens from the far more dangerous alternative they currently face—unregulated, uncertified quackery.

India is a global outlier in this regard. It is perhaps the only country where even a limited set of essential, life-saving drugs remains the exclusive preserve of the MBBS cadre. Critics often cite Western models to oppose a dedicated primary-care tier, but global experience points the other way. In the United Kingdom, nurses and pharmacists function as "independent prescribers" after specific training. In the United States, nurse practitioners—often with fewer years of formal clinical training than Indian MBBS or BHMS doctors—form the backbone of rural primary care.

Against this backdrop, denying a five-and-a-half-year

institutionally trained AYUSH doctor the right to prescribe paracetamol, while trusting far less-trained paramedics elsewhere, exposes a systemic irony that rural India can no longer afford. The most compelling case for reform lies in its economic impact. India's healthcare system is trapped in a vicious poverty-health cycle. Nearly 70% of healthcare spending is out-of-pocket, much of it incurred by rural families forced to travel long distances for minor ailments.

First, legalising limited prescribing rights for AYUSH doctors helps eliminate the hidden "quack tax". In the absence of authorised prescribers, villagers turn to informal practitioners. Bringing AYUSH doctors into the formal system integrates them with the National Digital Health Mission.

Second, timely first-line treatment prevents minor illnesses from escalating into emergencies that drain a family's life savings.

Critics frequently invoke "mixopathy" as a rhetorical shield against reform. The legal window for this change already exists—it requires administrative clarity and resolve. Under the Drugs and Cosmetics Act, specifically Rule 2(e), the definition of a Registered Medical Practitioner (RMP) can be explicitly expanded to include institutionally qualified AYUSH doctors as authorised prescribers for primary care.

The Supreme Court's ruling in the Mukhtiar Chand case (1998) upheld the State's power to notify practitioners of modern medicine. What is being proposed is a restricted, regulated clinical privilege.

Interactions with medical undergraduates across the country reveal a sobering consensus. Few join medical colleges aspiring to become general practitioners. The dominant ambition is specialisation and super-specialisation. As a result, rural primary care is treated as a temporary inconvenience before their postgraduate exams. This "specialist trap" leaves primary health centres with infrastructure without stable prescribers.

Ultimately, the health of a nation cannot be measured by the sophistication of its urban hospitals alone but by the accessibility of a single life-saving pill in its most remote hamlet. The 47-drug framework has the potential to bridge India's rural-urban health divide.

(The writer is a doctor, an ex-bureaucrat and Karnataka BJP state secretary)

OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

50 YEARS AGO: JANUARY 1976

Prasanna demolishes New Zealand

Auckland (New Zealand), January 28
Off-spinner Erupalli Prasanna with career best figures of 8 for 76 runs, bowled India to a magnificent eight-wicket victory over New Zealand in the first Test here today. New Zealand resuming their second innings this morning at Monday's score of 161 for two—yesterday was a rest day—soon crumbled to the deadly bowling of Prasanna and Chandrasekhar to be all out for 215 in just 70 minutes of play leaving India to make 68 runs for outright victory. India did not take long to achieve the target and the match ended 20 minutes after lunch on the fourth day with a full day to spare.

25 YEARS AGO: JANUARY 2001

Fresh tremors rock Gujarat, toll reaches 20,000

Ahmedabad, Jan 28 (PTI)
A series of tremors today rocked Kutch, Ahmedabad and some other parts of Gujarat causing panic among the already stricken people as international teams joined rescue and relief efforts two days after the worst earthquake on the Republic Day that claimed up to 20,000 lives, injured 50,000 and rendered lakhs homeless. Chief Minister Keshubhai Patel told newsmen that the death toll could be between 15,000 and 20,000 and it was difficult to give exact figures of the extent of loss of lives and damage to property. As many as 15,000 people may have died in Bhuj alone, Mr Patel said.

OASIS | JAYANTHI CHANDRASEKARAN

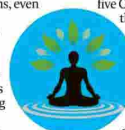
Of humility in triumph and honesty in error

One of my grandfather's favourite quotes is "In triumph you walk with humility and in errors with honesty". He would further elaborate that these two postures, seemingly opposite, are in fact the twin pillars of character. Triumph is often intoxicating, leading to the temptation to believe that one is superior. But it is a fact that every success stands on the shoulders of a web of support.

The tennis legend Roger Federer's brilliance wasn't just in his effortless grace on the court but in his graciousness off it. Despite being frequently called "The Greatest of All Time" by fans and commentators, he consistently avoided taking on the title himself. He always made sure to

acknowledge the support of his wife, Mirka, his coaches, and his team of physios and trainers. He consistently credited his opponents and thanked ball boys, umpires, and fans, even at his peak dominance.

Sundar Pichai, Google's CEO, is another example of someone who avoids personal spotlight and celebrates team contributions more than his own. Coming from a modest home in Chennai, he acknowledges family, teachers and India's public education system for shaping him. His message to students is, "Always be kind and stay humble. Intelligence is easier to find than humility."



If triumph tests the ego, error tests one's integrity. In 1982, seven people died after taking cyanide-laced extra-strength Tylenol capsules sold in five Chicago stores. James Burke, the CEO of Johnson & Johnson, acted with transparent honesty. Although the contamination happened outside the company, he said, "We are responsible for protecting the people who trust our product." He ordered a nationwide recall, losing millions, went live before the media and answered every question openly and redesigned packaging with tamper-proof seals. Burke's integrity turned a public disaster into

a benchmark study in ethical crisis management. In 1982, seven people died after taking cyanide-laced extra-strength Tylenol capsules sold in five Chicago stores. James Burke, the CEO of Johnson & Johnson, acted with transparent honesty. Although the contamination happened outside the company, he said, "We are responsible for protecting the people who trust our product." He ordered a nationwide recall, losing millions, went live before the media and answered every question openly and redesigned packaging with tamper-proof seals. Burke's integrity turned a public disaster into



The tragic end of Ajit Pawar

Ajit Ashatkar Anantnar Paware, 66, lived his political and personal life in ways that ensured a chapter, not merely a footnote, in the annals of Maharashtra's contemporary politics. Tragically killed, along with four others, in an aeroplane crash near his home turf, Baramati, on Wednesday morning, Ajit, Dada, or Dada as he was called, was a modern-day politician—ideologically flexible but firm of purpose. He was known for his strong grasp on the administrative machinery for more than 25 years, handling the finance portfolio, among others; a blunt and no-nonsense attitude; homegrown language and idioms that occasionally were in the risqué territory; and an ability to recognise party workers and network across political lines. For reasons within and beyond him, Pawar never did take the oath he most aspired to—that of the chief minister of Maharashtra. He held the deputy's post for a record six times under four chief ministers of different parties, some with less experience than he had.

That aspiration, as much as the need to annul the corruption charges in the Rs 70,000-crore irrigation scam, led him to splinter the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) set up by his uncle Sharad Pawar in June 1998, after he walked out of the Congress.

Groomed to be the second-in-command, Ajit Pawar's NCP finally allied with the BJP under Devendra Fadnis and Eknath Shinde's Shiv Sena. He played into the BJP's hands, he did not acknowledge it, nor did he explain the dubious oath-taking ceremony in the wee hours of the morning in 2019 with Fadnis. Somehow, he retained his seat in the state government. Such bewildering decisions and the corruption charges stain his legacy. To his credit though, he did not visit the RSS headquarters as several crossover leaders did, and he held nothing back in criticising Yogi Adityanath for his communal vitriol during the 2024 elections. Fadnis knows that Pawar's vacuum will gnaw at the government.

The void left behind in the party and the extended Pawar family may prove more challenging to fill. Vilas Pawar, old and ailing, who also groomed daughter Surpriya Pawar, but relied on Ajit, now merge the two factions of the NCP? For the family, this cuts the deepest. Ajit, Dada was the foremost among his generation, someone even Sule acknowledged looking up to, with an enviable personal connection across the clan. He groomed wife Sunita and son Parth into politics, in the dynastic mould that most parties unfortunately follow, but beyond politics, he was a person of sensitivity and authority in the Pawar clan. Indeed, across Baramati. He will be dearly missed at home and on his home turf even as his mixed legacy in politics and public life is appraised by commentators and historians in the years to come.

A strategic pact beyond tariffs

The long-anticipated India-European Union free trade agreement is now a reality. The figures are impressive—the free trade pact connects people who generate a quarter of the world's GDP. As a result of the deal, trade between the European Union and India is expected to more than double within a decade, propelling economic growth in large parts of the world. Still, it may not be the win-win that leaders on both sides are touting it to be, but it will certainly boost India's traditional exports of textiles, gems and jewellery and integrate Indian manufacturers, who are able to make the grade, into European supply chains. There will be some heartburn among our local uber-rich, as Europe too will gain by tapping into India's craze for high-end cars and foreign liquor, whose duties are being slashed.

At its most basic level, the agreement aims to reduce or eliminate tariffs on over 90 per cent of the goods traded between India and the 27-member bloc. As global trade becomes increasingly entangled with strategic competition—especially between the US and China—both India and the EU are seeking to diversify economic partnerships and reduce overdependence on any single country. That alone would be significant. However, the bigger gain is political. In the bewilderingly new multipolar world, where the US has made it abundantly clear it will not underwrite Europe's defence nor will it make the continent's enemies its own, a compact with a rising Asian power was needed to defend the sea commerce which has been the lifeblood of the European continent. India, too, needs a hedge in a world dominated by a fickle global power, which is more concerned about its backyard in the Arctic and South America rather than the problems of far-flung areas and an insurmountable northern neighbour, which has made clear that it feels Asia is its future pocket borough. That is where the less spoken about part of the negotiations comes into play—the Security and Defence Partnership between the two trading partners. To start with, it's still a nascent treaty. The two sides are talking about "closer engagements in maritime security, especially in the Indo-Pacific area, non-proliferation and disarmament, space, counter-terrorism, and countering cyber and hybrid threats."

It will certainly "boost defence industrial collaboration", with Indian manufacturers co-producing defence systems and selling their innovations as India continues its defence trade with traditional European partners. But the cream of the pact lies in the launch of negotiations for an ambitious 'Security of Information Agreement', which will let the two sides exchange "classified information and stronger cooperation in security and defence areas", which in turn could "lead to India's participation in EU security and defence initiatives." To sum up, in an era when trade is increasingly weaponised and the world is fragmenting into rival power centres, an agreement built on openness, rules, and mutual benefit also sends an important signal—that relations built in Greek times with ancient Marayans survive and can act as a pillar of sanity in the new world order which is being fashioned.



Guest Column

BISWAJIT DHAR

Almost two decades after they agreed to initiate negotiations to formalise a bilateral Free Trade Agreement (FTA), India and the EU finally announced the conclusion of the agreement. The FTA promises to benefit the two partners, coming as it does at a time when the global economy is beset with uncertainties caused by Trump's tariff war and the consequent dismantling of global trade rules. The escalating risk of trading with the US has forced major economies to explore ways of diversifying their export destinations. For both India and the EU, the newly minted FTA provides an opportunity to increase their bilateral trade and reduce their exposure to the US market.

This FTA promises to increase India's presence in the market of one of its largest trade partners that accounted for over 17% of the country's exports in 2024-25. India could benefit from the EU's decision to eliminate import tariffs on 96% of its exports in terms of trade value. Several labour-intensive manufacturing sectors, including textiles and clothing, leather, footwear, marine products, gems and jewellery, and engineering and automobiles, could be among the major beneficiaries, as the EU has offered to remove im-

India's trade agreement with EU brings relief for farmers

Though India expects the FTA would help increase agricultural exports, conformity with the EU's strict food safety laws could be a challenge

port duties on almost \$33 billion of India's exports once the implementation of the agreement gets under way. According to the Government of India, agricultural and processed food sectors could also receive "a transformative boost" under the India-EU FTA since commodities, such as tea, coffee, spices, fresh fruits and vegetables, and processed foods, are to gain additional market access. One of the major pluses for India is that its FTA with the EU does not require it to reduce import duties on major cereals and dairy products. India has, thus, been able to protect its sensitive agricultural products, preventing the farming community from facing adverse import competition. Getting enhanced access in partner countries' markets for service sectors has been among India's key interests in bilateral trade deals. The EU seems to have met India's expectations, as it has opened several sectors in which India has perceived strengths, including IT and IT-enabled services, education, financial services, and other business sectors. But the most noticeable gain for India in this sector is the EU's commitment to provide "seamless movement of skilled Indian professionals", which was one of India's key demands.

For the EU, its two-decade wait for clinching this bilateral trade deal seems to be well worth it, as it has secured substantial concessions to increase its presence in the world's 4th largest economy. India has offered to reduce or eliminate tariffs on 97% of its imports from the EU. Included in the concessions that India has offered are sharp reductions in the tariffs on automobiles from 10% to 10%, but future imports would be regulated through an annual quota. The EU would consider this as a major gain, since India had stridently refused to reduce tariffs on automobiles, preventing the deal from going through earlier. India has agreed to reduce import duties on a range of products, including pharmaceuticals, processed agricultural products, and machinery, though in most cases, tariffs would be reduced after 5-7 years. This transition period should stand the Indian industry in good stead, for it needs to improve its competitive strength to face import competition.

Though India has kept major agricultural commodities out of the trade deal, it has opened its domestic market for processed agricultural products to the EU. Tariffs on processed food, such as confectionery, breads, pastry, pasta, chocolates, pet food, and sheep meat, would be phased out over a period of time. The Indian government is quite upbeat about the prospects of

benefiting from this deal stemming from the lower levels of tariffs offered by the new FTA partner. However, realisation of the expected benefits may not be easy, as the EU uses a plethora of regulations that act as non-tariff measures. Importantly, many of these key regulations are embedded in the FTA.

The chapter on Trade and Sustainable Development of the Agreement introduces two sets of regulations, one to enhance environmental protection and climate change, and the other for effective protection of workers' rights. The EU has always favoured significant reduction of the carbon footprint, and for doing so, it has adopted strict domestic regulations for restricting emissions. Earlier this year, the EU imposed the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), which is a carbon tax imposed at the border on imports. The CBAM would make it difficult for Indian businesses to enter the EU market, as they would have to bear high compliance costs, eroding their competitiveness. The only silver lining is that the EU has offered to extend to India some concessions that it had earlier provided to the US, which may benefit the MSMEs.

In all its FTAs, the EU has insisted that its partner countries must ratify the Core Conventions of the Inter-

national Labour Organisation, ensuring effective protection of workers' rights. India has not ratified two of the key conventions—freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining—to lend flexibility to its labour market. It would be of interest to see whether the EU forces the Indian government to amend its labour laws.

Though India expects that the FTA would help increase agricultural exports, conformity with the EU's strict food safety standard laws could be a formidable challenge. The EU has explicitly stated that human, animal, and plant health is not negotiable.

India has accepted one of the EU's major demands to implement a high level of protection and enforcement of intellectual property rights. Specifically, the EU demanded that India must protect new plant varieties using the provisions of the UPOV Convention, which prevents farmers from saving seeds from one harvest and reusing them in the next. India has in place a law that allows farmers to save their seeds, besides protecting new plant varieties developed by them. The centre must ensure that this legislation is not barred away.

Dr Biswajit Dhar is former professor, Jawahar Nehrū University.

The void left behind in the party and the extended Pawar family may prove more challenging to fill



Niti Sutra

PROF HIMANSHU RAI

In the Mahabharata, war is never presented as a single, uncomplicated act. It is not merely a clash of armies or a contest of strength. There is yuddha—open, declared, rule-bound combat—and there is kutayuddha—covert, deceptive, indirect conflict fought through strategy rather than swords. Krishna acknowledges both, yet insists that neither is morally neutral. The true question is not how war is fought, but why it is fought and within what limits. Power, in this worldview, is always inseparable from responsibility.

In today's world, this ancient distinction has returned with renewed urgency. Wars are increasingly undeclared, fought through proxies, cyber operations, drones, sanctions, disinformation campaigns, and economic coercion. Battlefields are blurred; adversaries are unnamed; accountability is diluted. The age of kutayuddha has arrived—often without the ethical restraints that once governed even the most ruthless forms of conflict.

THE CLASSICAL DISTINCTION: Indian strategic thought never romanticised war. Kautilya viewed it as a tool of last resort, to be employed only after diplomacy, alliances, and internal strengthening had failed. The Mahabharata treated war as a

tragic necessity, permissible only when dharma was repeatedly violated and all peaceful avenues were exhausted.

Yuddha was governed by clear and publicly understood norms:

- declaration before engagement,
- protection of civilians,
- proportionality of force,
- respect for non-combatants and envoys.

KUTAYUDDHA, by contrast, allowed deception, surprise, and indirect methods—but only when open warfare would cause greater harm or when the adversary itself had abandoned dharma. Even then, it was not a licence for cruelty or excess. Chanakya warned that unrestrained deceit corrodes the victor as much as the vanquished, undermining internal cohesion and long-term stability.

This ethical layering is crucial. Indian thought did not divide war into "legal" and "illegal," but into justifiable and unjustifiable, judged by intent, consequence, proportionality, and restraint. Strategy was never divorced from moral judgment.

WAR IN THE MODERN AGE: Contemporary conflict increasingly resembles kutayuddha without conscience.

- Cyberattacks cripple infrastructure without attribution or accountability.
- Drones kill without formal

battlefields or declared hostilities.

- Economic sanctions devastate civilian populations far removed from decision-making power.
- Information warfare poisons public discourse and systematically delegitimises institutions.

These methods avoid the visible costs of open war but impose long-term instability and diffuse suffering. The danger lies not in kutayuddha itself, but in its normalisation without moral limits. When conflict becomes perpetual, invisible, and deniable, accountability erodes and escalation becomes unpredictable.

The world today suffers not from too much restraint, but from too little clarity about where limits lie and who bears responsibility.

INDIA'S STRATEGIC DILEMMA: India's security environment exposes it to both yuddha and kutayuddha. Conventional military threats persist along contested borders, while hybrid warfare—terrorism, cyber intrusions, economic coercion, and narrative manipulation—has become constant and relentless.

India's response has largely been measured, reflecting civilisational restraint rather than passivity. When force has been used, it has been calibrated, limited in scope, and publicly jus-

tified. When covert responses have been employed, they have tended to be restrained, defensive, and proportionate, aimed at deterrence rather than spectacle.

This approach frustrates those who demand either total aggression or absolute pacifism. Yet Chanakya would recognise it as strategic maturity—the ability to choose methods without surrendering ethics, and to wield power without becoming captive to it.

ETHICS AS STRATEGIC ADVANTAGE: Contrary to cynical belief, ethics are not a handicap in war; they are a strategic asset. Wars fought without restraint generate endless cycles of retaliation. Populations radicalise, legitimacy collapses, alliances fracture, and peace becomes structurally impossible.

The Bhagavad Gita reminds us that violence divorced from dharma destroys discernment. A warrior who loses moral clarity loses strategic clarity as well. The same holds true for states that allow short-term gains to override long-term order.

India's insistence on norms—sovereignty, proportionality, civilian protection—enhances its credibility globally. It allows India to act when necessary without being perceived as reckless or predatory. In a fractured world, legitimacy multiplies power more effectively than raw force.

THE RETURN OF JUST WAR THINKING: The global

order urgently needs a renewed conversation on the ethics of conflict. International law has struggled to keep pace with technological and hybrid warfare. Yet ancient frameworks like yuddha and kutayuddha offer a richer moral vocabulary than modern binaries of "legal" and "illegal."

THEY ASK DEEPER QUESTIONS:

- Was force unavoidable?
- Were alternatives exhausted?
- Was harm minimised?
- Does the action preserve long-term order or undermine it?

These questions do not weaken states; they civilise power and anchor strategy in responsibility.

THE SUTRA FOR OUR TIMES: The future will not eliminate war, but it can shape how war is conducted. The choice before nations is not between force and restraint, but between disciplined power and chaotic violence.

Yuddha reminds us of transparency and limits.
Kutayuddha reminds us of strategy and foresight.

Dharma reminds us that both must serve stability, not ego.

THE SUTRA FOR OUR TIMES IS THIS: When war becomes necessary, let strategy guide action and ethics restrain power—for victory without dharma is only delayed defeat.

The writer is director of Indian Institute of Management, Indore

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

India as Stabiliser

Global recognition of India reflects trust in its political continuity, economic resilience and pluralism. In uncertain times, reliability matters more than dominance. Sustaining credibility requires strong institutions, inclusive growth and balanced diplomacy. If guided wisely, India's rise can serve as a stabilising global force, promoting cooperation and tempering volatility worldwide.

Insia Raj, Ujjain

Bengal's Humanist Legacy

Support extended to a Kerala nun through Bengal's batik tradition reflects the region's enduring humanist values. From Tagore's rural empowerment to Mother Teresa's compassion, Bengal symbolises tolerance and

empathy. Attempts to vilify this legacy should caution against growing intolerance. Preserving cultural pluralism remains essential to safeguarding India's moral fabric.

Prasun Dutta, West Midnapore

Governor's Repeated Walkouts

Tamil Nadu Governor R.N. Ravi's repeated walkouts from the Assembly undermine constitutional decorum. Unlike innocent error, these acts appear deliberate, marked by arrogance and political hostility. Such conduct diminishes the dignity of the office and fuels unnecessary confrontation. Constitutional positions demand restraint, respect and responsibility—not provocation or indifference.

Tharcus S. Fernando, Chennai

An Act of Madness

The cold-blooded murder of a fellow passenger in a crowded Mumbai local has sent shock waves among commuters. Petty quarrels in a crowded local train for a 'seat' are common, but physical violence is unacceptable. The intention may not have been to 'kill', but a family has lost their near and dear one due to an act of sheer madness. The accused needs to get capital punishment so that it acts as a stern warning to others committing similar such crimes. We must have the patience to accommodate fellow passengers in the short local train journey we take each day!

S.N. Kabra, Mumbai



Double-Engine Myth

Claims that Tamil Nadu needs a 'double-engine government' ignore reality. The State recorded 11.19% GSDP growth in 2024-25, the highest nationally, driven by industry

and human development. Voters have consistently rejected this model. The DMK's sharp counter signals an aggressive campaign against misleading growth narratives.

Ranganathan Sivakumar, Chennai

Padma for Pioneers

Vijay Amritraj's Padma Bhushan honours his immense contribution to Indian tennis. Though without a Grand Slam title, his Davis Cup record and global stature

inspired generations. Alongside legends like Borg and Connors, he shaped an era. Amritraj's influence parallels Gavaskar's in cricket, igniting a sporting revolution that nurtured future champions.

S.N. Kabra

Winning Ways, Lessons

India's dominant T20 series win against New Zealand showcased brilliant leadership and bowling discipline. While the top order is firing, Sanju Samson's struggle reflects pressure rather than lack of talent. He needs patience—singles first, shots later. Aggressive teammates shot-for-shot may hurt his game. A calmer approach could unlock his true potential.

Vinay Mahadevan, Chennai

The FT View



FINANCIAL TIMES
"Without fear and without favour"

ft.com/opinion

Intervention will not reverse yen weakness

Loose fiscal policy no longer makes sense now that Japan has escaped deflation

Since last Friday, when the US Treasury conducted a so-called "rate check" of market participants, the yen has jumped from around ¥159 per dollar to hold levels close to ¥153. It is a sizeable move, and while it remains unclear whether any intervention actually took place, the signalling by the US and Japan was the closest thing short of it. Intervention to strengthen the yen is unlikely to do much good, but equally, it is unlikely to do much harm. The bigger question to ponder for Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe – and his electorate – is why the yen is so persistently weak.

Intervention is unlikely to do much good because of the basic trilemma of international economics. The trilemma states that it is not possible to have all

three of a fixed exchange rate, free movement of capital and an independent monetary policy. Since there is no plan to stop Japanese citizens from moving their capital in and out of the country, or to prevent the Bank of Japan from setting interest rates as it sees fit, it follows that the authorities will be unable to fix the exchange rate. Empirical studies of currency intervention suggest there is a short-term impact on market prices that quickly dissipates.

Intervention is unlikely to do much harm because the yen is, according to most estimates, extremely cheap. Japan has large foreign currency reserves – accumulated decades ago, during interventions when it was trying to hold the yen down – and converting some of those reserves back into yen at today's advantageous exchange rates will realise a sizeable profit. As long as Japan does not try to fight the markets with massive, open-ended intervention, purchases now will most likely work out as a good trade, and not something

the country has cause to regret.

Whether intervention is verbal or actual, it may succeed in stabilising the yen for a few weeks, and with Japan going to the polls for a general election on February 8, Takaichi will be happy enough with that. The weakness of the currency, however, shows the downside of her populist fiscal policies. They include a proposal to suspend consumption tax on food for two years, on top of the large stimulus package she passed last November. Takaichi's political imperative is to lower the cost of living, which has become the number one issue for the public, now that inflation has returned in Japan.

While the country was suffering deflation, fiscal stimulus made sense in order to bolster demand and use spare capacity in the economy. Now that Japan has inflation, however, it is hard to understand the economic rationale: extra spending and borrowing by the government is likely to push up interest rates without much benefit to activity. Even

The risks of a debt crisis are often overstated and there is little imminent danger

more seriously, populist fiscal policy could raise concern about Japan's large public debt. The risks of a debt crisis are often overstated and there is little imminent danger. Nonetheless, if you are one of the world's largest sovereign debtors relative to GDP, you should be prudent with the public finances unless there is good reason to act otherwise.

The yen's move was especially large because of the implication that the US Treasury might get involved in co-ordinated intervention. Its interest in the matter is clear: the weaker the yen, along with other Asian currencies such as the Korean won, the harder it is to reduce the US trade deficit. But just as it is at the Japanese end, the US trade deficit is driven by the fundamentals of supply and demand in the economy. Intervention in the yen is a flashy way to appear to be taking action, but if they want an actual appreciation in the Japanese currency, decision makers on both sides of the Pacific should look at policies closer to home.

Opinion Science

Can smart pills make us healthier?



Anjana Ahuja

The old term was "compliance"; today, the preferred label is "adherence". Whatever you call it, getting patients to keep taking their meds is a big deal.

First, it benefits the patient: non-adherence accounts for an estimated 125,000 preventable deaths per year in the US, many from controllable conditions such as HIV and type 2 diabetes, plus at least \$100bn in health-care costs. Second, private lapses matter for public health: drug-resistant strains of tuberculosis have emerged triumphant from half-finished treatment courses.

Now scientists at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology claim to be one gulp closer to tackling the problem, by creating an experimental pill that sends a radio signal to report it has been swallowed. The signal is detected

We need to recognise the shift that happens when drugs become messengers as well as medicines

locally and then sent on to health staff, with a missing signal prompting a reminder or an alert. While digital pills have appeared before, the touted leap forward here involves electronics that disappear after being taken. The MIT smart pill is mostly "bioreabsorbable", which means it can break down in the body.

But while we should welcome innovations that make it easier to stay healthy, we should also recognise the subtle shift that happens when pills become messengers as well as medicines. Digital treatments "reinforce the framing of non-compliance as the fault of the patient rather than of the healthcare team, supply chain or medication itself", observes bioethicist Richard Ashcroft of City St George's University of London, adding they should not replace the human touch. Smart pills also raise obvious issues of privacy and autonomy, as the MIT researchers themselves recognise, given sensitive medical information is telegraphed to third parties.

The experimental pill, so far tested only in animals and reported in *Nature Communications* earlier this month, comprises a capsule containing a zinc RFID antenna wrapped in cellulose, a natural plant polymer. The capsule's outer layer is made of gelatin, cellulose and a signal-

blocking substance like molybdenum. Swallowing it causes the coating to dissolve, which releases the antenna. This activates a radio-frequency tag, providing a time stamp for ingestion to be picked up by a nearby reader, like a wearable patch, and transmitted onwards.

Preliminary studies in pigs showed the tag activated within an hour of hitting the gut. All the ingredients broke down in the body over 24 hours except for the sub-millimetre RFID tag, presumed to have been excreted out. Giovanni Traverso, a gastroenterologist and co-author of the paper, said the passive, degradable system avoided the safety concerns of existing digital pills, with no batteries or electronic components left in the body. Measured levels of zinc and molybdenum afterwards were recorded as being within the bounds of dietary variation.

Further work would need to prove the pills can work long term in people. The project received funding from the Advanced Research Projects Agency for Health (Arpa-H) and pharma company Novo Nordisk; three authors, including Traverso, are named as co-inventors on a patent application.

For now, he explained, the proof-of-concept targets conditions for which missed doses carry considerable risks: neuropsychiatric illnesses; tuberculosis; HIV; immunosuppression for transplant patients, to stave off organ rejection; some cases of cancer and cardiovascular disease. The system can, however, be spoofed by dissolving the capsule outside the stomach, so deploying it requires guarding against false positives.

There are other barriers to wider adoption: feasibility, cost, miniaturisation and regulatory acceptance. The technology, Traverso recognised, "raises legitimate concerns about privacy, consent and autonomy... and [we] see ethical oversight and engagement with patients and ethicists as essential steps in clinical translation".

In short, digital pills still need patient buy-in. It is worth asking: why do some find it hard to reliably take their pills in the first place? The American Medical Association lists many reasons: fear of side-effects; worries about cost; not understanding why they are necessary, especially for chronic rather than acute diseases; a perceived lack of symptoms; confusion when taking multiple medicines; a suspicion of doctors, drugs or drug companies; concerns over dependency; depression.

None of these means that digital pills are a dead end; they could furnish valuable insights into real patient behaviour. But social, economic and cultural fixes matter too.

The writer is a science commentator

Letters

China's shrinking population isn't a problem

Your editorial offers some obvious suggestions for raising China's extremely low fertility rate ("A better way to address China's population decline", FT View, January 22).

The UN forecast showing China's population shrinking to less than half of its current size of 1.4bn by 2100 is mind-blowing, but this is just an extrapolation of current fertility and mortality trends. It is not a crisis requiring dramatic and immediate measures.

While it is hard to see today how China will stabilise its population in the

next 75 years, it was not possible 75 years ago to imagine the world we live in now. There is a combination of government policies, human behaviour and technology that should be able to raise China's fertility rate close to the 2.1 (children per woman) replacement level by 2100.

The problem with your editorial is that it seems to regard the proper population size of China to be 1.4bn people. In a world where climate change is an existential crisis, China along with every other country would benefit from setting a target population

size in the medium term that is smaller. This target would be adjusted up or down every five or 10 years as each country gets a better understanding of its sustainable population size. In the case of China, for example, a case can be made that China will be more prosperous and even more of a global superpower if its population size is stabilised around 1bn souls in 2100.

Lex Rieffel
Former Scholar, Brookings Institution;
Former Economist, US Treasury
Department, Washington, DC, US

How climate goals skewed incentives for Shell and BP

The Big Read describing how energy giants Shell and BP tried to transform their businesses to slash emissions, but ended up dramatically scaling back those plans, writing off billions of dollars as they shut or sold units, is illuminating not only for what it reveals about corporate strategy, but for what it shows about a deeper tension between company-level incentives and investors' self-interest ("Inside a failed green revolution", December 11).

The article documents apparent mis-steps by both companies: organisational disruption, over-reach, and investments that did not always play to their strengths. It also shows how investor pressure for near-term performance was a factor in both companies' decisions to reverse course after oil prices slipped following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

A former Shell executive notes that investors have historically accepted long gestation periods for oil and gas investments, while expecting new energy businesses to deliver comparable results almost immediately. That asymmetry was an important influence.

More fundamentally, another factor behind BP's and Shell's reversals reflects a much wider problem. The financial interests of individual companies and those of their investors are often treated as identical – but for most investors, they are not.

Most asset owners, such as pension funds, hold diversified, long-term portfolios whose performance depends far more on the health and stability of the overall economy than on particular companies' short-term returns.

Strategies that maximise near-term profits by externalising costs that destabilise the broader economy – such as those caused by outsized greenhouse gas emissions – can be rational for individual companies while ultimately damaging investors' portfolios.

Climate risks do not remain confined to one balance sheet or sector. They affect growth broadly and a growing number of studies show that if current decarbonisation trends persist, long-term portfolios could be severely impacted.

Yet most investors continue to reward companies' pursuit of short-term profits, even when the practices used to achieve them worsen systemic risks. That incentivises companies to abandon transition strategies and revert to business models that appear safer in the short run, regardless of their longer-term consequences for the economy and for portfolios.

The lesson from BP and Shell is therefore not simply that energy transitions are difficult or that these companies moved too fast. It is that



without patient, aligned capital, companies are pushed towards decisions that may benefit some shareholders in the short run, while undermining the economic foundations on which most investors ultimately rely.

Ben Cushing
Director, The Sierra Club's Sustainable Finance Campaign, Washington, DC, US

An unfair asymmetry in how fraud cases are covered

In 2017 the US Securities and Exchange Commission commenced proceedings for fraud and other offences against Rio Tinto, its chief executive, and its former chief financial officer, Guy Elliott. The case centred on the alleged late disclosure to shareholders of information about the collapse in value of the company's investment in a Mozambique coal project.

The SEC in due course dropped the fraud allegation but continued with the other lesser charges. In 2023, it reached a settlement with the company and with the chief executive. Guy Elliott refused to settle because he wanted complete exoneration. Two weeks ago the SEC dropped all charges.

There has been almost no coverage of this. Yet it is important since it represents the vindication of someone whose professional life has been blighted for a decade by these proceedings, and his personal life horribly overshadowed by them, because of over-mighty authorities bashing away at individuals and being found to have nothing worthwhile to bash with.

This event deserves to be properly remarked upon. We write as friends of Guy Elliott who always have known him to be, not only top of the league in terms of honourable business people, but also as utterly conscientious.

Louis Greig
London SW7, UK
Richard Oldfield
Faversham, Kent, UK

Trump vowed to 'stop this carnage'. Remember that?

Donald Trump is perpetrating the "American carnage" he vowed to end, aided and abetted by Congress ("Inside Minneapolis: a city under siege", The Big Read Visual Investigation, January 26).

The American journalist G Elliott Morris, author of *Strength in Numbers*, wrote that Republicans could stop this at any time: "All it would take to end the murder of American citizens by an untrained government goon squad is 16 Republicans in Congress voting with Democrats to defund ICE (or 23 to impeach and remove Trump – 3 in House & 20 in Senate). That's it: 23 Americans can vote for the public and end all of this."

There are 1.3mn Americans, active military members, who are prepared to lay down their lives to protect our country and preserve our constitution, but apparently there are not even 23 members of Congress (also sworn to protect the country and constitution), who are willing to risk their jobs to end the carnage. That's a shocking statistic.

Ruth Bettelheim
Psychotherapist, Life Coach and Writer,
Portland, OR, US

The business case for online prediction platforms

Your editorial on "The uses and abuses of prediction markets" (FT View, January 26) warns against dismissing markets hosted by online platforms like Kalshi and Polymarket as "mere gambling".

However the business model of these platforms is the same as traditional bookmakers: their ultimate source of revenue is punters, who must collectively lose money if the platform is to make a profit.

Topics such as sports and entertainment can attract so-called "dumb money" but markets for more specialised subjects, which would be more helpful to policymakers than knowing whether Taylor Swift is pregnant, often struggle to attract less-informed punters. The result is that popular prediction market platforms have become sports betting exchanges in all but name.

Esports like *League of Legends* have been a few free lunches but assuming knowledgeable forecasters will be compensated by recreational gamblers is to expect a free lunch. Lunch can be paid for if the market is explicitly subsidised by those who want a prediction, removing the need to attract uninformed participants. This could make prediction markets socially useful, but it is a fundamentally different model to that being pursued by platforms like Kalshi.

Mark Roulston
Senior Research Fellow, Lancaster
University Management School, Lancaster
University, Lancaster, Lancashire, UK

Grade inflation charge can't be levelled at Durham

Chris Smyth and Amy Borrett's article, "Rise in top grades at English universities sparks alarm" (Report, January 15), ignores the broader picture. Durham University awards grades based on merit. There is no dilution or easing of standards. The Office for Students (OfS) has raised no concerns with us as a result of its annual monitoring.

As we told the FT, the article selects one element of the OfS data. To explain further: the OfS looked at what degree grades universities awarded in 2010/11, and then considered, year by year, whether they were grading in line with expectations – based on students' entry qualifications, and the grades gained by students with equivalent qualifications in 2010/11.

An alternative OfS metric shows that Durham was an outlier in 2010/11, awarding far fewer first-class degrees than expected based on the sector-wide data. For 2023/24, those figures are much closer to expectations. Conclusion: on the most recent data available, Durham awards an appropriate proportion of first-class degrees.

Our full University statement is here: <https://www.durham.ac.uk/about-us/notices/office-for-students-degree-classification-data/>

Professor Tony Fawcett
Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education),
Durham University, UK

PM to Beijing, cap in hand

By all accounts Sir Keir Starmer's delegation to China has high hopes of securing some major Chinese investments in the British economy ("PM to tour China on charm offensive", Report, January 26).

But why is it necessary for Britain to go cap-in-hand to China for investment funding? The answer, of course, is that Britain saves too little and consumes too much, a pattern that is traceable as far back as the 1970s. It is a true indication of Britain's relative decline that almost no one in authority in London seems to think this is a problem.

Eamonn Fingleton
Author, Dublin, Ireland

Touché from the Balts

The Financial Times, a publication based in the former Roman province, an Anglo-Saxon settlement zone, and a possession of the Dukes of Normandy, keeps referring to the Baltic states, which were occupied by the Soviet Union for over 50 years, as "former Soviet republics" ("Europe already at war" with Russia, says Latvia's central banker, Report, January 18).

Perhaps the FT does not know that the UK did not recognise Soviet sovereignty over them and that the British view is that they were never Soviet republics.

Branslav Shantchev
Professor of Federal Science,
University of California, San Diego,
CA, US

Bertrand Russell on Marx, and our hate-filled politics

A wise person, the philosopher Bertrand Russell, once noted that Marxism did not fail for its love of the proletariat, but rather for its hatred of the bourgeoisie.

Hate-filled politics sow the seeds of their own demise, but not always soon enough.
Fred Lucas
London W4, UK

Opinion

ICE and America's flailing autocrat

POLITICS

Edward Luce



As governor of South Dakota, Kristi Noem launched an anti-drug campaign with the tagline: "Meth: We're on it." Noem's message control has not obviously sharpened as Donald Trump's homeland security secretary. On Saturday, Noem insisted that the slain Alex Pretti was "brandishing" a gun with the intent of attacking federal officers. Anyone watching the Minneapolis videos would have seen a man shot 10 times in the back after trying to protect a woman from being manhandled. Noem nevertheless instructed

Americans to ignore what they saw with their own eyes.

As goes Noem, so goes the rest of Trump's team. Stephen Miller, Trump's deputy chief of staff and self-appointed bad cop, called Pretti a "domestic terrorist". This echoed what the administration said about Renée Good, a 37-year-old woman, who was also shot dead at point blank range in Minneapolis two weeks ago. Though her vehicle was turning at a slow speed, and the officer shot her through the side window, the Trump crew said she was using her car as a weapon. After Pretti's murder, Trump's defence secretary, Pete Hegseth, told ICE agents in a post on X that "we have your back 100%. You are SAVING the country."

Which raises the question, with autocrats like these, who needs democrats? It is possible that actual Democrats will miss the open goal that Trump has presented to them. He came to office with

immigration as his strongest issue. Americans wanted violent criminals deported and border control enforced. Instead, Trump has turned ICE into a menacing paramilitary that detains five-year-olds, hauls elderly men from their homes, snatches mothers from day care centres and executes non-

Trump is stirring the public out of an apathy that is essential to any power grab

violent protesters. The US public is turning sharply against these methods.

After Good's slaughter, JD Vance, the vice-president, declared ICE and border patrol agents had "absolute immunity". Vance and his colleagues are ploughing through the US constitution at speed.

Each of its key amendments – the first on free speech, the second on gun rights, the fourth on protection from warrantless searches – turns out to be optional, depending on whether it is convenient. A competent wannabe autocrat would be covering his actions in the patina of legality, pitching scholars against scholars. Trump, by contrast, is uniting scholars and ignoramuses against him.

In so doing, he is stirring the public out of an apathy that is essential to any power grab. Someone once remarked that Trump's incompetence outruns his malevolence. That observation's salience is on full display. Pretti was a nurse at an intensive care unit for veterans. Good was mother to a six-year-old, and her last words were: "It's fine dude, I'm not mad at you." Each is instantly recognisable as your friendly neighbour on any American block volunteering to shovel your snow or jump-start your car. The phrase "Minnesota nice"

describes a state that is particularly known for such people. To depict them as terrorists is darkly comical and profoundly inept.

The legitimate fear is that Trump will rig the US midterm elections this November to stop a widely forecast Republican defeat. But he is robbing himself of the means to get away with it. The meta-tool available to him is public gullibility. Enough people must be willing to believe that ballot boxes are being stuffed, or illegal immigrants are being bussed to the polling booths, for any shenanigans to work. The hollow people working for him are wrecking that tool with easily discredited propaganda.

That, in turn, threatens to neutralise Trump's on-the-ground muscle. ICE and Border Patrol are the obvious federal crack troops to respond to viral stories about "illegals" swamping polling booths. The US public is now deeply familiar with masked men poking guns

in the faces of unmasked civilians. "We are the storm," said Miller at the funeral of the murdered Maga broadcaster Charlie Kirk last September. "Our enemies cannot comprehend our strength, our determination, our resolve... You are nothing. You are wickedness." That indeed was a scary threat from Miller. But it was super-unwise. A competent autocrat would be stoking the country's desire to be protected from the "enemy within". Instead, Americans increasingly fear their alleged protectors.

The same applies on the global stage. It is hard to find an American who dreads Mark Carney, Canada's prime minister is to Trump's foreign policy what Good and Pretti are to his domestic politics. A competent autocrat selects his enemies with skill. Trump's Achilles heel is that he gets worse at this with experience.

edward.luce@ft.com

The reality of a world after rupture

Martin Wolf Economics

Europe has a key role to play in building a successor to the US-led global order



At the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos last week we heard Donald Trump deliver a rambling address suffused with his familiar blend of grievance and megalomania. We also heard Mark Carney, former central banker and now prime minister of Canada, deliver a brilliant speech on the end of the old order and options for "middle powers". The latter was the bigger event.

Carney began by citing an essay by Václav Havel, writer, dissident and first president of post-communist Czechoslovakia. In this Havel argued that communism sustained itself, in Carney's words, "through the participation of ordinary people in rituals they privately know to be false". In a similar way, Carney argued: "We largely avoided calling out the gaps between the rhetoric and reality" of what we called the "international rules-based order". But in today's world of weaponised interdependence, "you cannot live within the lie of mutual benefit through integration when integration becomes the source of your subordination". Today, he argued, marks a "rupture, not a transition". He was right.

Carney insisted not only that the old order is not coming back, but that we "shouldn't mourn it. Nostalgia is not a strategy." The following sentence, which is "we believe that from the fracture, we can build something better, stronger, more just", is a hope, but also not a strategy. A sober analyst must ask whether and how far it might become one.

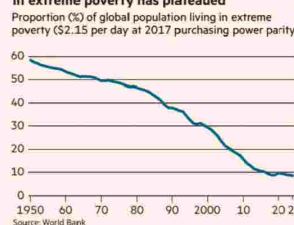
If we are to turn hope into reality, we must realise that the parallel he drew between the lies that sustained communism and those legitimising the old global regime is misleading. The former were outright lies: the old regimes of eastern Europe failed on every dimension relative to western Europe. The latter, however, were better even than half-truths.

Dispute settlement within the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade and World Trade Organization, for example, was often effective, even against the US. As Carney himself notes: "American hegemony, in particular, helped provide public goods: open sea lanes, a stable financial system, collective security and support for frameworks for resolving disputes". The liberal order was far from mere fiction.

Far more important, the post-second world war period was, in the large, one of huge, indeed unprecedented, success. There has been no direct war between great powers since the Korean war in the early 1950s. The spread of prosperity and improvements in health across much of the globe has been unprecedented. The opening of the world economy to trade and investment has made a vital contribution: any sensible Chinese or Indian person would agree on that. As for the difficulties of adjustment in some countries, notably the US, this is due to political choices made by the most prosperous. Trump's chaotic protectionism has been the result. But it will fail to succour the people it is supposed to help: it is a fraud.



A huge fall in the share of the world's people in extreme poverty has plateaued

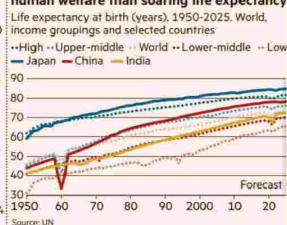


In sum, integration was a source of prosperity and vulnerability. The system was far from a lie, but has changed into one, as the mercantilism of a rising China interacted with the protectionism of a declining US. The result has been to force countries to hedge. But, make no mistake, this hedging will be costly.

So, where should we go from here if we are to minimise the losses caused by the rupture? Carney's recommendation is for agreements among "middle powers" as an alternative to a "world of fortresses".

Carney recommends agreements among 'middle powers' as an alternative to a 'world of fortresses'

There is no better indicator of improving human welfare than soaring life expectancy



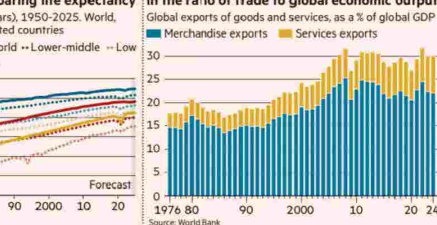
His approach is to be based on what Alexander Stubb, president of Finland, calls "values-based realism": Canada will be "principled in our commitment to fundamental values", by "engaging broadly, strategically, with open eyes".

Assume that every middle power moves in a similar direction: where would it work best, where would it work worst and what else might be required if problems are to be solved?

Trade and investment are the easiest areas to sustain. The collapse of the old rules creates costly uncertainty, particularly in regard to trade with the US. But the latter only accounted for 17 per cent of world imports of goods in 2024. Big, but not the only market.

Money and finance are more difficult. The middle powers will be vulnerable to extortion by the US over use of the dol-

The era of 'hyperglobalisation' saw a big rise in the ratio of trade to global economic output



lar and reliance on the US financial system, without some radical reform. Use of the renminbi is not a solution: it just creates another vulnerability.

Security is a still more difficult challenge. The world has three nuclear superpowers and two all-round military ones. There is a limit to the ability of most middle powers to provide security for themselves and their partners. Against some threats – piracy, for example – they may be effective. But against others, this will prove harder.

Yet it is going to be even harder to provide certain global public goods, notably action against climate change, if one or more superpowers is fiercely opposed. Here global co-operation will be needed, perhaps sanctions against the US.

The more one looks at what lies ahead, the more important, as my col-

league Martin Sandbu argues, becomes the EU – in Trump's eyes, the greatest enemy. With every passing day, the EU is having more greatness thrust upon it, in all domains. Happily, it is not without weapons. As Robert Shapiro, commerce under-secretary under Bill Clinton, notes, Europe's financial leverage over the US is substantial. It must use it.

In his book *The World of Yesterday*, written in exile, Stefan Zweig, an Austrian Jewish writer who died by suicide in Brazil in 1942, described the lost world of pre-first world war Europe. We are also losing a world. It, too, was imperfect, though far better than that one. This time, Europe has to be a saviour, not a destroyer. The UK, too, will have to join in the struggles now ahead.

martin.wolf@ft.com

What to do when no relationship is special

GEOPOLITICS

Constanze Stelzenmüller



That's the news from Lake Wobegon: where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking and all the children are above average," was the frequent tagline of an ironically nostalgic American radio show set in the eponymous (fictional) small town in Minnesota. A similarly wistful take on NATO might have run: "Where all the allies are blameless, Article 5 is an article of faith, and every relationship is special."

Cynics will point out, fairly, that it was never thus. Yet the point may be moot.

President Donald Trump's climbdown in Davos from his threat of invading Greenland, and Europeans sending a tripwire force to the island to give him pause, may have left the alliance formally intact. But it has been shaken to its very foundations.

Within the past week, I have heard politicians and policymakers from northern Europe muse about the problem of the US as the latest hostile member within NATO; it might be time, one thought, to reopen the Western European Union (the EU's proto-defence club, founded in 1954 and finally retired in 2011). Another asked: "Do we need to move from defending Europe without the US to defending it against the US?" A third felt that Europe needed to own new nuclear weapons capability for regional deterrence – one that is shared and not reliant on the US for maintenance. That same week, the Toronto-based Globe and Mail reported that the

armed forces of Canada, a founding member of NATO, had modelled a hypothetical US invasion of their country for the first time in more than a century.

But it's worse than that. NATO member states on Europe's Atlantic and Arctic flanks, protected by geography

There is more potential for action in the Arctic beyond just periodically standing up to bullying

from the constant tension juddering through eastern and central Europe ever since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, always took deep reassurance from their proximity and deep security ties to America. Dignitaries visiting Washington from these countries would invariably intone at dinners that, Trumpian

turbulences notwithstanding, our special relationship immunises us against any kind of trouble.

Indeed, shared civilisational beliefs, universal values and mutual interests were subject to interpretation within NATO even before Trump. Yet there was at least one rock-hard basis for even the most peripheral or least powerful states' bilateral relationship with America: the possession of strategic real estate essential to US homeland defence, allied defence and US power projection abroad (from Canada and Denmark to the Azores and Norway). The lesson of Greenland for Europe's western flank is that the "iron laws of the world" (as Trump's adviser Stephen Miller put it) apply here too: everything can be weaponised at any time.

Some locations now feel especially vulnerable. The Norwegian Arctic Archipelago Svalbard has had a demilitarised status since 1920; but it guards

the exit route of the Russian nuclear submarine fleet on the nearby Kola Peninsula and houses a large polar-orbit satellite ground station whose data supports commercial and military systems worldwide. Iceland (no military) or Ireland (tiny navy) are also now very conscious of their exposure.

Europe's Atlantic and Arctic states have been quietly reviewing their national defences; Iceland gave itself a new national security strategy in 2025. Leaders in Oslo, Reykjavik, Dublin, Copenhagen and elsewhere are upping defence budgets and improving capabilities. For now, there are no signs that Ireland will follow Sweden and Finland and join NATO; Iceland is mulling a referendum on opening EU accession talks. Even so, in an enormous maritime zone that is now the object of predatory interest from three great powers, there is more potential for collective action beyond just

periodically standing up to US bullying. European countries could establish a sustained presence on Greenland that focuses on the wellbeing and security of Greenlanders. That would help Greenland and Denmark protect a fragile ice ecosystem whose integrity is a global public good, and engage in responsible harvesting of natural resources. They could also collaborate to provide the entire region with space-based and maritime systems for early warning about risks and threats ranging from climate change to hostile activity around seabed cables and other infrastructure.

Such a dense and comprehensive safety net doesn't require club membership in either NATO or the EU. But it would stabilise the region – and thus serve the interests of both and, arguably, America's too.

The writer directs the Center on the US and Europe at the Brookings Institution

Opinion

The world will remember Trump's Greenland outburst

He is attacking the shared values to which democracies have aspired for decades: the rule of law, recognition of national sovereignty and respect for self-determination.

The Editorial Board

The free world exhaled last Wednesday when President Trump retreated from his administration's threat to invade Greenland. That relief, however, masks the damage that Mr. Trump has done to America this month. Mr. Trump's apologists once dismissed his bullying of Greenland as an attempt at humor. Instead, it has been something far darker. His immoral threats against a loyal NATO ally have escalated a crisis in U.S.-European relations, weakened one of history's most successful alliances and hurt American interests in tangible ways.

NATO has been an important force for global stability and for the democratic values that America champions. It has made the world safer, more prosperous and better able to work together in common purpose. The alliance amplifies American military might, deterring Russia and adversaries around the world through the original promise that an attack on one member is an attack on all. NATO also serves nonmilitary purposes, helping present a unified front that limits the rising technological and economic influence of China and its autocratic allies.

Mr. Trump is undermining these interests with his push to take control of Greenland, a semiautonomous territory of Denmark, despite vociferous resistance from Denmark and Greenlanders themselves. He is attacking the shared values to which democracies have aspired for decades: the rule of law, recognition of national sovereignty and respect for self-determination. Mr. Trump is causing what Prime Minister Mark Carney of Canada last week called "a rupture, not a transition" in the world order.

In normal times, the president deserves great deference in the exercise of foreign affairs, but that deference is never absolute, especially not when the president has shown himself unbound by legal and ethical constraints. When the president endangers the country or breaks its laws, other branches of government have a responsibility to intervene. Mr. Trump's repeated moves to undercut America's most valuable alliance require other Americans to reaffirm their commitment to international partners. The Republicans who control Congress cannot sit on their hands as they have so many times in the last year. Many of them know the value of NATO. Congress should pass a bill that bars spending on any military action against Greenland or Western Europe. It should also hold up all of Mr. Trump's nominees to national security positions until he commits to halting his attacks on the alliance.

The Supreme Court has a role to play as well. Mr. Trump's attempt to use tariffs to coerce allies, including in the fight over Greenland, is unconstitutional. He has justified using them by declaring a national emergency on false pretenses. We are encouraged that most justices expressed skepticism of his use of tariffs during oral



ILLUSTRATION BY REBECCA CHEN/THE NEW YORK TIMES

arguments in November. We are disappointed that the justices are about to embark on a midwinter break that will last until late February, apparently without acting on the case. They should issue an expedited ruling, given

the policy's illegality and the damage it is causing.

Mr. Trump has always been an undisciplined and unprincipled politician, but the shambolic and sometimes illegal nature of his foreign policy

moves of the past few weeks has been unusually harmful.

After months of blowing up boats in the Caribbean, without giving the victims any chance to defend themselves, he ordered a military operation

to capture Venezuela's dictator — and has since allowed the dictator's corrupt deputies to continue ruling the country. Mr. Trump encouraged Iranians to rise up against their brutal government.

EDITORIAL BOARD, PAGE 10

Minneapolis and Gaza now share the same violent language

When ICE and Hamas start looking the same, we are all in trouble.



Thomas L. Friedman

Every day now, I sit at my computer and ask myself: What is there left to say about the two news stories I care about most? One is unfolding in my hometown, on the banks of the Mississippi River; the other is unfolding on the West Bank of the Jordan and on both banks of the Wadi Gaza.

Which video should I linger on longest? The footage of Renee Good, shot in the face by an ICE officer in Minneapolis while she was clearly trying to evacuate the scene? Or the video from Saturday of federal agents shooting Alex Pretti, an intensive care nurse, after he tried to help a woman who was being pepper-sprayed? Or perhaps the video from last Wednesday showing the aftermath of Israeli strikes that killed three Palestinian journalists, among others, in Gaza? The journalists had been working for a committee providing Egyptian aid and were documenting its distribution at a displacement camp. Or perhaps the videos of Hamas executing rivals and refusing to yield, despite the fact that the war the group ignited on Oct. 7, 2023, has resulted in nothing but catas-

trophe for Palestinians?

These stories have much more in common than you might think. All are driven, in my view, by terrible leaders who prefer easy, violent solutions to the hard work of negotiated problem-solving. These leaders see an iron-fisted approach as the best way to win their next elections: President Trump in the 2026 midterms; Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel, who is expected to call elections around the same time; and Hamas, in its desperate effort to lead the Palestinian movement in the postwar era, despite having lost the war.

Hamas and ICE also share one very visible trait that I never thought I'd see in the United States: Almost all of their foot soldiers wear masks. My experience as a reporter in the Middle East taught me that people wear masks because they are up to something bad and don't want their faces captured on camera. I saw it often in Beirut and in Gaza; I never expected to see it in Minneapolis. Since when have America's domestic policing forces, charged with defending the Constitution and the rule of law, felt the need to hide their identities?

I understand why Hamas fighters wear masks — they have both Israeli and Palestinian blood on their hands and fear retribution. But if you placed a photo of an ICE officer next to a Hamas militiaman in a news quiz, I would defy you to tell them apart. Memo to the homeland security secretary, Kristi Noem: That is not a good look. What are you hiding?



ABIR PARK/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Good and Pretti were both clearly present as observers — and trying to defend others — yet both were drawn into the chaos and shot at close range by agents who should never have pulled a trigger. Yet the Trump team insists that ICE is blameless. That is not how you build legitimacy for a government effort to track down and deport illegal immigrants.

That same instinct for "fire, ready, aim" is one of the morally corrupting legacies of Israel's war in Gaza. One of

the Palestinian journalists killed by the Israeli airstrike on last Wednesday, Abdel Raouf Shaath, had worked for years as a cameraman for CBS News and other outlets; the others were local journalists Mohammad Salah Qishba and Anas Ghneim. They were reportedly on assignment to film aid distribution by the Egyptian Relief Committee when their vehicle was targeted.

Really? Was that the only way to handle the situation during a cease-

fire? Immediately launch an airstrike and ask questions later? Israel can assassinate nuclear scientists in Iran in the dead of night from 1,200 miles away, yet it can't distinguish a journalist from a combatant in broad daylight next door? It's shameful. This comes only months after Israeli forces killed the Reuters journalist Hussam al-Masri on the stairs of Gaza's Nasser Hospital in August.

Netanyahu apologized for that earlier killing. But regarding the three journalists killed last week, the Israel Defense Forces released a boilerplate statement saying troops identified "several suspects who operated a drone affiliated with Hamas" and "struck the suspects who activated the drone." The I.D.F. added that details are being reviewed. That is what it always says. That is how a nation and an army loses its soul.

Here is what is really happening: Netanyahu is running for re-election. Israel currently occupies approximately 53 percent of the Gaza Strip, with Hamas holding the other 47 percent. Trump — with help from Egypt, Qatar and Turkey — is pushing for Hamas to disarm, for its military leaders to leave and for the organization to become a purely political entity. In return, Trump expects Israel to begin a withdrawal toward its own border.

Netanyahu knows that if he runs for election with Hamas still holding political influence in Gaza and the I.D.F. pulling back, he will be savaged by the far-right extremists in his coalition.

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OPINION

The New York Times

INTERNATIONAL EDITION

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Brooklyn Beckham is doing his best

Molly Jong-Fast
Contributing Writer

Nobody really pities the celebrity nepo baby, much less the billionaire heiress, but when someone airs petty resentments about their famous families, it's hard to look away. It can be stressful to be born on second or third base, always knowing that you'll probably never quite equal your highly accomplished, likely somewhat megalomaniac mother or father (or both). And so we have Brooklyn Beckham, who last week went off about his celeb parents, specifically his mother, the Spice Girl turned fashion designer Victoria Beckham, for ruining his life.

Mr. Beckham wrote a series of posts on Instagram, beginning with: "I have been silent for years and have made every attempt to keep these matters private." He continued, "I do not want to reconcile with my family. I'm not being controlled, I'm standing up for myself for the first time in my life." He also claimed that his attention-seeking mother "danced very inappropriately on me in front of everyone" at his wedding to Nicola Peltz.

Our story starts out at Coachella in 2017, like any modern fairy tale. Mr. Beckham was the 18-year-old eldest son of Victoria and David Beckham, a hot professional soccer player with multiple tattoos. Ms. Peltz was the 22-year-old child of the billionaire investor Nelson Peltz

and the former model Claudia Heffner Peltz. The young couple were engaged in 2020 and married in April 2022 at her father's 13-acre waterfront estate in Palm Beach, Fla., named Montserrat. There is, for the nepo, tremendous pressure to escape feeling like a brand extension for your parents. The huge advantages that come with a recognizable name can often create a cycle in which that name becomes the petard one hoists oneself by again and again. Sometimes you marry within your nepo social class. Often these nepo-plus-nepo marriages end in your famous parents paying for your expensive divorce lawyer.

Part of the public appeal of nepo babies is that they are the continuation of their parents' story. As someone born in the public eye, too — my mother, Erica Jong, was no Posh Spice, but was famous in a way that writers just aren't allowed to be today — I get it. I was, after all, a celebrated, independent woman's only child, and people often thought they knew me because she had written about me.

Or perhaps you have been photographed since you were a baby, as the younger Mr. Beckham has. Brooklyn Beckham may have money and good looks and lots of Instagram followers, but his mother actually owns the trademark for his name. (She trademarked his siblings' names, too.) He has become the nepo baby Everyman, famous for his birth and not much else. He cycled through the usual nepo baby career gestures: He was a model, a photographer. In 2017, he published a

book of photographs entitled "What I See." It turns out Mr. Beckham saw a lot of fuzzy, nebulous images. The book included a photograph of an elephant with the caption, "Elephants in Kenya. So hard to photograph but incredible to see." Now he does food stuff on Instagram, has a social media show called "Cookin' With Brooklyn" and an artisanal hot sauce brand.

Ms. Peltz has experimented with nepo career paths as well. She is an actress, writer, director and model. Her father disavowed President Trump after the Jan. 6 Capitol attack and then, according to The New Yorker, appeared to change his mind, deciding during the 2024 primaries that "we can't afford Joe Biden," which sounds like code for worrying about more taxes.

These marital alliances between families — one with fame they turned into money, the other with money they turned into fame — have their own perils. The Peltzes are East Coast billionaires (Palm Beach and Westchester County, N.Y.) and the Beckhams are British pop culture figures. Nelson Peltz, now 83 years old, dropped out of the University of Pennsylvania to ski and work at his family's food distribution company, which eventually seeded the making of a pile of money. They will be rich and powerful without the attention economy, or without much attention

at all. The Beckhams, on the other hand, built a family business upon being famous — which means having fans. Rumors started after Mr. Beckham and Ms. Peltz married. First there was the question of why Ms. Peltz didn't wear a gown by Ms. Beckham. (Instead, she wore Valentino.) She was notably absent at her mother-in-law's 50th birthday, and then both she and Brooklyn missed David's 50th last year. In August 2025, to celebrate being married for three whole years, the pair renewed their vows at the Peltzes' Westchester estate. None of the other Beckhams attended.

It wasn't until the prodigal nepo baby got on Instagram that all hell broke loose. The internet exploded with memes and conjecture, including fake videos of Ms. Beckham dancing "inappropriately."

Is Mr. Beckham actually a hero? Are any of us nepo babies heroes? Probably not. Born on second base but still ailing our parental dynasty, is he the internet? We are no one's best-case scenario.

I can see where Mr. Beckham is coming from. Last year I published a book about my mother and our relationship that wasn't meant to be retaliatory, but certainly some people saw it that way. Last week David Beckham was in Davos for UNICEF, and though he didn't address the feud directly, he told a journalist: "They make mistakes. Children are allowed to make mistakes. That's how they learn. So that's what I try to teach my kids. But you know, you have to sometimes let them make those mistakes as well."

Maybe Brooklyn was being immature. As a parent myself, I can see David's point of view, too. But sometimes you just have to tell your own story.

MOLLY JONG-FAST is the host of the "Fast Politics" podcast and the author of "How to Lose Your Mother: A Daughter's Memoir."



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY THE NEW YORK TIMES

The world will remember Trump's Greenland outburst

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saying "help is on the way" and abandoned the protesters to a crackdown that reportedly killed thousands of them and imprisoned thousands more. And his confrontation with NATO crossed a new line: threatening the territory of a longtime ally. The notion that the United States might invade Greenland would sound like satire under any other modern-day president.

Yet it fits with Mr. Trump's escalating attacks against NATO. During the 2016 presidential campaign, he called the alliance obsolete. In his first term, he reportedly considered withdrawing from it. During the 2024 campaign, he said he would encourage Russian leaders to "do whatever the hell they want" with NATO allies if the allies did not increase their military spending. The threat was chilling to Russia's Baltic neighbors, like Latvia and Estonia, given President Vladimir Putin's slaughter of civilians in Ukraine.

As is often the case, Mr. Trump has blended a reasonable policy critique with blatant falsehoods and extreme behavior. In this instance, the reasonable critique is that most European countries have long spent too little on their defense, relying on the United States to do the heavy lifting in the Western Hemisphere. He says the United States needs to own the island if it is to establish an effective missile defense system for the United States. These claims fly in the face of NATO's extraordinary record of collective self-defense over the last 75 years.

By last Wednesday, Mr. Trump had partly backed down and declared a framework for a still uncertain deal to end the dispute over Greenland. Even if a deal comes together and Greenland recedes from the headlines, though, the bullying will have enduring costs. NATO's strength is not just its formidable military power. It is also a collective commitment to the shared values of democracy and open markets that underpin a system that has been enormously beneficial to the people of the United States since World War II. Those values have also been good for the world, contributing to stability that allowed poverty to plummet in recent decades and violent deaths to become

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The cost of inaction over Iran

ALINEAD, FROM PAGE 1

but it does give him the option of striking a blow against government repression.

I'm no military planner, but it's clear that attacks on the infrastructure of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and the Basij militia that it controls would damage the Islamic Republic's protest-crushing machinery. The goal should be to disrupt the regime's ability to shoot, jail and terrorize. The strike could also encourage fence-sitters inside the security services to stand down, if not actually join the protesters.

Europeans should designate the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps as a terrorist organization, something they have yet to do despite a mountain of evidence about the violence it has perpetrated. While they are at it, they should expel Iranian diplomats and close the country's consulates.

Along with the standard expressions of concern I heard at the United Nations, Western governments reached for another familiar warning as the crackdown escalated this month: We cannot intervene. Experts invoke the disastrous war in Iraq or the chaotic violence in Libya. The conversation ends.

Both of those military misadventures are real scars. Skeptics of military action in Iran may argue that the United States would be violating Iran's sovereignty with an attack and that it may trigger a "rally around the flag" effect. But sovereignty comes from the will of the people, and regime that mows down thousands of its own citizens has lost its legitimacy. During the recent protests, Iranians burned the Islamic Republic flag and instead waved the pre-revolutionary Lion and Sun flag, a sign that limited strikes might not ignite wide-scale anti-American feeling.

Too often, the argument about the dangers of intervention is less about prudence than paralysis. It turns failures into a permanent permission slip for every dictator watching. Kill enough people and the world will be too afraid of past mistakes to stop you. The argument is dishonest because it pretends that intervention means invasion.

Iranians are not asking for foreign tanks to roll down the streets of Tehran. They are asking for the world to stop acting as if the only options are occupation or indifference. Inaction gives a regime time to regroup, rebuild its machinery of repression and return with a cleaner narrative and a longer list of prisoners.



A Danish soldier in Nuuk, Greenland, this week. Royal Danish Navy vessels are moored in the harbor to exercise Danish sovereignty.

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far less common than during much of humanity's war-torn history.

NATO has weathered crises before, and it will likely survive this one, not least because European countries still rely on it for their defense. In the face of Mr. Trump's attacks, however, it risks becoming what Rebecca Lissner of the Council on Foreign Relations calls a "zombie alliance," capable of the logistics of combined defense but devoid of the trust that deters aggression.

NATO countries other than the United States may also seek closer ties with autocracies. Already, Canada has warmed relations with China. France recently cut deals with Beijing on technology and trade that hurt America. The Dutch have declared they will limit intelligence sharing with Washington because of Mr. Trump's autocratic actions.

Winning back the trust of these allies will be difficult. The best hope involves bipartisan expressions of revision at Mr. Trump's actions, coming primarily from Congress. Already, Republican criticism of his menacing of

Greenland seems to have played a role in his backtracking. Senators Thom Tillis of North Carolina and Lisa Murkowski of Alaska both decried the threats, with Mr. Tillis calling them "beyond stupid." Ms. Murkowski joined the Democrat Jeanne Shaheen in introducing legislation to constrain Mr. Trump's aggression toward NATO allies. Members of Congress should follow through and pass that legislation as a show of America's commitment to the alliance.

Mr. Trump has a habit of declaring national emergencies on dubious pretexts to justify his policies. His reckless assault on a pillar of U.S. national security and abandonment of longtime allies are the true national emergencies. Leaders in Beijing and Moscow are no doubt thrilled. America — and the world — are less safe than they were just a week ago.

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Minneapolis and Gaza

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Those allies don't just want to stay in Gaza; they want to annex the West Bank. So Bibi wants the war to continue; he wants to provoke Hamas into fighting so he never has to withdraw administration is trying to install.

Back at home, Trump seems to believe the chaos in Minneapolis will work for him in November — even though polls show a majority of Americans disapprove of ICE's tactics. He is betting he can run on a "law and order" platform fueled by anti-immigration sentiment.

There is, however, another view inside the White House. Vice President JD Vance visited Minneapolis last week to urge local officials to cooperate with federal agents to "lower the temperature and lower the chaos." Suddenly, the cynical Vance — of all people — was the voice of calm and reason. I suspect he was channeling the voice of Republican lawmakers who worry that ICE's activities could lead to an electoral disaster in the midterms.

To my friends and family in Minnesota: Stay proud of the way you are documenting abuses and standing up for your neighbors — those with legal papers and those without them — who abide by the law, work hard and enrich our city. But it is vital that this campaign be accompanied by a loud commitment to immigration reform that both controls the border and creates a legal pathway to citizenship.

The winning message remains: high wall, big gate. Control the border, but increase legal immigration. Democrats must never forget that one reason Trump returned to power was the previous administration's failure to control illegal immigration. Independent voters still care deeply about that.

Trump, Bibi and Hamas each have their eyes on the prize: the 2026 elections. The people of Minnesota, Israel and Gaza must keep that in mind. Because if Trump maintains control of Congress, if Bibi wins re-election and if Hamas seizes control of the Palestinian movement, all three societies will head into a darkness from which recovery will be agonizingly difficult.



LEO CORREA/ASSOCIATED PRESS

In Bosnia, the world delayed until the Srebrenica massacre made inaction politically unbearable; eventually, a combination of pressure and force helped to end the slaughter in the former Yugoslavia. The peace was imperfect, but the killing stopped. In Kosovo, NATO intervention prevented a humanitarian catastrophe.

Outside of NATO's backyard, after a referendum favoring independence triggered violence in East Timor in 1999, the U.N. Security Council authorized a multinational force to restore security and allow for humanitarian assistance. It was a focused intervention to stop militia violence and protect civilians. In Gambia in 2017, a dictator refused to give up power after losing an election.

The region didn't shrug. West African states pressed to bear the burden, backed by a credible threat of force, to ensure a peaceful transfer of power. The dictator stepped down and fled into exile.

These are not fairy tales. They are evidence that the world has options besides the two extremes we sometimes pretend are the only ones.

When the world doesn't choose one of the available options, we are left with graveyards.

Ask the Rohingya in Myanmar, where top military leaders are accused of genocide against the Muslim minority. Look at the Darfur region in Sudan, where civil war has led to the killing of tens of thousands of people, a stain on the international community for its lack of decisive action. The international response to the Rwandan genocide is not remembered as a cautionary tale about interventionist overreach. It is remembered as cowardice. The world had notice about the catastrophe but lacked the will to act.

President Obama had a chance in 2009 to support millions of Iranians who protested a rigged election. He spoke out but chose not to do more, to avoid undermining the protesters, he said, and to avoid ruining negotiations over a nuclear deal with Iran that he believed would help secure a wider peace in the region. Mr. Obama has since regretted that decision.

Now America has another chance to act in support of Iranian protesters. History will not accept "We were monitoring the situation" as an answer. Inaction has a body count.

MASHI ALINEAD is the founder of the *My Stealthy Freedom* campaign against the compulsory hijab and the author of "The Wind in My Hair: My Fight for Freedom in Modern Iran."

COMMENT

Editorials

Chinese market vast ocean for Finnish and other European firms to swim in

President Xi Jinping's meeting with Finnish Prime Minister Petteri Orpo in Beijing on Tuesday highlighted the vitality and forward-looking nature of China-Finland relations, sending a clear signal that cooperation, mutual trust and multilateral coordination should be the defining features of bilateral ties.

Over the past 76 years since the establishment of diplomatic ties, China-Finland relations, characterized by mutual respect, equality, future orientation and win-win cooperation, have achieved steady growth regardless of how the international landscape has evolved. The stability of the relationship reflects that perseverance and self-reliance are cherished by both peoples and provides a foundation for further deepening cooperation.

Their meeting came at a critical moment. This year marks the beginning of China's 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-30), during which the country will continue to advance high-quality development and expand high-standard opening-up to the rest of the world. Against this backdrop, China-Finland cooperation based on complementary economic structures holds great potential and promises tangible benefits for both sides.

Practical cooperation has long been a highlight of bilateral relations. From clean energy to environmental protection, from forestry and agriculture to advanced manufacturing and scientific research, the two countries have demonstrated how different development paths can converge into mutually beneficial outcomes. Looking ahead, both sides can further tap cooperation opportunities in the energy transition, circular economy, agriculture and forestry, and scientific and technological innovation, creating more flagship projects.

China welcomes Finnish companies to swim in the vast ocean of the Chinese market to enhance their global competitiveness, as Xi said. It is good to hear Orpo say that Finnish companies have a strong interest in cooperating with China, expressing Finland's willingness to deepen cooperation in trade, investment, the digital economy, clean energy and agriculture.

At the same time, cooperation in winter sports offers a unique avenue to deepen mutual understanding. As a traditional powerhouse in winter sports, Finland shares strong common ground with China, a major winter sports nation, providing fertile soil for continued exchanges and

friendship. Notably, Xi welcomed more Finnish people to visit China and experience its blend of ancient heritage and modern vitality.

As Xi stressed, China is also ready to work with Finland to firmly uphold the international system with the United Nations at its core and the international order based on international law, to jointly respond to global challenges.

This commitment to multilateralism and the rule of law is especially valuable at a time when protectionism and unilateralism are on the rise, posing serious challenges to global stability and development. Major countries, in particular, should take the lead in upholding equality, cooperation and integrity. China is willing to work with Finland to promote an equitable and orderly multipolar world as well as a universally beneficial and inclusive economic globalization.

As an important trading partner for China in Northern Europe, Finland occupies a unique position within the EU framework. China-Finland relations should thus extend beyond bilateral cooperation to the broader relationship between China and the European Union.

China and Europe are not adversaries but partners with shared interests and responsibilities, especially in safeguarding the multilateral world order. Their cooperation outweighs the competition, and their common ground outweighs differences, Xi noted. China hopes Finland will play a constructive role in promoting the healthy and stable development of China-Europe ties.

Orpo's remarks during the meeting also underscored Finland's openness and constructive attitude in these regards. He reaffirmed Finland's adherence to the one-China policy, praised China's remarkable development achievements, and acknowledged China's important and constructive role in international affairs. His emphasis on Finland's readiness to strengthen communication and coordination with China, support free trade, advocate European strategic autonomy, and play a positive role in promoting the healthy development of China-EU relations shows the Finnish side's awareness of the importance of Sino-Finnish ties within the framework of China-EU relations.

By enhancing mutual trust, expanding exchanges and deepening cooperation, China and Finland can continue to bring tangible benefits to their peoples, advance their ties, and help steady China-EU relations.

UK should discard dual-track approach

United Kingdom Prime Minister Keir Starmer's visit to China this week comes at a key juncture in the evolving relationship between the two nations. As the first British prime minister to visit China since 2018, his trip underscores a growing recognition in London of the importance of improving ties with Beijing.

The UK government's recent approval for the construction of a new Chinese embassy in London, a project that had been delayed for years, suggests an intent to reset bilateral relations that had suffered a deterioration under previous UK governments.

The timing is particularly noteworthy as it coincides with increasing transatlantic frictions over many key issues. In this context, it is understandable that allies of the increasingly unpredictable United States are conducting a pragmatic policy reassessment based on real-world conditions. The UK is not alone in making this recalibration, as shown by the series of Western leaders visiting China in recent months.

Such a practical choice is driven by these countries' recognition that they need to expand their development space in today's complex international environment. For the UK, which currently faces growing pressures on its economy, the opportunities in the Chinese market are particularly pronounced.

But if the UK wants to make the most of cooperation with China, it must consider the serious negative effects of its recent politicization of trade issues related to China. The so-called "China threat" that has been used as justification for these actions has been fabricated by the US as part of its self-serving agenda.

The UK government will best serve its country's interests by embracing a wholehearted cooperative relationship with China rather than hedging or succumbing to outdated biases.

Since Starmer took office, there have been encouraging developments in bilateral interactions, with strengthened dialogue and expanded cooperation in trade, investment, green develop-

ment, finance and people-to-people exchanges. Yet, the UK's practice of sending positive signals of cooperation while simultaneously viewing China as a "threat" is not conducive to a genuine turnaround in relations. It is incumbent on the UK to demonstrate true sincerity. This means shedding its ideological biases and viewing its relationship with China objectively.

In his recent speeches on China, Starmer rejected both the "golden age" rhetoric of a decade ago and the confrontational "ice age" stance of his predecessors, and criticized previous Conservative governments for failing to visit or adequately engage with China, calling it a "staggering" "dereliction of duty".

But his assertion that China poses a "national security threat" to the UK raises doubts about his government's sincerity in seeking to stabilize and advance China-UK relations. Not to mention that the UK's continued interference in China's internal affairs creates unnecessary friction. Hence, to truly reset relations, the UK government should anchor its stance in the consensus reached by the leaders of both countries.

China welcomes the prospect of improved relations with the UK. But this requires the UK to adhere to the principles of mutual respect and noninterference, and reciprocate China's sincerity in seeking steady, healthy and mutually beneficial relations.

China and the UK have strong economic complementarities, with huge potential for cooperation in financial openness, the new energy transition and third-party market collaboration. If the UK can focus on managing differences with China properly and tapping the potential of their collaboration, it will inject fresh momentum into their relations. Both sides can also make joint efforts to address global issues such as climate change, AI and public health.

Starmer's visit is a chance to kick-start ties on an upward trend, but the true test will be whether the UK can move beyond its dual-track cooperation-confrontation policy and embrace a more consistent and constructive engagement with China.

Li Min



Opinion Line

Reference model for practical approach to climate action

The United States has announced its withdrawal from 66 international organizations, with the White House declaring that 31 United Nations and 35 non-UN entities "no longer serve American interests".

Many of these bodies, however, are vital to humanity's shared future, particularly those confronting the interconnected crises of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. This includes the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, a treaty that underpins international efforts to combat global warming.

The US, which is the largest historical emitter of greenhouse gases, has also withdrawn from the landmark 2015 Paris Agreement for the second time. As the world's second-largest annual carbon emitter, the US' exit from global efforts to limit greenhouse gas emissions and curb dangerously rising temperatures represents more than a diplomatic departure; it shatters trust and constitutes a default on its responsibility to help less developed countries mitigate the effects of climate change.

The Paris treaty explicitly reaffirmed the commitment of developed nations — initially made in 2009 and extended through 2025 — to mobilize \$100 billion annually by 2020 to help developing countries better manage the impacts of climate change. Yet this pledge has seldom been honored in practice.

Against this backdrop of broken promises, developed countries pledged \$300 billion annually by 2035 at the 2023 UN climate change conference in Dubai. The figure still falls drastically short of the over \$1 trillion in assistance called for by developing nations. The US withdrawal from the Paris pact has made the inadequate pledge of \$100 billion more elusive, while the prospect of mobilizing the \$1 trillion truly needed has become more remote.

The US decision to abandon the UNFCCC strikes another blow to climate efforts, further trapping developing nations in the worsening crisis.

This moment of fracture reveals a deeper truth: the path forward must transcend reliance on uncertain aid and instead embrace a dual imperative. While developed economies must be held accountable for their commitments, developing nations must also accelerate the creation of sustainable, self-reinforcing economic models to finance climate resilience.

What is urgently needed is a shift toward investment-driven green transition frameworks. China's experience provides a reference here. The country has developed a practical nexus of policy, finance, market instruments and industrial scaling from which other countries can draw inspiration.

China's unparalleled success in scaling renewable energy, for instance,

offers a critical lesson in how targeted policy can act as a catalyst for industrial transformation, even in capital-constrained environments.

More than four decades ago, lacking the necessary technology and research and development capabilities, China was only able to manufacture microturbines for off-grid power generation. But now, the country supplies roughly 70 percent of the world's wind power equipment.

This achievement is due to the consistent, systematic and stage-specific policies that have built a resilient renewable ecosystem from the ground up. A cornerstone of this approach was the feed-in tariff — a guaranteed above-market price for solar and wind power, funded through a small surcharge on electricity bills.

Over the past decade, China's efforts have lowered the global costs for wind-generated electricity by approximately 60 percent and for solar-generated electricity by 80 percent.

China's model affirms a crucial insight: well-designed public policy can drive radical cost reduction. This policy-first approach offers developing countries a tangible blueprint for building climate-resilient economies from within. The goal is not to replace global cooperation, but rather to redefine it, shifting to a paradigm of engineering shared and sustainable prosperity.

—HOU LIQIANG, CHINA DAILY

What They Say

Policy support for SMEs with innovation capabilities

Editor's note: The People's Bank of China has announced a package of measures to support technological innovation. Pang Ming, a senior researcher at the National Institute for Finance and Development, wrote an article for 21st Century Business Herald on the significance of the measures. Below are excerpts. The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.

The central bank will provide a relending quota of 1 trillion yuan (\$143.4 billion) to small and medium-sized private companies and increase the relending quota for technological innovation and upgrades by 400 billion yuan.

What matters most is not the additional 400 billion yuan lending quota, but the change in the criteria to determine which private SMEs can access the finance. For the first time, the intensity of investment in research and development has been made a key factor in the lending criteria.

This is a clear departure from earlier approaches that relied mainly on static indicators such as asset size, collateral and credit records.

Under the earlier framework, more mature firms with substantial assets and collateral were more likely to obtain financing, while many start-ups operating at the technological frontier — typically characterized by high R&D spending, light assets and volatile cash flows — were often excluded.

The new policy signals a formal recognition of the market value and creditworthiness of a company's intellectual capital and innovation activities. Rather than focusing too much on a company's existing financial strength, it shifts the emphasis to whether enterprises are willing to commit resources to research and innovation. This in turn guides finan-

cial institutions to build risk assessment models based on the innovation potential of a borrower and its long-term growth prospects.

Expanding lending support to private innovation-oriented SMEs with high R&D intensity will directly and effectively ease the cash-flow pressures inherent in the "light-asset, heavy-R&D" model. With the expanded scale and coverage, low-cost capital from the central bank can encourage commercial banks to increase the credit supply, reduce lending rates and interest burdens for innovation-oriented SMEs, and provide more stable cash-flow support for their R&D endeavors and business operations.

Another key reform is the integration of bond financing facilities for private enterprises with the science and technology innovation bond risk-sharing tools. This not only creates a larger and more clearly defined pool of risk-sharing funds but also forms a more unified and flexible risk-sharing framework. It sends a strong signal to the market that policy support for innovation-oriented private enterprises will be sustained.

After the integration, the combined tool will better target entities that are both private and innovation-driven, while standardized risk-sharing arrangements will boost market confidence in bonds issued by private

enterprises, especially private tech firms, and reduce risk premiums.

For enterprises, the unification and simplification of management rules will lower participation barriers for financial institutions and expand the pool of eligible firms. More medium- to high-credit private tech companies with strong growth potential will gain access to bond market financing that was previously difficult to reach, improving market acceptance, issuance success rates and overall financing availability, enabling firms to issue bonds more smoothly.

At the same time, unified credit enhancement support can narrow credit spreads on bonds issued by private tech enterprises, improve liquidity in the secondary market, reduce overall financing costs and compress risk premiums, making bond financing more affordable and sustainable.

From a cost perspective, relending reduces banks' funding costs and encourages them to provide medium- and long-term loans to tech firms at more favorable rates, broadly lowering interest expenses for enterprises. By sharing credit risks and strengthening market confidence, the bond risk-sharing tool helps reduce bond issuance yields and underwriting costs, enabling firms to issue long-term bonds at lower interest rates.

CHINA DAILY WORLDWIDE

Contact us at:

China Daily
15 Huxin Dongjie Chaoyang District,
Beijing 100029
News: +86 (0) 10 6491-8366
editor@chinadaily.com.cn
Advertisement: +86 (0) 10 6491-8631
ads@chinadaily.com.cn
Subscription: +86-400-699-0303
subscription.chinadaily.com.cn
App: www.chinadaily.com.cn/mobile/daily.html

China Daily UK
90 Crenson St, London EC4N 6HA, UK
+44 (0) 207 398 8270
editor@chinadailyuk.com

China Daily Asia Pacific
China Daily Hong Kong
Unit 1618, Hing Wai Centre, 7 Tin Wan
Payas Road, Aberdeen, Hong Kong
+852 2519 3111
editor@chinadailyhk.com
editor@chinadailyasia.com

China Daily USA
1500 Broadway, Suite 2800,
New York, NY 10036
+1 212 537 8888
editor@chinadailyusa.com

China Daily Africa
P.O. Box 27281-00100, Nairobi, Kenya
+254 (0) 20 692 0900 (Nairobi)
editor@chinadailyafrica.com
enquiries@chinadailyafrica.com
subscription@chinadailyafrica.com

VIEWS

Zhu Caihua

A stabilizing force in the global supply chain

Global supply chains are under unprecedented stress. From raw materials to finished products, every link — from production to transportation and distribution — is facing disruption. Geopolitical tensions, especially the US-China “decoupling” in technology and trade and the Fourth Industrial Revolution, have reshaped supply chains into a complex arena where efficiency alone no longer dictates outcomes. Today, supply chains are as much about sustainability, public health and industrial security as they are about cost.

Policy choices in some countries are accelerating this transformation. Where economic logic once drove global integration, considerations of national security and values now shape decisions, prompting localization, regionalization, and friend-shoring. For developing economies, this shift presents three major challenges.

First, reshoring by developed nations may reduce opportunities for participating in global value chains and risk marginalizing certain industries. Second, decreased import demand, especially for labor-intensive goods, threatens traditional comparative advantages. Third, the rise of automation and intelligent manufacturing in developed countries is eroding labor-cost advantages, making industrial repatriation economically viable rather than merely politically motivated. The global industrial map is being redrawn, and the window for industrialization in developing countries is narrowing.

Amid these shifts, China emerges as a key stabilizer. Its vast domestic market, comprehensive infrastructure, strong industrial clusters and nationwide coordinated approach have helped China remain competitive across most manufacturing sectors while leading in advanced technologies. This dual role — as both a global supplier of critical components and an innovator — has allowed China to transition from “manufacturing” to “intelligent manufacturing”, securing a proactive role in supply chain rebalancing.

The numbers speak for themselves. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development identifies China as a dominant actor in roughly half of the 10 critical nodes across global value chains, particularly in electronics, chemicals, metals, and machinery. Manufacturing value added accounts for nearly 30 percent of the global total, with

China maintaining the world's largest manufacturing scale for 15 consecutive years by 2025. The United Nations Industrial Development Organization projects that by 2030, China's industrial value added will account for 45 percent of the global total, more than double the combined total of the United States, Japan, and Germany.

China's domestic market amplifies its global influence. In 2025, total retail sales of consumer goods surpassed 50 trillion yuan (\$7.18 trillion). For businesses worldwide, China represents a downstream market of significant scale, providing a solid foundation for value-added trade.

China's role extends beyond domestic demand. The Belt and Road Initiative enhances supply chain connectivity in partner countries, providing landlocked and infrastructure-limited nations access to global markets. By linking energy, minerals, agricultural products and manufactured goods to the world, the BRI not only strengthens China's economic ties with participating coun-

tries but also indirectly connects China with non-participants, benefiting hundreds of millions in developing countries.

China's outbound investment further reinforces supply chain stability. In 2024, Chinese manufacturing overseas investment reached \$37.5 billion, up 37 percent year-on-year, while mining investments grew 115 percent to \$21.3 billion. Asian countries, particularly ASEAN members, remain primary destinations, but investment in Oceania, Europe, and Latin America is rising. These investments enhance local industrial capabilities and integrate host countries into global value chains, while generating \$211 billion in exports.

At the same time, China continues to expand high-level openness. Contrary to following protectionist practices such as imposing high tariffs, China promotes trade and investment liberalization. Since 2018, overall tariff levels have fallen to 7.3 percent, among the lowest globally. In 2025, China announced zero tariffs on all products

from 53 African countries. Initiatives such as the Hainan Free Trade Port exemplify China's commitment to free and facilitated market access, creating opportunities for foreign products, capital and technology.

As global strategist Parag Khanna noted, “Who rules the supply chain, rules the world.” China's approach, however, is not about domination. By connecting supply chains and promoting mutual benefit, China seeks stability and shared prosperity — a practical embodiment of its vision for a community with a shared future for humanity.

In a world of fragmented trade and political uncertainty, China's stabilizing role in the global supply chain is not just an economic advantage; it is a linchpin for global growth, cooperation, and resilience.

The author is a professor at the School of Economics, University of International Business and Economics. The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

Li Chunding and Li Ningling

Tech cultivating China's rural vitalization

China's countryside is being reinvigorated. Digital and smart technologies are rapidly transforming agriculture, laying the foundation for comprehensive rural revitalization. According to the 2025 smart agriculture action plan, the country's smart agriculture market exceeded 100 billion yuan (\$14.35 billion) in 2024 and is projected to reach 120 billion yuan in 2025. Artificial intelligence, 5G and big data are increasingly being integrated into farming. In Zhejiang province, agricultural robot penetration rose from 3.2 percent in 2020 to 15.7 percent in 2024.

These advances are reshaping rural life, not only by improving production efficiency but also by redefining governance and industry models.

National policy has been instrumental in driving this transformation. China is building a comprehensive institutional framework for digital agriculture, embedding technology across the entire value chain, and steering traditional agriculture toward data-driven production. The focus on “digital farmlands + smart management” is accelerating applications of AI, low-altitude drones and satellite technologies while upgrading rural telecommunications infrastructure. Phased development goals include raising agricultural informatization rates and establishing digital farms, providing a road map for medium- and long-term growth.

If national policy sets the direction, local governments are turning vision into reality. By leveraging regional agricultural strengths, they are developing differentiated models of smart agriculture that translate national plans into real-world outcomes. In Jiangxi province, a digital platform integrates 68 previously fragmented agricultural systems, linking provincial, municipal, county, township and village levels. With annual provincial investment close to 100 million yuan, this system demonstrates “data sharing + precision services” in action.

In the rice-shrimp bases in Dayu county and through drone logistics in Nankang district of Ganzhou city, Jiangxi province, digital technologies have enhanced productivity and reduced costs. In Jiangsu province, the “smart-to-digital transformation” initiative aims to establish 100 smart industrial parks and 200 digital farms, supported by a cloud infrastructure for farmers and innovative financial products like loans for farmers. These local experiments illustrate how policy innovation and technological application can create scalable and replicable models for nationwide adoption.

The impact of smart agriculture extends beyond efficiency gains. In production, digital tools are shifting farming from experience-based judgment to data-driven decision making. Beidou navigation, the internet of things and big data analytics enable precise planting, real-time monitoring and optimized harvesting, increasing yields while conserving resources. In Nanchang city of Jiangxi province, fully unmanned planting zones and smart plant protection systems demonstrate how technology stabilizes product quality, lowers costs, and enhances resilience — vital for ensuring food security.

Digital agriculture also transforms industrial and commercial dynamics. By breaking spatial and temporal barriers, it fosters new business models that blend e-commerce, logistics, and rural tourism. By 2025, China had built 346,000 village-level logistics service stations. Express delivery coverage exceeded 95 percent of administrative villages and over 100 million packages were handled daily. More than 158,000 village e-commerce service points linked farmers directly to consumers, creating new value chains. This “logistics, e-commerce and specialty products” ecosystem reduces losses, streamlines distribution and boosts farmers' income, exemplifying how digital integration can revitalize rural economies.

Governance is also being upgraded. AI and digital platforms provide precise and efficient tools for village management. Systems like Jiangsu's project to link the villagers and Zhejiang's “rural brain” integrate administrative services, ecological monitoring and social welfare, enabling “one-stop” governance. Such innovations transform rural administration from coarse, reactive management into targeted, data-driven solutions, improving both efficiency and the quality of public services.

Three priorities will shape the next phase of digital agriculture in China. First, infrastructure development must continue, extending 5G, satellite internet and smart water systems to rural areas, creating a digital backbone for production, commerce, and governance. Second, technological innovation should focus on seeds, intelligent equipment and data analysis, fostering collaboration among government, industry, and academia to localize key technologies. Third, talent cultivation is essential: training farmers in digital skills, promoting returnee entrepreneurship and nurturing “new farmers” proficient in agriculture, technology, and market operations.

Digital and smart agriculture is not just a technological upgrade — it is a structural transformation enabling rural China to thrive in the 21st century. By integrating national policy guidance with local innovation and leveraging iterative advances in AI and digital tools, China is breaking through traditional constraints, aligning agricultural modernization with rural revitalization strategies. The result is a vision of rural communities that are productive, well-governed and prosperous — a model of modern, sustainable and inclusive development.

Li Chunding is the associate dean of the College of Economics and Management at China Agricultural University; and Li Ningling is a research fellow of the International Economics Institute of the College of Economics and Management at China Agricultural University. The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.



SHI YU / CHINA DAILY

John Quelch and David Gosset

Starmer visit pragmatic step in right direction

United Kingdom Prime Minister Keir Starmer's visit to China is not just a routine diplomatic gesture, but a politically consequential move in a less forgiving international environment. Enabled in part by the UK's recent approval of the new Chinese embassy in London, the visit is the first by a British prime minister since Theresa May in 2018.

The trip reflects a deliberate choice by both governments to arrest a period of drift and tension and to reintroduce high-level dialogue at a time when geopolitical fragmentation, economic decoupling, and strategic mistrust are becoming structural features of the global system. In this sense, it matters not only for China-UK relations but also for how major economies navigate rivalry without resorting to disengagement.

For China-UK relations, that would be a turning point after years of uncertainty. Since the late 2010s, ties have been strained by disagreements over technology, security, human rights and Hong Kong, compounded by shifting domestic politics in the UK. The appointment of Peter Wilson — a diplomat and sinologist — as the new UK ambassador in Beijing in August 2025 laid the foundation for a fresh start in bilateral ties.

While neither side is likely to abandon its core positions, Starmer's visit



UK prime minister offers a chance to reset the relationship's tone, emphasizing pragmatism and dialogue. For London, it reflects an effort to pursue a more stable and realistic China policy — one that manages risks while preserving channels for cooperation. The potential for engagement is significant, especially as Chinese companies lead key sectors of the global economy.

On issues such as climate change, multilateralism and global governance, the UK is closer to China than to the current United States administration, creating scope for coordinated action. Both countries are permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and recognized nuclear powers, giving additional weight to possible collaboration on global challenges.

There are parallels with the successful visit of Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney to Beijing, Canada, like the UK, had strained relations with China, marked by political disputes, public mistrust and economic friction. Carney's trip may not have erased those differences, but it showed that high-level engagement, grounded in realism, can stabilize ties and reopen space for coop-

eration. The analogy is not perfect — China-UK relations are historically deeper and more entangled with global finance and security — but the broader lesson is clear: dialogue, when carefully framed, can arrest downward spirals without requiring political convergence.

Economically, Starmer's visit underscores enduring mutual interests. China is the UK's third-largest trading partner, while British firms continue to pursue opportunities in China's consumer market, green transition, life sciences and advanced manufacturing — sectors where collaboration can have global ripple effects. Exchanges in education further deepen these connections, building long-term networks that facilitate cross-border innovation and investment.

By traveling with a delegation of business leaders, Starmer signals that economic engagement remains a core pillar of the relationship and that the UK is a key gateway for Chinese companies seeking global expansion. For China, the visit affirms its openness to foreign investment amid geopolitical uncertainty. This focus on predictability is especially salient as China enters its 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-30), a phase emphasizing policy clarity and long-term signaling to both domestic and international partners.

The visit's broader significance lies in its timing. The international system is

increasingly fragmented, with rival blocs, weaponized interdependence and weakened multilateral institutions. In this context, engagement between major economies carries symbolic weight. Starmer's trip, like Carney's, shows that middle powers retain agency: they can engage China while remaining aligned with allies.

This is not a return to “golden eras” or uncritical engagement. It reflects sober diplomacy suited to a complex world — one that accepts disagreement as structural but treats communication as essential. Regular dialogue, even if limited, helps manage competition and reduce the risk of miscalculation.

Starmer's visit matters not because it will resolve deep-seated differences, but because it recognizes a shared reality: in a fragmented world, disengagement carries its own dangers. By reopening channels of communication at the highest level, the trip underscores that diplomacy remains vital for managing rivalry, sustaining economic ties, and finding solutions to shared global challenges.

John Quelch is executive vice-chancellor of Duke Kunshan University and David Gosset, a sinologist, is the founder of the China-Europe-America Global Initiative. The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.