

The reality check

India has responded with restraint to Trump’s nasty remarks, but some give and take on the trade deal is the only way out

DONALD TRUMP DOMINATED the 2024 presidential race with a master plan of political incorrectness, using the art of the insult to brand political opponents and bash the media all the way to the White House. He has kept that tradition going even after becoming president for the second time. But even by his own abysmally poor standards of public behaviour, it was shocking to hear his rant about India on Wednesday and Thursday. No one expects any head of state to talk so disparagingly about any other nation, especially about the world’s largest democracy. “Obnoxious”, “dead economy”, etc. are nothing but gutter-level politics. Trump’s poor behaviour becomes even more evident from the restrained way in which India has responded—no name-calling, only a firm assertion that the government will make sure national interests are protected. Preserving self-interest demands tactful diplomacy—something in which Trump needs a crash course.

It is no doubt upsetting that India has been slapped with a 25% tariff plus a penalty when many other countries have managed with far less. The point to note, however, is that all these countries have also yielded to some of the US’s demands. Without retaliating, India must do what it takes and revisit its stand on some issues to get the tariff down. The fact is that the impact of the tariff bombshell could be punishing. If implemented, the 25% tariff, taken together with the existing sector-specific tariffs on products like aluminium, steel, and automobiles, would push up the total effective US tariffs on Indian imports to around 26.6%, excluding the impact of the unspecified penalty. Economists estimate the higher tariff alone will shave off 20-30 basis points (bps) from India’s GDP. Worryingly, labour-intensive sectors such as gems and jewellery and textiles are likely to be badly hit at a time when business isn’t exactly brisk. Moreover, sectors such as pharmaceuticals, semiconductors, and electronics where investigations are on—under Section 232—are currently exempt from tariffs but these could be reviewed; a 200% duty on pharmaceutical imports has been talked about. Several drug companies earn about a third of their revenues from the US market and would struggle with a 25% tariff.

There is also the indirect effect of the elevated tariffs and the accompanying uncertainty. Companies that have a business exposure to the US, for instance, are likely to postpone investment decisions. Goldman Sachs estimates that every 5 percentage point increase in US tariff rates could cause an 80-bps incremental hit to MSCI India earnings per share from direct and indirect channels. Of course, it won’t be easy for India to resolve the sticking points, especially throwing open the agriculture and dairy sectors and allowing imports of genetically-modified soya bean and corn. But some give and take is the only way out at this point. After all, the US is India’s largest export destination, accounting for about 18% of total exports. For a number of sectors, exports to the US account for 30-40% of global exports of that product category. Slower exports and costlier imports could push up the current account deficit from the estimated 1% of GDP for FY26 by about 10-15 bps, though that’s not a big concern. The immediate casualty has been the rupee, which slipped to a record low of 87.60 on Thursday. While there are pros and cons of a weaker currency, this is no time for please-all policies.

Meta pivots on AI under cover of superb quarter

ON WEDNESDAY, MARK Zuckerberg addressed every constituency that mattered. In a video posted to Reels, and in a 616-word written manifesto, he first talked directly to his users about his desire to build a new “personal superintelligence” that will help people rather than take their jobs: “This is distinct from others in the industry who believe superintelligence should be directed centrally towards automating all valuable work, and then humanity will live on a dole of its output.”

Then he spoke to his new AI superintelligence team, and those who might be interested in joining it, by stressing Meta Platforms Inc.’s strengths in the AI race: We have the resources and the expertise to build the massive infrastructure required, and the capability and will to deliver new technology to billions of people across our products.

And later, after the closing bell, he gave investors everything they wanted to hear and more. Revenue rose 2.2% in the second quarter compared with the period a year earlier, and profit was up 36%—both ahead of analysts’ estimates. For the current quarter, Meta forecast revenue of as much as \$50.5 billion, again ahead of estimates. Astonishingly, the company is still expanding its user base, up 6.4% from the quarter a year earlier: 3.48 billion people now use Meta-owned apps daily. Shares jumped as much as 12% in after-hours trading.

As with previous quarters, the strong performance of Meta’s advertising business has been enough to convince investors to look the other way when it comes to the less pleasant parts of its results. Costs are increasing sharply as Meta, like its peers, invests in more data center infrastructure. The company has stood apart from the pack in its willingness to shovel obscene amounts of money in the direction of AI talent. Costs will keep growing in 2026, Meta said.

And no Meta check-in would be complete without checking in with my favourite number: Losses from Meta’s Reality Labs unit, the “metaverse” division, were \$4.53 billion for the quarter, the fifth consecutive quarter of losses in excess of \$4 billion. (Zuckerberg could have hired at least two AI researchers for that kind of money.)

The underlying message to take away from Wednesday’s communications blitz is that it helped Meta navigate what might have been a tricky transition for its AI strategy, one that could have been interpreted as an embarrassing admission that its initial approach was proving misguided.

What some analysts have described as a doubling-down from Meta on AI looks to me more like a critical pivot: After going full throttle with building an open-source AI model, Llama, Zuckerberg has now changed course and strongly hinted that this “personal superintelligence”—powered by the insights into users that only Meta has—will be closed to outsiders. The company will be “careful about what we choose to open source,” Zuckerberg wrote in his manifesto—a statement about safety, yes, but one that matters for its business model, too. Recent releases of Llama have been poorly received as its capabilities fell behind US competition while being shown up by the cost efficiencies of China’s DeepSeek. Meta has no footing in the enterprise AI space that OpenAI, Microsoft Corp., Amazon.com Inc. and others are going after—meaning it must look to the consumer market to find its much-needed return on investment. It’s easy for Zuckerberg to say his AI won’t be the one to replace jobs, but that’s because no companies are coming to him for that. Making lemonade from those lemons, Meta will lean heavily on that idea that it’s on the side of the everyday person. While farcical, it’s a tone that might land. The PR strategy started in earnest on Wednesday with Zuckerberg’s manifesto. “The rest of this decade seems likely to be the decisive period for determining the path this technology will take,” it read, “and whether superintelligence will be a tool for personal empowerment or a force focused on replacing large swaths of society”.

Also still to be determined: what “personal superintelligence” even means, practically speaking. I guess those details come later.

INDIA SHOULD TREAT TARIFFS AS TOOLS FOR TRANSFORMATION, NOT TEMPORARY PROTECTION

The opportunity in tariff war

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manufacturers could capture a portion of that, either through direct exports or by establishing operations in tariff-neutral regions. In select categories, India has already expanded its export footprint, supported by a competitive cost base and improving quality benchmarks. However, tapping into this demand requires a lead time of 18-24 months to meet global standards. Indian firms must invest in R&D, compliance, and deeper linkages with original equipment manufacturers and Tier 1s.

In pharma, India could gain share across imports of finished formulations and active pharmaceutical ingredients by either scaling domestic capacity, launching US-based operations, or friend-shoring partnerships with American and European firms. Adoption of new technologies (continuous vs. batch) and addressing the talent gap are key imperatives to make domestic manufacturing viable in the US. However, these opportunities are vulnerable to shifts in US policies. Despite the most recently proposed tariff on select Indian pharma products, the broader US objective of ensuring affordable, diversified drug supply chains aligns with India’s strengths. This creates an opening for deeper collaboration on technology transfer, joint ventures, and co-manufacturing models that can offset tariff pressures while reinforcing India’s strategic role in US healthcare resilience.

Over the past decade, the Indian government has taken decisive steps to bolster manufacturing. Flagship initiatives such as Make in India and the production-

linked incentive schemes have catalysed new investments. To sustain double-digit growth through 2030—akin to China’s past trajectory—India must continue advancing logistics, energy reliability, innovation, and regulatory efficiency. Policymakers need to continue working to modernise land acquisition, improve micro, small, and medium enterprise credit access, and streamline compliance. At the same time, the private sector must step up as a key partner—invest in R&D, enhance quality standards, and develop a future-ready workforce. This synergy between state and industry will be critical to drive productivity and attract global investors.

India is also reshaping its external trade architecture to support this manufacturing pivot. India signed a landmark free trade agreement (FTA) with the UK recently, eliminating tariffs on 99% of Indian exports and advancing cooperation in tech and climate. India has earlier inked an FTA with European Free Trade Association nations—Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein—focused on tariff cuts and market access. In light of recent developments in US trade policy, the need for a comprehensive US-India trade pact has become more pressing—offering a path to turn short-term tensions into long-term strategic alignment and strengthen investor confidence on both sides.

Even as India scales up, it must prepare for the risk of aggressive dumping by China. With excess capacity and weakened

India's private sector must look beyond reactive adjustments and seize emerging opportunities at their inception

We can have odd situations going forward—for example, the MPC could keep the repo rate unchanged but tweak the CRR for liquidity



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Need to revisit MPC arrangement

The Monetary Policy Committee should vote on all the monetary instruments and not on the repo rate alone, to help improve transparency

THE RESERVE BANK of India’s (RBI) Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) meeting is scheduled to be held on August 4-6. The MPC was constituted in October 2016 as part of the RBI’s formal adoption of flexible inflation targeting (FIT). Since its composition, the MPC has done a fine job of managing the monetary policy. However, one problem still remains—the MPC does not vote on all the monetary instruments.

The MPC’s structure was established by amending the RBI Act (1934). Chapter III-F was introduced in the Act (1934), dedicated to inflation target and MPC. Section 45ZB (3) specifies that “the Monetary Policy Committee shall determine the policy rate required to achieve the inflation target”. Section 2 (ccccc) mentions that “policy rate” will mean the rate for repo transactions. Further, sub-section (12AB) of section 17 tells us “repo” means an instrument for borrowing funds by selling securities of the central or state governments. Thus, the RBI Act specifies that the MPC’s main job is to achieve the inflation target (4+/- 2%). The MPC will achieve its job by determining the policy rate (repo rate). The other policy rates such as standing deposit facility and marginal standing facility form a corridor with repo, and both change automatically with changes in repo rate.

Limiting the MPC vote to only repo rate creates a problem as the RBI uses other instruments to conduct monetary

policy. Textbooks on Indian macroeconomics teach us that apart from repo the RBI also deploys the cash reserve ratio (CRR) and statutory liquidity ratio (SLR) as monetary policy tools. In fact, both CRR and SLR were used as monetary policy tools much before repo—CRR was initiated in 1935 (at the time of the RBI’s formation) and SLR was introduced in 1949, and, repo in 1999, yet, the MPC only votes on repo.

Take the case of the latest June policy, where the MPC voted to cut the repo rate by 50 basis points (bps) to 6%, surprising markets which expected a rate cut of 25 bps. A CRR cut of 50 bps to 4% was announced too. While the repo rate easing was mentioned in the MPC resolution statement, there is no mention of CRR. The CRR was instead mentioned in the governor’s statement.

Why did the MPC end up voting only on repo?

One gets some ideas in the committee established by the RBI in 2013 to revise and strengthen the monetary policy framework. The committee’s report laid the foundations for the inflation targeting framework. It discussed how monetary policy has evolved in India, with the

CRR and SLR playing important roles initially. With the 1991 reforms, the monetary policy shifted to the repo rate for balancing the overnight liquidity and transmission to other interest rates. It recommended that the MPC vote on the policy rate. For SLR, it said that it should be reduced to levels of the liquidity coverage ratio, and there is no mention of CRR. Based on these recommendations, the RBI Act was amended, allowing for the constitution of the MPC.

We get more clues from the government’s notification of the MPC and Monetary Policy Process Regulations in the Gazette of India dated July 14, 2017. It mentioned that after the MPC meeting, the RBI would release an MPC resolution and a statement. It added that the resolution should include the repo rate and “and at the discretion of the

chairperson, any other monetary policy measures including those relating to the operating framework of monetary policy”. Further, it said that the statement “should describe the monetary policy changes involving instruments other than the repo rate and the operating procedure as decided by the MPC shall be explained in the policy statement, followed by a press release setting out details

on implementation”.

Following these legislative changes, the MPC resolution only votes on the repo rate and the governor’s statement discusses the other monetary policy instruments.

However, this arrangement only causes confusion. The MPC votes only on the repo rate, and the governor’s statement includes the overall monetary policy instruments, but it is not clear who decides on the other instruments. We can have odd situations going forward—for example, the MPC could keep the repo rate unchanged but tweak the CRR for liquidity. How will this be interpreted?

The RBI also releases a Statement on Developmental and Regulatory Practices (SDRP), which discusses new measures on regulations and market developments (this was not released for the June meeting). In the post-media interaction, the governor and deputy governors address the questions on changes in both monetary policy and SDRP. The voices of external MPC members are barely heard, barring media interviews.

The current MPC arrangement should be revisited and streamlined. It should vote on all the monetary policy instruments, and the speeches/interviews of MPC members should be linked on the RBI website. This will help improve both transparency and communications from the central bank.

any, should be reported immediately. Jane Street must be allowed to make profits only on legitimate short-selling and its pump and dump policy in dealing stocks must be prevented. It must be prevented from adopting questionable strategies which will harm the fairness of the market and make retail investors lose money in the process.
—NR Nagarajan, Sivakasi

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OUR VIEW



Welcome the charge of India's battery brigade

With their global prices softening, storage batteries have the potential to disrupt our power market, hasten utility reforms, attract entrepreneurs and empower electricity consumers

Electricity regulators in Maharashtra and Gujarat recently approved battery projects to be set up by their respective state-owned utilities, marking the adoption of power storage facilities by two large Indian states. Delhi had operationalized one unit a few months ago. These are designed to soak up excess electricity from solar-panel farms for its supply to consumers when the sun doesn't shine. With battery prices having dropped globally by 30% over the past year and the Centre aiding its adoption by providing funds to plug viability gaps, these states have been quick to seize what's arguably the fastest way to gain clean supply stability in the face of solar interruptions caused by cloud cover and sunsets. As we go along, battery installations should help power utilities improve their green report card and meet their commitment to clean energy.

However, batteries only store electricity. They do not generate it. As of now, they typically act as stop-gaps for just an hour or two, with their charge rarely lasting beyond the evening's peak demand, let alone overnight. So, even though India's capacity for renewable energy (RE) has been ramped up, its supply remains hostage to the weather, which impacts not just output, but also the ability to charge batteries. To best populate various states with these units, utilities need to study both consumer demand and weather patterns as they get reshaped by climate change. This year, for example, India's peak summer demand was lower than last year's, thanks to less intense heat spells and the early onset of monsoon rainfall. Such an approach will improve the ability of batteries to bridge supply gaps during phases of RE intermittency. This role goes beyond sup-

porting clean energy. They can also plug gaps caused by failures of supply infrastructure, like transformers, assuring us overall reliability. As adoption rises, batteries could help transform an Indian market riddled with tariff distortions. To subsidize households and farms, state-run utilities make commercial users pay more. The grip of these utilities has been loosened by bulk consumers setting up their own solar farms. But they have still had to rely on utilities in fallow RE periods. Cheaper and better batteries will allow them to explore set-ups that reduce their dependence on utilities in terms of volume and load, both of which reflect in their electricity bills. Evolving battery technology brightens such prospects. Non-lithium chemistry, like the use of sodium ions, holds out the promise of lower cost combined with superior safety and reliability. Should battery-linked RE facilities mushroom, it may push utilities to reform—not only their tariffs, but also their operations. This could lead to consumers paying for power at rates that reflect costs more closely, which would relieve over-tariffed businesses in need of lower bills to be competitive.

A key measure in this context would be tariffs levied to reflect the real cost of power as it varies around the clock. For these prices to influence demand, users need to know when high or low rates apply. Alas, only around 10% of India's billing meters are digitized, so very few users can look at their billing and shift some usage—say, to charge vehicles or operate a washing machine—to low-rate hours. If the penetration of smart-meters deepens, dynamic pricing could nudge us all to optimize our electricity use. And friendlier pricing may help utilities retain large customers amid a surge in captive supply led by the charge of our battery brigade.

THEIR VIEW

Copyright theft by AI? Don't mix up creativity and dissemination

It's the unauthorized distribution of a work that amounts to infringement and not its mere creation



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Voltaire and William Ralph Inge may have differed on whether originality was nothing but undetected plagiarism or judicious imitation. Tarantino openly proclaimed that he steals from every movie he has seen, while David Bowie had famously remarked that he only studied art he could steal from.

No human being is born inherently creative. Our creativity is fostered by the literature, art and various cultural stimuli that we consume. Every original work of art, literature or music that we create is invariably influenced by the countless works we have experienced.

Yet, we reward this perceived originality as creativity, granting copyright protections to such works that are deemed original. Historically, the copyright industry emerged as a powerful force during the Industrial Revolution, significantly contributing to wealth creation and democratizing access to knowledge.

Amid this focus on protection and reward, we sometimes overlook the core aim of copyright law, which is to encourage access to knowledge. Our legal systems already include measures such as copyright term limits, fair dealing and compulsory licensing provisions.

The generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) disruption has re-ignited this

age-old debate. GenAI models can generate content, whether it is text, imagery or video, that looks substantially like copyright content, even if such models were not trained on copyright-infringing data.

Copyright laws have never stifled human cognition and creation. They only protect expressions, not ideas. Students could learn the process of creating art or literature by copying works at home or school. Copyright laws, at least in practice, only kick into action when such work is exposed to the public.

Why shouldn't we apply the same standards when it comes to cognition and creation by GenAI models, which happen at the instance of a user within the confines of a digital device? If we argue that GenAI, a non-deterministic technology, should be prevented from producing outputs merely because these might infringe copyright, we are equating the act of machine cognition with infringement itself. This is akin to stopping human imagination, which is inherently counterproductive to human progress. If artists constantly self-censor their creative process for fear of copyright infringement, we might avoid infringement altogether, but also kill innovation that produces groundbreaking art.

Instead of penalizing a GenAI developer or deployer for producing content that resembles existing works, if the AI model has been responsibly trained, we should shift our focus towards dissemination as the key point of accountability. Accountability should lie in the act of disseminating content generated by artificial intelligence.

If a large language model (LLM) produces a work similar to an existing creation in response to a user's input, should the developer/deployer be held liable? Probably not, if the model was trained on copyright-compliant data or if it was not designed to perpetrate infringement.

Instead, liability should lie with the individual or organization that chooses to (i) create this work using prompts and (ii) distribute the same to the public. It is at the point of dissemination of this work that the harm of copyright infringement arises.

This nuanced approach promotes access and innovation and is in line with how courts have dealt with copyright laws and new technology. For instance, in the classic Betamax decision, which dealt with video tapes, US courts refused to impose liability on the technology provider merely because users could use it to infringe copyright. Most copyright laws also allow temporary copies—such as in the case of search engines—for purposes of communication to the public, as it does not amount to any direct economic harm to copyright owners.

Our copyright framework must evolve for GenAI tools to distinguish between the cognition process, whether human or artificial, and dissemination. It should regulate unauthorized distribution and not creation. This approach enables AI-driven creativity without stifling innovation and ensures that accountability remains firmly anchored in human agency. Such a recalibration of our copyright law can ensure it continues to reward creativity while fostering access.

QUICK READ

Penalizing a GenAI creation for being influenced by some work is not only unjust but would stifle innovation. After all, every work bears some influence. We should focus on what's made public.

We must modify our copyright framework to distinguish between the cognition process and work dissemination. That would reward creativity without restricting access to new tools.



JUST A THOUGHT

The sun has never been hotter, and neither has solar power as an investment.

LYDIA LOIZIDES

THEIR VIEW

The long arc of our US trade deal may end in a win-win

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The Donald Trump administration's trade negotiations with US trade partners have picked up pace in recent weeks. Tariff deals have been announced with nearly all major partners: the UK, Vietnam, Indonesia, Japan and the EU.

Talks with China, perhaps the trickiest, are ongoing: A 90-day extension of the tariff and export control détente struck in mid-May seems likely—a negotiating team led by US Treasury chief Scott Bessent and top Chinese economic officials held talks in Stockholm on 28 July for more than five hours, and again on July 29 to resolve long-standing economic disputes and reach a tariff agreement.

In contrast, US negotiations with India, even after numerous rounds of talks conducted in Washington and New Delhi, appear to have lagged.

It's clear that US President Donald Trump is not settling for win-win deals, and that may be what's slowing progress with India. The White House is handing out lopsided

deals: US trade partners must accept its one-sided terms or have the sweeping 'Liberation Day' tariffs that Trump announced on 2 April imposed on their exports.

Countries whose economies are heavily dependent on exports can't really hold out and are consenting to drop their tariffs on US exports—to zero in many cases. Vietnam, for example, got a pretty raw deal. While tariffs on Vietnamese exports have reduced from 46% to 20%, America has got duty-free access to Vietnam's market. Worse, Vietnam's exports of transhipped goods will still face a 40% US import duty.

The centrepiece of these accords are US base rates. These across-the-board American import tariff rates are much higher than the average of 3% that prevailed before 2 April and also the concessional rates that the White House wants for US exports, which makes these deals one-sided.

The base rate is 10% for British exports, 20% for Vietnamese exports, 19% for Indonesian exports, 15% for Japanese exports and 15% for EU exports. The White House may insist on a high base rate for Indian exports.

The EU had pitched a zero-for-zero tariff deal at the start of its talks with Washington and had readied an armoury of retaliatory counter-measures to be imposed on the US

in a bid to strengthen its negotiating position. But Trump proved a tough negotiator—the EU has agreed to a base rate that is even higher than that on British exports.

The alternative was a trade war, European trade commissioner Maroš Šefčovič told news reporters, underlining just how close Trump came to walking out of the negotiations that were conducted in the ballroom of his Scottish golf resort.

New Delhi will find it politically impossible to sell a similarly lopsided deal at home. Indian negotiators would need substantial

But on 7 July, Trump unilaterally reduced the US reciprocal tariff for some of our trade rivals like Bangladesh and Cambodia, thus upsetting our potential tariff-differential advantage. His persistent threats of a 50% levy on copper, a staggering duty of 200% on pharmaceutical products and an additional 10% tariff on imports from Brics countries has further complicated the negotiations.

New Delhi has tread cautiously so far, not giving in to any wild demands, and has not let talks break down. Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman lowered tariffs on whisky and pharmaceuticals preemptively and unconditionally ahead of Trump's 2 April tariff announcements. Perhaps in recognition of this careful approach, Trump desisted from sending India a tariff letter earlier this month at the end of his 90-day reprieve for concluding bilateral deals. On Wednesday, though, he threatened to impose a tariff of 25% plus a "penalty" from 1 August on our exports, presuma-

bly to hasten negotiations. But it would not be unrealistic to expect him to agree to another extension. Trump is famous for changing his decisions quickly. Extended negotiations could be used for demanding concessions that will make an India-US pact less one-sided. Trump may come around if US companies with significant leverage in Washington lobby for those concessions to be granted.

Like the UK, we could ask for conditional relief on steel and aluminium. We could similarly seek a tariff rate quota for automobiles. India could go beyond tariffs and secure concessions in services too, such as a higher and assured number of H-1B visas that an Amazon would like as much as a TCS.

Digital trade, like in the US-Indonesia agreement, can be part of our deal, suitably adapted for Indian companies. Trading paperless could be a way to blunt the blow of a base rate. If authorities start accepting electronic documents and online filings, the savings that may accrue to Indian exporters—as estimated by the UNESCAP-ADB—would substantially offset the impact of tariff hikes. Without these, India may not be in a position to sell the deal domestically—commerce minister Piyush Goyal indicated as much when he said that India is aiming for a win-win deal.



THE EDITORIAL PAGE

WORDLY WISE
WE MUST LIVE TOGETHER AS BROTHERS
OR PERISH TOGETHER AS FOOLS.
— MARTIN LUTHER KING JR

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

On tariffs, a what-if story



SANJAYA BARU

Could Prime Minister Modi have handled President Trump differently?

AFTER SEALING A deal with the European Union and Japan, agreeing to a 15 per cent tariff in the case of these developed industrial economies, and even as he strings China along, United States President Donald Trump has shocked India, a low-middle-income developing economy, imposing a 25 per cent tariff. Till recently, the official Indian briefing to the media was that discussions were still on and India may get a couple of weeks' reprieve in August to strike a deal.

Hours after the Lok Sabha saw Prime Minister Narendra Modi unwilling to give any credit to President Trump for the pause in Operation Sindoor, the latter hit hard. Even after the PM and foreign minister's statements in Parliament, President Trump tweeted for the nth time his claim that he had stopped the war. He had always linked that to trade. There's more to the Trump action than just trade and tariffs.

Never since 1971 has India found both the United States and China on the same side on a matter concerning Pakistan, while at the same time having to defend its relationship with Russia. This is perhaps the lowest point for Indian foreign policy, which has consistently endeavoured for three decades to keep the US on the Indian side while having to deal with the China-Pakistan alliance. Parliament must undertake a comprehensive review of Indian foreign policy.

India is now stuck in a Catch-22. Damned if he will, damned if he won't, Prime Minister Modi will not admit that US intervention played a role. If the issue was only about how the war ended, the matter would have rested there. After all, even in the past, the US did play a role in sorting out issues between India and Pakistan, even with India consistently maintaining that all disputes between neighbours can only be settled bilaterally. No US President has made a big deal of it in the past.

This time it's different. Not only has President Trump made a big deal of his intervention, explicitly seeking credit for it, he has gone a step further and linked this to the outcome of the trade and tariffs negotiations. While the EU and Japan are relatively happy with the outcome of tariff negotiations, making promises on investment, and China is working its way through Washington DC's

corridors of power, India has been hit.

Worse, as one longstanding watcher of US-India relations said on a social media post, Trump has rubbed salt into Indian wounds by striking a deal with Pakistan, "whereby Pakistan and the United States will work together on developing their massive oil reserves".

Could Prime Minister Modi have handled President Trump differently?

The problem goes all the way back to Indian expectations about a second Trump presidency. Even as Prime Minister Modi tried to remain neutral between Trump and Kamala Harris in the run-up to the presidential elections, many in India and many Indians in the US continued to assume that Trump would be better for US-India relations. When Trump chose to invite President Xi Jinping of China to his inauguration in January without extending such an invitation to Modi, alarm bells would have sounded in New Delhi's South Block.

Both the PM and the External Affairs Minister worked overtime to reach out to President Trump and retrieve ground. It is possible that after this initial shock, the Prime Minister and his diplomatic team may have reassessed the status of US-India relations. The earlier assumption that President Biden was unfriendly towards India, and in fact friendly towards Pakistan, while President Trump would rebalance the equation ought to have been dismissed and a new assessment made about what lies ahead. It appears Pakistan made such a re-assessment and quickly invested in the Trump entourage, buying up support.

When President Trump unveiled his trade and tariff policy, he repeatedly named India a "tariff king" and as a target for action. Perhaps the Modi government had hoped that by buying more defence equipment from the US, showing how it is contributing to the US economy, Trump could be appeased. The government even proposed a bilateral free trade agreement and hoped the negotiating process would get India off the hook. There was considerable optimism within the Union commerce ministry on this count even as late as April this year. Matters, however, had not been sorted out.

Caught in this trade trap, the Modi government had a fantastic opportunity to feed

President Trump's ego and vanity by thanking him for his role in the declaration of the ceasefire. Of course, it would be argued that Prime Minister Modi would not have wanted to depart from India's longstanding diplomatic posture of denying any role to the US or any other country in settling a bilateral dispute with Pakistan. But there was a way out.

After ceasefire was declared, Prime Minister Modi could have called President Trump, referred to the conversations he had with Vice President JD Vance, and the foreign minister had with his counterpart, and thanked Trump for his interest in ending wars and maintaining peace around the world and then added a line about how India-Pakistan issues can only be settled bilaterally. By linking his role in terminating Operation Sindoor to a trade deal, Trump appeared to be seeking a quid pro quo — credit for his role in exchange for concessions on trade.

The official Indian position could have been, "Yes, President Trump was concerned about the situation getting out of hand. He reached out to both sides. We thanked him for his concern. But, we declared ceasefire only after our objectives were met." End of story. Modi would have acknowledged Trump's role without giving him credit for the final decision and sticking to the standard Indian position that India-Pakistan disputes will only be settled bilaterally.

Whatever happened on those four fateful days in May this year, the government was clearly not prepared to deal with the larger challenge of the Trump presidency — that of pandering to and appeasing Trump's ego. The present Indian leadership does not have the toolkit to deal with egos as big as their own.

This is all the more surprising given that few heads of government around the world had established a better equation with President Trump than Prime Minister Modi. The government and foreign affairs scholars owe an explanation to the lay public as to why US-India relations have deteriorated to the point we find ourselves in today.

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RULE OF THE MOB

Chhattisgarh conversion row, violence on Pune family, frame a disturbing tendency — police taking their cue from vigilantes

TWO INCIDENTS, A day apart, show the police in two states, Chhattisgarh and Maharashtra, in poor light. They failed to uphold a basic precept of modern governance — only law enforcement agencies have the power to detain and question suspects and investigate crime, and they must also do so only according to due process. Last week, policemen in these two states appear to have acted at the behest of the mob. On July 25, the Chhattisgarh police arrested three people, including two nuns, on charges of forced conversion and human trafficking. Reports in this paper have raised questions about the neutrality of the law enforcers in a situation rife with tension. Instead of calming tempers and probing the charges, the Chhattisgarh police drew up their FIR almost entirely on the basis of statements of Bajrang Dal members. One of the women at the centre of the row later admitted she was coerced by a member of a right-wing outfit to give a statement against the accused. A day after the Chhattisgarh arrests, a group of around 60-70 people, several of them allegedly belonging to the Bajrang Dal, barged into the house of a Kargil War veteran's relative in Pune, demanded identity proofs from the family, and called them Bangladeshis. The police personnel present at the site participated in the humiliation of the family by taking them to a police station in the dead of the night.

The Supreme Court has, on several occasions, underlined the dangers of mob vigilantism. But whether in cow protection cases or in matters related to religious conversion, or now in the increasingly contentious issue of illegal migration, law enforcement agencies show a disturbing tendency to let self-proclaimed community leaders take over. The Pune incident reportedly occurred after a "tip-off" about Bangladeshis in the city. The role of the Bajrang Dal in this episode — as well as in the conversion-related arrests in Chhattisgarh — points to the same worrying tendency of the state law enforcement apparatus ceding vital space to vigilantes.

On more than one occasion, including in December last year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has underlined the contributions of the Catholic community in social welfare. Instances such as the episode in Chhattisgarh pose question marks on that outreach. It's also a cruel irony that at a time when members of all political parties are applauding the valour of the armed forces in Operation Sindoor, a war veteran's relatives were targeted with impunity. The police in Chhattisgarh and Maharashtra have much to answer for.

RETURN OF MR DARCY

'Pride and Prejudice' is set for another reboot. Two centuries on, it's still Austen's world

IT IS A truth generationally acknowledged that Jane Austen remains one of literature's most enduring influencers. As things go, most people are fools in love. And so, the idea of vicariously participating in other people's romantic misadventures through her work — if only to gauge one's own missteps — holds a timeless appeal. Perhaps that is what explains the periodic resurgence of her classic *Pride and Prejudice* on screen: It is set to be repackaged as a Netflix series. In the meantime, the writer's 250th birth anniversary is being marked by a nostalgia-laden return to theatres of the 2005 adaptation featuring Keira Knightley.

Austen's staying power, however, runs deeper than costume drama and clever repartee. Her genius lies in dissecting how people perform identity — through class, courtship, marriage and conversation — and how frequently they misjudge one another in the process. The charming narcissist, the ambitious social climber, the well-meaning sibling who cannot keep a secret, the distant father, remain familiar tropes. If anything, in a modern retelling, Lizzie Bennet might host a podcast on dating red flags, and unpack her romantic patterns in therapy. Austen's world is specific, but her insights remain universal, which is why her stories keep finding new forms, and new audiences.

Still, the proliferation of adaptations does invite scepticism. At a time when new voices struggle to break through, the constant tilling of old soil can feel like creative fatigue masquerading as homage. Does the industry's fixation on Austen reflect a reluctance to move beyond the literary canon or are her themes — pride, perception, emotional cluelessness — simply more resonant than ever? After all, whether in bonnets or bustiers, misreading the room is as much hardwired into modern DNA as it was in the 19th century. Two centuries on, Austen still sees young people — and yes, she's still smirking.



GOURAV VALLABH

US-INDIA TRADE RELATIONS — anchored in democratic values and strategic convergence — have entered a more challenging phase. The recent imposition of 25 per cent-plus tariffs on Indian exports by the US adds stress to trade negotiations. The core of the dispute lies not just in tariffs or market access. While India's prudent refusal to open its agricultural and dairy markets remains a sticking point for Washington, a deeper unease stems from India's energy and defence ties with Russia. India expanded its crude oil imports from Russia — from around 2 per cent of total imports in FY22 to 36 per cent in FY25 — largely due to wartime discounts. With those discounts now shrinking, India has fresh room to diversify its sources — including LNG and crude from the US — potentially turning friction into an opportunity.

The impact of tariffs cannot be ignored. Indian exports to the US constitute just over 2 per cent of GDP but their composition matters. Sectors such as textiles, chemicals, pharmaceuticals and auto components will face the brunt. The tariff shock could cost India up to \$30 billion in export earnings, affecting supply chains, employment and GDP momentum in the short term. Yet India's economic structure — rooted in strong domestic consumption — offers it a cushion.

Still, the broader global environment remains volatile. A slowdown in emerging markets, ongoing capital outflows and ris-

STEADY HAND IN STORMY WATERS

US tariffs, global volatility can cause short-term shocks, must be handled with care

Despite near-term volatility, India's market fundamentals remain sound. Key drivers such as financial services, consumer goods and technology are relatively insulated from trade tensions. However, short-term market volatility is inevitable, driven by high valuations and policy uncertainty. Sectors like auto components could even gain, as US tariffs on Chinese and Mexican parts create demand for alternatives.

ing financial uncertainty are contributing to short-term pressures. July saw foreign portfolio investors pull more than \$1.4 billion from Indian markets, and the Rupee weakened nearly 2 per cent, ranking among the weaker emerging market currencies in the month. A depreciating currency feeds into imported inflation, raises the cost of foreign debt and adds complexity to monetary policymaking.

This leaves RBI with a delicate balancing act. Inflation is benign — expected at around 3 per cent in FY26 — but the case for rate cuts is not straightforward. RBI must weigh global interest rate trajectories, volatile capital flows and exchange rate dynamics while ensuring domestic growth remains on track. In this climate, its credibility and consistency become as important as its policy tools.

While Washington's growing dissatisfaction with India's defence procurement — still dominated by Russian-origin systems — is understandable, India's position is pragmatic. Legacy dependence is being addressed through increased indigenous production, joint ventures and expanded purchases from Western partners, including the US. This evolving defence landscape can, in fact, serve as a strategic bridge rather than a barrier.

India is not alone in facing US tariff actions. Even close allies such as the UK, EU, Japan, and Vietnam have faced similar measures. The pattern suggests a larger trend —

Washington's push to narrow its current account deficit through selective protectionism and reduced import dependence. Economic diplomacy is becoming more tactical than rule-based. India's approach must be anchored in smart bargaining. Any "mini-deal" will have to go beyond symbolic relief to address structural irritants across agriculture, energy access, and technology transfer.

India's market fundamentals remain sound. Key drivers such as financial services, consumer goods and technology are relatively insulated from trade tensions. However, short-term market volatility is inevitable, driven by high valuations and policy uncertainty. Sectors like auto components could even gain, as US tariffs on Chinese and Mexican parts create demand for alternatives. Pharmaceuticals and electronics — so far exempt from US tariffs — also continue to perform well.

India's lower export dependency gives it strategic room but it must not foster complacency. By carefully balancing its energy sources, defence partnerships and trade positions, India can emerge as a resilient economy and a shaping force in the global order. India's steady hand and long-term vision are not only essential for its own growth but increasingly important for global economic stability.

The writer is part-time member, PM's Economic Advisory Council

AUGUST 1, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

LALIT MAKEN KILLED

LALIT MAKEN, PROMINENT trade union leader and Congress (I) MP from South Delhi, and his wife, Geentanjali, along with a visitor, Balkrishan Khanna, were shot dead in their Kirti Nagar house by two unidentified youths. A Congress (I) worker of the area, Suresh Malik, who used to drive Maken's car, was also shot in the shoulder. He is out of danger. The assailants, it appears, were aware of Maken's programme.

'GAS LEAK SABOTAGE'

THE UNION CARBIDE Corporation has ruled out everything but sabotage as the cause of last year's chemical disaster in Bhopal, the company

lawyer, Bud G Holman, said. His comments went further than any previous statement by Union Carbide on the cause of the gas leak that reportedly killed 2,000 people and injured 2,00,000. A company spokesperson, Ed Vand Name Le, said later that the lawyer's statement should have been that the UCC has "all but ruled out everything but sabotage". He left open the possibility that the gas leak was accidental.

MAKEN MURDER: 3 HELD

THREE PERSONS HAVE been detained in connection with the gruesome murder of Lalit Maken, his wife and a visitor to their house, the commissioner of police, Ved Marwah told a press conference. The three have been detained

on the basis of information collected from the five eye witnesses to the crime, he said. All three were residents of South Delhi, Marwah added. The police commissioner promised a reward of Rs 1 lakh to any person giving clues leading to the arrest of Maken's assailants.

PARLIAMENT ADJOURNED

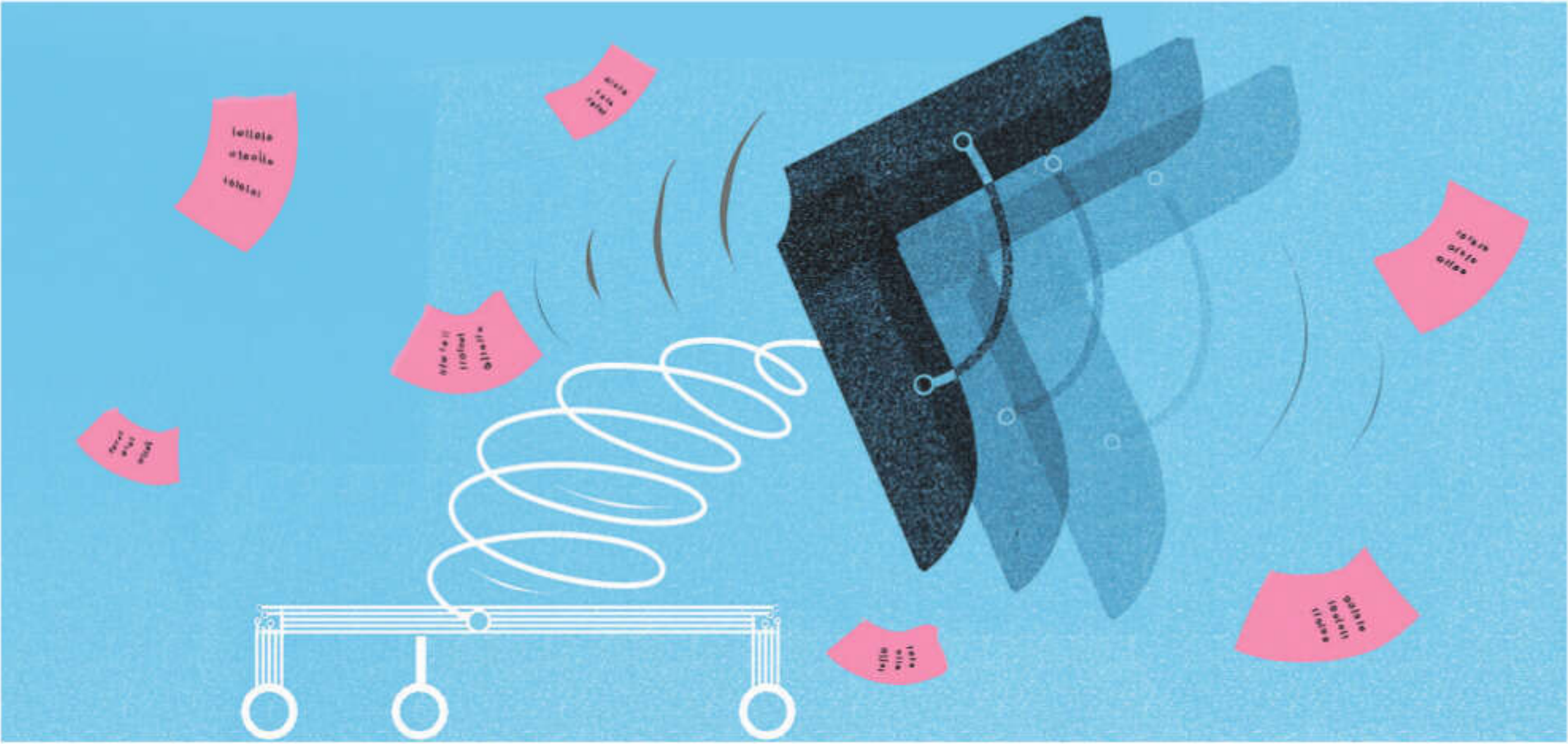
A STUNNED AND grieved Parliament adjourned as news of Congress (I) MP Lalit Maken's killing came in. Speaker Balram Jakhar, PM Rajiv Gandhi and Opposition leaders paid tributes in the Lok Sabha prior to adjournment. In the Rajya Sabha, chairman R Venkataraman broke the news to a shocked House soon after Question Hour and adjourned the proceedings.



THE IDEAS PAGE

DIS/AGREE
THE BEST OF BOTH SIDES

A weekly column, which offers not this-versus-that, but the best of both sides, to inform the debate



C.R. Sasikumar

In the wake of the TCS layoffs, a question:
In the age of AI, is India's IT sector still a beacon of opportunity?

India's IT story isn't over

The real test is not AI, but how swiftly Indian tech can build its next competitive moat



SRINATH SRIDHARAN

FROM THE PRINTING press to the steam engine, from electricity to the internet, every wave of technology has made societies fret and question old certainties, rethink economic models and invent new financial and social ideas. Yet through every industrial revolution, humans adapted, adopted and ultimately thrived. Today's AI wave is different in its speed and breadth, and disruptions like it will become the norm in this century.

For decades, the Indian IT-ITES sector has been the ladder to the middle class and above, a steady recruiter of young graduates, a constant on equities markets and a quiet assertion of India's competence on the global stage. Yet, its traditional pyramid model of mass entry-level hiring is giving way to a diamond-shaped structure built around mid-level specialists and deeper expertise.

Since TCS announced plans to lay off up to 12,000 employees, the anxiety has been palpable. While TCS cites skill mismatch and denies AI is the cause, Infosys is instead doubling down on campus hiring and re-training over two lakh staff in AI and cloud. What it really signals is that the first moat the industry built — cost, process discipline and scale — has served its purpose and is now being overtaken by new forces, especially AI.

Yet, the sector does not face this transition empty-handed. Decades of serving demanding global clients have given Indian IT some of the highest corporate governance standards among emerging markets, and competitive ability to navigate complex business demands worldwide. The real question is whether they can now build a second moat: Wider, deeper and harder to breach, based on skill, IP and product leadership.

To see why this is not a simple story of decline, it helps to look back. The IT-ITES industry became a global force by offering reliable, standardised services at a fraction of global cost, powered by an English-speaking coding and software talent pool and disciplined delivery.

Even before AI's surge, this model had begun to plateau. Net hiring slowed, global clients shifted from volume to value, and industry starting salaries barely changed over a decade. The arrival of commercially usable AI has simply made the need for reinvention impossible to ignore. It is, in a way, like the moment every Indian child knows too well: When the report card brings home bad marks, and a tough conversation with parents becomes the trigger to study harder for

the next quarterly exam.

AI need not kill the Indian tech sector. Global demand is rising for cybersecurity specialists, AI operations experts, data engineers and cloud architects. These roles will not hire tens of thousands of freshers each year, but they will pay better, demand deeper expertise and be harder to automate. Instead, by embedding AI literacy (right from middle school) and advanced skills across its workforce, the industry can go beyond cost arbitrage and build higher-value, globally respected services. This evolution comes with trade-offs.

Not everyone in today's workforce can be retrained for specialised roles, which is exactly what TCS has boldly announced. It is neither practical nor wise to force companies to keep every worker purely as a political or policy gesture. These firms are accountable to shareholders, and long-term strength will come from better returns through innovation.

So what must India do next? First, we must stop measuring the sector's health purely by the number of freshers it hires. The signs of resilience will now be revenue per employee, the share of digital and consulting in revenue and the creation of home-grown intellectual property.

Remember that the sector has rebuilt itself before. From Y2K to ERP, from outsourcing to digital, Indian IT has pivoted repeatedly. What makes AI different is the speed and depth of its impact. This time, it will test whether industry, academia and policy can move together.

search; and making lifelong learning real. We need genuine co-creation (and not just collaboration) between industry and academia, teaching problem-solving and interdisciplinary thinking. There is little sense in building new education campuses if what is taught inside is outdated.

And both the Union and state governments must see the merit in the National Education Policy not as a political contest, but as a chance to modernise upskilling and multi-skilling at scale. The goal must be to help the next generation become global citizens, fluent in technology and resilient across domains. India's demographic dividend still exists, though not forever.

AI will reshape the global economy whether we wish it or not. India already enjoys a reputation as a disciplined, trusted technology hub. It is a strength we can extend to AI by investing in agile regulations on data and ethics, and positioning ourselves as a global centre for "responsible AI".

The writer is a corporate advisor and author of Family and Dhanda



SHASHANK REDDY

TATA CONSULTANCY SERVICES' (TCS) recent announcement that it will be laying off 12,000 employees, amounting to 2 per cent of its global workforce, has begun to cause significant hand-wringing about the impact of AI on India's labour market. The clarification from K Kirithivasan, the company's CEO, that the layoffs are because of "skill mismatch" and not AI, however, is unlikely to quell growing unease within the country, as the IT sector has had an outsized impact on India's economic story. It employed just over five million people in 2024 but contributed around 7 per cent of GDP and accounted for 50 per cent of India's services exports.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, the IT sector has traditionally been the most straightforward and sought-after path to upward economic mobility and prosperity for India's le-

gions of engineering graduates, and any dip in the employment prospects of this sector is likely to have significant ripple effects on India's economy and politics. Coupled with several other, more bombastic statements by global giants like Meta and Salesforce on the reduced need for entry-level engineers and a turbulent business outlook for India's IT sector, an anxiety-inducing cocktail is born. In this context, there are three key takeaways from TCS layoffs to keep in mind.

First, it is of course entirely likely that these layoffs are not caused by AI. Net hiring by India's IT giants has been going down for several quarters, partly to balance the aggressive hiring spree in the aftermath of the Covid pandemic, and partly due to a more volatile global economy, which has reduced spending by potential clients. This slowdown in hiring is not limited to the IT sector. That said, there are also other emerging industries, particularly global capability centres (GCCs), which now employ nearly 2 million, and the start-up ecosystem, which are fast becoming an attractive alternative employment pathway for young engineers. We are not even sure what the actual impact of AI on employment and labour force participation globally has been so far, so it might be a little premature to lay the blame for these cuts at AI's feet.

Second, this does not mean that AI will not have an impact on India's IT sector. Historically, our IT giants have based their offerings on India's labour cost advantage, relying on the hundreds of thousands of engineers who graduate every year to pro-

vide standardised, relatively low-skilled services mostly in support functions at a fraction of global costs, best exemplified by the fact that starting salaries in the IT industry have not changed in a decade. AI can already do nearly everything that fresh hires in the sector are expected to do, and if the cost structures allow, there is very little reason for IT companies to keep hiring tens of thousands of fresh graduates each year. It can be reasonably expected that net hiring in these companies will no longer reach the levels seen in the last couple of decades, and any excess workforce, the so-called "bench" in IT HR parlance, will be systematically trimmed.

Third, the anxiety surrounding a single company's layoff decision is indicative of a much larger issue in the Indian economy — the fact that quality employment opportunities have not kept pace with economic growth rates and the growing aspirations of India's youth. Low wage levels in the private sector and growing living costs have made India's middle class more precariously placed than ever before, indicated by the rapidly expanding use of personal debt for consumption and basic necessities.

The advent and increased use of AI will also change the nature of jobs that are likely

to remain relevant. Demand, even within the IT space, is shifting from entry-level testing and support work to domain specialists in areas like cybersecurity, cloud computing, full-stack capabilities and AI itself. There is also growing demand for personnel in sectors like data centre management and chip design. While these jobs are likely to be high-paying, they will require significant investments in education and can never reach the employment numbers of the IT sector. With manufacturing not

taking off as expected and the narrowing opportunities in IT, fresh graduates, particularly from Tier-II and Tier-III colleges, might increasingly feel bleak about their employment opportunities.

The anxiety around TCS layoffs should be seen in the larger context of the structural issues within the Indian economy. Mitigation of any potential negative fallout due to widespread AI adoption on an already stressed workforce will require a multi-pronged approach, including a rapid, affordable skilling programme, a complete overhaul of India's higher education system, and policy incentives to boost other sectors, particularly emerging areas like biotech, pharmaceuticals and advanced manufacturing. No longer can one sector take on the burden of upholding India's middle class and economic prospects the way that IT has in the past. More diversified, well-paying employment opportunities will only strengthen the Indian economy during an uncertain time.

The writer is managing partner, Evam Law & Policy

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Sir Keir Starmer's declaration on Palestinian statehood sends a welcome signal for the future. But more pressure is needed if a humanitarian catastrophe is to be averted."
— THE GUARDIAN

Dear Vice President

Eight suggestions for the new incumbent, whoever that may be



ZERO HOUR

BY DEREK O'BRIEN

THE BEST TIME to give advice is to speak to a chair in front of you with nobody sitting on it. Empty chairs have arms. No ears, no minds, no conscience. Tell an empty chair anything and it will listen. And that's precisely what I have planned to do in this column — give *gyan* to an empty chair. There is a vacant seat to be filled. The chair of India's second-highest constitutional office will have a new occupant soon. The Vice President of India, as we learnt in civics books in school, chairs the Council of States. Before the monsoon recedes, we will have a new full-time presiding officer seated in the Rajya Sabha.

As a student of parliamentary democracy, let me — you guessed it — offer some suggestions to an empty chair. (Will be filled on the election of the 15th Vice President of India.)

Take 'Notice' of the Opposition

An important tool that enables MPs in the Opposition to hold the Union government accountable is to submit Notices seeking discussions on important issues. There has been a steep decline in the number of notices being accepted and then discussed on the floor of Parliament. In the eight years between 2009 and 2016, 110 notices were admitted into the Rajya Sabha for discussions. In the next eight years, between 2017 and 2024, that number dropped to an abysmal 36.

Rule 267 of the Rajya Sabha states that a member may ask the Chair to suspend the business listed for the day, and instead take up a discussion on an issue of urgent national importance. Under the watch of Venkaiah Naidu and Jagdeep Dhankar, in eight years, not even one discussion was allowed under this rule.

Stop mass suspension of MPs

In December 2023, 146 MPs were suspended from Parliament, 100 of these were from the Lok Sabha. A dubious record. For context, during the 10 years of UPA I and UPA II, a total of 50 MPs were suspended.

This mass suspension in 2023 was because Opposition MPs were demanding a statement from the Home Minister on the security breach in Parliament.

Choosing Vice Chairs

The Chairperson has the prerogative to nominate six members as Vice Chair to preside over the Rajya Sabha in the absence of the Chair or Deputy Chair. In the last two years, about 30 MPs were included in the panel to perform this duty. This must not be looked at as a perk. Nor

can it be a game of musical chairs. Two suggestions here. (i) Only those MPs with considerable experience should be chosen to perform this duty. (ii) The political party they are in needs to be (informally) consulted before names are announced.

Do not censor protests by the Opposition

Visuals of Opposition MPs protesting inside Parliament are not shown on the government-run Sansad TV. Cameras and on-line edits of the proceedings only show the Treasury Benches. Is this fair?

Ensure more Bills are sent for scrutiny

When a Bill is referred to a parliamentary committee, it goes through critical examination with stakeholders and experts being consulted. This scrutiny often helps improve the quality of legislation.

In the 14th Lok Sabha (2004-09), six out of 10 bills were sent to various committees for scrutiny. In the 15th Lok Sabha, it was seven out of 10. In the 16th Lok Sabha this number fell to around three out of ten. In the 17th Lok Sabha (2019-24), only two out of 10 Bills were examined by a parliamentary committee.

Let MPs exercise constitutional rights

When a bill is being passed in Parliament, each Member can move amendments to the Bill. When the amendments are being moved in the House, the Member has an absolute right to ask for "division" (electronic voting). In the last few years, there are multiple examples of members being denied this right. Several MPs, including your columnist, asked for division during the passing of the contentious farm bills. The right was denied.

Must accept points of order

A point of order can be raised by any member when she feels that there has been a transgression of any rule in the House which the Chair has not taken cognisance of. The rules state that whenever such instances occur, members "can and should" bring such instances to the notice of the Chair.

Raising a point of order is a legitimate parliamentary tactic. The Chair cannot, and must not, look away.

Do away with birthday greetings

Not long ago, the Chairman of the Rajya Sabha introduced the practice of wishing MPs on their birthdays. Good thought or an avoidable self-indulgence?

Wishing 200 plus members every year, at two minutes a member, adds up to over 400 minutes. Maybe this time can be used by Parliament to discuss important issues facing the nation.

These are eight suggestions to an empty Chair, expectantly waiting for somebody to sit on it.

The writer is MP and leader, All India Trinamool Congress Parliamentary Party. Research credit: Ayashman Dey, Chahat Mangtani

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A FURIOUS DEBATE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Debate must go on' (IE, July 31). After a prolonged silence, Parliament has rediscovered its voice, and what a chorus it was! Operation Sindoor, catalysed by the tragedy in Pahalgam, finally received the scrutiny it deserved, bringing overdue clarity and catharsis. The twin developments, surgical precision in Dachigam and a diplomatic nod at the UNSC, offer India both closure and clout. Yet, amid the sound and fury, some members mistook debate for a duel. Name-calling and national interest are uneasy bedfellows, and using Parliament as a partisan stage weakens what should be a unified front.

K Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Debate must go on' (IE, July 31). The most important pillar of democracy was indeed up and about after a long time. The debate on Op Sindoor raised a number of important issues relating to strategy, diplomacy, deterrence and the India-Pakistan ceasefire. The government stooped lower than the Opposition in its attempts to dodge pointed questions. The Opposition's challenge at times appeared bellicose and immature, but the government's stubborn stand, too, was unparliamentary. The most important question, whether our forces are ready and fully equipped for modern warfare with unfriendly neighbours, was missing in the debate.

Vasant Nalawade, Satara

BEYOND STATEHOOD

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Moving the needle' (IE, July 31). The UK and France, being old-world colonial powers with pockets in West Asia, retreated wilfully decades ago, abandoning their responsibilities towards the UN-proposed two-state solution. After all this delay, we can be forgiven for thinking that the current line seems rhetorical. The crisis is above and beyond statehood now. It is, at the moment, more of a humanitarian issue, and only solid action will have a lasting impact on the ground. Our own stance at the UN and at world forums should make the needle tick.

Abhinav Shah, Lucknow

CAMPUS MOTHERS

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'The politics of care' (IE, July 31). Though it is correct that caregiving is the job of the community and not solely the job of "mothers" who may have their own struggles, the idea of "campus mothers" should not be rejected in its totality. The intent behind the idea must also be preserved. An informed discussion, supported by data, whereby the success and limitations of the initiative are assessed, may be the way forward. Until then, we can have additional support groups where caregiving and receiving is a mutual, two-way process. Activities like art therapy, music, and mediation can help build mutual care.

Aerika Singh, Chandigarh



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If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to explained@indianexpress.com

Why Mussoorie hotels must now register guests on govt portal

AISWARYARAJ
DEHRADUN, JULY 31

OWNERS OF hotels, guesthouses, and home-stays in Mussoorie will now have to register their guests on an Internet portal run by the Uttarakhand Department of Tourism as part of measures to ensure that the fragile ecology of the region is not burdened beyond its 'carrying capacity' — which refers to the maximum number of individuals an ecosystem or specific area can sustainably support without degrading natural resources or causing significant environmental damage. This directive is part of a suite of 19 preventive and remedial measures recommended in a 2023 report by a committee appointed by

the National Green Tribunal (NGT) to protect the environment of the tourist destination. On May 8, the Tribunal took note of the action taken based on the report in an affidavit by the state government, and pressed the state to expedite the implementation of these steps.

Process of registration

"Registration of tourists should be done according to the carrying capacity of the area, especially the available parking space, guest room availability, etc. Tourists can be charged for visiting the Mussoorie area, and the payment can be utilised for managing waste and cleanliness," the 2023 report had said. After dragging its feet for some time, the state Tourism Department began trials on the registration of tourists, which was one of the

19 recommendations, on Wednesday. A meeting was convened to apprise owners of hotels and homestays of the order, district tourism development officer Brijendra Pandey said. "We have given a live demo to the managers and owners on how to register their units in the system and fill in the data of the tourists. This registration will be carried out in real time when visitors check in," Pandey said.

Rising tourism pressure

Tourist arrivals in Mussoorie, which is around 320 km from Delhi and well connected by road and rail (till Dehradun), have been increasing steadily. From an estimated 1.5 lakh in 1958, the number of tourists reached 3 lakh in 1966, and 8.5 lakh by 2000. In 2019, the last year before the Covid-19 pandemic, more than

30 lakh tourists visited the hill station.

The rush of tourists has put great pressure on Mussoorie's physical infrastructure. As of 2023, the registered accommodation in the area included 303 hotels, 201 homestays, and six *dharamshalas*. All public and private parking together had space for only 1,240 vehicles, and the committee had suggested in 2023 that the number of tourist vehicles should be limited to this number.

The 2011 Census recorded the resident population of Mussoorie at 30,118. The 2023 report estimated this number would increase by 23% by 2037 and 52% by 2052. The hill station already suffers from a shortage of water — the 7.69 million litres per day supply from six pumping stations and six gravity sources by the Mussoorie Nagar Palika has

to be augmented by water from the Yamuna Water Supply Scheme.

Fragile Himalayan zone

The hill station, located at an altitude of 2,005 metres above sea level in the foothills of the Garhwal Himalayas, is in Seismic Zone IV, one step below the most active Zone V.

A 2007 study had concluded that the highly jointed, fractured, and weathered carbonate rock mass, and the steep slopes and high water percolation into them, create ideal conditions for slope instability in the area. Many buildings stand on slopes steeper than 40 degrees, and many are taller than the 12-metre height permissible under the Uttarakhand Building By-Laws and Regulation, 2001.

The NGT had earlier cited a report by the

Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration on Mussoorie's carrying capacity in 2001, which had concluded that no further constructions were viable. Dr Vikram Gupta of Dehradun's Wadia Institute of Himalayan Geology had backed this finding, saying that the limestone in Mussoorie was weak with microcracks.

In 2023, following the Joshimath landslide incidence incident, the NGT had flagged similar risks to Mussoorie and surrounding areas.

"Over-concretisation leads to landslides. The proposed tunnel below Mussoorie is dangerous. So is the proposed ropeway from Dehradun to Mussoorie. The ropeway and tunnel have damaged Joshimath... Excessive building activities are beyond the capacity of Mussoorie," it had said.

EXPLAINED GLOBAL

HOW A DOOMSDAY CULT IN KENYA LEFT AT LEAST 400 PEOPLE DEAD

A COURT IN Kenya has ordered the exhumation of around 400 bodies suspected to be of people who starved themselves to death in a cult ritual two years ago. These bodies are believed to have been buried in shallow graves on the outskirts of Malindi, *Reuters* reported.

Mackenzie & his church

At the centre of the scandal is Paul Mackenzie, a taxi driver turned evangelist who has been a religious leader for two decades.

Unlike the Roman Catholic or Anglican churches, which are governed by hierarchies and rules, many evangelical churches in Kenya are "run by independent preachers who have no oversight", according to a 2023 report by *The New York Times*. Mackenzie's Good News International, with its sprawling campus in the Shakahola forests near Malindi, was one such church.

According to the church's website, it was established "to nurture the faithful holistically in all matters of Christian spirituality as we prepare for the second coming of Jesus Christ through teaching and evangelism".

Its TV show, titled *End Time Messages*, would broadcast "God's word based teachings, preaching and prophecy on end times... to bring the Gospel of our LORD Jesus Christ which is free of deceit and man's intellect," the website said.

A deadly plan

Mackenzie gained a cult following on the back of his TV show and YouTube videos. And with that, his message became increasingly deadly. In early 2023,

he told his followers that the world was going to end by August, and that Satan would rule for the next 1,000 years. Subsequently, he ordered them to starve themselves and their children to death so they could meet Jesus in heaven instead. According to police, Mackenzie is said to have had a three-stage plan: first to be killed would be the children, followed by the women, and then he himself would die with the men. He was able to make headway in his plan by brainwashing his followers, and cutting them off from their families and society. "Education is evil... Children are being taught lesbianism and gayism in school curriculums," he said in one video in 2023.

In March 2023, a resident of the area told police that his brother and sister-in-law had starved their children to death in the forest on Mackenzie's orders. Officers searched and found the bodies, after which Mackenzie was arrested. But a magistrate freed him, after which he returned to the forest and speeded up his plans.

He was arrested again after another tip-off in April. A search of the 800-acre Shakahola campus led to the discovery of around 80 bodies, most showing signs of death by starvation, and some by asphyxiation. Mackenzie, who now faces charges of murder and terrorism, denies the accusations against him.

Kenya's President William Ruto had said the government would form a judicial commission of inquiry to establish why Mackenzie's alleged activities were not detected earlier. The President has faced strong criticism for his handling of the incident.

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE

'BABY TALK' MAY HAVE HELPED IN EVOLUTION OF LANGUAGE: STUDY

IF YOU'VE ever cooed at a baby, you have participated in a special experience. Whereas humans constantly chatter to their infants, other apes hardly ever do so, a new study published in *Science* reveals.

"It's a new feature that has evolved and massively expanded in our species," said Johanna Schick, a linguist at the University of Zurich and an author of the study. That expansion, Schick and her colleagues argue, may have been crucial to the evolution of language.

Other mammals can bark, meow, roar and hoot. But no other species use a set of sounds to produce words, or build sentences with those words to convey an infinite variety of meaning.

The study makes a crucial discovery:



young apes hardly ever heard 'infant-directed communication' or 'baby talk' from the adult apes around them. But humans engage in baby talk, featuring repeated words, an exaggerated stress on syllables and a high, singsong tone, all the time. This means that human children have a profoundly different experience with language.

The researchers speculated that young apes learned how to make calls by listening to adults. That was enough for a relatively simple system of sounds. But when early humans began gaining a complex language, children needed more help. Talking to them a lot before they could speak may have enabled them to master the spoken word. **THE NEW YORK TIMES**

before the Supreme Court by couples who find themselves stuck in the process due to a change in the law on surrogacy. Essentially, they had begun their treatment before the enactment of the law, but the new law's age limits make them ineligible for surrogacy.

A Supreme Court Bench comprising Justices B V Nagarathna and K V Viswanathan heard three petitions filed by couples requesting eligibility certificates under the Surrogacy Act, arguing that they had initiated the process before the Act was brought in. In one of the petitions, the husband is 62 years old, while the wife is about 56 years old. The couple lost their only child in 2018 and, desirous of having another child, began fertility procedures in 2019.

After facing delays due to the disruptions induced by the COVID-19 pandemic, they were able to eventually arrange for an embryo transfer in early 2022. The petition states that their pregnancy was unsuccessful — and by the time they

sought to proceed with another transfer, they had crossed the age limit laid down by the surrogacy law.

The petitioners argued that the retrospective application of these conditions was unreasonable, especially when medical procedures were already underway at the time the Act came into force. They also submitted that the age limit created an unreasonable classification, violating Article 14 of the Constitution, and also interfered with reproductive autonomy, which is a facet of Article 21, which protects personal liberty.

Regulatory laws usually offer transitional safeguards for those navigating compliance during a legislative shift. These provisions are called "grandfather clauses", which "grandfather in" certain existing situations. The Surrogacy Act has no such transitional clauses. The petitioner's challenge also raised broader concerns, including the right of sin-

gle, unmarried women to pursue parenthood through surrogacy, a choice that the current law does not accommodate.

Provisions of the law The Surrogacy (Regulation) Act, 2021, and the Assisted Reproductive Technology (Regulation) Act, 2021, enacted in January 2022, together ban commercial surrogacy and allow only altruistic surrogacy.

According to the government, this change in law was intended to prevent the commodification of reproductive labour and to impose procedural safeguards to ensure that surrogacy is used only in cases of medical necessity.

The Surrogacy (Regulation) Act lays down eligibility conditions for couples intending to seek surrogacy. The law states that for intending couples, the woman must be between 23 and 50 years of age, and the man between 26 and 55 years.

The process requires the couple to ob-

EXPLAINED LAW

RAVI'S CRITICISM OF LINGUISTIC STATES



"In my own state Tamil Nadu... people of different languages — Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, Gujarati, Marathi, Hindi... they all live together but the moment it became a linguistic state, one third of the population became a second-class citizen. It happened in other parts also."

R N RAVI, GOVERNOR OF TAMIL NADU

ON JANUARY 26, 1950



Maps not to scale. Indicative only.

AFTER 1956 REORGANISATION



Sriramulu, a 51-year-old railway engineer, went on a hunger strike demanding the creation of a Telugu-speaking Andhra state. His death, after a 58-day-long fast, triggered widespread public outcry and protests. Two days later, on December 17, Nehru announced the creation of Andhra, which would officially become a state on October 1, 1953.

Less than three months later, the Centre set up the States Reorganisation Commission (SRC) under Justice Fazl Ali. "The greater development of political consciousness among the people and the growing importance of the great regional languages led gradually to demands for the formation of certain States on a linguistic basis. Each such separate problem was however closely interrelated with other problems, and any formation of a new state necessarily affected a number of other States. It thus became increasingly difficult to consider any such problem in isolation..." the Centre said in its resolution to create the SRC.

Justice Ali submitted its report on September 30, 1955. Based on the SRC's recommendations, the political map of India was redrawn to comprise 14 states and six Union Territories (UTs).

Language not the only criteria

In its December 1953 resolution on the SRC in Parliament, the Centre had made it clear that language would not be the only criterion for the reorganisation of states.

"The language and culture of an area have an undoubted importance as they represent a pattern of living which is common in that area... [but] there are other important factors which have also to be borne in mind. The first essential consideration is the preservation and strengthening of the unity and security of India," it had said.

The final report too reflected this sentiment. "...After a full consideration of the problem in all its aspects, we have come to

the conclusion that it is neither possible nor desirable to reorganise States on the basis of the single test of either language or culture, but that a balanced approach to the whole problem is necessary in the interests of our national unity," the SRC report stated.

Most of the criticism directed at the SRC and the Centre was that it was not doing enough to recognise linguistic demands.

For instance, the SRC recommended the creation of a bilingual Bombay state that stretched from Kutch in the northwest to Vidarbha in the east, and bordered Goa in the south. This was in spite of their being vibrant movements, which could be traced to well before Independence, for both a Marathi and a Gujarati-speaking state.

On the other hand, the Centre rejected the SRC's recommendation of bifurcating the Punjabi- and Hindi-speaking regions of Punjab, primarily to strengthen the border state that had already been split by the Partition less than a decade ago.

Bombay and Punjab thus saw continued protests, often violent, for linguistic division. While the Centre would eventually cave to these demands, Nehru more than once expressed his displeasure with the principle of unilingualism.

"We do not stand for this principle of unilingualism... Language should not be confused with the boundaries of a State. It may be that sometimes the boundaries may be linguistic... [But] we can never function in this country unless we cooperate with each other, unless the Tamil cooperates with the Telugu and the Kannada, the Malayalee and the Marathi and the Gujarati and the Bengali and the Punjabi and so on," he said on August 10, 1956, while the States Reorganisation Bill was being debated.

A success story

Historian Ramachandra Guha wrote in *India After Gandhi* (2007): "Some Western observers... believed that [the] profusion of tongues would be the undoing of India... Linguistic states they regarded as a grievous error... that would further divide the states from each other [and] heighten the impulse toward secession".

But quite the opposite has happened. As Guha put it, "the sustenance of linguistic pluralism has worked to tame and domesticate secessionist tendencies." This is in stark contrast to India's immediate neighbours Pakistan and Sri Lanka where the imposition of a single language has been a cause for division and deadly conflict rather than unity.

The Second Administrative Reforms Commission (ARC) report of 2008 stated: "The resolution of linguistic conflicts was one of the major achievements after Independence... Continuance of a common language has provided the basis for administrative unity and efficiency within the State."

When the ASG mentioned the risks associated with geriatric pregnancies, Justice Nagarathna pointed out that some couples "will take the risk" anyway. Essentially, the Bench asked why surrogacy as an option must be outlawed for an older couple when natural geriatric pregnancies are not outlawed.

The ASG responded that advanced parental age influences both an unborn child's health through genetic and epigenetic changes, and also the filial love that a child requires for 20 years of their life. "Rational nexus to the object of the Act is absent by having this age bar, especially as there is a void regarding not taking care of the couples who have already commenced. Genuine intending couples who had commenced surrogacy, the Act doesn't care for them and puts an embargo. Stop, no children! Look how harsh it is," Justice Nagarathna said, emphasising that the Surrogacy Act's intent is to prevent commercial surrogacy, not genuine parenthood.

Before the Supreme Court, questions over the age cap in surrogacy law

AMAA SHEIKH
NEW DELHI, JULY 31

THE SUPREME Court this week reserved its verdict in a clutch of petitions challenging the age cap for couples seeking to have a child through surrogacy, especially those couples who had started the process before the current law on this matter was enacted by Parliament.

The Assisted Reproductive Technology (Regulation) Act, 2021 and the Surrogacy (Regulation) Act, 2021, prescribe the legal framework for surrogacy.

Together, these laws lay down age limits on those intending to have a child through surrogacy. The intending woman, if married, must be between 23 and 50 years of age; fathers must be between 26 and 55, and single women must be between the ages of 35 and 45 years.

The case before SC

Several writ petitions have been filed

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

No one is guilty in Malegaon case

Failure to secure convictions in terror cases shows the prosecution in a poor light

Yet another terror case has failed to pass muster in the courts on the grounds of shoddy investigation. A special court in Mumbai has acquitted all seven charged by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) in the 2008 Malegaon blasts case that killed six persons. The Malegaon acquittal comes 10 days after the Bombay High Court overturned a 2015 verdict by a special Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime Act (MCOCA) court in the Mumbai serial train blasts case, in which 189 persons died. The high court acquitted all 12 persons convicted by the MCOCA court and pulled up the Maharashtra anti-terrorism squad for botched investigation. The Malegaon verdict is equally harsh on the investigators, though the court has given qualified acquittals. Special Judge AK Lahoti said: “A grave degree of suspicion is established, but not enough to convict them; hence, the court has given them the benefit of the doubt.”

Several questions arise at this point. One, why do investigators fail to establish guilt in courts, even in the most gruesome terror incidents? In the Malegaon case, the judge found procedural gaps, poor evidence gathering and recording (the spot *panchnama*, or record of events, was faulty, for instance), unreliable evidence and hostile witnesses. Two, why does the investigation and judicial process stretch this long? It has been 17 years since the Malegaon blasts, and closure seems a distant possibility. Justice has eluded the victims, and years after the incident, the nation does not know who perpetrated these acts of terror. Time-bound probes and faster trials are necessary not just to ensure timely justice but also to reduce the pain of waiting for closure. Delays also expose cases to allegations of interference and manipulation of evidence and witnesses. A review of similar cases from the same period may be instructive: the 2006 Malegaon blasts which killed 37 persons; the 2007 Samjhauta Express blasts that killed 68; the Mecca Masjid blasts (2007) that claimed nine lives; and the Ajmer Dargah Sharif blasts (2007) in which three persons died. The investigators failed to secure convictions in these cases, which became politically sensitive as they came to be clubbed under the umbrella term “saffron terror”. The first accused in the Malegaon case was Pragma Singh Thakur, a saffron-clad political activist, who was elected to Parliament in 2019 on a BJP ticket, and other accused involved a serving Army officer, Lt Colonel Shrikant Purohit. Strangely, NIA did not appeal against the acquittals in these cases.

The guilty in terror cases have to be found, their guilt established and punished. It is also important that accountability is fixed on investigators who fail to follow due process. Committed officers, good forensics, adherence to procedures, and insulation from political pressure — not coercive confessions — can ensure convictions, justice and closure in terror cases.

The law of driving on Indian roads

India has the highest absolute number of road accident fatalities in the world; this moderates somewhat when seen per capita, but remains a significantly high figure — higher than, say, China, which has a comparable population but higher vehicle density. Road accident deaths are also easily preventable. So, the Supreme Court’s observation that sudden and unannounced braking is negligence, particularly if it endangers others, could be read as a response to the high human toll.

However, if the observation, made in a compensation order becomes the basis for wider application, it is likely to come up against the practical difficulties of driving on Indian roads, where one can spot the entire historical trajectory of man’s engagement with motion in a single reel — starting with pedestrians, handcarts, bullock carriages, bicycles, autos, buses and trucks, many often driving on the wrong lane or in the wrong direction. Speeding, tailgating, jaywalking, lane-changing without signalling, and a raft of other traffic infractions are all too common — as is dereliction of personal safety conduct. Add to this animals straying onto the roads and potholes and craters, and sudden braking becomes both an unavoidable hazard of and survival tactic for driving on Indian roads. It will be no minor challenge to penalise sudden breaking, that is, if the apex court’s observation becomes the law. The way forward is to crack down on infractions that prompt sudden braking. Severe penal action is the only way to enforce road rules, and no authority should be spared from action, including when they fail to maintain roads in conditions suitable for safe driving and walking. But such action must also factor in the ground realities.

Coming up Trumps against tariff threat

Impact of latest US tariffs on Indian garments exports can largely be neutralised by playing our cards well

India’s garments exports — that have stagnated in the \$16-18 billion range over the last 10 years — now face an additional threat. Effective August 1, the Trump administration has more than doubled the tariff on Indian exports to 25%, with a threat of an additional penalty. Major apparel supplier Vietnam, on the other hand, recently secured a last-minute deal to cap US tariffs at 20% on many of its exports — giving it further advantage against India — while Bangladesh, another major competitor, is looking to secure a similar deal as Vietnam in the next few days.

The US imported almost \$85 billion worth of garments in 2024, of which India accounted for about \$10.5 billion. While the latest tariff announcement can be seen as a setback, India still has three aces up its sleeve to neutralise its impact and push firmly towards its \$100 billion textile exports target. These aces are concluding the free trade agreement (FTA) with the EU, ensuring the supply of raw material at competitive prices, and an incentive and reforms package tailored for employment generation through apparel exports.

The first ace India must play is to

expedite the FTA with the EU. Currently, the EU is the largest garments importer with an import value close to \$200 billion. India only captures \$5 billion of this against Bangladesh’s \$25 billion. The primary reason is the 10% duty advantage enjoyed by Bangladesh due to its LDC status, which allows it to export to the EU duty-free. If India were to sign an FTA with the EU on the lines of the recently concluded UK FTA, this disparity will vanish — making Indian exporters highly competitive in the largest market in the world.

The second ace India needs to deal is addressing the high cost of raw material for its textile and apparel industry. Cotton, the lifeblood of our textile industry, carries an import duty of around 10% imposed in 2021. Duties are even higher when it comes to synthetic-fibre-based products. For example, the basic customs duty on polyester fabric is 20%, which raises the cost of synthetic fabric in the market.

While garment exporters are allowed to import fabrics duty-free under the advance authorisation scheme, it is currently extremely restrictive and rigid. A few simple but far-reaching reforms can enable Indian exporters to access fabric at globally competitive prices, on a par with their Bangladeshi counterparts.

First, simplify the input-output norms and allow exporters to import

fabrics on self-certification basis with post-export audit, on the lines of the EU. Second, allow exporters to import inputs against export orders or contracts without prior licence. Finally, allow exporters or third parties to pool inputs or maintain bonded warehouses for multi-party use and treat sales of fabric to exporters as deemed exports.

In addition to these, rationalisation of import duties on both cotton and synthetic fibres, yarn, and fabrics would eliminate the substantial disability Indian garment exporters face on account of raw material.

The third ace that India must play is a package of carefully crafted policy measures and reforms for the garment sector to enhance competitiveness to world-beating levels.

Such measures would include a suitable incentive scheme for the garment sector — one that is easy to avail and is export- and job-centric. The scheme would essentially function as an employment-linked incentive (ELI) — rewarding companies not just for production volumes, but for the number of new jobs they create and sustain in the sector.

For it to be truly effective, such a scheme should be skewed towards large manufacturing units that employ, say, 1,000+ workers, to drive economies of scale and higher productivity. The



Ashish Dhawan



Piyush Doshi



The apparel sector can lift millions out of poverty, as seen in Bangladesh, where garment work has empowered women at scale. REUTERS

government must also extend the Rebate of State & Central Taxes and Levies (RoSCTL) — which refunds embedded taxes to exporters — beyond 2026 to keep Indian apparel prices competitive globally.

In addition to incentives, the government must fast-track the completion and operationalisation of the new PM MITRA textile parks. These parks should become magnets for textile and garment manufacturers through world-class infrastructure, responsive governance, and easier regulation around land, labour, and environment.

The goal must be to make India the supplier of choice in terms of cost and reliability. The apparel sector can lift millions out of poverty, as seen in Bangladesh, where garment work has empowered women at scale. India can replicate and surpass that model by consciously steering policy to favour labour-intensive growth.

The encouraging news is that global brands are already showing interest. From Japan to West Asia, buyers are in talks to tap into India’s expanding production capacity and favourable incentive structure.

This confidence, combined with the right policy push, could help India achieve the government’s ambitious target of \$100 billion in textile and apparel exports by 2030, up from roughly \$30-40 billion (including yarn and fabric) today. Achieving this would vault India into the upper ranks of global apparel exporters, close in on rivals and create an estimated 2.5 crore new jobs by 2030 — a transformation with profound social and economic benefits.

Ashish Dhawan is founder-CEO and Piyush Doshi is operating partner, The Convergence Foundation. The views expressed are personal.

When a stay is sought on a court’s acquittal order

In the 2006 Mumbai train blast case, 12 individuals were acquitted by a two-judge bench of the Bombay High Court, which gave a detailed 667-page judgement. The Maharashtra government approached the Supreme Court seeking a stay on the high court’s final judgement. It contended that the observations made in the verdict could potentially affect other ongoing criminal trials in the state. This line of reasoning, however, raises a fundamental question: Can the final judgment of acquittal of accused persons be stayed at the interim stage merely because other criminal trials will be affected? From a legal and procedural standpoint, the answer is a categorical no with a caveat about the extraordinary jurisdiction of the Supreme Court — it can pass any order.

It is a well-settled principle of criminal law that a judgement of acquittal carries the same legal force as a judgement of conviction. The mere fact that an acquittal might influence pending trials does not provide sufficient grounds for its stay. If the high court had convicted the accused in this case, was the convict equally free to argue that the judgment must be stayed because other trials might be affected? The court would have outrightly rejected this plea.

Our legal system gives great value to judicial precedents of constitutional courts. It ensures that, where circumstances are materially similar, past rulings — especially those of constitutional courts — guide future adjudication. Just as judgements affirming conviction are often relied upon to determine guilt in other cases, the verdict of acquittals, based on procedural or substantive infirmities, must be afforded equivalent authority.

The system does not discriminate in judicial intervention for the grant of stay of judgements of acquittal vis-a-vis verdicts of conviction. Once a final judgement — whether of conviction or acquittal — is rendered by courts of record, it cannot be stayed while being under appeal, merely to preserve the status quo in other pending matters. The very objective of the judicial process is to do justice based on facts and evidence placed on record before the court, fix accountability, and reflect clarity under the law so that the judgement can be relied upon in subsequent cases, if the law permits.

Through detailed and reasoned judgements, high courts and the Supreme Court play a pivotal role in evolving criminal jurisprudence. These rulings serve as practical templates for subordinate courts. They ensure uniform application of law and promote fairness in trials, be it in relation to the standard of proof, treatment of evidence, or procedural safeguards. The established law for criminal trials is that these shall be adjudicated strictly based on the evidence placed on record and evaluated according to the standards of admissibility under the law. If, as the Bombay High Court found, certain

confessional statements were vitiated due to coercion or custodial torture, and if such findings are backed by prior judicial reasoning given by the Supreme Court in earlier cases, then these findings can and must be considered as precedents in other similar cases.

From the high court’s judgement, it appears that the accused persons’ confessional statements were recorded while they were in police custody. After those statements were recorded, they were shifted to judicial custody, where many of them retracted their confessions on the very same day. This sequence of events is not merely procedural; it is indicative of a substantive issue of ensuring fairness in criminal investigation and prosecution.

The Supreme Court, in earlier decisions, has categorically held that confessions — particularly when retracted — must be viewed with circumspection. Even when procedural safeguards are formally adhered to, the possibility of confessions being extracted through coercion can’t be ruled out. Retracted confessions, therefore, must be evaluated in light of the circumstances that prompted the retraction. It has repeatedly emphasised that the phrase “procedure established by law” under Article 21 of the Constitution must mean a procedure that is fair, just, and reasonable. Any State action, including criminal prosecution, must pass this test.

A recent judgement by a two-judge bench of the Supreme Court (Justices Vikram Nath and Sanjay Karol) stressed that the Indian criminal justice system disproportionately burdens the accused, particularly those who are economically or socially disadvantaged. In the same spirit, the Court reiterated that a judge is not a mere recording machine. A judge’s duty is not limited to mechanically endorsing the prosecution’s case; rather, the judge must actively engage with the truth, seeking it out and weighing the evidence with impartial care. In fact, the Supreme Court recently remanded a capital punishment matter back to the high court for fresh consideration, underlining this very principle.

A larger issue also begs the question of whether the continued power of police to record confessions while an accused is in their custody is consistent with the modern constitutional understanding of a fair trial. The evolution of fair trial standards must proceed unobstructed. Considering the fact that the jurisprudence of dignity, liberty, and protection against self-incrimination has evolved, the law must now move toward a model where evidentiary value of pre-trial confessions is done away with. If the accused wants to make any voluntary confession, after the charge-sheet is filed or the trial is ongoing, the same can be recorded as per law.

The order granting an interim stay sets a disturbing precedent on this final judgement of acquittal, especially when it is thoroughly reasoned and detailed. It will, in some way, influence the minds of trial court judges against the principle of fairness and their duty to act without fear and favour, no matter how inconvenient it may be to the prosecuting State. The stay order will help only those officials who have failed to collect admissible evidence as required by law.



MR Shamshad

MR Shamshad is senior advocate, Supreme Court. The views expressed are personal.

{ VOLODYMYR ZELENSKY } PRESIDENT OF UKRAINE

We need to fully block Russia’s war machine... It’s time to confiscate Russian assets, not just freeze them, confiscate them and use them to serve peace, not war.

Administrative reform paves the path to good governance

The ruling dispensation at the Centre has laid major emphasis on “good governance”, which continues to be bogged down with colonial administrative processes. Good governance would, foremost, require a critical analysis of the existing system to identify and understand errors and mismanagement. Therein lies the paradox: Critique and critical analysis are anathema to the Indian system, which stands on almost all “outstanding” (as per annual performance reviews) government employees. Criticism is taken personally, with little or nil professional consideration. Nonetheless, it is important to pinpoint flaws in the system to be able to move towards better governance.

Inefficiencies and inconsistencies in the system arise from a lack of definitive processes, rules, and regulations, which are currently fluid and open to multiple interpretations. This works well when forward-thinking individuals are at the helm, but it is a major roadblock when individuals averse to risk and decision-making take charge. The absence of definitive processes makes the system individual-centric. Good governance must be process-driven and functional, independent of the individual. With nebulous processes, ownership lies with individuals and not the system; projects suffered when the lead person(s) moved on. This is especially true for administrative services with constant transfers. In a robust system, projects are more likely to stay in place, with the system operating them efficiently. India requires administrative rules that are clear, unambiguous, with a professional approach to business within the government and with national and international partners.

Without a well-defined framework of rules and regulations, it becomes harder to maintain quality and efficiency, with poor accountability.

Additionally, without definitive processes, departments/organisations tend to have poor institutional memory, depriving themselves of prior experience, discussions, and debate. The loss of institutional memory and utter disregard for historical records affect the current government as well — departments and ministries are unable to provide comprehensive reports for the past 11 years of work.

Carefully thought-out processes, with caveats for unforeseen situations, are key to developing a well-defined administrative and financial framework. Constant revision and retraction of processes throughout the year kill efficiency. The defined framework must be the rule of law, fairly and impartially applied to all, a seemingly impossible ask for India, where networks and connections work more than the system. Digital processes and e-office allow for accessibility and

transparency — whether in allotment of contracts or approval of a project or appointments — with rules and rigorous checkboxes. Discretionary quotas must be dispensed with as they promote favouritism and create an impenetrable network.

Digital technology and AI provide powerful tools for truly transformative governance, making the processes transparent and accountable — with minimal human bias or interference. The data collected will be invaluable evidence for future policies and directions.

That inclusive, fair, and equitable governance is possible has been expressly demonstrated by the reorganised Padma awards nomination and selection process, which needs to be safeguarded with institutionalised norms.

This also requires skilled manpower; the need for specialised cadres is now at a critical point. With the largest population in the world and a growing economy, a generalist approach is no longer sustainable. An effective solution would

be specialisation at the UPSC entry examination level. Applicants can choose specialisations such as finance, urban or rural development, commerce, power, information technology, and stay with these departments — like the diplomats of MEA do now — to build deep domain expertise and experience.

The science and technology ministry must also become part of the UPSC recruitment system, albeit with tweaks in age limits, as the entry-level qualification for scientists is a doctorate degree. The secretary should continue to be from the vast expanse of government research institutes. Increasingly, there is a need for an interdisciplinary approach to governance; it is therefore imperative that the science ministry becomes integral to the civil administration, allowing connection with other ministries that are potential customers of science-and-technology-led solutions.

Finally, reviews and appraisals must always be third-party, devoid of any conflict of interest. Certification by self or from beneficiaries can never be honest and straightforward assessments, and are at best delusional or sycophantic. Till the grain is not separated from chaff through objective and hard evaluation, the incentive to perform in an honest and committed manner is limited, resulting in an “outstanding” system with mediocre outputs. The Indian governance system must encourage discerning and judicious examination of its working. If adopted well, this will only make for a better and efficient outcome.

Shailja Vaidya Gupta, former adviser, department of biotechnology, ministry of science and technology. The views expressed are personal.

Editor's

TAKE

India's space odyssey comes of age

NISAR stands as a testament to India's space rise — co-building and launching satellites alongside NASA

Vikram Sarabhai, the father of India's space programme had a dream. He wanted to leverage space technology for India's development and progress, focusing on practical applications like communication, weather forecasting and resource management. He envisioned a self-reliant India that could utilise space technology to uplift its people and address societal challenges. Over the years India has been moving in that direction, realising the dream of Vikram Sarabhai. It has an advance space programme which is world class and has used it for the betterment of its people from weather forecasting and mapping India's natural resources. India yet again did that on Wednesday with successful launch of NISAR — the NASA-ISRO Synthetic Aperture Radar Satellite — from Sriharikota.

This \$1.3-billion Earth observation satellite, the most expensive of its kind in the world, was not just a technological milestone but a powerful symbol of how far India's space programme has come. Developed jointly by ISRO and NASA, NISAR represents the first major collaboration of its kind between the two agencies.

This isn't just about launching a satellite. It's about what it represents. When India launched its first satellite, Aryabhata, in 1975 with Soviet assistance, it was dependent on foreign platforms and expertise. Today, it is launching one of the most complex satellites in the world, co-developed with NASA, and doing so on its own rocket, the GSLV-F16. NISAR is the first satellite to use dual-frequency radar, with NASA contributing the L-band radar and ISRO supplying the S-band radar.

This hybrid system allows for an unprecedented level of detail in imaging Earth's surface. NISAR will orbit the Earth every 97 minutes, capturing high-resolution snapshots of the planet every 12 days. These images will help scientists track changes in the Earth's landmass — from deforestation and glacier shifts to soil movement, agricultural patterns and even early warning signs of earthquakes and landslides. NISAR could become a vital tool to counter climate change.

Indeed the credit goes to ISRO scientists for transforming ISRO into a world-class space agency. From launching low-cost satellites and interplanetary probes to developing indigenous cryogenic engines, ISRO has matured into a reliable and respected space agency. What makes NISAR different, however, is that it positions India not just as a provider of launch services, but as a co-designer of global scientific infrastructure.

India and the US, the two great countries have joined hands to build a transformative satellite, and it was launched from Indian soil. It signals trust, capability, and a shared commitment to pushing the boundaries of Earth science. NISAR may well be the beginning of a deeper collaboration between India and global space agencies. With India preparing for its human space flight mission, Gaganyaan and exploring future planetary and lunar ventures, partnerships like this one will be crucial. At the same time, India's increasing ability to independently execute complex missions gives it a strong footing in shaping the future of space exploration. The success of NISAR is, in every sense, a coming-of-age moment. And as the GSLV-F16 roared into the skies with NISAR onboard, it carried more than a satellite — it carried the promise of a future where India is at the forefront of space innovation.

Unleashing India's Intelligence Power

An integrated intelligence backbone is key for India's AI-driven defense. It transforms disparate data into decisive action, elevating global partnerships and strategic autonomy

Modern warfare has transformed. It's no longer just about hardware, but increasingly a battle of information, where AI-driven intelligence is the ultimate force multiplier. From real-time combat decisions to geopolitical shifts, AI reshapes defence. While India prioritises indigenous AI/ML, its full strategic potential remains constrained. The core argument is clear: India needs a sophisticated, integrated intelligence backbone — a unified platform fusing all data, from classified military intelligence and real-time sensor feeds to open-source information. Without this integration, our AI's capacity for real-time, actionable output is limited, hindering our ability to reshape alliances and contribute as a global security partner.

India's Unmet Intelligence Challenge

India's commitment to self-reliance in defence is undeniable. Our defence budget for FY 2025- 26 is a record high, with a substantial portion earmarked for domestic procurement. DRDO's RCD budget has surged for AI/ML, yielding successes like indigenous swarm drones and AI-based predictive maintenance for the Sukhoi-30 MKI fleet. We are also deploying AI on tactical edge devices for faster, localised decision-making, and systems like Akashteer are beginning to process air defence data in near real-time.

Yet, a critical gap persists, especially given India's historical position as the world's second — largest arms importer (2020-2024). Much of our current indigenous AI relies primarily on open-source information. While valuable, this data is incomplete and lacks the depth crucial for dynamic military operations. It cannot provide the granular, timely, and classified intelligence commanders need for split-second decisions on a rapidly evolving battlefield. AI's analytical power remains limited without access to sensitive, classified data.

An effective AI-driven defence ecosystem requires a secure "infrastructure for intelligence." This platform must seamlessly fuse information from all streams: classified signals, imagery, human intelligence, real-time sensor feeds, and cyber threat data. The challenge lies in connecting disparate classified databases, overcoming siloed systems, and ensuring secure, ultra-low latency processing. Without this foundational integration, our advanced AI tools, currently in isolated pockets, cannot provide the holistic, predictive, and truly actionable operational picture essential for modern multi-domain warfare. We risk having advanced components but lacking the unified nervous sys-



TANMOY CHAKRABARTY

tem to translate intelligence into decisive advantage.

A New Era for Alliances

Bridging this intelligence gap is a geopolitical imperative that will redefine India's strategic alliances:

Firstly, it enables proactive deterrence.

Fusing classified and unclassified data in real-time grants unparalleled situational awareness across all domains. This allows for superior predictive analysis and swift, decisive action, signaling to adversaries India's comprehensive understanding and rapid response capabilities, thus contributing significantly to regional stability.

Secondly, it empowers the Global South. India's rapidly growing defence exports, reaching over

80 countries, demonstrate our commitment as a security partner. By offering integrated intelligence platforms that provide real-time decision support — beyond just hardware — India can uniquely empower nations often lacking such sophisticated systems. This fosters deeper trust and strategic interdependence, positioning India as a crucial player in global South-South cooperation and technological self-reliance. Lastly, it elevates partnerships with advanced economies.

As India develops a sophisticated indigenous intelligence backbone, our relationship

with countries like the US or France transforms. We become a co-developer and strategic collaborator, able to securely share and leverage fused, real-time intelligence. This builds immense trust, enables deeper joint exercises, and enhances interoperability, allowing India to play a more proactive and indispensable role in shaping global security architectures as a technological peer.

Building India's Strategic Advantage

Realising this vision demands overcoming formidable challenges. Technically, data integration is immense, requiring secure, ultra-low latency fusion of diverse, classified data. Robust cybersecurity is paramount. Beyond technology, human and organisational challenges are critical: a shortage of specialised AI/ML talent with security clearances, and deep-seated inter-agency silos that fragment data and efforts.

To accelerate, India needs a dedicated, national endeavour:

- **Targeted Investment:** Beyond general RCD, significant capital outlay for this backbone is essential. Initiatives like iDEX and ADITI must expand their scope to incentivise firms working on secure, classified data integration.
- **Scaled Public-Private Partnership (PPP):** India's vibrant tech ecosystem must be



VANSHITA GARG

leveraged under stringent security frameworks. Seamless government-industry collaboration is vital for sensitive defence applications.

● **Unified National Vision:** An overarching national strategy and architecture is crucial. A high-level apex body, empowered to break down silos and ensure seamless interoperability across defence and intelligence agencies, is needed to create a true "sensor-to-shooter" capability.

India's commitment to indigenous AI/ML in defence is clear. Yet, our strategic prowess will ultimately be measured by our ability to transform disparate data — both open-source and classified — into decisive, real-time action. By prioritising and building an indigenous, integrated intelligence backbone, India stands on the cusp of a profound transformation. This will be more than a military upgrade; it will fundamentally alter our geopolitical standing, enabling us to project power not merely through weaponry, but through superior, actionable intelligence. This capability will solidify India's position as a technologically advanced, truly self-reliant, and indispensable global partner, driving meaningful alliances and contributing significantly to stability. This is the next frontier for India's strategic autonomy.

(Tanmoy Chakrabarty is a veteran in public sector transformation and former Group Government Affairs Head at Tata Sons. He currently serves as the Founder-Director of Chakrabarty Consulting Services; Vanshita Garg, works at Chakrabarty Consulting Services as a strategy and policy professional)

PICTALK



Police personnel marched in a farewell ceremonial parade for outgoing Delhi Police Commissioner Sanjay Arora at the Parade Ground, New Police Lines, New Delhi. PTI

Muted morality: When outrage is selective

SECOND Opinion

In Indian politics, what is not said often speaks louder than what is. When leaders known for their vocal and persistent criticism of the Government suddenly fall silent on matters of public concern, it invites inquiry. This is precisely what we are witnessing in the aftermath of the Enforcement Directorate's (ED) revelations involving serious financial irregularities linked to a prominent industrialist, once routinely invoked in opposition discourse.

According to recent ED raids, the person involved is accused of using a network of shell companies, round-tripping money, and misusing thousands of crores.

The evidence, including documents, witness statements, and audit reports, makes the case very serious. An entire business empire has collapsed, with loan defaults of over ₹77,000 crore. New findings from investigation agencies also show large-scale financial wrongdoing.

These are not small issues. If corruption is truly the problem we are fighting, this should be the main focus. But strangely, those who usually speak out are now silent. Under usual circumstances, such material would have triggered a flurry of political statements, press briefings, and social media campaigns.

Surprisingly, however, there has been no comment from



AMIT KUMAR SRIVASTAVA



senior opposition figures who have long positioned themselves as crusaders against economic malpractice. The very names that were once frequently cited to symbolise a corporate-political nexus seem to have been selectively dropped from the narrative.

This selective silence is striking because over the years, names like Ambani and Adani have featured prominently in speeches, slogans, and campaigns challenging the Government's alleged proximity to big business. But in this recent case of financial fraud, the crony capitalism outrage script seems abandoned by those politicians.

The silence is especially puzzling given the consistency with which the opposition has historically raised concerns about corporate favouritism.

One may wonder why the narrative machinery differen-

tiates between earlier incidents and this recent development. Given the level of narrative building, the absence of reaction appears strategic rather than accidental. It prompts an uncomfortable question: was the opposition's anti-cronyism rhetoric ever about systemic reform, or merely about targeting politically useful adversaries?

Such selective activism undermines credibility. The public, increasingly perceptive, can distinguish between genuine conviction and performative outrage.

When political parties pick and choose which allegations to highlight and which to ignore, they risk reducing the fight against corruption to a campaign tool rather than a matter of principle.

This is not about supporting any corporate group. If the charges are proven true, the law should take its proper course. But in a democracy, how political leaders react, or choose not to react, is just as important.

Their silence not only weakens their moral standing but also raises questions about the honesty of public discussion. Political consistency is crucial, especially when speaking on issues of governance, transparency, and economic justice.

When silence replaces scrutiny, it is not just credibility that is lost; it is trust. As the Sanskrit saying goes, *Maanam Sammati Lakshanam*, silence often implies acceptance. In the case of political discourse, it may even suggest complicity.

(The author teaches at the University of Delhi and writes independently on politics, governance and public policy)

Letters to the Editor

India must push for ceasefire in Gaza

The humanitarian crisis in Gaza has intensified, drawing widespread condemnation. Over 38,000 Palestinians, including thousands of women and children, have been killed since the conflict began, with recent airstrikes leaving at least 149 more dead. Food and medical supplies remain critically scarce — only 109 of the 600 aid lorries permitted have reached civilians, while air-drops have largely failed to make meaningful impact. In a rare move, 31 prominent Israeli figures have publicly called for international sanctions against their own government, accusing it of committing genocide.

As global divisions deepen — especially with the UK increasingly backing Palestine — India continues its delicate diplomatic balancing act, maintaining strategic ties with Israel while voicing concern for civilian casualties.

However, given its global ambitions and reputation for neutrality, India must now actively push for an immediate ceasefire and assume a leadership role in facilitating sustainable peace through multilateral forums. Ultimately, the escalating crisis demands concern, it requires decisive action. India's unique position allows it to champion a swift ceasefire and lead peace efforts on the global stage. This move would not only uphold its neutral standing but also solidify its commitment to humanitarian principles.

RS NARULA | PATIALA

Minorities under fire again

In recent years, India has witnessed a disturbing surge in the persecution of religious minorities, particularly Christians, by right-wing Hindu activists. Incidents of violence, harassment, and discrimination have increasingly come to light, threatening the constitutional right to freedom of religion. Alarming reports indicate that Christian missionaries, including nuns, are being unjustly accused and charged under questionable legal grounds.

A recent incident on 26 July at Durg Railway Station, Chhattisgarh, underscores the seriousness of the issue. Two Catholic nuns from the Assisi Sisters of Mary Immaculate (ASMI), Preeti Mary and Vandana Francis, were arrested and falsely accused of trafficking under Section 143 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), and charged under Section 4 of the Chhattisgarh Religious Freedom Act, 1968, for allegedly forcing religious conversions. The Government of India must reaffirm its constitutional commitment to religious freedom by ensuring that no individual is targeted or harassed due to their faith. It must investigate such incidents thoroughly and hold accountable those who incite violence or spread religious hatred. Additionally, existing legislation such as the Chhattisgarh Religious Freedom Act must be reviewed and reformed to prevent its misuse against religious minorities.

JUBEL D'CRUZ | MUMBAI

The US is an ally despite Donald Trump

Apropos of the headline *Trump slaps 25 per cent tariff on India* (31st July), this move reflects the new normal in global trade. More than trade, US tariff policy now signals protectionism and hegemony, with past deals rendered transient. Even existing agreements are no longer honoured. This oscillatory approach erodes US credibility in trade settlements. The pugnacity and petulance of the US President have shaken trust in American intent. Sectoral impacts become secondary when examining the real motives behind such tariffs.

From India's viewpoint, the US must abandon its obsession with Pakistan — a failed state despite billions poured in by the US, IMF, World Bank, China, and others. India must recalibrate its response to US indulgence in the region, especially in recognising India's efforts towards peace. Denying Trump's role in a ceasefire during Operation Sindoor may bruise his ego, making him feel India challenges US dominance in West and South Asia. It is on record that Trump neither called nor communicated with Mr Modi on the ceasefire — yet that is his style. We need not react every time Trump does. Let the US Congress challenge him at their cost. We can concede on tariffs — but without grovelling. India's oil imports from Russia, its agriculture, and MSMEs cannot be compromised. Between China and the US, the latter remains the natural partner.

VINOD JOHRI | DELHI

PAHALGAM PERPETRATORS KILLED: OPPOSITION QUESTIONS TIMING

Ever since the Pahalgam tragedy struck the country in April 2025, the people of the nation and the opposition parties had been demanding the arrest of the four or more terrorists involved in the dastardly attack and complaining that the BJP Government seemed disinterested in apprehending the criminals, even after the lapse of three months since the massacre. Though this issue was raised by the opposition in public many times, the Government maintained a stony silence and remained tight-lipped, with no further developments reported.

Meanwhile, when the opposition parties were about to raise the issue of the Pahalgam murders and Operation Sindoor for discussion in Parliament, Home Minister Amit Shah sprang a surprise by suddenly announcing in Parliament that, just a day prior, three of the four killers of the 26 Indian tourists in Pahalgam were killed in

encounters by our CRPF! The announcement, rather than evoking happiness, left listeners shell-shocked.

They are now left with more unanswered questions than before, particularly in view of the timing of this crucial revelation. The opposition has raised several doubts about the statement made by Amit Shah, and the people, too, are not ready to accept the story, having been forced into a state of disbelief.

This raises serious questions about the transparency and timing of government actions, further eroding public trust in official narratives regarding critical security operations. Are we to believe that miracles still happen, even in the twenty-first century? If what Amit Shah says is true, many more may start believing in them.

THARCIUS S FERNANDO | CHENNAI

How Climate Change Threatens Gujarat's Agariyas

Gujarat's Little Rann of Kutch, producing a third of India's salt, faces rising climate threats. The Agariyas, its traditional salt workers, balance fragile livelihoods with ecological pressures



ANANDAJIT GOSWAMI

Gujarat is India's undisputed salt heartland, churning out roughly three-quarters of the nation's supply; almost one-third of that comes from a single landscape — the Little Rann of Kutch (LRK), which is highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change in the future. The community responsible for carrying out this painstaking work is locally known as the Agariyas. Kodi Thakurs by caste, they have for generations harvested salt from the moody salt flats of the regions of Kutch and Surendranagar

The 8000 Agariyas in this region have an intricate relationship with biodiversity, ecology and salt flat lands. On one hand the community is dependent on the moody salt flat lands and on the other hand they have a complicated relationship with the ecosystem which is home to wild asses, migratory birds, buffaloes and more. The land belongs to the Forest Department and it is being rented and sublet to the Agariyas. However, the Agariyas are dependent on rain, climatic variables like sun rays, wind, rain for their livelihood from the salt brine. Climate change can impact these variables and can impact their livelihoods in the future.

Cooler nights that slow evaporation, unseasonal cyclones that drown half-harvested pans, and deeper bore-wells that gamble on shrinking aquifers all pose problems to the continuity of the Agariyas work. As the Agariyas sit at the far edge of formal protection — many of them lack land titles, grid power or 'crop' insurance and climate variability threatens not only India's lowest-carbon salt but also some of its most precarious livelihoods.

Research Gap

While salt production has been modelled hydrologically, currently there is a gap in terms of assessment of climate vulnerability through a vulnerability framework for communities like salt pan, tea estate workers and other marginal labour segments of India whose livelihoods are dependent on climate variables. Our study creates such a scalable framework by using the variables exposure, sensitivity and adaptive capacity into a single relationship pattern defined as — (Exposure + Sensitivity — Adaptive Capacity = Vulnerability).

The framework therefore provides climate policy planners an assessment structure that helps in understanding the position of the climate vulnerability of each household in adverse climatic situations relative to each other in terms of their exposure, sensitivity, and adaptive capacity.

This framework therefore creates an operational tool for future climate policy making at a downscaled level in climate vulnerable villages, districts of India



and can help civil society and change makers working at the grass roots in climate vulnerable communities.

Vulnerability in this case was measured in the following way-

● **Variables used:** The composite climate vulnerability index uses 28 questionnaire items grouped under 7 exposure indicators (e.g., flood frequency, unexpected rain, wind shifts), 9 sensitivity indicators (eg income share from salt, months worked, heat illness, etc.) and 12 adaptive-capacity indicators (eg access to training, savings, solar pumps, co-op membership).

● **Data sources:** An on-ground survey of 499 households across Surendranagar district, capping responses to 35 per village was taken to maximise spatial spread.

● **Computation:** The individual scores of each indicator were standardised, normalised and then the principal component loading was done to assign weightages to the indicators. Further, scores were min-max normalised (0-1), then combined multiplicatively to avoid hiding extreme values. K-

THE 8000 AGARIYAS IN THIS REGION HAVE AN INTRICATE RELATIONSHIP WITH BIODIVERSITY, ECOLOGY AND SALT FLAT LANDS. ON ONE HAND THE COMMUNITY IS DEPENDENT ON THE MOODY SALT FLAT LANDS AND ON THE OTHER HAND THEY HAVE A COMPLICATED RELATIONSHIP WITH THE ECOSYSTEM WHICH IS HOME TO WILD ASSES, MIGRATORY BIRDS, BUFFALOES AND MORE

means clustering (k = 3) was conducted and households were grouped into low, medium and high vulnerability bands; the centroids estimated were updated automatically as new data arrived.

Some of the startling findings that emerged from our exercise are-

- **No family is without risk:** The bell curve never touches 0, no Agariya family is immune to the effects of climate change.
- **Most workers sit on a knife-edge of "moderate" risk:** The cohort's mean vulnerability index is 0.57 on a 0-2 scale; 68 per cent fall between 0.46 and 0.68. That bell-shaped spread means small improvements in adaptive capacity could tip a large share into the low-risk bracket.
- **High-risk households are not a minority:** K-means results show 198 households (40 per cent) in the high-vulnerability cluster, where high exposure and sensitivity coincide with weak buffers.
- **Technology gaps persist:** Field responses show 86 per cent already operate Government-subsidised solar pumps, leaving roughly one in seven families to rely on diesel sets that cost ₹600-₹800



BAHAAR JAIN

per operational day — an expense that spikes when post-monsoon cyclones push the season later into hotter months.

FIRST Column

Scalability and Policy Directions: Future Perspectives

Results of our climate vulnerability framework based analysis for salt pan workers open out multiple directions

for future discourses on climate vulnerability studies for marginal communities of India. The directions are as follows-

Scalability & applicability

The vulnerability framework studies various aspects of marginal life and livelihood — health, access to financial help, education and land ownership. These factors are common to many other climate vulnerable marginal populations and can be applied to study their vulnerability and economic and social resilience. As the index relies on simple normalisation and clustering algorithms, any livelihood that maps onto the exposure — sensitivity — capacity triad can reuse it. This scale can be modified for any form of farming/natural element dependent means of income easily, and further form a Vulnerability Framework that can be used on for farming and other marginal workers too who are climate dependent for their livelihoods.

The pertinent important policy directions which emerge out of our study are-

Policy directions

● **Close the pump gap:** If policy implementation at the local level can supply solar pumps to the remaining 14 per cent of Agariya families, it would move 112 households out of the high-risk cluster: however this would mean a one time bulk fiscal outlay of ₹2 crore.

● **Credit tied to vulnerability scores:** Financial inclusion and risk hedging policies and its implementation at a local level can ensure that local regional rural banks can use the vulnerability index as a risk metric, unlocking lower-interest working-capital loans for the 302 households scoring < 0.60.

● **Targeted training & weather alerts:** Policies need to be designed and implemented to prioritise high-cluster households for adaptive-capacity training and push SMS-based "shutdown-day" alerts using IMD forecasts.

● **Integrate inland salt workers into state climate-action plans:** Gujarat nhs current state climate action plan lists coastal aquaculture and rain-fed farming, but not desert salt production; hence adding this sector would make the Agariyas eligible for existing adaptation funding and can address their climate vulnerability risks for future.

(Dr Bahaar Jain is Consultant, ACPET; Dr Anandajit Goswami is Research Fellow, ACPET and Ritam Chowdhury is intern, ACPET)

From policy to practice: Five years of National Education Policy 2020

Education and the knowledge paradigms related to it have been the foundation of progressive societies. A rich ancient repository of Bhartiya scholarship has been acknowledged worldwide and has inspired many to contribute in their respective academic fields.

Despite such illustrious knowledge heritage, this nation took 73 years to embrace a National Education Policy in the year 2020 that was aligned with the 'aspirational goals of 21st century education while building upon India's knowledge traditions and value systems'. National Education Policy 2020 (NEP2020) was introduced on 29 July 2020 and is completing five years.

This allows us to take a holistic view of the implementation of the policy, assess the conducive changes, overall progress in school and higher education, as well as the further scope of improvement.

Language as a medium of instruction plays a pivotal role in the conceptual clarity of subjects. Educationists have advocated for imparting education in Bhartiya languages since the time we attained independence from the British. Post-independence, one of the earliest recommendations on education in the University Education Commission report (December 1948-August 1949), chaired by Dr Radhakrishnansaid, said that English should be replaced as the medium of instruction as early as practicable by Bhartiya languages.

However, this recommendation only saw the light of the day when NEP2020 recommended that the 'medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, but preferably till Grade 8 and beyond' should be in the native language. Availability of textbooks in Bhartiya languages has been an ongoing exercise in the last five years.

Two years ago, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had launched 100 books in 12 Bhartiya languages in line with NEP 2020. DIKSHA (Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing) is a national web platform used as an education e-infrastructure where energised books (which come with a QR code) for 31 Bhartiya languages and 7 foreign languages are being prepared.

The 2025-26 budget allocation of ₹347.03 crore for Bharatiya Bhasha Pustak Scheme to provide digital books for school and higher education in Bhartiya languages will encourage institutions to adopt Bhartiya languages as a medium of education in the curriculum. The census report of 2011 states that 96.71 per cent have one of the twenty-two scheduled languages as their mother tongue, while only 10.6 per cent stated that they can speak English.

Education in Bhartiya languages as a medium will make education more inclusive and augment the learning outcomes in the coming years. For instance, in Pimpri Chinchwad College located in

Maharashtra, B. Tech students were taught Computer Science and Engineering entirely in Marathi. They secured placements in top companies, demonstrating that language is not a barrier to success in technical education.

The burden of the colonial hangover in our textbooks has eventually been replaced by Bhartiya contributions.

While imparting education in Bhartiya languages is one of the primary concerns of NEP2020, it emphasises building a positive cultural identity. National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) has launched ten new textbooks for classes five and eight in Hindi, English and Urdu, covering languages, social science, science and art education. More are in the offing with emphasis on conceptual understanding, pedagogical approaches, and experiential learning. Under NEP2020, rooting textbooks in our heritage has been a guiding principle that aims to strengthen our national identity.

NEP2020 has also envisaged the incorporation of hands-on experience and skilling necessities of the 21st century in the curriculum. Regulatory Frameworks ensuring parity and integration of academic and skill-based learning have been formalised by the National Credit Framework (NCRF). This parity and equivalence in academic programs, especially in tertiary education, will assist seamless transfer in a unified credit system.

Multiple entry-exit options for a student in a programme in higher education have introduced academic flexibility. To streamline the academic credentials of the students countrywide, a unique 12-digit ID is being generated for the students called Automated Permanent Academic Account Registry (APAAR) that digitally manages the academic records and stores them in the Academic Bank of Credit. This technology-assisted record management supports the 'One Nation, One Student ID' campaign, ensuring accessibility and continuity throughout the country.

Five years of NEP2020 have brought a radical transformation in the education system in the country. An important aspect of taking the leap in its implementation in the next five years would be capacity building of the faculty. At present, NISTHA (National Initiative for School Heads and Teachers Holistic Advancement) and MMTTC (Malviya Mission Teachers Training Programme) are undertaking training programs for teachers in schools and higher education, respectively. Teachers need to be equipped with new pedagogical methods like experiential learning and competency-based assessments. Robust professional development programs in physical mode can cascade the execution pace of NEP2020. A constant feature across the various education policies in the country, from the Kothari Commission in 1965



to NEP2020, has been the budgetary provision of 6 per cent of the GDP for education.

The 2023-24 annual report of the Ministry of Education states that the Centre and States will work together to increase public investment in the Education sector to reach 6 per cent of GDP at the earliest. Education, being a concurrent subject in the constitution, needs handholding from the Central Government as well as the State Governments.

Initiatives like Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan by the Centre aim to improve existing systems, level performances, learning outcomes and bridge social as well as gender gaps at the school level. However, state Governments are important stakeholder, and their lack of political will may lead to potential gaps in reaching the goals.

A standardised monitoring mechanism can help in effective evaluation and implementation of the National Education Policy, particularly in infrastructure and foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) and early childhood care and education (ECCE). The varying level of engagement with the policy by the states and the sheer size of the country, at times, poses a concern to the uniform and effective implementation of NEP2020.

NEP2020 has introduced systemic academic and administrative reforms within the first five years of its implementation. As a nation preparing to become a developed nation by 2047, significant impetus to education will play a pivotal role in shaping the intellectual and skill capital, and economic strength, of India.

The implementation of National Education Policy 2020 across the country in letter and spirit it will prepare citizens who take pride in being Bhartiya, fuel innovation, develop a knowledge economy, foster equity, sustainable development, and democratic values and will be equipped to engage with the world confidently.

(The writer is Director of Non-Collegiate Women's Education Board, University of Delhi)

IFPI and India's Cooperative Fertiliser Framework

"Jab mitti maa hai, to uska daam kyun firangi tay karein?" "Jab hamare haathon mein hal hai, to daam ka hisaab bhi toh hamare haathon mein hai!"

These aren't just rhetorical questions — they are the burning voice of every Indian farmer whose sweat irrigates this nation's economy. It is a cruel paradox that in a country where agriculture is sacred and cooperatives are the spine of rural life, the prices of fertilisers are decided in foreign boardrooms. Bharat, with the largest agricultural cooperative structure and the second-largest arable land in the world, still depends on Morocco, the US, and Russia to nourish its fields. The irony is heartbreaking, and the injustice unbearable.

Behind this invisible oppression lies a cartelised global fertiliser market. Three major players — OCP Group of Morocco, Mosaic of the United States, and PhosAgro of Russia — hold the world's critical supply of rock phosphate, DAP, and other nutrients. They dictate prices through export quotas, long-term opaque contracts, and strategic trade pacts, leaving India with no negotiating power. And yet, India remains the world's largest consumer of fertilisers, importing over 90 per cent of its DAP and nearly all its rock phosphate. The cartel profits, while our exchequer bleeds through rising subsidies and our farmers are left vulnerable to price shocks.

Unlike crude oil, gold, or grains, there is no transparent, globally accepted benchmark for raw material for fertiliser prices. No "Brent for DAP," no "CBOT for urea." Existing market intelligence tools are expensive, elite, and seller-driven. Subscription services like ICIS or Profercy charge lakhs of rupees just to access data that shapes Government tenders and contracts. Bharat, with central role in global demand, may have a central voice in price-setting.

We are a price taker in a world that listens only to the few who produce. Cooperative Economic framework is the befitting reply of this imbalance and The Indian Fertiliser Price Index (IFPI) is not just an idea — it is a national necessity which can mitigate these gaps. Proposed by the World Cooperation Economic Forum (WCOOPEF), IFPI envisions a grassroots-to-national framework where cooperatives-from PACS to APEX — come together to build a transparent, participatory, and real-time fertiliser pricing mechanism.

IFPI would track everything from global input prices, freight, gas rates, and port data, to domestic stock levels and local demand. Most crucially, it will reflect ground realities gathered from cooperatives and FPOs, bringing true representation into fertiliser economics.

With IFPI in place, India can negotiate international contracts with authority. No more blind procurement. No more hurried imports after price



BINOD ANAND

spikes. Instead, with advance warning and real-time data, cooperatives can engage in bulk reverse auctions, saving thousands of crores. IFPI also opens the door to diplomatic coordination with other Global South nations — Brazil, Indonesia, Kenya, and Bangladesh-building a South-South pricing alliance that challenges the current North-led monopoly. In the long term, IFPI can lead to indexed contracts, strategic futures markets, and even an independent fertiliser exchange for cooperatives.

WCOOPEF has outlined a four-phase roadmap. In Phase One it can pilot the system in five key agricultural states, mapping district-level fertiliser demand through PACS and FPO networks. Phase Two involves creating a cooperative commodity exchange and onboarding major fertiliser producers like IFFCO, KRIBHCO, and NFL.

Phase Three will see integration of global port and customs data, enabling a national IFPI dashboard accessible to Ministries and cooperatives. Finally, in Phase Four, India will take the lead in creating a South-South Fertiliser Consortium and launch indexed trading tools via SEBI or MCX.

The economic case is clear. IFPI could reduce procurement costs phenomenally and it save the Government in millions of Rupees subsidies annually. It would empower cooperatives to procure smartly, on favorable terms, instead of waiting for crises. And it would return the power of price discovery to Indian hands.

But the case is more than economic. The journey of a fertiliser molecule — from Earth's crust in Morocco, to Indian ports, to cooperative godowns, and finally to the soil of a small farmer in Bihar — is the journey of national destiny.

It is a journey of nourishment, but also of dependence. If we do not reclaim the control of this chain, we remain at the mercy of invisible hands that care little for our *annadata* or our sovereignty.

Through IFPI, we can restore that control-not by confrontation, but by cooperation. By making data a tool of the people. By using the cooperative model not just to distribute inputs, but to shape markets and policies.

IFPI is a weapon of peace, of logic, of transparency — and it must be wielded with national conviction.

And as we look to the future, we must remember: fertiliser is not just an input. It is a symbol. A symbol of food security, economic independence, and farmer dignity. And this time, the farmer's voice will echo in policy, in pricing, and in global trade. Let this be the century where Bharat not only feeds the world, but sets the price of that nourishment with dignity, wisdom, and cooperative resolve.

Jai Hind! Jai Kisan ! Jai Sahkar !

(The writer is Executive Chairman of World Cooperation Economic forum)

The Statesman

Incorporating and directly descended from THE FRIEND OF INDIA - Founded 1818

Mixed Signals

The parliamentary debate on Operation Sindoor was an opportunity for political clarity in a country still reeling from the Pahalgam terror attack and its military aftermath. What it turned into, instead, was a missed chance ~ not just for the ruling party, but especially for the opposition, which failed to press the government on important points. The government used the floor primarily to consolidate its nationalist credentials, portray strength, and deflect uncomfortable questions with a barrage of historical whataboutery. But it also revealed, in its selective disclosures, that Operation Sindoor was not an open-ended military campaign. It had a clearly defined objective: precision strikes against terror infrastructure in Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. When those targets were hit, India agreed to a ceasefire. This would have been an acceptable strategic explanation ~ had the government not spent years ~ and continues even now ~ encouraging speculation that the real objective is to escalate further, perhaps into Pakistani territory or even to reclaim PoK. Home Minister Amit Shah repeated that claim in Parliament, asserting that while Congress gave away PoK, it is now this government's responsibility to take it back. In that context, the sudden ceasefire created confusion, especially among the government's core supporters, and gave rise to the perception of external pressure ~ particularly from Washington. Here, the opposition had a real opportunity. But instead of questioning the contradiction between the government's belligerent rhetoric and its decision to accept a ceasefire, it chose to publicly challenge the credibility of the government's claim on the ceasefire itself. That was a tactical blunder. The technical facts were not on the opposition's side: Pakistan's military had indeed reached out for a ceasefire via official channels. India accepted ~ but only after a flurry of international calls involving American officials and Indian leaders. The sensitive nature of these diplomatic exchanges, especially the role of the US President who has loudly claimed credit for brokering peace, is precisely what the government wants to keep out of public focus. When the opposition demanded that the Prime Minister call those claims false, they walked into a trap. A more astute strategy would have been to accept the government's claim ~ and then hold it to its own rhetoric. If the enemy was indeed on its knees, why stop short? If "taking PoK" was the real national mission as stated repeatedly from the top, why was the operation called off before that objective was achieved? Why stir up public expectations only to back off? The political cost of this confusion may not be limited to national security debates alone. In states headed for elections, especially where nationalism plays well, the gap between promise and performance could disillusion even loyal voters. For a party built on control of narrative, that's a dangerous loose end. By framing the debate around loyalty rather than logic, the government was able to obscure its contradictions. But by framing its own response around disbelief rather than strategy, the opposition ensured it gained no ground either. India deserved answers. Instead, it got noise.

The Big Change

The growing conviction among AI pioneers that artificial general intelligence (AGI) could arrive as early as 2027 represents more than just technological bravado ~ it signals a pivotal moment in the human story. If AGI can indeed surpass the average human in all cognitive tasks, we are staring down the barrel of what could become the most transformative force in economic history. But as with any force of great power, the true question is not whether it will change the world, but whether we are prepared to steer that change wisely. The potential upside is breath-taking. AGI could supercharge the pace of scientific discovery; rewire innovation cycles, and compress decades of research into months. Economic growth ~ long thought to inch forward at modest, manageable rates ~ could spike beyond anything modern society has witnessed. With machines learning faster, solving problems more efficiently, and even refining themselves, breakthroughs in healthcare, climate technology, and energy could follow in swift succession. Such acceleration could lift billions out of poverty, unlock abundant clean energy, and make high-quality education universally accessible. The illusion that economic growth alone will solve social rifts is a dangerous one. Without deliberate redistribution mechanisms ~ universal basic income, digital dividend systems, or AI resource trusts ~ the gains from AGI may flow to a thin layer of tech elites. If society fails to anticipate this asymmetry, the same tools that promise abundance may instead deepen unrest and instability. But the risks, though often veiled in abstraction, are equally profound. AGI could exacerbate inequality at an unprecedented scale. Ownership and control of these super-intelligent systems will likely be concentrated ~ whether in a handful of corporations or geopolitical blocs ~ creating power structures that are effectively unchallengeable. If AI displaces more jobs than it creates, we risk a crisis of economic dislocation and dignity, not just employment. Worse, scenarios involving AI misalignment, runaway self-improvement, or misuse in areas like biotechnology aren't the stuff of science fiction ~ they are now part of serious policy conversations. The troubling part is that those closest to building AGI are also the most nervous. Many feel trapped in a global race dynamic, where slowing down means losing a strategic or economic edge to a faster competitor. This incentive structure, favouring speed over safety, could be our undoing. It is not enough to marvel or fear. The years ahead demand global cooperation, new governance models, and a serious rethinking of what economic value means in an age when cognition itself is automated. We must shift the narrative from disruption to stewardship ~ from who builds AGI first to how it is shared, regulated, and embedded in human values. If this is indeed the dawn of super-intelligence, we must rise to meet it not just with innovation, but with foresight. The future won't be decided by the intelligence of our machines, but by the wisdom of our choices.

Social Safety

Many schemes, such as those under the Employees' State Insurance Act and the Employees Provident Funds and Miscellaneous Provisions Act, primarily cater to workers in the organized sector, leaving out a vast majority of the workforce in the unorganized sector. This limitation is particularly problematic given the significant proportion of India's workforce engaged in informal or unorganized activities. The exclusion of these workers from social security benefits exacerbates income inequality and increases vulnerability to poverty and economic shocks



The notions of social security and social insurance systems have their roots in the evolution of the welfare state concept. In contrast, earlier 'laissez-faire' or police states did not prioritize these aspects, focusing solely on maintaining order.

It was later that governments began to prioritize social welfare and introduced systems to ensure social security. Members of modern society are ever exposed to certain risks, which are essentially contingencies against which it is not possible for an individual of poor means to provide effectively, either by his own ability or in private combinations with his fellows. These risks are of sickness, invalidity, maternity, old age and death. Social security refers to the security that society furnishes through appropriate organisations against these risks.

In India, where the majority of workers have to live in straitened circumstances, the need for social security plans does not require emphasis. But it is noteworthy that social insurance provides only partial security while a policy of social security aims at a unified approach for the prevention of injury and disease, the achievement of proper redistribution of income and the realization of freedom from all types of want.

Briefly, social security is one of the fundamental objects of welfare-oriented development planning and social insurance is one of the means by which the objective may be reached. Therefore, social insurance is of great significance as it will encourage labour enthusiasm for augmenting production.

India's social insurance system is a complex and multifaceted framework designed to provide financial protection and security to its citizens, particularly vulnerable sections of society. While the system has undergone significant transformations over the years, it still faces numerous challenges that hinder its effectiveness.

Some notable social security initiatives in India may be mentioned here as Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maan-Dhan (PM-SYM) ~ a pension scheme for workers in the unorganized sector; Atal Pension Yojana (APY) ~ a voluntary pension scheme for citizens aged 18-40;

National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP) ~ a programme providing financial assistance to elderly, widows, and disabled persons below the poverty line, and Ayushman Bharat-Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB-PMGAY) ~ a health insurance scheme for poor families.

One of the primary concerns is the limited coverage of social security programmes. Many schemes, such as those under the Employees' State Insurance Act and the Employees Provident Funds and Miscellaneous Provisions Act, primarily cater to workers in the organized sector, leaving out a vast majority of the workforce in the unorganized sector.

This limitation is particularly problematic given the significant proportion of India's workforce engaged in informal or unorganized activities. The exclusion of these workers from social security benefits exacerbates income inequality and increases vulnerability to poverty and economic shocks.

Awareness and education about insurance products are also significant issues. Many individuals, particularly in rural areas and among the underprivileged, lack awareness about the benefits and procedures of various social insurance schemes.

This lack of awareness can lead to low uptake of these schemes, further marginalizing already vulnerable populations. Moreover, the complexity of insurance products and the requirements for accessing benefits can be overwhelming for many individuals, highlighting the need for simplified processes and enhanced financial literacy.

Affordability is another major concern. Premium costs can be prohibitive for low-income individuals, making it difficult for them to access insurance benefits. This is particularly true for health insurance, where out-of-pocket expenses can be catastrophic for many families.

The government's initiatives, such as the Ayushman

Bharat-PMJAY, aim to address this issue by providing subsidized health insurance coverage to vulnerable populations. However, the sustainability and effectiveness of such schemes depend on various factors, including funding, service delivery, and beneficiary identification.

Administrative inefficiencies also plague the social insurance system. Claim settlement delays, beneficiary identification issues, and fund management problems can undermine the effectiveness of social insurance schemes. These issues can lead to frustration and mistrust among beneficiaries, ultimately affecting the overall impact of these schemes. Streamlining administrative processes and leveraging technology can help improve the efficiency and effectiveness of social insurance programmes.

Despite these challenges, the government has introduced several initiatives to strengthen the social insurance system. The Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana, for example, aims to provide financial inclusion to all citizens, particularly the underprivileged. The Atal Pension Yojana provides pension benefits to unorganized sector workers, ensuring financial security in old age.

These initiatives have the potential to significantly improve the social security landscape in India, but their success depends on effective implementation and sustained support.

A comprehensive approach is required to address the social security needs of India's citizens. This includes not only providing financial protection but also ensuring access to healthcare, education, and protection against various risks.

Streamlining the fragmented social security architecture into a simple and inclusive system can help serve all citizens more effectively. This may involve integrating various schemes, enhancing beneficiary identification and enrollment processes, and improving service delivery mechanisms.

Ultimately, a robust and inclusive social insurance system is crucial for promoting economic growth, reducing poverty, and improving the overall well-being of India's citizens. By addressing the challenges and limitations of the current system, policy-makers can create a more effective and sustainable social security framework that benefits all sections of society.

This requires a concerted effort to enhance awareness, improve administrative efficiency, and ensure the financial sustainability of social insurance schemes. With careful planning and implementation, India's social insurance system can play a vital role in achieving the country's development goals and ensuring a secure future for its citizens.

India's social security measures are inadequate, particularly for the informal sector workers who make up a significant portion of the workforce.

Some key issues include: i) Limited coverage ~ only 7.5 per cent of the workforce receives monthly social security benefits; ii) Insufficient budget allocation ~ the budget allocation for social security is inadequate, leading to a lack of resources for implementing and sustaining social security programmes; iii) Policy challenges ~ social security policies are not effectively implemented, and there are issues with corruption and leakages in social security programmes, and iv) Digital divide ~ the digital divide, particularly in rural areas, hinders access to social security benefits and services.

In conclusion, India's social safety net has made significant progress, but challenges persist. Though India has made efforts to improve social security, more needs to be done to address the challenges and ensure adequate coverage and benefits for all citizens.

To strengthen the system, policy makers must address gaps in coverage, ensure adequate funding, and improve implementation. A robust social safety net is crucial for reducing poverty and inequality, and promoting inclusive growth. By prioritizing the most vulnerable populations and leveraging technology, India can create a more effective and sustainable social safety net that supports the well-being of all its citizens.

A MEMBER OF THE



ASIAN VOICES

Sumatra is burning

Sumatra is currently in the throes of a severe land fire crisis, with an alarming surge in incidents across several provinces on the island as the dry season intensifies. Riau has emerged as the epicenter of this environmental catastrophe, reporting fires across all 12 regencies and cities, engulfing approximately 1,000 hectares of vital forest and notoriously difficult-to-extinguish peatland.

The situation has prompted immediate emergency declarations. Riau, along with two of the 19 regencies and cities in neighboring West Sumatra, last week officially declared a state of emergency for forest fires. This dire situation is further exacerbated by the nature of peatland fires, which burn underground, smoldering for weeks or even months and posing persistent and hazardous challenges to containment efforts.

Adding to the regional crisis, North Sumatra has become the latest province to declare a state of emergency, with seven of its 33 regencies and cities affected. The National Disaster Mitigation Agency (BNPB) has reported at least 61 wildfires across North Sumatra since the beginning of the year, devastating over 4,400 hectares of land.

Of particular concern are recent fire incidents around Lake Toba, a UNESCO Global Geopark.



These fires, some believed to be triggered by illegal slash-and-burn land clearing, jeopardize the government's efforts to preserve the site's prestigious status, which has been under a warning since 2023.

The Meteorology, Climatology and Geophysics Agency (BMKG) has issued a stark warning: The peak of the dry season next month is expected to bring even less rainfall and drier weather to several Sumatran provinces, including Riau, indicating a potential escalation of the crisis.

Authorities have taken some decisive actions. Riau Police have apprehended 51 suspects for alleged land clearing by burning, linked to at least 41 separate fires. Furthermore, the Environment Ministry has temporarily shut down four palm oil plantations and a mill in Riau after identifying hot spots within their concession areas. The BNPB and local authorities are actively engaged in controlling and anticipating fires through water bombing, weather modification technology to induce rainfall and extensive land and aerial patrols.

However, these efforts face a significant hurdle: Persistent illegal land clearing practices. While the total area burned this year is still considerably less than the devastating 2015 wildfires that scorched over 2.6 million hectares in Sumatra and Kalimantan, impacting neighboring countries with dense haze, the current trajectory is a serious cause for concern. To prevent the current situation from escalating into a full-blown, cross-border disaster, the central and local governments must implement a multi-pronged and robust mitigation strategy.

First, strengthen law enforcement and prosecution. This includes increasing aerial surveillance to detect illegal clearing early, implementing harsher penalties for arsonists and corporations found responsible for fires, and ensuring swift and transparent legal processes. The current arrests are a positive step, but consistent and widespread enforcement is crucial.

voices, just as he did with such brilliance.

As a devoted lover of cartoons, I earnestly request society

to honor this milestone by organizing exhibitions of his iconic cartoons and artworks, allowing new generations to experience

and appreciate his timeless contributions.

Yours, etc., Susanta Roy Chowdhury, Kolkata, 31 July.

COERCIVE

Sir, By imposing a 25 per cent tariff on Indian exports and slapping penalties for India's enduring ties with Russia, President Trump has made one thing abundantly clear: Washington's so-called strategic partnership with New Delhi was always more tactical than genuine. Add to this the U.S.'s fresh oil exploration venture with Pakistan ~ India's terror-exporting neighbour ~ and even the floated notion that Islamabad might one day sell oil to India. It's less diplomacy, more duplicity. What we're witnessing is not a breakdown, but a revelation. The U.S.'s courtship of India was never about shared democratic values; it was about leveraging India against China. The moment India charted its own sovereign path ~ especially in energy and defence ~ came the economic punishments. This is textbook coercive diplomacy, dressed in the language of partnership. India must see through it. We cannot afford strategic amnesia or misplaced trust. It's time for New Delhi to reassert its foreign policy independence, deepen alternative alliances, and stop confusing transactional proximity with geopolitical loyalty. The United States, once again, reminds us that in the world of realpolitik, friendships are fleeting ~ but national interest must be eternal.

Yours, etc., N Sadhasiva Reddy, Bengaluru, 31 July.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

editor@thestatesman.com

Remembering Mario

Sir, This year marks the 100th birth anniversary of Mario Miranda, one of India's most beloved cartoonists and illustrators. Mario Miranda was born on May 2, 1926. As we celebrate this milestone, it is only fitting that we take a moment to honor the life and legacy of a man whose work captured the spirit of everyday India with humor, warmth, and incredible insight.

Miranda's distinctive style, often brimming with vibrant characters and bustling street scenes, brought Goan life ~ and Indian society at large ~ into sharp, whimsical focus. His cartoons in *The Illustrated Weekly of*

India, *Times of India*, and *Economic Times* were more than just entertainment; they were social commentary layered with wit and compassion.

In an era where visual storytelling is more powerful than ever, Miranda's art continues to inspire generations. His ability to find humor in the mundane and portray it with such elegance remains unmatched.

As we remember Miranda on his 100th birth anniversary, let us also celebrate the enduring power of art and satire in shaping our cultural consciousness. May his legacy inspire young artists to explore and express their unique

Trade shock demands a resolute response

SANTHOSH MATHEW

With a 25 per cent tariff shock and fresh FTA pressures, Trump's aggressive trade agenda threatens Indian agriculture, exports, and the rupee.

"Earlier, trade followed politics; now, politics follows trade." This quote aptly captures the shifting sands of the India-US relationship, where economic interests increasingly dictate diplomatic alignments. The latest salvo in this high-stakes game came from U.S. President Donald Trump, who announced a 25 per cent tariff and penalties on Indian imports, sending shockwaves through both economies.

Trump's announcement, posted on Truth Social, was blunt: starting August 1, Indian goods entering the U.S. would face a steep 25 per cent tariff, plus additional penalties for India's continued crude oil purchases from Russia and its "unfair trade barriers." He accused India of being the "highest-taxing nation in the world" and reiterated his long-standing criticism of India's trade practices.

While calling India a "friend," his tone and policies spoke otherwise. At the heart of this tension is the stalled India-US Free Trade Agreement (FTA). Once described by Trump as a "very big trade deal," the FTA has become a symbol of imbalance, with India being pushed to open its markets to heavily subsidized American products while receiving few concessions in return.

Indian agriculture is the most threatened sector under Trump's renewed tariff and trade agenda. The U.S. dairy industry alone receives about \$12 billion in annual subsidies. With tariff barriers lowered, American

whey powder, skim milk, and cheddar cheese could flood Indian markets at prices local farmers can't compete with. While U.S. cheddar sells for Rs 300/kg, Indian producers need at least Rs 475 to break even. Over 75 million Indians involved in dairy could face economic ruin.

The cultural clash deepens this divide. Many U.S. dairy products are made using rennet, an enzyme derived from slaughtered calves, and cattle feed often contains animal by-products - both violate Indian religious sentiments. Any attempt to allow such imports would trigger social unrest, adding to the economic shock.

India also faces a soybean tsunami. Following the U.S.-China trade war, over 46 million tonnes of American soybeans piled up. Now, India is being eyed as the next dumping ground. If allowed, this would devastate Indian farmers growing mustard, groundnut, sesame, and other oilseeds integral to local agricultural systems.

Corn (maize) too is under siege. The U.S., as the world's largest corn exporter, seeks to push surplus maize into India. Indian industries - poultry, ethanol, starch - rely on domestic maize. Cheaper U.S. imports would wreck cultivation hubs in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka.

The poultry industry faces its own nightmare. The U.S. exports parts of chicken discarded by American consumers - legs, thighs, and wings - at dirt-cheap prices. Since India lost a WTO dispute in 2018, limited imports began. But an FTA could open the floodgates, devastating Indian poultry farms already grappling with high feed costs. Ironically, that feed - corn and soy - is subsidized, so the damage would reverberate back to Indian crop farmers.

Even pulses, where India achieved near self-sufficiency, are at risk. In 2023, after import duties were slashed, pulse imports nearly doubled - from 2.45 to 4.5 million tonnes. This jeopardized decades of investment and awareness campaigns to promote domestic cultivation of tur, urad, and moong. Further tariff cuts would unravel these gains.

In horticulture, the story repeats. When India halved duties on U.S. apples, imports surged 16-fold. American apples, with longer shelf life and global distribution, are outselling local varieties from Himachal Pradesh and Kashmir in urban markets. Small orchard owners, lacking cold chains, are losing out.

Even cotton, a sector where India leads globally, is being undermined. Subsidized American cotton, supported by price guarantees and export incentives, enters Indian mills, pushing down prices. The deeper threat is genetic. Along with American cotton comes the push for seed patents and biotech enforcement - moves that could destroy India's traditional seed systems and force farmers into annual seed purchases from multinational corporations.

Trump's tariffs are part of a broader, unapologetically transactional trade philosophy. He demands that allies comply with U.S. interests - or pay. India's defense ties with Russia and its discounted oil imports have angered Washington. In fact, a U.S. Senate bill proposes a staggering 500 per cent tariff on nations like India and China that continue to import Russian crude. Though likely to be watered down to 100 per cent, the message is clear: loyalty to U.S. policy is now an economic imperative.

Markets have already reacted. The Indian rupee has taken a hit, falling by



89 paise in a single day, touching Rs 87.80 to the U.S. dollar - a near-record low. For the first time since March, the rupee breached the Rs 87 mark. Economists warn that the rupee could slide to Rs 88-90 in the coming months if exports shrink and imports rise - a dangerous double whammy.

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has hinted at the end of its interest rate cuts, citing inflation and industrial weakness. Major Indian banks are reporting rising bad loans, and corporate earnings are under pressure. IT giants like TCS are downsizing by thousands, a worrying sign given how integral the software sector has been to India's export story.

The lesson is clear: while trade deals can offer opportunity, blind enthusiasm could cost India dearly. The FTA with the U.S., if signed on Washington's terms, could devastate

local industries, displace millions of rural livelihoods, and hollow out India's agricultural sovereignty. This is not just an economic debate-it's a political one. The Prime Minister's image as a strong, strategic leader is now being tested. The decisions he makes could shape India's trade, economy, and food systems for decades. The time has come not to romanticize foreign friendships but to negotiate from a position of strength, fairness, and foresight. After all, a nation's sovereignty isn't just about borders - it's also about seeds, milk, food, and the dignity of its farmers. "Trade is the mirror of power," wrote historian Paul Kennedy. India must remember this as it prepares to negotiate with a transactional superpower once again.

(The writer is Professor, School of International Studies and Social Sciences, Pondicherry Central University.)

If China, Russia and India join hands...

DINESH BHATTARAI

The debate over the Russia-India-China (RIC) troika is back in the news, with the Russian Foreign Minister proposing that "cooperation would be in their interests and would contribute to peace and security", raising the prospect of revitalising the trilateral mechanism that could challenge the US-led world order. Russia has long shown interest in making this format work among these three important partner countries to promote confidence-building measures, eliminate distrust and suspicion, resolve outstanding disputes and replace confrontation with dialogue and negotiation.

Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov first floated the proposal for a RIC triangular formation during his visit to India in December 1998. The urge for an Asian alternative appears to have coincided with the display of Western military prowess during the 1991 Persian Gulf War - Operation Desert Storm and after. Sources suggest that the idea goes even further to the persistent interest in Asian unity shown by India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, during the 1930s and 1940s against the global fascist challenge.

The idea thus envisages a forum to share Asian wisdom, which has the potential to provide alternative paradigms in strategic thinking and facilitate the inclusion of Asian views in global debates and decision-making. In a regular press briefing, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian said, "China-Russia-India cooperation not only serves the respective interests of our three countries, but also helps uphold peace, security, stability and progress in the region and the world. China stands ready to

maintain communication with Russia and India on advancing trilateral cooperation." Indian External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal described the RIC mechanism as "a consultative format "where the three countries come and discuss global issues and regional issues of interest."

The centre of gravity is shifting to the Eurasian continent, long regarded as the cockpit of global rivalry. The eastern hemisphere of Eurasia is rising, increasingly outcompeting the Western hemisphere. The RIC grouping is seen as a natural outcome of such global development, as these countries occupy a strategic position in terms of economic strength, geography, demography, technological advancement and dynamics of international politics.

China is the world's second-largest economy, and India is the fourth-largest and fastest-rising economy. RIC's approximate combined economic strength (\$25 trillion) is nearly equal to the USA's \$29 trillion. In terms of PPP, RIC is ahead of America. Taken together, they have the largest land area, vast natural resources in energy, minerals and rare earths, enormous human resources, cyber capabilities and huge stockpiles of nuclear weapons to challenge American primacy.

India is the world's largest democracy and a rising IT power. China is the world's largest trading and manufacturing nation, connected to every global supply chain. China and India have lifted a significant number of their people out of poverty. Historian Paul Kennedy of Yale University, in his book "Preparing for the Twenty-First Century", published in the 1990s, claimed that if India and China manage to raise the living standards of their people significantly, the side effects would threaten the

earth's overall atmosphere. However, it is legitimate for both countries to claim a place of pride and seek an increasingly prominent role in global affairs. Russia and China are permanent members of the UN Security Council. China already plays a significant role in the United Nations as its second-largest contributor, heading four of the UN's seventeen Specialised Agencies.

The coming together of the RIC troika could be a critical step in reviving the hope of an Asian century and making positive contributions towards the evolution of a global framework for peace and security. RIC is accelerating the process of moving towards a polycentric world as all three advocate a 'just and rational' new international order, democratisation of international politics and multi-polarising the global order. They are members of the G-20—a forum of the world's largest economies and the Global South.

The proposal to revive the mechanism comes when America is pursuing an "America First" agenda, including sweeping tariffs. The fact that India and China came together just a few days before the American presidential elections in November 2024 - following their deadly border clashes in June 2020 in the Himalayan region - for "disengagement and resolution of issues in the areas," is not without significance. As Chinese President Xi Jinping told Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014, "When China and India meet, the world watches".

Organisations functioning in the eastern hemisphere of Eurasia include the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the Boao Forum for Asia - all created and dominated by China - and have shown their value in



building confidence, and hold the potential to serve as successful examples of alternative paradigms. All three countries are members of the BRICS (originally Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, now expanded). Based on emerging trends, it can be said that the RIC group could work as a critical component in enhancing cooperation among these three Asian powers as well as fostering their collaboration with other major players.

The deterioration of relations with the West led Russia to deepen its relations with China. China and Russia have a "no limits partnership." In a thriving anti-Western axis, some links are already strong, others are marked by partial collaboration, and certain issues remain unresolved. China, Russia, Iran and North Korea, abbreviated as CRINK, are forging closer ties and consolidating the anti-Western alliance. China signed a 25-year "strategic agreement" with Iran in 2021. CRINK shares deep hostility towards the United States.

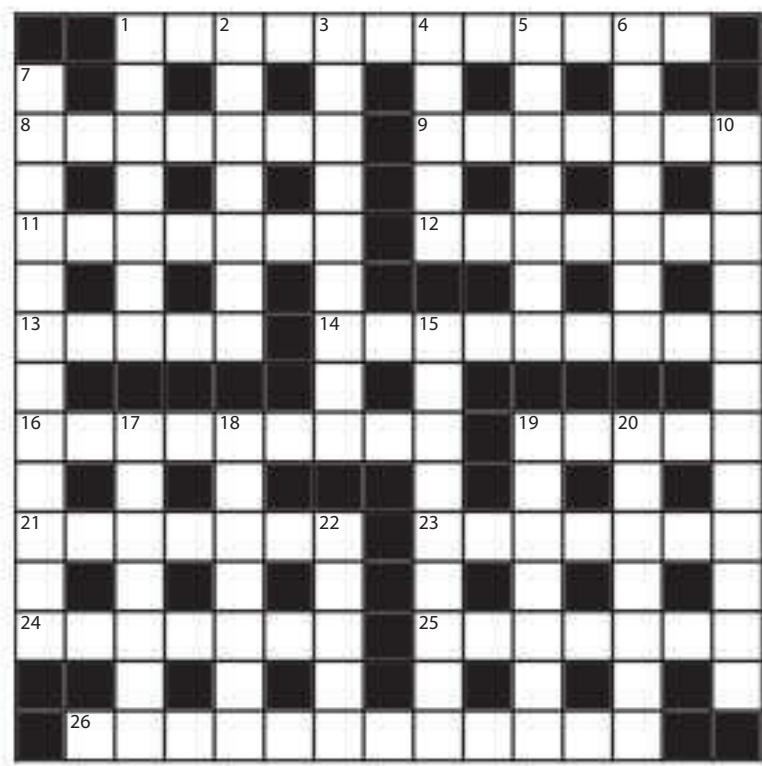
Beijing's massive infrastructure project called the Belt and Road

Initiative (BRI), referred to as "the project of the century," contains land, maritime and digital versions of the Silk Road. India has expressed its reservations about the BRI. Since the Sino-Indian border clashes in June 2020, India has turned to the US and is now an active participant in the US Indo-Pacific strategy. While India and Russia have strong relations, the intensification of great power rivalry in the Indo-Pacific region is placing strains on this relationship. The world is fraught with geopolitical tensions and conflicts, ranging from the Russia-Ukraine war to cross-border terrorism, climate change, cyber security threats, and transnational challenges, all of which call for cooperation, collaboration and collective action. On every issue affecting peace, security, stability and prosperity, working with the US remains the most critical prerequisite in building the future world order. Ultimately, the big 'IF' is that the success of RIC hinges on the improvement of India-China relations.

The Kathmandu Post/ANN.

CROSSWORD

NO-293211



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

ECOSYSTEM O P
L A P A UPSLOPE
SAFES EX S M P T
I T I TCHINESS
NURDLE A U R I
O O O S RAMPANT
RECEIPTED T E
E K D I T I C T E
G MANGROVE S
CHAPAU E O E U
A B M L BURSAR
SIDEBOARD P A I
P E A T REIMAGE
A I N T R E E O E I N
R K SUPERBRAT

ACROSS

- Perhaps cursory work for the young (7,5)
- Drop of continental perfume (7)
- Picked up grass with garden tool - I'm resigned to it! (5-2)
- Attraction, touring Spain, is relaxation (7)
- Character's lost outside after 31 days in band (7)
- Cheer, say, with drink getting knocked back (3,2)

- Soak Britain later in seawater, island swallowed (9)
- Van of Amazon figure in old African region before delivery (9)
- Work to keep little animal outside window (3-2)
- Come into home solitary maiden leaves (7)
- One remarkably animated in party, given drink (7)

- Two different versions of European material (7)
- Stops short on theory, oddly (7)
- Fractious Mourinho, as fans out (12)

DOWN

- We're told any singer's building a tree house (7)
- Painter's awful ear injury (7)
- Hardliner wants exit terms renegotiated (9)

- Ruffian provides company online (5)
- Guy involved in job there is at work (7)
- Sage Derby, say, eaten by parent (7)
- Mixing English in sign a film's unsuitable for kids? (12)
- To do with politician stopping as he is suffering too much stress (12)
- Gutted Estonian to cheer up and act as informer (9)

- What monarch wears brown in the capital? (7)
- Trump's head enhaled in near bliss (7)
- In more need of sunshine, doctor in seaside city (7)
- Pastries with excessive filling where toddlers go (7)
- A certain military group getting some heat (5)

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)

100 YEARS AGO

OCCASIONAL NOTE

IN diplomacy as in other matters the United States can and does set a no table example to the United Kingdom. When rubber was selling at seven-pence a pound three years ago, and speedy ruin stared planters and shareholders in the face, it never occurred to any Britisher to get the Ambassador in New York to represent matters to the American Government in order that the consumers in the United States might be induced to pay a higher price for rubber and so save the industry. But now that the commodity is between three and four shillings a pound, the American consumers are feeling the draught, and they have prodded their Government into making representations to Great Britain through the Ambassador, with a view to the lowering of prices. Mr. Chamberlain has received the representations with noncommittal politeness, but when he comes down to "brass tacks"—as the Americans would say—he might quite well refer the Ambassador to the repeated answers given by the Colonial Office in the House of Commons. These answers have reiterated the refusal of the British Government to interfere with the Stevenson scheme in spite of the inconvenience caused to British consumers by the present abnormal prices. It is difficult to discover why it should now be prepared to move specially in the interests of the American consumers, particularly as the enhanced price of rubber is simplifying the problem of American debt payments.

NEWS ITEMS

LONG DISCUSSION

OWNERS & THE PREMIER'S OFFER

AN earlier Reuter message states: The coalowners and miners' representatives separately considered the new situation this morning. The coalowners' discussion was so prolonged that they were unable to meet Mr. Baldwin at the time appointed. They are anxious to know the precise terms of Mr. Baldwin's offer of financial assistance before replying.

Apparently the announcement in the newspapers that the coalowners had withdrawn their notices was premature, as the Secretary of the Mining Association, interviewed by Reuter at 11-30 A.M., said that the question of withdrawing the notices was still being considered.

Replying to a question in the Commons, Mr. Eyres-Monsell said that Mr. Baldwin was still unable to make a statement as negotiations were still proceeding.—Reuter.

RUSSIANS IN CANTON STEADILY INCREASING IN NUMBER

HONG-KONG, JULY 31.

THE Russian steamer Simferopol was signalled to-day from Waglan lighthouse but refused to answer and proceeded direct to Canton. Quantities of sandbags and kerosene tins were observed on board, and also many Russian men and women.

The Simferopol is the second steamer that has left Vladivostock for Canton within a fortnight. The number of Russians in Canton is steadily growing.—Reuter.

ARMAMENTS AND WAR

EMPIRE LABOUR MEETING QUESTIONNAIRE

LONDON, JULY 30.

MR. Simpson (Canada), presided over to-day's session of the British Commonwealth Labour Conference when the Geneva Protocol was the subject of a debate in which Messrs. A. Henderson, Ramsay Macdonald, Sampson (South Africa), Heagney (Australia) and Dewan Chamam-lal (India), participated. Mr. Macdonald said he hoped that the delegates on returning to their own countries, would keep the spirit of the Protocol alive.

The conference decided to send a questionnaire to each organization, in order to secure the views of the various labour movements on inter-Commonwealth political relations, particularly as regards armaments and war, and also the position of subject peoples in the Empire.—Reuter's Special Service.

100 ARABS KILLED

PERSIAN TROOPS ATTACK MOHAMMERAH RAIDERS

BAGDAD, JULY 30.

PERSIAN Government troops attacked the Sheikh of Mohammerah's palace which was held by the Arabs who stormed the Mohammerah bazaar on Friday. The palace was taken by the Persians after sharp fighting.

The casualties were 6 Persians killed and 100 Arabs killed. Farther trouble is not expected.—Reuter.



Soured relations

The higher U.S. tariffs place India at a relative disadvantage

The 25% tariff “plus penalty” on imports of Indian goods in the United States, announced by President Donald Trump, should have come as no surprise to India. Mr. Trump has, for a while now, been voicing his displeasure at India’s dealings with Russia, with regard to energy dealings and military equipment. He has also been quite vocal about India’s high tariff and non-tariff barriers. These were the reasons he cited in his announcement on Wednesday. Add to this these facts – first, U.S. Trade Representative Jamieson Greer, as recently as Monday, had said that a trade deal with India needed “some more negotiations”, and second, Indian Commerce Ministry officials had stopped talking about a mini-deal for a while now. Thus, the writing on the wall was pretty clear: a deal before August 1 was not in the offing. The only uncertainty in this mix was the mercurial Trump, but he has finally made his position clear. However, while there was an expectation that a mini-deal would not materialise, something does seem to have shifted in India-U.S. relations. This is showing up now in Mr. Trump’s language – as a snide remark on Thursday about Pakistan selling oil to India in the future, or he, even more recently, calling the Indian economy “dead”. Whether this was him venting his frustration at not being able to secure a deal with India – after calling himself the “Dealmaker in Chief” – or whether something else has triggered him is not clear yet. The fact is that both sides have not budged from their core policies. The U.S. wants India to reduce its tariffs and provide market access across the board and India has held firm about ring-fencing agriculture and dairy.

All of this makes negotiating a potential bilateral trade agreement (BTA) that much more complicated. Where government officials have constantly changed deadlines for a mini-deal, they have been remarkably consistent about meeting the Fall deadline for the BTA. But now Mr. Trump has linked India’s dealings with Russia to India’s trade relations with the U.S. Who India does business with is a sovereign matter, and the Ministry of Commerce and Industry rightfully reiterated its commitment to securing India’s national interest. On the other hand, the U.S. accounts for around a fifth of India’s exports. The 25% tariffs plus a yet-unknown penalty places India at a relative disadvantage when compared to competitors such as South Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam. Trade associations representing several sectors have already voiced their concern. Indian negotiators will have to work doubly hard to conclude an acceptable deal.

New phase

NISAR has capped a decade-long bilateral effort of NASA and ISRO

The GSLV-F16 mission lifted off from Sriharikota on July 30, placing the NASA ISRO Synthetic Aperture Radar (NISAR) satellite into a sun synchronous orbit. The ascent capped a decade-long bilateral effort and opened a new phase in global earth observation cooperation. NISAR is a 2.8-tonne observatory that combines a NASA-built L-band radar with an ISRO-made S-band radar – also a first. They allow NISAR to detect surface changes measuring only a few centimetres, even through clouds and vegetation. NISAR will supply freely accessible data on ground deformation, glacier flow, biomass, land use changes, and sea ice dynamics. As its dawn-dusk orbit repeats every 12 days, its radars will be able to revisit the same point under nearly identical lighting conditions. This geometry, coupled with a duty cycle exceeding 50% in the L-band, has been designed to yield closely spaced time series observations that can quantify geological processes. Indeed, its various engineering firsts lead up to NISAR’s unusually broad science agenda: map mangrove extent, urban subsidence, crop-soil interactions, and calving rates in polar ice shelves in a single orbital cycle. Its data could help support the Sendai Framework on reducing disaster risk and refine IPCC models.

For ISRO, flying a flagship payload on the GSLV Mk II rocket is notable for a vehicle once dubbed “naughty boy” for its early-career setbacks. The ISRO-NASA partnership would also have eased technology transfer between the two countries. Developing the S-band radar would have demanded tighter tolerances in radiofrequency electronics, thermal stability, and data throughput than previous Indian satellites. From a diplomatic standpoint, the launch confirms that India can be trusted with high-value hardware and demanding integration schedules, although it is still learning to shape joint missions on equal terms. The 12-metre reflector, the Ka band downlink, and much of the flight software stack were imported, and the key design reviews were led by NASA. Achieving parity will require larger domestic investments in advanced materials, deep-space communications, and systems engineering plus earlier Indian involvement in framing the scientific agenda of future multilateral missions. NISAR’s data downlink rate also presents a challenge. ISRO must expand its Ka-band ground network, automate cloud-based processing, and release analysis-ready products within hours if state agencies are to make timely use of the data. Sustaining the time-wise data will also depend on authorising follow-on SAR spacecraft before 2030 and finalising data-sharing rules that encourage private analytics while protecting sensitive scenes. Addressing these gaps will determine how fully NISAR’s potential is realised in India.

The Supreme Court of India speaks in questions. Sometimes softly, sometimes sharply. In its hearings on the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) conducted by the Election Commission of India (ECI) in Bihar, the Court has asked what many in the country were thinking: Why was there a sudden need for fresh documentation? Why now? And what happens to the millions who cannot comply? Yet, the Court got a response from the ECI that did not address the underlying concern. The ECI insists that this is a technical revision. But the reality on the ground, and the implications of its policy, tell a very different story.

The SIR in Bihar requires every voter to submit new proof of citizenship – within one month – or face removal from the voter list. The stated intent is accuracy. But the effect is exclusion. This is not administrative housekeeping. It is an ideological shift in the treatment of citizens: from presumed inclusion to presumptive exclusion. This shift marks a deep departure from the constitutional vision of universal adult franchise.

Turning away from constitutional promises When India became a republic, it did something radical: it gave the vote to all adults, regardless of literacy, income, caste or gender. The Constituent Assembly debated this extensively. Many Members doubted whether the country was ready. But Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, among others, insisted that political equality must come first as a prelude to achieving social and economic equality.

That principle was translated into practice by the first Chief Election Commissioner (CEC), Sukumar Sen (March 21, 1950-December 18, 1958). Faced with 173 million potential voters, most of them illiterate, he innovated. He introduced voting symbols and designed processes that made participation easy, not difficult. India’s first elections were not perfect, but they were inclusive. In contrast, the revision in Bihar by India’s 26th CEC, Gyanesh Kumar, is the opposite. By demanding rare documents such as birth certificates and passports – held by only a small fraction of the population, the ECI is setting a bar that millions cannot meet. Aadhaar cards and ration cards, widely held by the poor, are not accepted. In Bihar, over 65 lakh people may now be at risk of disenfranchisement.

This is not an isolated event. We saw a similar exercise in Assam. The classification of



Sanjay Hegde

is a Senior Advocate designated by the Supreme Court of India

The Special Intensive Revision of Bihar’s electoral rolls is a turning point for citizens, civil society and Parliament – universal franchise must not be undone in the name of ‘vigilance’

Transforming early childhood care and education

The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP) has ushered in transformative changes in the educational landscape of India, particularly in the field of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). While private schools have had nursery classes for long, government schools have historically admitted children only from Class one, thus sowing the seeds of inequity even before the start of schooling. By paving the way for the opening of preschool classes for 3-6 year olds in government schools – previously catered to only by Anganwadis in the public sector – the NEP has initiated a long-overdue structural transformation towards equity.

There are three key structural shifts in the ECCE sector, driven by the NEP, with each one unfolding at a different pace. Understanding these shifts and preparing for them is crucial in ensuring quality early childhood care and education for the nation’s children.

An expansion

First, the expansion of the ECCE sector. A significant but often underappreciated shift is the anticipated growth of the ECCE sector by 2030, the target year for its universalisation. For decades, the public sector’s ECCE infrastructure had stagnated at approximately 14 lakh Anganwadi centres. This is now set to expand significantly. With the NEP paving the way for three preschool classes (Balvatika-1,2,3) in government schools, the number of public ECCE classes will increase significantly. This will have substantial implications for personnel management, including the financing, recruitment, training and deployment of skilled ECCE providers.

The Ministry of Education has already begun allocating budgets under the Samagra Shiksha scheme for the ECCE. Many States and Union Territories (UTs) have begun utilising this provision to introduce preschool classes in



Jatin Goyal

is Director (Education), Union Territory of Dadra Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu, and Joint Secretary (Finance). He was Director (Women and Child Development) earlier

Understanding the key structural shifts driven by National Education Policy 2020 and preparing for them are essential

lungi-wearing, Bengali-speaking Muslim inhabitants as “D-voters” (doubtful voters) by the officers of the Election Commission, turned thousands into stateless persons. Many found themselves pleading before foreigners’ tribunals, facing hostile bureaucracies and with no real opportunity to prove citizenship. With tribunals declaring them as foreigners and with no country ready to accept them, many have been just forcibly thrown away across India’s borders, as unwanted human detritus.

Bihar is at risk of repeating that mistake. The State is poor, flood-prone, and infrastructurally weak. A rigid document deadline during the monsoon season is not just poor planning. It is a barrier, intentionally or otherwise, for the poor and the marginalised to access the ballot box. The burden of proof has now shifted. Citizens must prove that they belong, rather than the state proving they do not. This reversal may seem technical, but its moral and democratic cost is immense.

Historical lessons and warnings

There are disturbing echoes here of the Jim Crow era in the United States (late 19th century to the mid-20th century), where African-American voters were disenfranchised through literacy tests, poll taxes and administrative obstructions. The veneer was legal; the purpose was political. It took federal intervention and landmark rulings such as *Reynolds vs Sims* (1964) and the Voting Rights Act 1965 to restore the right to vote as a true universal right.

India has similar legal protections. Supreme Court rulings such as *Md. Rahim Ali vs State of Assam* (2024) and *Lal Babu Hussein vs Electoral Registration Officer* (1995) have made it clear: disenfranchisement without due process is unconstitutional. Citizenship cannot be revoked or denied arbitrarily. Yet, here we are again – requiring the most vulnerable to navigate a process stacked against them.

The Court, during its hearing, asked pointed questions about the humanitarian consequences of the ECI’s actions. But the ECI’s response has been administrative, not empathetic. It continues to insist on timelines and technicalities, without addressing the social reality.

The ECI’s constitutional mandate is not merely to maintain clean lists. It is to ensure free and fair elections. This means enabling the right to vote – not erecting barriers to it. In this, the ECI is failing. And the Court, while alert, must decide

government schools. But, some have not begun to use this provision, while others have under-utilised it with some training or material being added, without starting additional classes. The extent and manner of this utilisation needs to be tracked.

Migration from anganwadis

The second shift is the growing emphasis on education when compared to other ECCE services such as health and nutrition. This trend is already visible in the Union Territory of Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu, where the Union Territory has introduced a preschool class in all its primary schools, prioritising the admission of 4-6 year olds. This has resulted in a substantial migration of this age group from Anganwadis to schools.

Data shows that parents have overwhelmingly preferred preschool classes in schools over Anganwadis, when given both options. This migration is largely driven by the perception that schools offer better educational opportunities. As a result, the traditional image of Anganwadis as vibrant centres filled with toddlers is now at risk as more government schools open preschool classes, and children in the 3-6 year age group move out of Anganwadis to schools.

The Anganwadi system must adapt by emphasising education as a part of its ECCE services. The Ministry of Women and Child Development’s ‘Poshan bhi Padhai bhi’ initiative is a timely step. However, its success depends on tangible implementation at the ground level, targeting an increase in measurable indicators such as the time spent by an Anganwadi worker on educational activities.

While schools cater to this demand, they need to be aware of the risks of excessive ‘schoolification’ of pre-schooling. They need to retain play at the centre of this education, in order to focus on the breadth of skills, instead of

whether it will continue nudging it or start directing it. A soft caution is not enough when millions face disenfranchisement.

If this continues unchecked, we are entering dangerous territory. Voting could become a privilege of the documented middle class – urban, salaried, tech-savvy –while the poor, the displaced, and the undocumented are left behind. We risk creating two Indias: one with voting rights and one without. Political parties will then cater only to those who count – literally. Those without votes will be ignored in policymaking, welfare and justice. We are not just talking about voter lists here. We are talking about power – Who gets it. Who keeps it. And who is kept out of it.

A quiet Emergency

There is no need for tanks on the street to declare an emergency. A quiet one is already here. It arrives through missing names, unmet deadlines and unanswered questions. It arrives when state machinery treats citizenship as a favour, not a right. This moment calls for resistance – not just from the Court, but from citizens, civil society and Parliament. We must reclaim the principle that the right to vote belongs to the people, not the paperwork. *Sadak, samaj* and Supreme Court must loudly proclaim that Mother India belongs to all her children and that she does not discriminate on a religious or economic basis when her protection is sought.

As historian Ornit Shani reminds us in the book, *How India Became Democratic*, universal franchise was not an administrative accident, it was an imaginative leap. Bureaucrats and citizens together transformed a colonial mindset into a democratic one. That achievement must not be undone in the name of vigilance.

The ECI must remember that elections are not entrance examinations. They are acts of belonging. And in a democracy, you do not have to prove you belong. You vote because you are a citizen. And you are a citizen because the Constitution says so, not because you can find your birth certificate.

The vote is not a mere document. It is a declaration: that we are all equal. That one man has one vote and one vote has one value. That even if I have one vote out of 1.4 billion votes, it is an equal share in the republic, in which I and every Indian are equal participants. That right of ownership and participation is what is now at stake.

focusing on the narrower skills of reading and writing in the pre-school classes.

The critical role of home visits

Third, the potentially most transformative shift is the possible reorientation of the Anganwadi system to focus on children aged 0-3 years through home visits, rather than focusing on 3-6 year olds attending the centres. Research, such as the ‘Perry Preschool at 50’ study in the United States and the Yale university study in Odisha done in collaboration with Pratham, highlights the critical role of home visits in early childhood development programmes.

In India, policymakers such as V. K. Paul (Member, NITI Aayog) and N.C. Saxena (IAS, retired) have long advocated focusing on 0-3-year olds within the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) framework, given the disproportionate developmental benefits during this stage. While the Prime Minister’s Overarching Scheme For Holistic Nourishment (POSHAN) Abhiyan has emphasised the importance of the first 1,000 days of life, implementation challenges persist. Overburdened Anganwadi workers naturally focus on 3-6 year olds who are physically present at the centres, leaving limited scope for individualised services to 0-3 year olds through home visits.

If government schools assume responsibility over 3-6 year-olds, we have a unique opportunity where the Anganwadi system could redirect its focus towards 0-3 year olds, along with the care of pregnant and lactating mothers, through more intensive home visits.

This shift, if realised, would mark a truly transformative change in India’s ECCE framework. The seeds for this transition have already been sown in the NEP 2020.

The views expressed are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Trump’s tariff tirade

The U.S. President’s “25% tariffs from Friday plus a penalty” may not have been unexpected as Mr. Trump has given many hints about his disapproval of India’s dealings with Russia. However, his comment that India and Russia can take their “dead economies down together” is shocking and reflects an unexplained contempt for both nations. As if this was not enough, his additional remark, of a U.S.-Pakistan oil reserve deal and the possible sale of this oil India “some day!”, is akin to adding insult to injury to India’s self-respect and national pride. The

Government of India’s response has been strangely meek and timid.

S.K. Choudhury,
Bengaluru

Debate in Parliament

‘Operation Sindoor’ is over and the Prime Minister, in his recent speech in Parliament, dwelt at length on the action taken. Therefore, it is unfortunate that the Congress leader and Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha is now attempting to tarnish ‘Operation Sindoor’ with his repeated questioning of the ceasefire. One expects a better standard of debate in

Parliament from the Opposition.

Mani Natarajan,
Chennai

Arrest of nuns

The arrest of the nuns in Chhattisgarh under ‘trafficking and conversion charges’ reeks more of communal vigilantism than credible law enforcement. When the kin of the tribal girls themselves deny coercion, the justification collapses. Anti-conversion laws, ostensibly to prevent forced conversions, are being misused to criminalise legitimate acts of charity, employment or faith. This is not

governance. It is harassment, weaponised. When constitutional freedoms are at the mercy of fringe complaints and political appeasement, we risk replacing rule of law with rule by mob. The state must protect rights, not undermine them under pressure from ideological groups.

K. Chidanand Kumar,
Bengaluru

Appeasement politics in Kerala and divisive politics in North India, with an eye on the vote bank, is the tactic the ruling party at the Centre is indulging in to win elections. Rather than

shedding crocodile tears and expressing well-rehearsed anguish, State leaders from this national party must walk the talk. .

Dr. Bijju C. Mathew,
Thiruvananthapuram

Poverty, illiteracy and ailment are three prominent causes which are used by missionaries. The moot question is this: why were the tribal girls being taken to a place hundreds of kilometres away from Chhattisgarh? To debunk the arrests as communal vigilantism is lopsided.

Ravi Mathur,
Noida, Uttar Pradesh

Honour killing Despite constitutional protections, it is evident that governments, central and State, have not shown a commitment to enacting legislation against honour killings, largely due to vote bank politics. Since societal beliefs in ‘caste supremacy’ are the root cause of these crimes, civil society has a responsibility to work collaboratively with the government to eliminate the illusion of ‘caste pride’ and ensure social harmony.

C. Raghavan,
Chennai

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

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Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Public grievances redressed in the past four months

4.47 In lakh. Out of more than 6.6 lakh public grievances received between April and July 24 this year, 4.47 lakh have been redressed. The Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances conducts monthly review meetings with all departments. PTI

Extra budget allocation for the PMKSY scheme

1,920 In ₹ crore. The Union Cabinet raised budgetary outlay for the flagship scheme Pradhan Mantri Kisan Sampada Yojana (PMKSY) to ₹6,520 crore to boost the food processing sector. The enhanced funds will be utilised for 100 food testing labs. PTI

The amount approved as a grant-in-aid for the NCDC by Cabinet

2,000 In ₹ crore. The Union Cabinet approved a ₹2,000 crore grant-in-aid to the National Cooperative Development Corporation (NCDC) for four years, a move that will help the organisation to mobilise more funds for lending. PTI

Forest land diverted by India in 2021-25 for various projects

78,000 ha. Union Minister Kirti Vardhan Singh said the government approved the diversion of 12,324.32 ha of forest land in first half of 2025. Madhya Pradesh accounted for the highest area approved for diversion. PTI

Area undertaken for planting trees in India in the last five years

93.7 lakh hectares The Minister of State for Environment said the government is currently carrying out afforestation and tree plantation under the 'Ek Ped Maa Ke Naam' campaign launched on June 5, 2024. PTI

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Why the world needs better green technologies

As nations grapple with land constraints, geopolitical conflicts, rising carbon dioxide levels, and the urgency of energy self-sufficiency, the imperative grows not just to deploy more renewable fuels but to invest in smarter, more efficient, and more diverse energy innovation

FULL CONTEXT

Chinnakonda S. Gopinath

As the global demand for sustainable energy soars and countries strive to meet climate commitments, silicon photovoltaics have emerged as the most widely adopted solution, transforming landscapes from urban rooftops to sprawling rural installations. Yet as the energy transition accelerates, a critical question surfaces: are conventional silicon panels, despite their proven track record, truly the most effective path forward, or is it time to embrace next-generation technologies promising higher efficiencies and lower environmental footprints?

The landscape is further complicated by new demands such as the widespread production of green hydrogen, touted as a key enabler of deep decarbonisation. Today's solar panel technologies not only affect the quantity of clean electricity generated but directly shape the potential and credibility of downstream solutions like green hydrogen, green ammonia, and green methanol. As nations grapple with land constraints, rising carbon dioxide levels, and the urgency of energy self-sufficiency, the imperative grows not just to deploy more renewables but to invest in smarter, more efficient, and more diverse energy innovation.

Silicon photovoltaics

The widely used solar panels, or silicon photovoltaics, were originally invented by researchers at Bell Laboratories in the U.S. in 1954 and first deployed on satellites so they could generate power in space. From there, they slowly entered other industries over time until, in the last few decades, their adoption exploded worldwide.

Current solar panels generally have a reported efficiency of around 18-21% and an in-field efficiency of 15-18%. In the last 15 years or so, around 80% of the supply of solar panels has been from China. In India, the production of silicon solar cells has reached around 6 GW and is expected to increase further in the coming years.

At this juncture, as the world prepares to invest more in solar power even as the ability to harness it has become a strategic ability, an important question has arisen: should we continue to adopt silicon solar panels even though superior, more efficient technologies have become available?

The best research-based solar cell efficiency chart has been regularly updated from 1976 for a broad range of photovoltaic technologies. There are many, with the maximum efficiency of around 47% being achieved by single junction gallium arsenide thin-film technology. Many of these photovoltaic setups have already been demonstrated at a high level and are ready to be commercialised.

Because silicon solar panels' efficiency is below 18%, they need to have greater area exposed to the sun than panels of higher efficiency. When the efficiency doubles, the required collection area halves.

Land area is becoming a rarer commodity: countries are urbanising rapidly even as increasing environmental consciousness, driven by the pressures of climate mitigation, render green spaces too valuable to be diverted for solar power plants.

Silicon photovoltaics are also slow runners in the world's race to catch up with its own growing energy demand.



Need for speed: A drone view of solar panels and the National Thermal Power Corporation power plant in Solapur, Maharashtra on March 2. REUTERS

While 4.45 TWh of renewable energy generation capacity had been installed until the end of 2024, the CO2 concentration in the atmosphere has continued to increase – from 350 ppm in 1990 to around 425 ppm in 2025 – implying energy demand is only increasing faster.

Costs of green hydrogen

The widespread adoption of silicon photovoltaics also has implications for the 'greenness' of green hydrogen, among other fuels. Hydrogen as a fuel can be produced by using a large electric current to break apart water molecules (H2O). If this current comes from a renewable energy source, the resulting hydrogen is called green hydrogen.

Green hydrogen is environment friendly and doesn't emit any greenhouse gases when it is combusted. However, the current electrolysis technologies available consume more energy to produce green hydrogen than its energy value in use. The yet other costs hydrogen imposes include that of its storage and transportation, which are very difficult because of the element's extremely low density, which causes it to leak easily.

As alternatives, experts have proposed infusing the green hydrogen into molecules like green ammonia (NH3) and green methanol (CH3OH), which are

easier to transport, before extracting the green hydrogen at the destination.

However, using green hydrogen to produce green ammonia or methanol by conventional catalysis methods, followed by stripping hydrogen out of those molecules, also requires a significant amount of energy.

Thus, at the first step itself – the act of generating renewable energy from silicon photovoltaics – there is a compromise on efficiency (that is, by not adopting more efficient solar power technologies). And in the subsequent steps, energy is consumed for electrolysis, storage or conversation, transport, and finally utilisation. As a result, the greenness of green hydrogen should not be taken at face value.

CO2 recycling

One alternative is to produce green methanol or ammonia directly from water, sunlight, and carbon dioxide or nitrogen, respectively. The plants in our gardens are already doing this everyday in a process called photosynthesis. Similarly, some scientists are working on a process called artificial photosynthesis, or APS. Currently, while APS technologies are restricted to the lab bench, some bright spots indicate they have a promising future.

As the world's various net-zero targets

come into view, it's important to develop and perfect diverse technologies, rather than just a few, so that it has the best shot of achieving carbon-neutral economies.

Europe is already working on 'Renewable Fuels of Non-Biological Origin', or RFNBO, which is the production of fuels with renewable energy and resources and without biomass. India should also work on such futuristic solutions to become energy independent, from its current position of importing nearly 85% of different forms of energy resources (including oil, coal, and natural gas) from other countries.

As geopolitical conflicts proliferate and the supply of energy is increasingly disrupted, achieving energy self-sufficiency is paramount. As such the Government of India should consider spending more on research, innovation, and technology development with help from the private sector.

Prevention is better than cure. Spending ₹1 crore on preventing pollution today will save us from having to spend several crore in the future on damage control. While green hydrogen and silicon photovoltaics are good technologies, the world already needs better, that is, more efficient, more practicable, more economic, and more diverse solutions.

Chinnakonda S. Gopinath is visiting professor, IIT Palakkad.

THE GIST

▼ The widely used solar panels, or silicon photovoltaics, were originally invented by researchers at Bell Laboratories in the U.S. in 1954.

▼ The widespread adoption of silicon photovoltaics also has implications for the 'greenness' of green hydrogen, among other fuels.

▼ Europe is already working on 'Renewable Fuels of Non-Biological Origin', or RFNBO, which is the production of fuels with renewable energy and resources and without biomass.

Tariff tantrums

India does well to stand up to Trump’s pressure tactics

US President Donald Trump’s typically peremptory tariff order, which entails a 25 per cent levy on Indian exports over and above existing most favoured tariff rates for now, is arguably not a cause for alarm. While 25 per cent additional tariff sounds high relative to countries that have done deals with the US, such as Indonesia (19 per cent), the Philippines (19 per cent), EU, South Korea and Japan (all 15 per cent) and probably places India on a par with Canada and Mexico, it should not be forgotten that the deal-makers have given a lot of concessions as well. The real tariff for India could be more.



The crunch lies in what is set to follow: an unspecified ‘penalty’ for buying arms and oil from Russia, dealing with ‘unfriendly’ BRICS countries and imposing “strenuous and obnoxious” non-tariff barriers. India has responded with admirable firmness by spelling out the red lines for future talks — namely, it will be guided by national interest in protecting farmers and small industries. This surely applies to sourcing oil. In its negotiations, it appears that these red lines have been conveyed — which perhaps explains Trump’s truculent outburst on Wednesday. Trump has left the penalty clause open for bargaining, and there is no real reason to panic. How India proceeds in talks with the US from here on is, in fact, not a very complicated matter. It can slash to zero its MFN tariffs (now averaging 17 per cent) on almost all of US goods exports — while fencing out farming and dairy as no-go zones. Oil purchases from Russia are expected to decline anyway (they have already fallen) as global oil prices fall as anticipated. India sources arms from countries in different blocs, and even here Russia’s share has dipped, as this newspaper reported on Thursday. Non-tariff barriers such as India’s ‘quality control order’ on imports can be negotiated upon.

Exporters in labour-intensive sectors such as garments, footwear and leather are wary about what lies in store. India’s relative advantage or disadvantage will be clearer in perhaps a day or two, after the US releases its revised ‘reciprocal tariffs’ for perhaps 40-odd countries, other than those with whom the US has already announced deals, or decided on tariffs. But rather than fret over the impact, the Centre should think in terms of measures to offset this shock.

Above all, it is neither possible nor desirable to respond to Trump’s use of tariffs as a weapon to shape a country’s foreign, or even domestic, policy. India did well in standing up for its interests during the stretched negotiations of the last few months. Trump’s decision to impose 25 per cent tariff and his outburst on social media soon after are proof of India’s unyielding stance. As developing countries jostle to ensure that they are on the left of the tariffs bell curve, they should also seek to act in concert — not only to gain bargaining leverage, but also to stop the weaponisation of tariffs. It is against this turbulent backdrop that India should continue talks and hope to arrive at a reasonable deal.

POCKET RAVIKANTH



How to duck the US-Russia crossfire

BALANCING ACT. US’ threat to impose punitive tariffs for dealing with Russia calls for a firm, non-antagonistic response



RAM SINGH

US President Donald Trump has slapped a 25 per cent tariff as base tariffs on Indian goods. He also announced the possibility of additional penal tariffs for purchase of Russian oil and involvement with BRICS countries.

Meanwhile, given the bipartisan support for the ‘Russia Sanctions Bill’ in the US Congress, this is a clear signal of intensifying pressure on countries like India, China, and Brazil that continue to import Russian energy or maintain strategic-economic ties with Moscow. The proposed Bill includes punitive measures of up to 100-500 per cent tariffs and targeted restrictions on entities engaged in “significant transactions” with Russia, supposedly aimed at circumventing the Western sanctions regime.

India’s ever-increasing import of Russian energy and other resources (crude, gas, fertilizer); the rupee-ruble trade mechanisms; continued defence procurement, including the S-400 systems; proposed upgradation of SU-30MKI; and strategic tie-ups for fifth generation fighter jets have drawn US’ scrutiny.

In this context, let us comprehend such threats, legal frameworks, and possible responses, going forward.

US THREATS

The US, in its bid to enforce geopolitical discipline, has deployed a range of legislative tools, most notably the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA). India’s acquisition of the Russian S-400 missile system during the Trump 1.0 provoked bipartisan concerns in Washington.

While CAATSA sanctions were not

ultimately applied, the episode highlighted the difficulties involved in strategic dependencies vis-a-vis the US.

Alongside CAATSA, other key legislative frameworks include the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA), Global Magnitsky Act, Iran Sanctions Act, Trading with the Enemy Act, and executive orders under the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). Enforcement is carried out through institutions like OFAC (Treasury), BIS (Commerce), the State Department, FinCEN, and the Department of Justice (DOJ).

Tensions escalated further with India’s steep rise in discounted Russian oil imports — jumping from 2 per cent to over 40 per cent of India’s crude basket between FY22 and FY24—yielding savings of ₹35,000 crore. India settled many payments in rupees and dirhams, avoiding dollar-dominated channels and SWIFT. This pragmatism, while beneficial, has unsettled Washington. Moreover, bilateral instruments like rupee-ruble trade, BRICS Pay, and MIR (Russian system)-RuPay interface represent a quiet but potent challenge to US financial hegemony.

Beyond energy, India’s deepening ‘trust-driven’ collaboration with Russia in nuclear energy, space exploration, and defense technology continues to draw US scrutiny. While the US promotes Indo-Pacific alignment through QUAD and I2U2, it increasingly seeks exclusivity in sensitive sectors. This raises a fundamental dilemma for India: can it sustain its multi-aligned statecraft

India has deepened strategic ties with the US through QUAD, I2U2, tech partnerships, and a proposed 10-year defence pact, while maintaining strong energy, space, and defence links with Russia.

amid global techno-nationalism and financial decoupling?

INDIA’S STRATEGIC PATIENCE

In the wake of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Western nations, led by the US, have intensified efforts to isolate Moscow economically, deploying sanctions, oil price-caps, insurance deniability and threats of secondary penalties to deter global partners from transacting with Russia.

Pursuing strategic autonomy, India banks upon bipartisan US backing for its development-linked exemptions, energy security and sustainable growth, while avoiding entanglement in ideological or bloc-driven politics. India follows a multi-aligned strategy rooted in national interest, prioritising industrial sovereignty, strategic autonomy, and resilient partnerships without compromising developmental imperatives or global responsibilities.

Rather than capitulating to pressure or projecting defiance, New Delhi has embraced a policy of calculated pragmatism, anchoring its engagements in issue-based partnerships while avoiding entanglement in ideological or bloc-driven politics. India follows a multi-aligned strategy rooted in national interest, prioritising industrial sovereignty, strategic autonomy, and resilient partnerships without compromising developmental imperatives or global responsibilities.

First, India has refused binary choices. It has deepened strategic ties with the US through QUAD, I2U2, tech partnerships, and a proposed 10-year defence pact, while maintaining strong energy, space, and defence links with Russia. Simultaneously, India proactively engages EU, UK, Israel, Japan, Korea, Australia, ASEAN, GCC, and Global South, projecting pragmatic multi-alignment.

Second, India has accelerated alternative financial architectures. Rupee-based settlements with Russia, the UAE, and Sri Lanka are slowly increasing, while BRICS Pay and proposed RuPay-MIR is to avoid the weaponisation of the dollar, reducing hedging costs and offering financial resilience.

Third, through industrial diplomacy,

India is building economic de-risking capacity. The Make-in-India push, PLI incentives, defence indigenisation, focus on food, fertilizer and mineral resources in the recent times exemplifies India’s strategic approach for ensuring strategic sovereignty.

To deal with the proposed US sanctions bill imposing 100 per cent tariffs on Russian-origin goods and partners, India must refine its statecraft anchored in autonomy and economic diplomacy.

First, India should accelerate to internationalise rupee-based trade mechanisms with partners like Russia, UAE, and Sri Lanka to reduce dollar dependency and insulate itself from secondary sanctions. It should fast-track resolution of dollar neutral ‘reference rates’ mechanism.

Second, India, sourcing energy from over 38 nations, must further diversify strategic and energy partnerships by deepening ties with West Asia, Africa, Latin America, and BRICS to strengthen and de-risk supply chains.

Third, India should be prepared to challenge any unilateral Western sanctions through established institutions and protocols, emphasising the illegality of ‘extraterritorial’ restrictions under international law especially when it is related to non-sovereign military alliance.

Fourth, India must use industrial diplomacy, such as joint defence manufacturing with the US and semiconductor partnerships with Japan and Taiwan, to build economic stakes that deter coercive action.

Fifth, India should continue its stance of narrative neutrality, avoiding alignment in polarised geopolitical conflicts while pursuing interest-based cooperation with all.

Finally, India should project its statecraft, though firmly grounded in realism, as one that is packaged in respect for international norms.

The writer is Professor and Head, IIFT, New Delhi. Views are personal

Mobile number validation – boon or bane?

The cost of checking numbers will hit small businesses and local service providers like plumbers and electricians

bl.explainer

Vallari Sanzgiri

What does the draft mobile number validation rule specify?

The draft cybersecurity rules proposed by the Department of Telecommunication (DoT) aims to curb online frauds, committed through mobile phones, through mobile number validation. The draft rules want banks and other entities that use mobile numbers to identify their customers, called telecom identifier user entities (TIUE), to use a new Mobile Number Validation (MNV) platform of DoT.

Every time an entity needs to verify a phone number, for app sign-ups or digital payments, a fee must be paid to the government.

Entities authorised with DoT, such as banks, must pay ₹1.50 per verification, while others pay ₹3. Numbers flagged as fake or suspicious by the MNV platform will be deactivated for 90 days.

Companies must use this official checking system, and they can no longer use their own methods anymore.

Do the rules say each bank account needs its own unique phone number? The rules don’t mention banks

specifically, but the provisions make it difficult for multiple people to use the same phone number for different accounts. This is because each phone number is registered under the name and identity of a single individual.

Now, if banks have to verify phone numbers frequently and pay fees each time, they might start requiring one phone number per account to avoid extra costs.

What this means in terms of your banking activities?

One family member can’t help another with mobile banking or use shared UPI accounts. You cannot help your grandparents with pension. Emergency money transfers will also become complicated if the “main” phone user isn’t available.

How will this hurt low-income families who share phone numbers?

Many low-income families have just one phone that everyone uses – grandparents for pension, parents for work and banking and children for school apps. If the government enforces these rules, family members might get locked out of their accounts as the platform considers multiple people using one number as “suspicious.” The rules essentially follow the principle of one mobile number per



NUMBER THEORY. Digital access MUSTAFAH KK

individual. Many families in India cannot afford this.

Particularly, families in villages with one smartphone will suddenly lose access to government welfare schemes. Migrant workers sharing phones in cities will lose access to money transfer apps. Women, who don’t own phones, get cut off from digital services. Elderly people dependent on family phones can’t check medical appointments.

How will this impact everyday life?

What seems like a simple rule could force many people to choose between family members who can have digital access, making everyday services more expensive and less accessible.

Mothers can’t transfer money,

children can’t access online classes. Domestic workers can’t receive digital payments because they use family phones.

Telemedicine apps will block families from booking appointments and vaccination registration becomes harder for families sharing devices.

How are businesses hurt by these rules?

Small businesses get hit hardest. A small food delivery app with 10,000 customers could incur ₹30,000 monthly just to verify phone numbers. Start-ups already struggling to survive will now have huge new monthly bills.

Apps like food delivery platforms may pass on verification costs to customers as higher delivery fees. Online shopping, cab booking, bill payments will become more expensive.

Small and local businesses using digital payments will face extra costs which they may add to product prices. This means, your local grocery store may even stop accepting digital payments altogether. The same goes for your favourite neighbourhood restaurants.

Local service providers like plumbers, electricians, handy men may stop using booking apps. These extra costs of checking number will make it even harder for small businesses to compete with big companies that can afford the fees.

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

‘Dead economies’?

This refers to ‘India, Russia can take their ‘dead economies’ down together: Trump’ (July 31). It was utter falsification on the part of the US President Trump to make such a claim hours after announcing 25 per cent tariffs on imports from India. Had it really been so, where was the need for him to be so much worried about the twin ‘dead economies’ of Russia and India? Truly speaking, this tariff imposition could hurt Trump more as India will

defy his diktats and continue with its ‘trade and defence’ ties with Russia. India will safeguard its national interests and not cowed down by Trump’s who is behaving like a ‘super cop’. Russia, India and China must jointly resist Trump’s tariff threats.

A Gupta
New Delhi

Disastrous decision

India will be deeply disappointed with Trumps 25 per tariff imposition

on India, citing baseless concerns over Russian imports. His short-sighted, punitive measures not only harm international relations but also betray the values of diplomacy and cooperation. India and the US have long been partners, and such aggressive actions jeopardize decades of goodwill. Trump’s rhetoric and lack of understanding of global trade dynamics will only lead to economic

harm, further isolating the US from vital allies. His approach is nothing short of irresponsible and detrimental to global stability.

Vijaykumar HK
Raichur

Apropos ‘Trump slaps 25% tariff on India, adds penalty for buying Russian oils, arms’, (July 31). In a conspicuous manifestation of coercive economic statecraft, Trump’s draconian tariffs imposition, plus penalties for New Delhi’s

strategic defence and energy engagements with Moscow — represents a calibrated assault on India’s trade architecture. This will hit export-oriented sectors including textiles, automotive components, leather goods, and agro-based commodities. India must now fortify sovereign trade frameworks and recalibrate its geopolitical alignments with prudence and resilience.

N Sadasiva Reddy
Bengaluru

Questionable Pak oil deal

It lacks transparency, will face tech and cost issues

Richa Mishra

Is President Donald Trump using “oil” to make India accept a tariff deal that suits the US. Seems so.

First, he stated that India will be paying 25 per cent tariff plus a penalty for trading with Russia — defence and energy. Next came his comment at @realDonaldTrump: “We have just concluded a deal with the country of Pakistan, whereby Pakistan and the United States will work together on developing their massive oil reserves. We are in the process of choosing the oil company that will lead this partnership. Who knows, maybe they’ll be selling oil to India some day!”

But, in the recent past, crude sourcing by India has been all about economics — cheap oil. India imports much of its crude oil from Russia, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, besides the UAE, the US, Nigeria and Angola to name a few. India’s crude oil purchase is no longer restricted to any one country or region.

LONG TIME-FRAME

When discussing the US-Pakistan oil deal what has to be remembered is that to develop any large oil or gas field and bring it to production, it takes six to seven years. Pakistan has updated its reserves this year, upwards of 23 per cent. According to reports, it was a revision to seven fields where discoveries were already made. But there are doubts on the size of these discoveries.

Says Tracy Shuchart, Senior Economist, NinjaTrader Group LLC, “Trump’s recent announcement of a US-Pakistan oil development deal has generated significant scrutiny and raised several key concerns. First, there are widespread doubts about the size of Pakistan’s oil reserves.”

According to her, “Despite Trump’s assertions of “massive” reserves, credible data suggests otherwise, as Pakistan’s proven reserves are modest and account for only a tiny fraction of global totals — far from meeting its own consumption levels. Most claims about large-scale reserves are speculative and remain unconfirmed by commercial drilling or international geological surveys.”

Further complicating matters are economic and technical obstacles, as Pakistan’s oil exploration efforts have historically been hampered by political instability, financial

INDIA RESILIENT

- Oil imports expanded from 27 to around 40 countries
- No sanctions on Russian crude; legally aligned
- 16% of global oil demand growth is from India
- IEA projects 25% share by 2045
- Strengthening ties with Brazil, Guyana, Canada and US
- Domestic reforms boosting exploration and affordability

risks, insufficient infrastructure, and a lack of advanced technology. This makes it difficult to attract major international investment or achieve meaningful discoveries any time soon, she adds.

“Geopolitical complications are also significant. The prospect of Pakistan selling oil to India is highly unrealistic at present, given long-standing tensions between the two countries and recent US policy contradictions — such as simultaneously pressuring India over Russian oil imports while pursuing energy deals with Pakistan,” she points out.

Also, lack of transparency surrounding the US-Pakistan deal fuels scepticism. “Details such as the identities of participating US firms, investment amounts, and timelines for exploration have not been released, and Pakistani officials have spoken only vaguely about enhanced economic cooperation rather than specific oil commitments. Oil industry scepticism is high due to a history of unfulfilled promises of major oil finds in Pakistan, so there is concern that the current announcement is more persistent political rhetoric than a credible business venture,” avers Shuchart.

Clearly, the oil industry is not convinced with what Washington has said as there are issues of unproven oil reserves, challenging economics, potential regional tensions, inadequate transparency, and a general lack of confidence about the feasibility and sincerity of the agreement.

India on its part has been a smart buyer. Minister of Petroleum and Natural Gas Hardeep Singh Puri, in a recent post on X, said: “India’s oil strategy is resilient, responsible, and reshaping the global energy market. India is no longer betting on one horse.

Is India ‘B-ready’ in insolvency?

NEW BENCHMARK. The World Bank’s Business Ready Index is more broad based than the erstwhile Doing Business series, and has implications for India’s insolvency reforms



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO



AMOL BAXI

The World Bank recently launched the first phase of its Business Ready (‘B-ready’) report ranking the business environment of countries across ten areas — entry, location, utility services, labour, financial services, international trade, taxation, dispute resolution, market competition, and business insolvency. The report has fresh inclusions and assessment methodology built around thematic pillars (regulatory quality, public services, and operational efficiency). In the first phase, 50 countries have been covered, with expansion gradually. The report replaces the Doing Business (DB) series, discontinued in 2021.

India has not been included in B-ready yet, but is planned in future phases. India’s upward movement in the DB rankings from 130 (2016) to 63 (2020) was attributed to many reforms including the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code’s (IBC’s) successful introduction and its resolution focus.

However, considering the freshly constituted index, it is worth examining whether India is B-ready in insolvency and key focus areas for a reasonable position.

REVISED PERSPECTIVES

In insolvency, the erstwhile DB report assessed nations annually on 16 indicators (across four categories comprising commencement procedures, value protection, reorganisation proceedings, and creditor participation). It assessed regulatory quality as well as recovery rates (discounted for time and cost). The report’s aggregate score reflected a simple average of the two components (for 190 countries).

In contrast, the revised B-Ready is more broad-based, relying on 49 indicators for insolvency (across three pillars: regulatory quality [28 indicators]; institutional infrastructure [17]; and time /cost efficiency [4]). Each of these pillars (equal one-third weight

in turn comprises several categories /subcategories.

While several DB insolvency indicators also find place in the B-Ready (for instance, commencement, IP appointment/dismissal, interim finance, avoidance transactions), the revised methodology significantly expands the scope of what constitutes sound insolvency regimes to include pre- and post-commencement indicators (for instance, workouts/out-of-court mechanism, management obligations, automatic stay, environmental and labour claims, specialised regime for MSMEs and cross-border insolvency). The index departs from DB report’s primary focus on regulatory quality (and recoveries), while also emphasising institutional infrastructure (digital/e-services), and efficiency. Its emphasis on value protection resonates well with IBC’s objectives.

Importantly, the integration of specialised regimes marks the recognition of the criticality of cross-border laws to sound insolvency systems (which UNCITRAL has stressed since 1997 through its harmonised model law). However, B-ready does not insist on its adoption, but assesses adequate mechanisms for recognition of foreign proceedings and international cooperation. Therefore, even non-signatory countries have scored optimally in this category (example: Vietnam).

IBC’s LIKELY POSITION

While India’s positioning in the erstwhile DB series post IBC was praised, considering B-ready, India would need to take some calibrated steps. A criteria review reveals some aspects (not exhaustive) for deliberation:

First, in terms of regulatory quality, IBC has enabling guidelines across several B-ready indicators (example:

While specific B-ready indicators may be prioritised for reforms/refinements, equivalent focus must be maintained on improving IBC’s effectiveness

commencement, value protection, creditor participation, IP appointment /dismissal, interim finance, and specialised procedures /pre-packs for MSMEs). However, IBC lacks some. For instance, it has limited provisions (bilateral /case-to-case cooperation) in cross-border insolvency.

The adoption of UNCITRAL (United Nations Commission on International Trade Law) model law remains long pending.

Other issues include a lack of priority for environmental claims in the IBC waterfall, an aspect requiring deliberation. Strengthening hybrid mechanisms/workouts for debtors (beyond MSMEs) have also been in the works for some time now.

Next, in the context of institutional infrastructure (digital services, interoperability, public information, IP registry, and expertise of courts/public officials), there have been many positive initiatives (some in place, others work in progress).

For instance, India recently mandated the use of the centralised e-auction portal (eBKRAY) for IBC, and work is ongoing to implement an integrated technology platform for IBC (announced in Budget 2024-25). Other ongoing initiatives to augment IBC infrastructure include strengthening NCLT benches. As regards information sharing, the regulator routinely publishes relevant data on timelines/public officials/IPs.

Lastly, in efficiency, significant delays continue to plague IBC (597 days in reorganisation /508 days for liquidation). Hence, this remains a core issue, endeavoured to be addressed through periodic amendments/guidelines. However, strengthening B-ready pillars may themselves lead to improved efficiency.

However, several subtle nuances within B-ready indicators exist, which may prevent optimal scoring (even where IBC *prima facie* appears positive). For instance, while IBC enables interim finance, financiers get takeout priority over all creditors (not just unsecured), historically viewed as sub-optimal for credit markets from World Bank lens. Similarly, while IBC has an automatic stay, secured creditors cannot opt out before liquidation order (even if erosion in security value). Hence, such nuances

will need careful consideration for a strategy.

SOME IMPLICATIONS

The B-ready (with its imperfections) brings some fresh dimensions for assessing insolvency regimes with implications for direction of India’s insolvency reforms. The index sets standards of what constitutes sound regimes. However, given each pillar has equal weightage, focusing only on the regulatory framework while not improving operational infrastructure and efficiency will hinder a high score for IBC. While India has already initiated several B-ready steps, much will depend on timely implementation of various planned/ongoing initiatives (such as integrated technology platforms, code timelines, cross-border frameworks, environmental claims priority and creditor-driven workouts) while tackling nuances in scoring criteria. However, ticking checkboxes may not be considered the sole objective of any economic reform (B-ready also notes a need to avoid overhype surrounding economy-wise rankings). Further, assessment hinges on specific index variables selected, and scholars have long argued, there is no one-size-fits-all approach.

Hence, notwithstanding changed benchmarks and scoring nuances, while specific B-ready indicators may be prioritised for reforms/refinements, equivalent focus must be maintained on improving IBC’s effectiveness for achieving the key objectives of any insolvency law (efficiently reorganising viable and liquidating unviable entities). While IBC already possesses some B-ready indicators (interim finance, pre-packs, debtor initiations, etc), challenges persist in their effectiveness/uptake. Hence, while India is making the right noises for B-ready, focus on removing bottlenecks must remain (while also providing regulatory clarity on dynamic jurisprudence). Further beyond B-ready, a domestic index to gauge IBC’s on-ground effectiveness can be explored at an appropriate point, factoring in local specificities.

The writer is presently a Visiting Fellow at the Research & Information System for Developing Countries (New Delhi). Views are personal

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

August 1, 2005

Reliance Life buys AMP Sanmar

The Chennai-based Sanmar group today announced the sale of its interests in AMP Sanmar Life Insurance Company to Reliance Life Insurance, a subsidiary of Reliance Capital Ltd (RCL). RCL already has a subsidiary, Reliance General Insurance Co Ltd, which is present in the non-life insurance business.

UTI-I to exit from subsidiaries

While the future of UTI Mutual Fund remains hazy, clarity is emerging on the roadmap for its twin outfit – the Specified Undertaking of Unit Trust of India (SUUTI) also called UTI-I. The Government has decided that SUUTI would have to exit completely from all its subsidiaries, including the wholly owned UTI Securities Ltd and UTI Technology Services Ltd.

IT career loses sheen among US students

Rising salaries and a growing software industry may have made IT one of the most sought-after careers for Indian students. An estimated 73,500 engineering graduates are expected to take up hi-tech jobs this fiscal. But computer science is fast losing popularity among US students in undergraduate institutions owing to fears of job loss due to outsourcing.

US inflation picks up; consumer spending rises moderately

Lucia Mutikani

US inflation increased in June as tariffs on imports started raising the cost of some goods, supporting economists’ expectations that price pressures would pick up in the second half of the year.

The personal consumption expenditures (PCE) price index rose 0.3 per cent last month after an upwardly revised 0.2 per cent gain in May, the Commerce Department’s Bureau of Economic Analysis said on

Thursday. Economists polled by Reuters had forecast the PCE price index climbing 0.3 per cent following a previously reported 0.1 per cent rise in May. In the 12 months through June, the PCE price index advanced 2.6 per cent after increasing 2.4 per cent in May. The data was included in the advance gross domestic product report for the second quarter published on Wednesday, which showed inflation cooling, though remaining above the Federal Reserve’s 2 per cent target. Economists said businesses were still

selling inventory accumulated before President Donald Trump’s sweeping import duties came into effect.

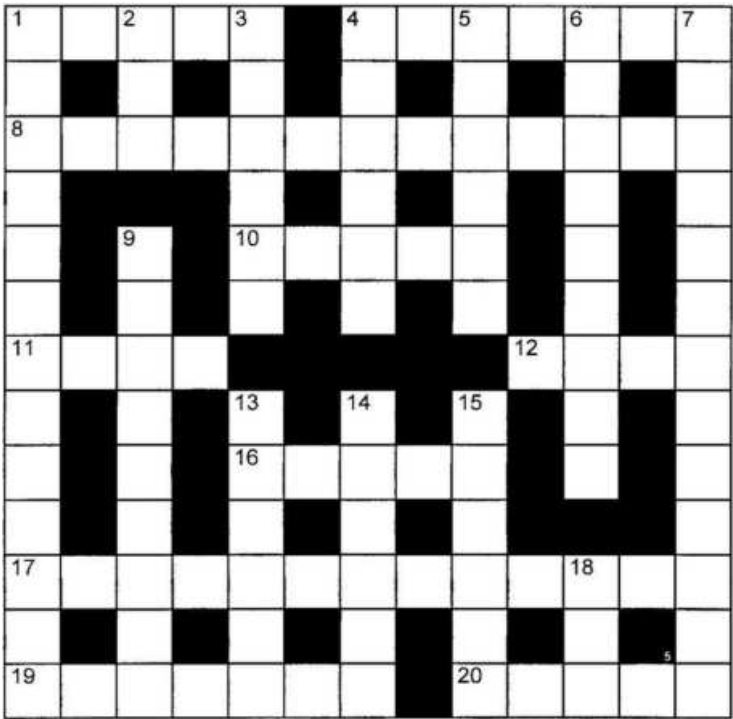
They expected goods prices to rise in the second half, with businesses passing on the higher costs from import duties to consumers. Procter & Gamble said this week it would raise prices on some products in the US to offset tariff costs.

The US central bank tracks the PCE price measures for monetary policy. The Fed on Wednesday left its benchmark interest rate in the 4.25-4.5

per cent range, where it has been since December, resisting pressure from Trump to lower borrowing costs. Economists expect the Fed to resume easing monetary policy in September.

Fed Chair Jerome Powell, responding to questions from reporters on the anticipated tariff-related price increases, said “a reasonable base case is that these are one-time price effects,” but added “I think we’ve learned that the process will probably be slower than expected” and take time to fully understand. REUTERS

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2752



EASY

ACROSS

- Alcoholic drink (5)
- Marked with bands of colour (7)
- Do somebody’s bidding (5,3,5)
- Series of links (5)
- Clicks tongue disapprovingly (4)
- Bearing, manner (4)
- Selected (5)
- (Match) between countries (13)
- Translated from cipher (7)
- Official garments (5)

DOWN

- Running (of sailing boat) (6,3,4)
- Not within-doors (3)
- Standard of moral behaviour (6)
- The Christian Sabbath (6)
- Taking part in speed event (6)
- Wall between rooms, barrier (9)
- Bounding structures without mortar (3,5,5)
- Working by itself (9)
- Gave one a fright (6)
- Faint-hearted person (6)
- Higher in rank (6)
- Snatch, arrest (3)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- Leak needed after barman’s first drink (5)
- Lashed like a tiger (7)
- What the gofer does with carbon father can dry out (5,3,5)
- Shackle stores under the same ownership (5)
- Sounds impatient or gets away from the teachers (4)
- Bearing one ascertained among soldiers (4)
- Selected camisole top with stockings (5)
- Lock one away with a Lion at random match between countries (13)
- Indeed, fish is to be retrieved from Morse (7)
- Gets into vestments of sober cut (5)

DOWN

- Running at sea prior to getting indigestion perhaps (6,3,4)
- In first part of Bible it is universally found rejected (3)
- Half echo this version of the moral issue (6)
- It is the Sabbath and German, for example, will get round it (6)
- Quickly going to reverse motor in Gateshead (6)
- Barrier to trap one maybe, not one to put out (9)
- Sty lowlanders adapted for barriers without mortar (3,5,5)
- It may be fired for working on its own (9)
- Singer initially minded about suffering stage-fright (6)
- Noel wrote of one having a yellow streak (6)
- Higher-ranking one is confused right at the end (6)
- Arrest one for overturning prohibition (3)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2751

ACROSS 1. Cough 4. Tankard 8. Materials 9. Off 10. Undress 12. Once 14. Capital 17. Aunt 18. Exigent 20. Ill 21. Monomania 23. Negated 24. Nudge

DOWN 1. Communication 2. Untidy 3. Horseman 4. Twa 5. Nose 6. Abound 7. Differentiate 11. Spike 13. Talisman 15. Unclog 16. Weaned 19. Omit 22. Nod

Managing expectations

Households focus on headline inflation

The consumer price index-based inflation rate in June declined to 2.1 per cent, considerably below the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI's) legally mandated target of 4 per cent. Anticipating a decline in the inflation rate, the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) in its June meeting decided to frontload the policy intervention and reduced the policy repo rate by 50 basis points to 5.5 per cent. Several economists are of the view that the inflation rate will remain soft in the coming months and are debating whether the MPC should further reduce the policy rate. From a policy perspective, while it is important what economists and professional forecasters think, central bankers pay considerable attention to household inflation expectations as well. A new research article by RBI economists, published in its latest Monthly Bulletin, tracks household inflation expectations and emerging trends. Some of its findings are worth discussing here.

It is now well known that expectations significantly affect economic outcomes. Therefore, central banks focus a great deal on managing inflation expectations. For instance, if inflation expectations are not well anchored, a spike in the inflation rate could get generalised more easily, making the central bank's job more difficult, potentially leading to higher output loss because of higher policy rates. Thus, anchoring expectations is a critical element in ensuring price stability. As the paper notes, unlike professional forecasters, household inflation expectations are formed by experience and are susceptible to fluctuations. Importantly, the study, which has used data from the RBI's Inflation Expectations Survey of Households, found a decline in inflation expectations from the highs of 2014, helped by the shift to the flexible inflation targeting (FIT) regime, timely policy intervention, and easing of global pressures.

The decline in inflation expectations suggests that households are more comfortable with a rule-based policy regime. Since the target is well known, and if households believe that the central bank will work to align inflation outcomes with the target, it will help maintain price stability. The study also shows that expectations are more aligned with the headline inflation rate and not with the food inflation rate. However, expectations can remain elevated during broadbased food inflation. Interestingly, women do not show a consistent upward bias. However, individuals above the age of 45 report higher expectations, which reflects their experience.

From the policy perspective, the paper arrives at some important conclusions. As mentioned above, the shift to FIT has had a positive impact on expectations. However, it has also been helped by supply-side intervention by the government, such as export bans. Although such steps help contain inflation, they have costs for producers, which are not appropriately accounted for in policymaking. Further, high food inflation at the time of higher overall inflation can keep expectations elevated. This also reflects the higher share of food items in the consumption basket. The study also shows that it is important to target headline inflation to manage expectations and improve welfare. There has been considerable debate on the target since the adoption of FIT. Several economists have argued that since monetary policy has a limited impact on food prices, which are often subject to supply shocks, the RBI should target core inflation. However, households look at the headline rate and removing a critical component could affect policymaking and expectations, with implications for overall price stability and longer-term growth.

Turning tide in Gaza

Global community finally calls out Israel

After months of looking the other way as Israel unleashed an attack against civilians in Gaza, key Western nations have performed a volte face of a kind. In short order, France, the United Kingdom, and Canada have extended conditional recognition of the state of Palestine in September and the two-state solution ahead of the 80th session of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly. In practical terms, the move is symbolic, since the Palestinian state virtually does not exist. But in the larger geopolitical context, this shift has enormous significance in the international community's stance on Israel. For the first time, four of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council are likely to extend recognition to Palestine (China and Russia being the other two), isolating the United States (US). They would join 147 member states — of the UN's 193 — that recognise Palestine, India being among the earliest to sign on. This shift in position was preceded by a joint declaration by the three countries stating that they were "horrificed" by the escalation by Israel in Gaza and condemned the expansion of illegal settlements in the West Bank.

The governments of these three allies of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization are responding to a groundswell of public opinion against Israeli atrocities against the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. Last week, Slovenia became the first European Union (EU) member state to declare two key Israeli ministers persona non grata for their role in the Gaza offensive. On July 30, 58 former EU envoys urged the bloc to end arms exports, sanction Israel, and act to stop "atrocities crimes". Earlier this week, dockworkers in France and Italy blocked shipments of arms components to Israel and called on their government to withdraw diplomatic support for Israel. Germany, where Holocaust history forces a certain implacable support for the state of Israel, announced plans to airlift aid to Gaza, though its support for Israel is intact. Even Saudi Arabia shed its studied indifference to the crisis by airdropping food aid. These declarations round off a week of consequential diplomatic activity. Over July 29 and 30, a high-level UN conference issued the "New York Declaration", setting out a phased plan to end the nearly eight-decade conflict, culminating with an independent, demilitarised Palestine co-existing with Israel.

Around the same time, the eight-nation Hague Group, led by South Africa, hosted a meeting of some 30 nations, including China, Spain, and Qatar, that agreed to a raft of measures against Israeli actions in Gaza — including a ban on supplying arms, on ships transporting weapons and reviewing contracts with links to Israeli companies. UN Special Rapporteur Francesca Albanese attended the meeting and described it as "the most significant political development in the past 20 months". The question, of course, is how far this overt shift in public opinion will alter the facts on the ground. Since the US continues to support Israel with 70 per cent of its defence equipment, Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu sees no reason to rein in the defence forces in Gaza or settlers in the West Bank. The real test lies in whether Europe will risk US President Donald Trump's threat of tariffs or worse to actively sanction Israel. Without more draconian pressure, the long-held two-state solution to this eight-decade tragedy will remain as elusive as ever.

US tariffs: Just a stumble

They present near-term growth challenges, but India needs to play the long game



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

The announcement of 25 per cent tariffs by the United States on imports from India, coupled with an unspecified penalty for Russian energy and defence purchases, marks a disappointing turn in India-US trade relations and appears particularly harsh, given that India was among the first to engage the US in negotiations. India faces higher tariffs than Vietnam (20 per cent), Indonesia (19 per cent) and other Asian competitors, despite being at a more advanced stage of negotiations. This disparity raises questions over both the negotiation strategy and the broader geopolitical dynamics at play.

However, viewing this setback through a broader lens, the announced tariffs may well prove temporary, serving as negotiating leverage rather than a permanent arrangement. The scheduled visit by the US trade delegation to India at the end of August suggests dialogue channels remain open and productive, with the possibility of lowering tariffs, although US trade deals with other countries suggest the best-case outcome would still be tariffs in the 15 to 20 per cent range.

The inability to negotiate better tariff terms will lead to a short-term economic cost, but this needs to be assessed against the longer-term challenges that could have arisen by agreeing to all of US demands, such as the loss of policy flexibility, precedent-setting concessions and domestic political consequences. While other nations secured quick, often verbal deals, India has pursued a more thorough process aimed at a comprehensive trade agreement.

The penalty for Russian energy and military purchases adds another layer of complexity, as India's strategic autonomy in energy and defence procurement has become entangled with trade negotiations. India can reduce its reliance on Russian oil imports by sourcing more from West Asia and ramping up LNG imports, although costs could be higher. The country needs to carefully navigate its relationship with Russia while maintaining a productive dialogue with the US and ensuring energy security.

Measuring the economic impact

The economic impact of these tariffs depends on their duration and scope. Significant uncertainty remains on this front, including on the penalty rate. Currently, sectors under ongoing Section 232 investigations — such as pharmaceuticals, semiconductors & electronics, among others — are exempt from reciprocal tariffs. This means India's effective tariff rate is lower than the announced 25 per cent rate, although still higher than our prior expectations of around 10 per cent.

If tariffs sustain at these levels through FY26, then we estimate that the immediate impact would shave 0.2 percentage points from our FY26 gross domestic product (GDP) growth forecast of 6.2 per cent. The US is India's largest export destination, accounting for about 2.2 per cent of GDP. For many product categories, exports to the US account for 30-40 per cent of India's global exports, highlighting the significance of maintaining competitive access to the US market.

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the export chain are especially vulnerable. These businesses, often operating with limited working capital and razor-thin margins, may struggle to absorb the additional costs. The ripple effects could extend to employment, particularly in sectors like textiles and gems & jewellery, where SMEs play a crucial role. India could also lose its competitive advantage in the marine food products sector, where it has built significant market share in the US for items like shrimp and prawns. Pharma and electronics are not subject to reciprocal tariffs, but they could face a heavier burden later, when the Section 232 sectoral tariffs are imposed.

India will also lose out on any potential trade diversion benefits in the near term. The reciprocal tariffs matter for gaining a relative tariff arbitrage over competitor countries. Most Association of Southeast Asian Nation (Asean) economies have negotiated a tariff rate of about 20 per cent, which means India's relative tariff advantage, even if the final rate is negotiated lower, will not be as significant as was believed earlier.

However, this should not overshadow India's



SONAL VARMA

Incentivise, not penalise, digital

India's digital journey has been nothing short of transformational. The country has built world-class digital public infrastructure (DPI) in areas such as identity (Aadhaar), payments (Unified Payments Interface), and financial inclusion (the Jan Dhan-Aadhaar-Mobile trinity). These foundational platforms have reduced friction across sectors and empowered citizens across socio-economic strata. Now, with the emergence of domain-specific digital public infrastructures such as the Open Network for Digital Commerce, the Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission in healthcare, and digital agriculture initiatives, India is set to redefine how markets, services, and innovation scale in an inclusive manner.

But while the infrastructure is robust, misaligned incentives threaten to limit the potential of these digital rails. Simply put, in many everyday scenarios, digital payments cost more than cash — a paradox that undercuts the idea of a cashless economy.

Take the case of UPI. In May, it clocked nearly 19 billion transactions worth over ₹25 trillion. UPI has surpassed all other instruments in both volume and reach, becoming the primary mode of payment for millions. Its success is no accident — it is free to use, both for peer-to-peer and merchant payments.

What goes unacknowledged is that UPI also reduces the systemic cost of currency management. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and commercial banks together spend around 0.15-0.2 per cent of currency in circulation annually on printing, distributing, and securing cash — particularly small-denomination notes. UPI displaces much of this burden through instant, traceable micropayments. At a macro level, it is a strategic tool for formalisation, transparency, and fiscal efficiency. Given these benefits, one would expect digital payments to be actively incentivised. Yet in practice, users are often penalised for going digital.

The convenience fee conundrum: Consider railway ticket bookings. A passenger using the railways' online portal and UPI pays a ₹15-30 "conveni-

ence fee" per ticket, while paying in cash at a counter is free. Similar discrepancies exist in electricity and property tax payments, exam fees, FASTag recharges, and airline bookings — where digital payments attract charges but offline transactions do not.

This reverse incentive structure impacts price-sensitive consumers and first-time digital users. The logic behind charging convenience fees — usually to recover payment gateway costs — is understandable. But it ignores the cost savings that digital modes bring to service providers: Reduced queue management, lower reconciliation errors, faster settlement, and minimised cash handling. The cost of payments to the gateways and software providers is minuscule compared to these savings. When public-facing entities externalise digital transaction costs to users, the message to consumers becomes clear: Cash is cheaper.

The GST misalignment: The disincentive also extends to how digital-first business models are taxed. Take passenger transport services, for example. Under goods and services tax (GST) rules, non-AC contract carriages are exempt from GST, but aggregators like Uber and Ola must pay GST on the full fare under Section 9(5) of the Central GST Act. This distinction is logical — they control the transaction life cycle from matching the passenger with the driver and collecting the fare. But confusion arises with platform-as-a-service (PaaS) models — digital platforms that enable discovery but do not process payments or provide the service themselves. These platforms charge a small facilitation fee from users but are now being asked to pay GST on the entire transaction value, including the fare, even though they do not deliver the service or handle payments.

This is akin to asking Google to pay tax on every product purchased after a user clicks a search result. As ONDC and other discovery-layer DPIs expand to health, agriculture, and logistics, such classification mismatches could severely throttle innovation.

This growing mismatch between policy objectives and ground-level incentives requires urgent correc-

longer-term attractiveness in the global supply chain. The broader China Plus One strategy continues to favour India, driven by factors beyond tariff considerations. Recent investments in electronics and other sectors demonstrate that companies are looking at diversification and India's structural advantages, rather than just tariff arbitrage. The momentum in low- and mid-tech manufacturing sectors, including electronics assembly, textiles and toys suggests India's integration into global value chains is likely to continue, despite these headwinds.

India's policy strategy

India's policy response to the trade challenges needs to be multi-pronged and carefully calibrated. On the trade front, India should maintain its strategic approach to negotiations while showing flexibility on specific issues. While agriculture and dairy remain sensitive due to domestic political considerations, there's room for compromise in other areas, such as autos or by increasing US purchases. The focus should be on securing a balanced deal that protects core interests while demonstrating India's commitment to trade liberalisation and addressing legitimate concerns about non-tariff barriers.

Over the medium term, export diversification becomes even more critical. Recent free trade agreements with the United Kingdom and ongoing negotiations with the European Union, New Zealand and others are in the right direction. These efforts need to be accelerated to reduce dependence on any single market. This is also an opportunity to accelerate structural reforms.

In addition to fast-tracking its negotiations, the government should also consider targeted support for affected exporters, particularly SMEs, through measures like interest rate subvention and enhanced export incentives, while maintaining fiscal discipline. The banking sector could play a role by ensuring adequate working capital support to affected sectors.

Monetary policy will also have to play a role in cushioning the impact. Soft domestic demand and adverse trade developments suggest downside risk to growth, at a time when inflation is low. Currency depreciation, if sustained, can add to imported inflation, but any pass-through should be limited and more than offset by other disinflationary forces. Inflation is likely to moderate to 2.8 per cent in FY26, well below both the Reserve Bank of India's forecast of 3.7 per cent and its 4 per cent target. This means that the RBI's rate-cutting cycle is not over, despite the change in its stance to neutral. We see room for the terminal repo rate to settle 0.5 percentage points lower at 5 per cent by the end of this year.

In summary: Overall, US tariffs do present a near-term challenge, but India's policy response should be more strategic than tactical, based on a calibrated cost-benefit analysis. In trade negotiations, as in chess, sometimes you need to accept a temporary disadvantage to secure a better long-term position.

The author is chief economist (India and Asia ex-Japan) at Nomura

Calculating the arts



DEVANGSHU DATTA

Marcus Du Sautoy is a working mathematician who holds the Simonyi Chair for the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University. He is the writer of several acclaimed books, including *The Music of the Primes*, which is a superb explanation of the Riemann Hypothesis.

Dr Du Sautoy is also a classical musician who plays trumpet and violin in orchestras. He learnt Sanskrit in order to grasp the theory behind the rhythms and melodies of Indian classical music, and the metres and syllabic count of epic poetry. He has also written (and performed) plays with mathematical themes.

The wide-ranging interests enable this polymath to easily segue into the subject of this book, which is all about the mathematical underpinnings of creativity in art, music, literature and architecture. The author's breadth of interest and expertise helps him to explain how intimately the wellsprings of creativity are connected to mathematics, even where the creative artists themselves may not be explicitly aware of the connections.

The writing is sprightly and the width of research is impressive. There are references scattered through this book that will lead the engaged reader down into a wonderland of rabbit holes. The dramatis personae — the creative souls whose work is analysed and picked apart in some detail — are listed in order of appearance.

It's a very eclectic list. The musicians' list, for example, includes Olivier Messiaen, Radiohead, Philip Glass, Björk, Sarmadeva, two members of the Bach family, Mozart and David Bowie, among others. The book cuts similar wide

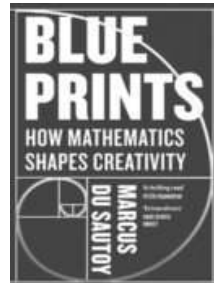
swathes through arts, literature and architecture. There are likely to be many names there in that list of dramatis personae that even the most erudite of readers has never encountered and a dive into their hitherto unfamiliar works is a fun way to expand mental horizons.

The chapters are organised according to mathematical themes, rather than being segmented by the arts. Each chapter is labelled a "Blueprint" and works across all creative fields that exploit the characteristics of this specific blueprint are examined. The Blueprints include prime numbers, circles, Fibonacci numbers (including "tribonacci" numbers), golden ratios, fractals, the platonic solids, symmetry, hyperbolic geometry, and randomness.

The maths isn't densely presented. This is another area where Dr Du Sautoy shines. He has the ability to expound on sometimes complicated mathematical subjects without losing the lay reader in thickets of explanation. He also has a knack for coming up with common-or-garden examples that make the abstruse familiar. For example, the "A-series" of paper sizes was designed with one specific mathematical property in mind:

When folded in half across the longer side, the new paper size retains the same ratio of length of sides as the original. If the short side is 1 unit and the longer side is A units, the ratio is A:1. When we fold the paper along A, the ratio of half A to 1, or 1:A/2 must be the same as A:1 and on the next fold, the ratio 0.5:A/2 must again be the same. This involves working with the square root of 2, which is an irrational number that cannot be exactly calculated. Tuning a piano (where the ratio of frequency of two consecutive notes must be the same) also involves working with the square root of 2, and it's a significant practical issue.

The use of mathematics in working out musical rhythms, or in the setting of poetic metres and syllable counts may be understood intuitively by creative artists who know nothing about the numbers. But the methods are laid out in rigorous detail by Pingala in his manual, *Chandasra*, which analyses verse, and Sarmadeva in *Sangita Ratnakara*.



Blueprints: How Mathematics Shapes Creativity
by Marcus Du Sautoy
Published by HarperCollins
336 pages

₹599

1.61 appears in the ratio between each number and its successor. Fibs arise naturally in hundreds of phenomena — most famously so in the birth rates and population growth of rabbits (where Fibonacci first mentioned them) and in the number of petals on a flower.

Incidentally, as Dr Du Sautoy mentions, there is a movement to get this

Dr Du Sautoy, with his knowledge of Eastern and Western classical music and Sanskrit easily navigates the similarities and differences in treatments. In passing, I would love to actually read a full-length book where Dr Du Sautoy focuses on global schools of classical music.


When it comes to Fibonacci numbers, the exposition on their use in art and architecture is brilliant. "Fibs" are sequences created by adding the last two numbers to generate the next as in 1,1,2,3,5,8,13 and so on. As the sequence extends, the golden ratio

sequence renamed to honour the Jain monk Hemachandra because he described them long before Fibonacci. Similar points could be made about the Taylor Series and Pascal's Triangle, which both pop up in Indian and Chinese maths centuries before Taylor and Pascal discovered them.

One of the few diagrams in the book (I wish there were more) explains the way Le Corbusier used Fibs in designing one of his most famous buildings. Another diagram looks at the Charbagh design template for layouts, which so often features in architecture. This has fractal elements, just like a snowflake and, of course, artists like Jackson Pollock exploited fractal properties long before mathematicians figured them out. Perhaps the most famous fractal would be the Eye of Sauron from *The Lord of the Rings* and the Marvel Universe has also used them extensively.

This is a book that leaves you unsatisfied in the best possible way because it teases the reader with so many themes hanging in the air, all worthy of further exploration. It's like a musical composition that fades out with an incomplete chord and leaves you wanting more.

The writer is former G20 sherpa. Go to www.bbc.com/news/health-12345678



CONTRAPUNTO

When I look up, I see people cashing in. I don't see heaven or saints or angels. I see people cashing in on every decent impulse and every human tragedy

- JOSEPH HELLER, *Catch-22*

Trumped? Not Yet

He may rant but the road to a trade pact is open. India should study how Japan, EU, S Korea did it

The sky didn't fall after Trump's tariff shock. Sensex ended Thursday just 0.36% lower, and if the markets have held their nerve, so should Indian negotiators working on the trade deal. It's impossible to answer "what now" when Trump's diktats end in ellipses. One moment he rants about India's "strenuous and obnoxious non-monetary trade barriers", then says talks are still on, "You'll know by the end of this week," then vents again: "(India and Russia) can take their dead economies down together, for all I care." Notes of petulance and impatience, but no clarity on the Russia penalty he'll charge on top of a 25% tariff starting today. Which is why Trump's act feels like a bluff.

Perhaps, Trump's more keen on a deal with India than he lets on. So the Indian side should learn from his recent actions. His 40% additional tariff on Brazil – total of 50% – is instructive. Starting with the lowest rate of 10% in April, Trump's hit Brazil with the



highest rate now, to meddle in its internal affairs. But that's his way. On Thursday, he also said Canadian support for Palestinian statehood "will make it very hard for us to make a trade deal with them." Yet, Brazil isn't too badly bruised because its aircraft, iron, precious metals, wood pulp, energy, fertilisers – and orange juice – industries have been spared. Largely because Brazilian negotiators got their US clients to lobby for them. The Indian side should do likewise.

Korea's deal also has useful pointers. Trump posted on Wednesday it would have to "buy down" its tariff rate from 25%, and the Koreans bid \$350bn to get the 15% rate that Japan and EU got earlier with investment pledges of \$550bn and \$600bn, respectively. In the bargain, Korea can keep its rice and beef markets closed. Since agriculture and dairy are key sticking points in Indian negotiations, India could take this approach. Meanwhile, there's no point losing sleep over Pakistan's "deal", with an undisclosed tariff and Trump's promise of "developing their massive oil reserves". Instead, the Russian oil question needs all of India's attention.

Until 2022, Russia supplied less than 1% of India's oil, so scaling back from the current 35-40% level is possible, especially with the per barrel discount down to about \$2 from a high of \$18-20. But it's a geopolitical question, bigger than the economics of tariffs. After all, Russian S-400s, not American Patriots, took down Pakistani missiles and drones in Op Sindoor. India must choose very carefully.

Well Judged

SC right in withdrawing own order on Bhushan Steel. But GOI must finetune aspects of insolvency law

SC's recall of its order from May that reversed JSW Steel's \$2.3bn acquisition of the bankrupt Bhushan Power & Steel Ltd in 2021, is wholly welcome. The May order had considered two technical grounds: one, the eight-year timeline and two, fact that JSW completed the takeover with a mix of equity and optionally convertible debentures, when it should have used equity alone. SC had also found adjudicatory bodies NCLT and NCLAT lacked jurisdiction and set aside their approvals – IBC's Section 32A that says that on approval of a plan, new investors would not inherit criminal liabilities of previous promoters & directors was a key sticking point. But SC's position was that such immunity could not override statutes like PMLA. SC's focus was entirely on statutory compliance of the takeover process.

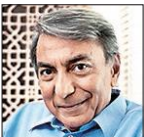
As TOI and our columnists wrote, SC's reversing the revival of a mismanaged corporate entity was a big blow to India's insolvency framework. Not only would it hurt JSW lenders and workers, but it would also affect investor sentiment and prospects of finding buyers for other insolvent companies. Investors would run scared. On Thursday, SC said the May order had not correctly considered precedents. IBC, introduced in 2016, is one of India's most significant reforms – enacted to revive distressed assets, protect employment and maximise stakeholder value. SC reversing its own order is an opportunity to also finetune jurisdictions and boundaries. As the case proceeds, GOI should also explore legislative or institutional redress for a clarity of roles for NCLT and NCLAT, especially in light of SC's questions on application of Section 32A. Finality of insolvency proceedings is IBC's fundamental base.

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Illegal Bengali

People who speak that Indian language face deportation from Gurgaon and other parts of the country

Jug Suraiya



Bunny and I are living under the Damoclean sword of summary deportation. No, we're not facing the prospect of deportation from Trump's America, where thousands of so-called illegal migrants are being rounded up wholesale and chucked out of the country.

We fear being deported out of Gurgaon where we've been living for more years than we, or Gurgaon, might care to remember. The powers-that-be in what bills itself as the Millennium City have launched a drive to identify and deport Bangladeshi migrants who've snuck into India, and then into Gurgaon, to find employment as domestic help and in other menial jobs.

The problem is that the powers-that-be lack the linguistic ability to distinguish between a Bangladeshi and a citizen from the Indian state of Bengal. For Gurgaon's officialdom, anyone speaking Bengali is a suspect Bangladeshi who should be ejected forthwith.

That the Bengali a Bangladeshi speaks is easily distinguished from the Bengali spoken by an Indian Bengali by the way the letter 's' is pronounced – Bangladeshis use the hard 's' as in kiss; Indian Bengalis use the soft 's' as in dish – is a piece of elocutionary trivia of which the local authorities remain blissfully ignorant.

Having lived most of our lives in what was Calcutta, Bunny and I speak fluent if ungrammatical Bengali and occasionally converse with each other in that language to keep our lingual hand in, to mix metaphors. If some snoopie eavesdropper were to overhear us, would we be reported for immediate expulsion as illegal migrants?

Indeed, we are migrants who as economic refugees left Calcutta, which after years of Marxist rule had become not just a backwater, but a stagnant pond, to seek gainful employment in National Capital Region, and had done it without seeking official sanction.

Does that make us instantly deportable illegal migrants? If so, where should we be deported to? Bangladesh won't have us. So would our only deportable destination be Mamata's welcoming Republic of Bengal, ultimate refuge for the illegal Bengali?

HOW TO DEAL WITH HIM

Don't get riled. Don't retreat from red lines in trade talks. Remember India withstood earlier hostile US action. Keep talking to him. But fast-track other trade talks. Retaliate if he targets service exports. Plan for worst case impact on growth. Give domestic stimulus if exports take a big hit

Gautam Bambawale



Indian public opinion is incensed by Trump's Truth Social post about having reached a deal with Pakistan, to prospect for and develop oil and natural gas in that country. He goes on to say that the search for the right company to undertake this work is ongoing. To add salt to the wound, he writes that perhaps in the future India could purchase oil from Pakistan. This has created a furore in our media, in Parliament and in our public at large.

As expected, opposition has labelled this development as the failure of gov't foreign policy. And our people are wondering what Trump is up to, especially how he has got so close to Rawalpindi during this second term. Not only has he feted Field Marshal Asim Munir over lunch at the White House, but now US govt appears to be cozying up again with Islamabad.

There can be little doubt that the Pakistanis have played their cards well. They catered to Trump's ego by nominating him for the Nobel peace prize, going far beyond giving him credit for bringing the recent India-Pak hostilities to an end. They have also ensured that Trump's family and friends have benefitted from deals on the cryptocurrency front. On the other hand, India has kept repeating that Trump never mediated an end to Op Sindoor.

Almost simultaneously with his posts about Pakistan, Trump also sounded off about the closeness of India and Russia, describing them as "dead economies". Add to this the 25% tariff that has been announced to go into effect from today, on Indian exports to US. Obviously, people in India are wondering what is happening at the White House – the pinnacle of power in the most powerful country in the world.

The question foremost in our people's minds is what should India be doing? First and foremost, we should remain calm and not react to Trump's words in a knee jerk manner. If we study the mind of Trump, we will comprehend that his approach to almost everything is to shake things up.

Whether it is American politics or economics or whether it is the global stage, what Trump does is to toss a pebble into the water and see what ripples it causes. Then he evaluates whether he can utilise the ripples to attain his own goals. He is doing exactly the same where India and Pakistan are concerned.

He is naturally wily, and he well knows that the 'P' word is something that riles Indians. So that is the game he is playing. We should not fall into his trap of reacting emotionally. It is important to take some time to reflect on his words, see which of them fructify into actions, and only then will we have a good understanding of his motives and his objectives. Plus, whether oil and natural gas will actually be found in Pakistan remains to be seen.

A trade agreement between India and US is close to finalisation. However, Indian negotiators are not giving in to American demands to open our nation to imports of agricultural products and dairy items from US. Perhaps there are a few other sticking points.

Our diplomats and politicians are firm that a large proportion of our people earn a livelihood from these sectors. They may be uncompetitive but there can be no bargaining on these important parts of the Indian economy. It is possible that this is where the negotiations are stuck.

What Trump is attempting to do through his social media posts is to pressurise India to compromise on this position and change our stance.

When looked at from this angle, everything that Trump has posted over the past days seems logical and falls into place. He is trying to get us to act emotionally – hence the cozying up to Pakistan, the derogatory description of the Indian economy and the recent action against Indian firms doing business with Iran. All these are pressure tactics Trump is employing to get India to fall in line with the trade agreement of his wishes.

Recently, the Indian-American intellectual Ashley Tellis had opined that India cannot keep a rising China at bay unless it becomes a US ally, as only America can balance out the second most powerful country in the world, which is sitting at India's

R Jagannathan



Whether you are a friend, foe or somewhere in-between (India, for example), Trump has been a vitriolic equal opportunity offender. From Canada to Mexico to EU and Japan, there is no country that's been spared this US president's verbal lashes, suggesting that bullying is his way of getting the kind of trade and other deals he thinks America will benefit from.

Now it's the turn of India to be at the wrong end of Trump's verbal battery. On Wednesday, he announced a 25% tariff on Indian exports to US, plus some additional (unstated) penalties for buying Russian oil and defence equipment. A while later, he claimed he didn't care about India and Russia: "They can take

that the bullying is working. EU and Japan have not only accepted deals involving 15% tariffs on their exports to US, but have additionally promised to invest billions of dollars in America and buy its expensive energy.

EU, according to the American read-out of the trade deal, has agreed to buy \$750bn worth of energy supplies and invest \$600bn in US by 2028 (US election year). Japan will not only invest \$550bn in US, it will also allow US to retain 90% of the profits from these investments. As for West Asian partners, between Saudi Arabia, Qatar and UAE, they have collectively signed up for \$2tn worth of investments in defence, aviation and AI.

To point out the obvious, the deals with EU, Japan and three Gulf states are not only mind-boggling, but also pie-in-the-sky. There's no way these sums are going to be invested in US in the short timeframe, and it is hardly likely that countries that are aggressively rearming themselves will have the kind of spare cash to invest in America, unless these sums are mostly earmarked for the purchase of American armaments.

The most likely reason why they agreed to sign up was probably to buy time, knowing that anything can happen in American politics, with the next mid-term elections due in 15 months. Who knows if Trump will be stronger or weaker after the next mid-term elections to US Senate and Congress?

India's response to Trump's provocations on social media has been measured and non-combative so far. We have merely stated that we are looking for a balanced trade deal and we will protect our interests.

We must keep talking, ignore his provocations and focus on his actions. Yes, we should prepare for the worst, which could be a massive trade-crippling tariff structure. We should only act aggressively if and when it becomes clear that Trump is actually out to damage India.

● We must assume there will be a dramatic decline in exports to US over the next two months, assuming a trade deal is not signed quickly. Measures to help exporters to sell to other destinations and access cheaper credit can be considered.

● We must fast-track trade deals with EU and other destinations, roughly on the lines we signed with UK.

● We must consider alternative defence suppliers, since it is now clear that we can't depend on Uncle Sam – GE has begun delivering the F404 engines for our Tejas light combat aircraft after a two-year delay. US is simply too unreliable as a defence partner. Its Congress can always put a spoke in the wheel, so even its president cannot assure supplies. Engines for our AMCA (Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft) must not involve any US supplies. Nor must we consider buying F35s, the stealth aircraft earlier offered by Trump to us.

● We should play hardball (by levying heavy counter-tariffs on US exports to India) only if Trump threatens India's most important interest in US – software services. In services India has an even greater surplus than in merchandise.

● We should act to prevent export disruptions from derailing our growth trajectory this year. GOI could, by Oct, consider a fiscal stimulus programme using both direct and indirect tax cuts to shore up weakening business sentiment.

The lesson for India is simple. With a president known for his transactional approach to relationships, relying too much on personal rapport to gain an advantage is pointless. The on-screen chemistry exhibited by Modi and him, both during Trump's earlier presidential term and now, is not translating into benefits for India. In the world of hard realpolitik, pappi-jhappi relationships are just for optics, an optional extra.

Sacredspace

Piglet sidled up to Pooh from behind. "Pooh!" he whispered. "Yes, Piglet?" "Nothing," said Piglet, taking Pooh's paw. "I just wanted to be sure of you."

AA Milne, *The House at Pooh Corner*

Calvin & Hobbes



The Quiet Power Of Friendship

Minoru Harada

The kind of world we live in is greatly influenced by whether or not we have good friends. Close friends can make even the most trying circumstances bearable, while loneliness can make even the smallest pain worse. Human connections are treasured in the Buddhist worldview, and friendship is seen as more than just a means of having fun; it is an essential force that influences our own spiritual growth or human revolution and our journey towards happiness and enlightenment.

Ananda, a disciple of Gautama Buddha, once shared with him, "It seems to me that by having good friends and advancing together with them, one has already halfway attained the Buddha way." Gautama corrected him gently but firmly: "Ananda, this way of thinking is not correct. Having good

friends and advancing together with them is not half the Buddha way but all the Buddha way." The core of Buddhist practice is revealed in this powerful statement: the presence of genuine, sincere and supportive friends fosters life's progress.

How do we create genuine friendships in a world where many people feel isolated even though they are connected digitally? The answer lies in taking the courageous first step to reach out, listen earnestly, and believe in the inherent worth of those around us. Deep bonds of trust that cut across age, background, and status can be created by simply opening our hearts to others without hesitation or fear of criticism and listening to the perspectives of those around us.

Genuine friendship takes work. It

entails caring about other people's happiness, supporting them even when it's inconvenient, and sharing both their joys and their sorrows. Walking the path of the Bodhisattva – a person devoted to the happiness of others – means caring deeply, acting with trustworthiness, and never giving up on people around us.

Buddhism refers to these people who support, encourage, and stand by us as 'good friends'. Having such good friends is important but so is becoming one ourselves. It is important to keep asking ourselves these questions:

How can we foster growth in those around us? How can we make our homes, workplaces, and communities places of warmth and trust?

My mentor Daisaku Ikeda once wrote, "Peace is not some abstraction far beyond our reach. It begins with creating

a circle of trust and friendship right where we are. As each of these circles expands to include more people, global peace will be realised." These words remind us that friendly conversation is the first step towards social reform, peacebuilding, and enduring harmony.

In its purest form, friendship is a spiritual endeavour. It is the practice of showing compassion in our day-to-day interactions and greeting people with warmth and respect. By becoming aware of our everyday interactions in this way, we begin to change not only our own lives but also the structure of society. By being our best selves with others, we can help bring out the best in them.

The future is not built by individuals walking alone. It is created by individuals who journey through life together as friends, companions, and fellow seekers.

The writer is president, Soka Gakkai, a global community-based Buddhist organisation

MP HC UPHOLDS CONVICTION OF CHEMISTRY TEACHER FOR MURDERING HER HUSBAND BY ELECTROCUTION

OPINION

SANJEEV SIROHI

It is definitely entirely in the fitness of things that the Madhya Pradesh High Court at Jabalpur in a most learned, laudable, landmark, logical and latest judgment titled Mamta Pathak vs The State of Madhya Pradesh in Criminal Appeal No. 6016 of 2022 and cited in Neutral Citation No. 2025:MPHC-JBP:34674 that was heard on 29.4.2025 and then finally pronounced on 29.7.2025 has deemed it fit to uphold the conviction of a Chemistry women teacher who was earlier sentenced to life imprisonment in 2022 for brutally murdering her husband by electrocution. It must be mentioned here that the Division Bench comprising of Hon'ble Mr Justice Vivek Agarwal and Hon'ble Mr Justice Devnarayan Mishra after hearing both the sides and analyzing all evidence before them concluded that the accused named Mamta Pathak was not on good terms with her sixty-five-year-old husband Dr Neeraj Pathak who was posted in Chhattarpur District Hospital and tortured him to death on April 29, 2021 at his home in Loknathpuram Colony by first giving him an antipsychotic drug followed by an electric shock. His body bore signs of electricity burn marks detected at

multiple places. Quite indisputably, the Court thus mandated after perusing everything pertaining to this leading case that since all the circumstances in the chain are complete, her guilt is proved beyond all reasonable doubt. Very rightly so! At the very outset, this brief, brilliant, bold and balanced judgment authored by one of the most eminent High Court Judges in India with stellar reputation for his excellent judgments – Hon'ble Mr Justice Vivek Agarwal for a Division Bench comprising of himself and Hon'ble Mr Justice Devnarayan Mishra of Madhya Pradesh High Court at Jabalpur sets the ball in motion by first and foremost putting forth concisely in para 1 that, "This appeal under Section 374(2) of the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973 (for short "Cr.P.C") is filed being aggrieved of judgment of conviction dated 29.6.2022 passed by learned III Additional Sessions Judge, Chhatarpur in Sessions Trial No.84/2021 convicting the appellant in person Smt.Mamta Pathak, W/o.Late Dr.Neeraj Pathak for the offence under Section 302 of the Indian Penal Code, 1860 (for short "I.P.C") and sentencing her to undergo rigorous imprisonment for life with fine of

Rs.10,000/ and in default of payment of fine to undergo additional imprisonment for six months."

To put things in perspective, the Division Bench envisages in para 2 while elaborating on prosecution case that, "The prosecution case in short is that Smt.Mamta Pathak had given merg intimidation bearing No.26/21 at Police Station Civil Lines Chhatarpur, which was registered under Section 174 of the Cr.P.C. with regard to death of Dr. Neeraj Pathak. The merg was investigated by the Sub Inspector Pramod Rohit (PW.3) and in pursuance of merg investigation, he had prepared Lash Panchnama and Safina Form and had taken the statements of complainant Smt.Mamta Pathak. He had prepared the crime details and had collected postmortem report (Exhibit P/1) from the doctors and found that in the opinion of post-mortem doctors, Dr. Neeraj Pathak S/o.Chintamani Pathak, aged about 65 years, R/o.Loknathpuram, District Chhatarpur died due to electrocution. The first information report pertaining to Crime No.288/2021 was registered against Smt.Mamta Pathak for the offence under Section 302 of IPC."

While unfolding the details further, we see that the Division Bench then lays bare in para 3 disclosing clearly stating that, "The investigation commenced. The memorandum under Section 27 of the Indian Evidence Act, 1872 of the accused was obtained and as per her memorandum, the objects like sleeping pills, electric wire, DVR from the C.C.TV camera installed in



the house of the deceased, footage from the C.C.TV camera, which contains views of the house of the accused, the video recording etc, were seized. After investigation, a charge sheet was filed against the appellant in the Court of Magistrate for the offence under Section 302 of the I.P.C. On 6.8.2021, the learned Chief Judicial Magistrate, Chhatarpur committed the case to Court of Sessions from where it was transferred to the Court of learned III Additional Sessions Judge, Chhatarpur for trial. The learned III Additional Sessions Judge, Chhatarpur found the charge proved against the appellant and convicted and sentenced her as mentioned in Paragraph No.1 of this judgment."

Do note, the Division Bench notes in para 161 that, "Firstly, it is an admitted fact that the house in which the incident took place is of Dr.Neeraj Pathak. Admittedly, the aforesaid house was jointly shared by Smt Mamta Pathak and her son Nitish Pathak at the time of the incident. Thus, when there was no exter-

nal movement to the house and admittedly, the appellant had seen her husband on 29.4.2021 at about 9:00 PM as admitted by her in the Merg Intimation and had found that his pulse was not functional, her conduct of not reporting the matter to the police and travelling to Jhansi on the pretext of undergoing dialysis and not contacting any doctor at Jhansi as is admitted by Driver Ratan Singh Yadav (PW.12), who had taken her to Jhansi, and thereafter giving a memorandum by Smt. Mamta Patak vide Exhibit P/14 and thereafter recovery of electric wire at her instance by Jagatpal Singh (PW.14) so also recovery of the strip of Olanzapine Tablets out of which four tables were found to be empty, the presence of Olanzapine in the viscera material (Exhibit P/21) of Dr.Neeraj Pathak and coupled with the testimony of Dr.Mukul Saha (PW.1) that Dr. Neeraj Pathak was electrocuted, leaves no iota of doubt that firstly, there was no trespassing to the house of Dr. Neeraj Pathak."

Do also note, the Division

Bench then notes in para 162 that, "Secondly, the minor discrepancies in the investigation are not sufficient to defeat the present case."

Most significantly and above all, the Division Bench then encapsulates in para 163 what constitutes the cornerstone of this notable judgment postulating precisely that, "Thirdly, the clever move made by learned Senior Advocate Shri Surendra Singh to introduce an element of doubt that elder son Nitish Pathak, was also sharing the same house and even a finger can be raised towards Nitish Pathak, therefore, the benefit of doubt should accrue in favour of Smt.Mamta Pathak, gets nullified from very statement of Smt.Mamta Pathak that on 29.4.2021, she had gone to the room of Dr.Neeraj Pathak and when he did not respond, she had checked his pulse, his pulse was non-functional and her submission that she had gone to Jhansi on the next day but not revealing the fact that her son had gone to the first floor where Dr.Neeraj Pathak was kept in isolation on the basis of suspected Covid patient, the report of Dr.Mukul Sahu (PW.1) showing that Covid antigen report of Dr. Neeraj Pathak was negative, leaves no iota of doubt that Dr. Neeraj Pathak was apparently not suffering from Covid while infact Dr.Neeraj Pathak was under a forceful isolation, he was visited by Smt.Mamta Pathak and not her son Nitish Pathak on 29.4.2021, the elder son Nitish Pathak for the first time visited his father Dr.Neeraj Pathak on the first floor on 1.5.2021 along with the police

personnel as Smt.Mamta Pathak had shown her inability to visit first floor of the house as she was not keeping good health and decided to be seated on a Sofa lying on the ground floor, her conduct of going to Jhansi without there being any reason, handing over a bag to her mother as stated by the Driver Ratan Singh Yadav (PW.12), who had taken her to Jhansi and thereafter roaming around Jhansi and then coming back to Chhatarpur at 9:30 PM where Driver Ratan Singh Yadav (PW.12) admitted that he had left Smt. Mamta Pathak and Nitish Pathak showing that Nitish Pathak was not left alone in the house when Smt.Mamta Pathak was away, completes the chain of circumstances to arrive at a conclusion that it was Smt.Mamta Pathak alone, who for the reasons best known to her, was not keeping good terms with her husband as proved by Chhandilal Bajpai (PW.4), tortured him to death firstly by serving seductive drug and thereafter passing electric current and since all the circumstances in the chain are complete, the guilt of Smt.Mamta Pathak is proved beyond all reasonable doubt."

Quite significantly and so also as a corollary, the Division Bench then finds absolutely just no hesitation in holding unambiguously in para 164 that, "Accordingly, the impugned judgment dated 29.6.2022 passed by learned III Additional Sessions Judge, Chhatarpur in Sessions Trial No.84/2021 convicting the appellant Smt.Mamta Pathak, W/o. Late Dr.Neeraj Pathak for the

offence under Section 302 of the Indian Penal Code, 1860 cannot be faulted with."

It is worth noting that as a no-brainer the Division Bench then very rightly directs and holds in para 165 that, "Resultantly, this appeal fails and is dismissed."

For sake of clarity, the Division Bench then further directs in para 166 holding aptly that, "The temporary suspension granted by a Co-ordinate Bench of this Court vide order dated 13.3.2024 shall stand cancelled. The appellant Smt. Mamta Pathak shall immediately surrender before the Trial Court for undergoing the remaining part of the jail sentence."

Further, the Division Bench directs in para 167 that, "Record of the Trial Court be sent back."

Finally, the Division Bench then draws the curtains of this notable judgment by directing and holding in para 168 that, "Let a copy of this judgment be sent to the Trial Court for necessary information."

In a nutshell, we thus see that the Division Bench of the Madhya Pradesh High Court at Jabalpur upheld the conviction of life term that was awarded to a former Chemistry Professor Mamta Pathak holding explicitly that the entire chain of circumstances indicates that the wife first made the husband unconscious by giving him sedatives and later killed him by electrocution. So her conviction was thus very rightly upheld by the Madhya Pradesh High Court. It merits just no reiteration that there can absolutely be just no denying or disputing it! *Sanjeev Sirohi is an Advocate*

Justice delayed, justice denied: The uncertain fate of the Aparajita Anti-Rape Bill in West Bengal

OPINION

ROSHANI CHAUDHARY & DR. ALISHA VERMA



The recent surge in rape cases across India highlights a troubling reality, casting a shadow over our nation's reputation as a safe environment for women. On 9th August 2024, a heinous crime was committed against a medical trainee in the seminar hall of R.G Kar Hospital, evoking public outrage reminiscent of the response seen during the Nirbhaya case in 2012. The details of the case can leave any person in despair and it raises a question on humanity. Despite the severity of the crime qualifying, it as a 'rarest of rare' case, the convict in the Kolkata Medical College rape case received life imprisonment on 20th

January 2025. As the public continued to mourn the brutality of the previous case, a new instance of sexual violence was reported, once again, within an academic institution in West Bengal. On 25th June 2025, a gang-rape case was reported in Kolkata, the victim herself explained the detailed of this heinous crime. The 24-year-old victim of the South Calcutta Law College was allegedly raped by two senior students and an alumnus of the institute in the guard's room on June 25. Following her complaint, police arrested the prime accused Manojit Mishra, Promit Mukherjee and Zaid Ahmed. The guard

of the college was arrested after a few days.

After the R.G Kar medical college rape case, Aparajita Women and Child (West Bengal Criminal Amendment) Bill, 2024 was passed by the West Bengal state legislative assembly. The public was assured that the bill would be more effective and comprehensive than the existing laws; however, it has yet to be enforced.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK OF WOMEN'S SAFETY IN INDIA

Following the Nirbhaya rape case back in 2012, the term of "rape" was revised to broaden the scope and the new legislation also criminalised acts such as stalking and voyeurism. Minors are safeguarded under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012 (POCSO). Following the Kathua and Unnao rape cases, the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2018 was adopted, instituting the death penalty for the rape of woman under 12 and mandating that investigations must be completed within two months and trials within six months.

The Bhartiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 (BNS, 2023) replaced the Indian Penal Code, 1860. It presents a more modern and socially relevant legal framework. It acknowledges the changing dynamics of sexual assault

due to technological advancements and penalises acts such as cyberstalking and the dissemination of personal images and films. The BNS implements more stringent penalties for offences, including enhanced punishment for repeat offenders.

As of now, the BNS, 2023 is in force, and following the report of the incident at RG KAR medical college rape case, the West Bengal state legislative assembly unanimously enacted the Aparajita Women and Child (West Bengal Criminal Amendment) Bill, 2024 on September 2, 2024. Chief Minister Mamta Banerjee stated that this measure emphasises three components: enhanced penalties, expedited justice delivery, and swift investigations. The law was announced around 25 days following the rape and murder of a medical trainee at RG Kar Medical College and Hospital. It aims to amend the current legislation, including the BNS, 2023 the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023, and the POCSO. Certain amendments have been enacted to guarantee the safety of women and expedite trial and justice. However, essential improvements are required to render the process more victim-centric. The new law focusses on victim protection; nonetheless, it requires



effective implementation and continuous monitoring to work efficiently

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF APARAJITA ANTI RAPE LAW AND THE BHARATIYA NAYAYA SANHITA, 2023

A special task force shall be established in every district in the name of "Aparajita Task Force" headed by the DSP to investigate into specified crimes and dedicated Special Courts for the trial.

The punitive measures laid out in the BNS, 2023 differ from those in the Aparajita Bill. The Aparajita Bill provides capital punishment for offenders of sexual offences if the conduct results in the victim's death or a vegetative condition.

In BNS, 2023, the penalty

for rape includes a fine and imprisonment for a minimum of 10 years, which may extend to life imprisonment. In the Aparajita Bill, the punishment includes a fine, rigorous imprisonment for the convict's natural life, or death.

When an offender's actions result in the victim's death, the BNS, 2023 mandates punish it with rigorous imprisonment for a term which shall not be less than twenty years, but which may extend to imprisonment for life, which shall mean imprisonment for the remainder of that person's natural life, or with death. The Aparajita Bill sought the imposition of a straight death sentence.

As per the BNS, 2023, the penalty for gang rape includes a fine and a minimum of 20 years of rigor-

ous imprisonment, which may extend to life imprisonment. Conversely, the Aparajita Bill proposes the imposition of fine, imprisonment of the convict's natural life, or the death penalty.

The Aparajita Bill eliminates the age of defendants for specific offences to facilitate the trial process. It also requires that investigations into rape cases be concluded within 21 days of filing the information with the police and trial to be completed within 30 days from the date of filing the chargesheet.

CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTATION

The West Bengal State Legislative Assembly passed the Aparajita Bill with support from both the Congress and BJP. However, despite this consensus, the bill re-

mains unenforced. Meanwhile, yet another disturbing incident, a rape case at Calcutta Law College, has come to light. The bill is still awaiting presidential assent, which requires consultation with the cabinet. Given the strained relationship between the ruling party at the Centre and the TMC-led state government, many believe that political rivalry is delaying its enactment. Unfortunately, this highlights how political interference can stand in the way of justice and public safety.

WAY FORWARD
Time and again, incidents of sexual violence shake our conscience and expose deep flaws in our legal and institutional systems. The Aparajita Bill was introduced as a strong step forward, promising stricter action against such crimes. Yet, despite its promise, the bill remains stuck in political limbo, reminding us that laws alone aren't enough. What we need now is not just legislation on paper, but real change on the ground. Justice must be swift, survivors must be heard and supported, and safety must be a priority beyond political rivalry.

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US tariffs bitter pill to swallow for India

The imposition of a 25 per cent additional import duty is the cruellest cut on India by one of its largest trading partners, the US. The impact on Indian exporters could be even more severe depending on what the quantum of penalty for importing Russian oil and arms is going to be and whether that would be applicable on all goods the US imports from India.

As the nation faces up to a new reality on which the avowed friendships and deepening strategic ties seem to have had no bearing, the transactional US President Donald Trump has stuck to his guns in an 'America First' principle, India may have to bite the bullet and plough on to preserve its interests which are more permanent than any personal friendships with the unpredictable leader of the free world.

Truth to tell, India has enjoyed the benefits of its historical protectionist trade policies which may have led to a trade surplus of around \$46 billion in 2024 after shipping goods worth around \$87.4. Any dip in exports to the US — which could be as high as 30 per cent — will affect the surplus as well as India's GDP that has grown to an estimated \$4.187 trillion now.

Since a 10 per cent duty has been applicable to all goods (not services, but which too will suffer if economies stop growing) and considering tariffs on steel, aluminium and auto parts, the gross duty could be much higher, say as high as 30-34 per cent as, for example, it is computed to apply to textiles. Gems and jewellery, pharmaceuticals, industrial machinery, smartphones, seafood and such other segments in which India has enjoyed an advantage in trading with the US may quickly evaporate.

A greater fear is a higher tariff on Indian goods as opposed to lesser ones on other Asian economies might mean India becoming less attractive as an alternative to China as a manufacturing base, in which sector it benefited as seen in iPhone exports to the US being higher than even China's in most recent figures. To diversify quickly to other markets will become a compulsion.

Protracted negotiations to try and beat the August 1 deadline for Trump tariffs broke down, principally on the need to protect India's foodgrain and dairy farmers who make a substantial contribution not only to food security but in terms of job creation too. Their interest cannot be sacrificed for the sake of placating Trump.

To try and conclude a trade deal for what it may be worth should be the highest priority this month even if it is not easy to negotiate when Trump, a self-confessed friend of India and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, plays hardball. But other nations, and a bloc of nations like the EU, have done it to avoid a trade war. In 2025, India is importing from China at a proportionally higher rate (a 13 per cent rise) than any other nation, but that is no solution to finding a measure of balance with the US without giving up the farm and letting adrift all those who plough the soil.

In the longer term, the hit to ties is going to be even more significant as Trump seems to be enjoying Pakistan as the flavour of the season in his spasmodic and whimsical judgments on friends, foes and US national interest. His thinking is so fanciful as to imagine that extraction of Pakistan's supposedly vast oil reserves can be done speedily and economically to attract India as a customer. But that can well wait while India attempts to seal a trade agreement with the US.

Road safety: A wake-up call

The Supreme Court's judgment in a tragic road accident case from Coimbatore offers more than a legal precedent — it gives an urgent wake-up call for Indian administrators to introduce lane discipline on chaotic roads.

In the judgment, the apex court apportioned part of the guilt to the car driver who had applied sudden brakes, which led to a tragic chain of events that resulted in the amputation of the biker's left leg after being run over by a bus coming in the adjacent lane.

At first glance, one may only blame the biker for not maintaining sufficient distance while driving on a national highway. However, the court's observation that the car driver's sudden braking without taking into consideration its impact on the trailing traffic was reasonable and logical. The judgment reaffirms the fact that road safety is a shared responsibility of the people who are using it.

In many developed countries, driving in designated lanes and following speed regulations are instinctive civic habits. However, Indian roads are a theatre of unpredictability, where one could find only a handful of socially-aware people following these basic road safety rules. A majority of road users in India don't understand the importance of lanes.

In countries like Germany, Japan, or Singapore, lane discipline is drilled into the psyche of motorists through driver education sessions and any violation of road safety rules will lead to penalties. In India, however, riders have a free run on roads.

Though the Road Transport Authority conducts namesake tests before issuing driving licences, it is most often riddled with corruption. If the government wants to end traffic chaos, it needs to ensure people are well educated about traffic rules.

Similarly, the government needs to follow a carrot-and-stick method for the efficient enforcement of the road safety rules. It should incentivise good road behaviour by offering them discounts in health insurance and motor insurance. It should also introduce artificial intelligence-driven solutions to track people's driving to penalise them for reckless driving. People must understand that a driving licence is not a right but a luxury which comes with responsibility.

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Targeting Muslims, Jews:
How minorities face flak

Sunanda K.
Datta-Ray

Reflections

India's cozying up to Israel for security talks at a time when most of the civilised world condemns Israeli brutality against the Palestinians might be justified in terms of Chanakya's "enemy's enemy is a friend" dictum. But self-respecting Indians can't be proud of the relationship after seeing pictures of dying children in Gaza where, at the time of writing, Israel largely refuses to allow food, humanitarian aid or international journalists.

Even Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi would not have approved. A veteran Israeli diplomat who was in the Zionist delegation that sought Gandhi's help told me that the Mahatma put up his hands and refused to be involved. Agreeing that the Jews had been "cruelly wronged", he wrote in *Harizan* that "they have erred grievously in seeking to impose themselves on Palestine with the aid of America and Britain and now with the aid of naked terrorism".

Muslims often appear to be the new Jews. Israel's arrogance recalls how roles are reversed in George Orwell's *Animal Farm* where yesterday's victim becomes today's oppressor. The Holocaust cannot justify Jewish tyranny over the helpless Palestinians. Jeremy Corbyn's sacking as British Labour Party leader because of alleged anti-Semitism was another instance. "One anti-Semite is one too many," Mr Corbyn himself stated, adding that "the scale of the problem was dramatically overstated for political reasons". He was probably too radical for Her Majesty's Prime Minister-in-waiting in a world where any criticism of Israel is branded anti-Semitic.

Dame Penny Mordaunt, former Conservative defence minister, and Lord Mann, the Labour peer and

the UK government's anti-Semitism adviser, claim that anti-Semitism is "rife among the middle class". As authors of a report commissioned by the board of deputies of British Jews, they had been "stunned into silence" by evidence of the anti-Semitism pervading the National Health Service, British universities and the arts.

Noting an "identifiable lack of consistency and capacity in anti-Semitism training", they recommended the creation of a specific anti-Semitism training qualification, adding that such training should be included within equality, diversity and inclusion in organisations and institutions. The 10 recommendations by Lord Mann and Dame Penny called on educators, public services and trade unions to do more to tackle anti-Semitism, including "basic training on contemporary anti-Semitism".

Prejudice is often unconscious. At school in Calcutta, we often chanted "Justin Aaron, king of the Jews, sold his wife for a pair of shoes" at the only Jewish boy in my class. Sometimes we threw our rulers asking Justin to turn them into serpents like the Biblical Aaron. One day when I wanted to borrow his pen and Aaron demurred. I expostulated: "Don't be a Jew!" His retort, "I am a Jew!", made me realise how innocent our teasing was.

Hermann Kisch, an English Jew who joined the Indian Civil Service in 1873, wrote that "Mr Gubbay" — a Calcutta Jew of Baghdadi descent like Aaron — was a nice man but would rather not invite him "in his red fez and black dressing gown" with European guests.

The last time the British Parliament discussed anti-Semitism, which has been called "the oldest hatred", a veteran Black MP, Diane Abbot, quoted Rabbi

Sacked as British Labour Party leader, Jeremy Corbyn was probably too radical for Her Majesty's Prime Minister-in-waiting in a world where any criticism of Israel is branded anti-Semitic

Herschel Gluck, chairman of the Arab-Jewish Forum and founder-chairman of the Muslim-Jewish Forum, to make a significant point. "Minorities, and especially the Jewish community in Europe, are the weather vane of discontent and a wider feeling of insecurity as people look for easy and quick answers to their problems."

That is doubly true of India, the land of minorities although the term now denotes the biggest minority of all. As the Sachar Committee confirmed, Muslims lag behind other communities, including Dalits, in most indicators of social, economic, and educational development. The remedies that Dr Manmohan Singh had pioneered has had some effect, but thanks to newer forms of social injustice, Muslims have lost on the swings what they gained on the roundabouts.

Despite the bravery of two young Moradabad girls who flouted orthodoxy to choose their own spouses, the Netflix version of Vikram Seth's hugely entertaining *A Suitable Boy* confirms how orthodoxy has weaponised inter-faith romance to create the stiletto of "love jihad". Time was when India defied American wrath to feed Fidel Castro's Cuba while angry protesters against the Vietnam war groined Calcutta to a halt. The Cuban deal was a tribute to P.V. Narasimha Rao's diplomatic finesse in quietly ordering the sale of 10,000 tonnes of rice to Cuba with a ₹10-crore price tag that was quietly waived.

Perhaps some awareness of that independence explained 15 protesters gathering by Mahatma Gandhi's statue in London's Parliament Square the day the anti-Semitism report

was released. Most were elderly. Some carried placards reading "I oppose genocide. I support Palestine Action", the group that Britain has banned as terrorist. A few wore the traditional checked scarf, *keffiyeh*, symbol of the Palestinian struggle, that is now manufactured in India or China and exported to Palestine. Curiously, while police arrested all the protesters sheltering by Gandhi's statue, the 15 beside a graven Nelson Mandela nearby were not touched.

Orwell argued that the British went to India not for money or power, but because servants and the rituals of drawing and dining room allowed them to pretend to be gentry. Kisch may even have revised his view of Mr Gubbay when his son married Sir Albert Sassoon's daughter in England. There were many Jews in India like Bombay's Bene-Israel, Cochín's Paradesi Jews who created the modern world's first Jewish homeland, the Malayalam-speaking Black Jews packing blue roses I met in Beersheba but could not converse with since they had no Hindi or English, and Mizoram's Tibeto-Burmese Bnei Menashe. Now, a 13th century tombstone has stirred speculation about a colony of Yemenite Jews in Tamil Nadu. Yet, Indira Gandhi stumbled when Ed Koch, New York's mayor, asked her about Jews here. I doubt if her successors are any better informed.

Minority means for them the Muslim question, which home minister L.N. Agarwal in Seth's novel tries to wish away by insisting that Independence gave Muslims a country of their own and that India is for Hindus. Many of the Mann-Mordaunt recommendations to counter anti-Semitism would also apply to anti-Muslim fanatics. The authors rightly say that "if our Jewish community is facing discrimination, this is a failure of our society". Similarly, the problems of which Indian Muslims complain about only proclaim the failure of Indian society at large.

The writer is a senior journalist, columnist and author

LETTERS
RAHUL'S CHARGE
BASELESS

The observation of Rahul Gandhi, Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, that PM Narendra Modi carried out Operation Sindoor without political will and meant only to protect his image is baseless. Operation Sindoor, in the aftermath of the Pahalgam attack, was a fitting reply to Pakistan and terrorists, and the PM did what he was expected to do in the matter. One feels, the Opposition parties in general and the Congress in particular should avoid talking against the government and Operation Sindoor in the interest of peace of the nation and the world at large. His insistence that Modi should say in the Lok Sabha that the ceasefire was not done by US President Donald Trump is unacceptable, to say the least. India maintains good relations with other nations and makes diplomatic moves sagaciously. The Congress should not affect them by making frivolous statements.

**S.Ramakrishnasayee
Chennai**

CHILDREN HAVE RIGHTS

THE SHOCKING incident from Malad East, Mumbai — where an eight-year-old child was burned with a candle for poor handwriting — exposes the alarming moral and educational decay in our society. It's not just a case of a teacher's cruelty, but a wake-up call for parents, schools, and the community at large. Education is meant to nurture, not traumatise. When those entrusted with shaping young minds resort to violence, the entire system is in crisis. The solution isn't limited to punishment; it lies in proper teacher training, strict oversight of tutoring centres, and widespread awareness of children's rights.

**Md Asad
Mumbai**

Mail your letters to chennai@deccanmail.com

Dilip Cherian
Dilli Ka Babu

Central Sectt in
midst of crisis;
no promotions
for officers 7 yrs

The Central Secretariat Service (CSS) may not be the face of government, but it's certainly its nervous system. And right now, it's showing signs of paralysis.

For years, the CSS Forum has been knocking on doors asking for what basic administrative hygiene should ideally be — timely cadre reviews, fair promotions and parity with other Central services. However, the 4th cadre review, due back in 2018, remains stuck in bureaucratic molasses, despite a committee being formed nearly two years ago.

What we have is a seven-year delay in what should've been a routine five-yearly exercise. Promotions are in deep freeze. Undersecretaries eligible after five years are stuck for over 12. ASOs of the 2014 batch haven't seen a single promotion. Sounds like systemic apathy.

And this isn't just about morale. Ministries and departments are running with a massive shortfall — RTI replies suggest a demand for 2,500 more CSS officers across just 24 departments. This has real-world consequences on governance, efficiency and public service delivery. What adds salt to the wound is that other services get their cadre reviews wrapped up in under a year. Is CSS being singled out for indifference, these babus are questioning.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of an

efficient, responsive government needs fuel. Digital India cannot be built with analogue HR processes. The DoPT, ironically responsible for personnel policy, has to ensure that CSS officers are regarded with the same respect as other members of the civil service. After all, CSS isn't asking for privilege, just parity. It is time to listen and act before the machinery grinds to a halt.

VICE-PRESIDENT OUT, STAFF OUT FASTER
Vice-President Jagdeep Dhankhar's sudden resignation may have been draped in health concerns, but it's the quiet aftershocks that raise the real eyebrows.

Even before the press had digested his exit, members of his secretariat staff, including officers on deputation, were reportedly being sent scurrying back to their parent cadres. No transition time, no soft landings. For a constitutional office of this stature, such haste isn't just unseemly, it's telling.

When a high constitutional functionary steps down mid-term, the system usually pauses, allows dignity to prevail, and ensures an orderly handover. But not this time. The signal was stark: Not only was the man out, so were his people. And fast.

This kind of administrative muscle-flexing suggests that Mr Dhankhar's exit wasn't as volun-

tary as the official line suggests. Add to that the deafening silence from the ruling establishment, and you've got all the elements of a classic quiet purge. Babudom, as always, speaks volumes through its paperwork, and the papers this time seem to have been moved in vengeance mode.

Mr Dhankhar's recent stances, which were occasionally at odds with the government's line, may not have gone down well with the powers that be. But it's the treatment of his staff that betrays just how personal this got. We've seen this play before. Only now, the eraser seems to work faster.

WHEN BABUS GET CANDID ON PODCASTS
Move over celebrity exposés — now even babus are turning podcasters. A wave of state-run or insider-led podcasts features police officers and babus sharing stories that were once confined to office corridors.

Uttar Pradesh Police's "Beyond the Badge" is a glossy narrative of ₹100 crore insurance fraud cases and UPSC toppers, delivered by cops themselves. It's storytelling in uniform, complete with technical forensic details and aspirational journeys. Haryana's HSNCB chief recently launched a series unpacking drug enforcement operations, from pharmacy abuse to interstate smuggling chains.

Public interest? Check. Transparency? Partially. But with babus as narrators, it's as much about recounting crime as it is about image crafting. The message: Here's the modern, woke babudom speaking in person, dropping jargon and drama in equal measure.

This trend taps into India's podcast culture explosion, where brands and public figures are discovering podcasts as a celebrity-greenlighting machine. The entry of babus into this arena is especially curious. While it humanises mumbo-jumbo bureaucratic processes, it also shows them chasing 'coolness' and narrative control.

But not everyone's buying it. Redditors and aspirants have long questioned whether civil servants belong behind the scenes, expected to be faceless public functionaries, should become social media influencers in khaki. When babus begin broadcasting, polishing their persona, or subtly flexing their status, the reaction has ranged from eye rolls to outright scepticism. If babus are looking for credibility, the real test isn't in telling tales. It is in doing the real work transparently.

Love them, hate them ignore them at national peril, is the babu guarantee and Dilip's belief. Share significant babu escapades dilipcherian@hotmail.com.

INDIAN EXPRESS IS NOT AN INDUSTRY. IT IS A MISSION.

— Rammath Goenka

LOST OPPORTUNITY TO SHOW UNITY AT OP SINDOOR DEBATE

EVER since Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared after the Pahalgam massacre that “India will identify, track and punish every terrorist and their backers. We will pursue them to the ends of the earth”, questions lingered as to whether the objectives of Operation Sindoor to render justice for the heinous crime had been fully achieved. India’s kinetic action against nine terror bases in Pakistan snowballed into a four-day clash with the neighbour. So, how did it end? If it was bilateral, why was President Donald Trump not told off for attributing it to US mediation? How many aircraft did we lose? And what about the perpetrators? Coincidentally, the last question got resolved the day parliament began debating the matter, as three terrorists who executed the Pahalgam plot, including its mastermind, were eliminated in a gunfight in Kashmir. All three were Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) operatives. Then came the US state department’s announcement proscribing Pakistan-based The Resistance Front (TRF), an LeT proxy that had claimed responsibility for the Pahalgam attack. By the time the debate concluded in parliament, a UN Security Council report had named TRF as the culprit. For a bystander, it looked like smart choreography, intentional or otherwise.

The three days of debate in parliament on Operation Sindoor saw a lot of sound and fury. Clearly, the national consensus against cross-border terror that had emerged in the wake of the attack had run its course. Reality TV played out in people’s drawing rooms with drama, nationalism, whataboutery and some sharp speeches. If Congress leader Rahul Gandhi accused the government of surrendering the initiative by calling up Pakistan shortly after bombing its terror havens and saying they were non-escalatory, Modi said no world leader had asked him to stop Operation Sindoor. He went on to accuse the Congress of taking talking points from Pakistan.

In the end, hardly anything new emerged from the debate except finger-pointing. What purpose the opacity on fighter jet losses serves in advancing national security was unfathomable. A joint resolution at the debate’s conclusion would have tempered the discourse. But there was no such agreement, allowing parties on both sides of the aisle to go after each other’s throats. It was an opportunity lost to put up a united front at a time when the global geopolitical situation is extremely fragile.

MALEGAON: JUSTICE, TRUTH CASUALTY OF DELAYS, LAPSES

THE verdict in the 2008 Malegaon blasts case is a telling example of justice delayed and then denied outright. The special NIA court’s acquittal of all seven accused in the case, including former BJP MP Pragya Singh Thakur and army officer Lt Col Prasad Shrikant Purhohit nearly 17 years after a powerful blast killed six people and injured more than 100 raises more questions than providing answers. While the long delay underscores one of the main ailments of the country’s criminal justice system, the outcome establishes that it has clearly failed the victims and their families.

On September 29, 2008, a bomb kept in a two-wheeler went off at Malegaon in Maharashtra’s Nashik district—a locality with a sizeable Muslim population—during the holy month of Ramzaan. The Maharashtra Anti-Terrorism Squad initially investigated the case and filed two chargesheets. In 2011, the National Investigation Agency was brought into the investigation. The central agency, in chargesheets filed later, reduced the list of accused, recommended dropping the stringent Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime Act (MCOCA) provisions against them, and highlighted “lacunae” in the ATS investigation. In 2017, the trial court dropped MCOCA charges.

It’s evident that the case got weaker during successive investigations. With the acquittal now, a disturbing shadow has been cast on the entire investigation and trial. The Malegaon blast was flagged as a case of ‘Hindu terror’, and it’s fitting that special court judge A K Lahoti, while pronouncing not-guilty verdict, noted: “Terrorism has no religion, because no religion can advocate violence.” The judge said the prosecution has failed to provide cogent and reliable evidence, and failed to establish guilt beyond a reasonable doubt, clearly pointing to lapses in investigation, proof-gathering and other procedures. The judge said there might be a strong suspicion against the accused, but that is not enough to punish them.

But the verdict neither provided the closure that the victims’ families deserved, nor can it be the end of the matter. The system owes an answer to the nation as to who is responsible for the explosion and they must be held accountable to deliver justice. If the prosecution believes it has done a fair job, there must be an appeal against the verdict. If not, a fair and proper reinvestigation is in order.

QUICK TAKE

PERILS OF CHATBOT COUNSELLING

URED by 24x7 access and stigma-free anonymity, more people are turning to artificial intelligence tools for emotional support. It’s not just about chatbots like Woebot, Wysa, Replika and Youper that provide supportive conversations and behavioural therapy tools. The trouble is that people are also increasingly expecting all-purpose tools like ChatGPT to offer specialised advice. Research published in the *Journal of Medicine, Surgery, and Public Health* last year highlighted AI’s potential as a specialised, trained tool in mental health professionals’ hands. But with more individuals turning to the convenience of inexpert, impersonal advice on generic chatbots, we need public discussion and academic research into the possibility of an AI-induced mental health crisis.

THE Election Commission of India’s special intensive revision (SIR) in Bihar constitutes nothing less than a systematic deconstruction of universal suffrage, the *sine qua non* of democratic legitimacy. This mechanised disenfranchisement, masquerading as bureaucratic rectitude, represents a constitutional trespass. Its jurisprudential malignancy demands not mere critique, but forensic evisceration.

The bedrock of India’s electoral democracy is Article 326 of the Constitution. Its language is unambiguous and deliberately restrictive: “The elections... shall be on the basis of adult suffrage; that is to say, every person who is a citizen of India and who is not less than 18 years of age... and is not otherwise disqualified under this Constitution or any law made by the appropriate legislature on the ground of non-residence, unsoundness of mind, crime or corrupt or illegal practice, shall be entitled to be registered as a voter.” The term ‘shall be entitled’ creates an indefeasible constitutional right, placing the burden of disproving eligibility squarely on the State.

This formulation crystallises four immutable principles. First, suffrage is the default constitutional status of citizenship. Second, disqualifications form a closed hermeneutic universe (*expressio unius est exclusio alterius*). Third, each disqualification requires judicial imprimatur—court declarations (unsoundness), legislative disqualification (corrupt practice), or quasi-judicial residency determination. Fourth, other agencies possess zero delegated authority to invent new exclusion criteria. The SIR commits constitutional *lèse-majesté* by substituting this framework with a documentary inquisition, transforming suffrage from a constitutional right into an administrative privilege.

The Representation of the People Act, 1950 (RPA) and the Registration of Electors Rules, 1960 operationalise Article 326. They provide the machinery for roll preparation and revision, but they do not—and constitutionally cannot—expand the grounds for disqualification beyond those in Article 326. Section 16 of the RPA parrots Article 326’s disqualifications verbatim, creating an impregnable statutory fortress. The Election Commission, through SIR, has created a rather spurious ground of ‘documentary insufficiency’ through executive *ukase*.

Section 19 of the RPA conditions registration solely on citizenship, age and ‘ordinary residence’. Section 20 defines ‘ordinarily resident’ as a factual determination based on intention and continuity of stay; it explicitly states tem-

The Election Commission’s premise for questioning voters’ eligibility *en masse* dents the credibility of past polls based on the rolls. It’s an unconstitutional precedent fomenting perpetual electoral insecurity

SETTING STAGE FOR EVERLASTING ELECTORAL ANGST

MANISH TEWARI

Lawyer, third-term MP and former Union minister



SOURAV ROY

porary absence does not break residence. Nowhere does it mandate continuous documentary proof or empower the electoral registration officer to demand specific documents as a precondition for maintaining registration. Section 21, under which the commission is carrying out SIR, empowers the preparation and revision of rolls. Revision inherently implies updating and does not empower a blanket re-verification of all existing voters.

This exercise has converted the due process into a Kafkaesque gauntlet where the people are presumed guilty until proven innocent. This violates not just precedent but the spirit of the law—the ideal separating civilisation from savagery, the fundamental jurisprudential principle that the burden of proof lies upon the one who declares, not the one who denies.

Rule 21A of the Registration of Electors Rules is the critical statutory pathway for

deletion of names. Deletion can only occur if the ERO is “satisfied” an entry is to be deleted under Section 22 (correction due to error). It establishes a tripartite process: notice, summary inquiry and hearing. The rule implies the burden lies on the ERO to be satisfied of the grounds. The SIR perversely reverses this: it places the burden on the voter to proactively prove their continued eligibility. It replaces statutory ‘satisfaction’ based on evidence and a hearing with administrative fiat based on non-compliance with an extra-statutory demand for documents.

The Aadhaar flip-flop is particularly damning. Section 23(4) allows the ERO to require Aadhaar for establishing identity, specifically for new applicants, or authentication of existing entries and identifying duplicate entries. Yet, the ECI, in the SIR, is rejecting Aadhaar as valid proof of citizenship. The government relentlessly

SUPPLY LINK FROM MINE TO MAGNET

DAVINDER SANDHU

Co-founder and Chair at Primus Partners; former advisor to World Bank Executive Director for India, and former Director at PMO

nets, at nearly double the prevailing global market price. Why? Because without such assurance, no company would risk building costly infrastructure in a price-volatile, externally-dominated market.

India imports nearly all the 900 tonnes of magnets used annually despite holding the fifth-largest rare earth reserves in the world. Not a single commercial magnet factory exists in the country as of 2025. India’s only meaningful processing activity is via IREL (India), which produces about 1,500 tonnes of NdPr oxide, most of which is used in R&D or exported.



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Rare earth magnets are crucial for electric vehicles, wind turbines and precision missile systems. Despite having large rare earth reserves, India has no capacity to produce these magnets yet. The govt needs to shoulder the market and revenue risks for the sector to take off

The recent shortage in the supply chain as a result of geopolitical events sent a shockwave through India’s automotive and electronics sectors. Factories were caught off guard. A small magnet—worth less than 5 percent of a vehicle’s value—threatened to paralyse entire production lines.

That’s why the Apple and DARPA approach is so important. Apple broke the ‘chicken-and-egg’ financing deadlock by acting as an anchor buyer. DARPA solved the viability problem by assuring a fair return on investment, re-

gardless of global price swings.

A strategic policy blueprint

India must respond with the same clarity and urgency that the US demonstrated in the sector. At the core of this strategy should be a government-backed price guarantee mechanism. Just as DARPA committed to paying nearly double the market price for NdPr oxide to secure a viable domestic industry, India must step in assure producers that their investments will not be derailed by sudden price collapses orchestrated by foreign suppliers. A stable price fixed for 10-15 years can provide the necessary foundation of certainty.

We must identify and empower at least three champions with deep capabilities in metallurgy, forging, and materials science. There are established players to take this forward. This must be complemented by a network of anchor buyers—public and private companies that can enter into structured buying agreements with domestic magnet manufacturers, with financial support covering any cost differential versus imports. These contracts will ensure that the production facilities are optimally used and financially sustainable.

India should also establish a strategic magnet reserve akin to the strategic petroleum reserve, to provide buffer stocks during disruptions and ensure supply continuity for critical sectors like defence and renewable energy.

The development of dedicated rare earth industrial parks in mineral-rich regions such as Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, or Tamil Nadu can drive economies of scale and enable shared infrastructure. These clusters can benefit from plug-and-play facilities and integrated logistics.

The Apple-DARPA blueprint offers a clear model of a three-pronged support—upfront capital, assured offtake, and price guarantees to enable investments in refining, alloying, and precision magnet production. This is a working model of supply chain resilience in rare earths and magnets that India must emulate.

(Views are personal)

The world is a story we tell ourselves about the world

Vikram Chandra

pushed Aadhaar linkage for years, asserting its validity for identity in electoral laws to the extent of enacting this provision in 2021. Now, when used to protect voters from wrongful deletion, the ECI finds it insufficient for ‘citizenship proof’.

It’s a bait-and-switch of monumental proportions, betraying citizens who complied with earlier state demands for linkage only to find that compliance now deemed worthless for protecting their right to vote. Demanding other citizenship proofs goes far beyond the statutory mandate and constitutional confines. It is an invention born of administrative overreach or political pressure, and is therefore *void ab initio*. Every voter currently on the roll was included after a statutory process, a previous summary revision where claims and objections were invited. Their inclusion represented a final determination of eligibility under the law at that time. The SIR, by seeking to re-open this determination *en masse*, undermines the legal finality of the existing roll.

It implies that the ECI’s own past processes were flawed or incomplete, casting doubt on the legitimacy of every election conducted using rolls finalised before this SIR. If the ECI lacked the power to verify citizenship properly before, how can elections based on those rolls be valid? If it did verify, why is this invasive re-verification needed? The SIR creates a dangerous precedent for perpetual electoral insecurity.

The demand for documents disproportionately impacts the marginalised—the poor, the migrant, the illiterate, those displaced, women lacking independent documentation, and minorities. These are precisely the groups whose democratic voice is most crucial and most easily silenced. The concerns about ‘doubtful voters’ and illegal immigrants, often stoked along communal lines, find fertile ground in certain political narratives.

The ECI, constitutionally mandated to be an independent bulwark against such pressures, appears complicit. It is allowing itself to be used as a tool for demographic engineering under the guise of electoral purity. If allowed to stand, the SIR grants the ECI a *carte blanche* to purge voter rolls on invented pretexts, effectively deciding the electorate rather than letting the electorate decide.

To remain silent is to acquiesce to the slow death of universal adult suffrage. Suffrage is democracy’s soul, not an administrative chattel. The Constitution’s architects did not birth a republic where voting rights expire at the altar of documentary technocracy and bureaucratic tyranny.

(Views are personal)
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MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Caste reforms

Ref: *Enact law against killing in the name of caste honour* (Jul 31). The editorial points out correctly that the time for rhetoric and condemnation has long passed; it is time for meaningful action. These evils can not be erased by legislation alone, but by reforming our beliefs too.

M Haneef, Kottayam

Water parley

Ref: *No politics over water between AP & Telangana* (Jul 31). Andhra Pradesh and Telangana should try to represent their respective farmers’ community rather than their political parties. A good sense must prevail between the state governments, especially their chieftains. Instances like the Cauvery dispute cannot be allowed to recur.

Jalkishan N, Bengaluru

Chess opening

Ref: *Stretching the board* (Jul 31). Divya Deshmukh expands India’s chess legacy by her stellar performance which has firmly put Maharashtra on the map of Indian chess talent. Her success is set to inspire players from across states, further strengthening India’s position in the global arena.

PV Prakash, Mumbai

Dhankhar overstep

Ref: *Warming up to outlanders, the sangh way* (Jul 31). Jagdeep Dhankhar had allegedly been swaying in the favour of opposition parties lately, which clearly irked many in the NDA leadership. Modi’s confidence finally eroded when he started acting more like a politician, than in his prescribed role.

S Kanthimathinathan, Thoothukudi

Airlines’ assurance

Ref: *Going beyond blame game to address fear in the air* (Jul 31). The author hits the nail on the head by arguing that true aviation safety starts by airlines setting their own house in order. His comparison of private carriers shows that walking the talk on safety makes all the difference.

M Barathi, Chennai

Browbeating Don

Ref: *Trump drops the tariff hammer* (Jul 31). Donald Trump seems to be taking liberties by unilaterally announcing trade tariffs when mutual discussions on the issue are on. It appears Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s one-sided efforts to build a personal relationship with Trump did not achieve the desired results.

Raju Mathai, Kochi

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The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Trump's onslaught

India needs to calmly hold its ground

US President Donald Trump fired a series of missiles at India on Wednesday. The biggest one was the imposition of 25 per cent tariff plus penalty on goods imported from India. Trump is bent on punishing a defiant India for buying crude oil and military equipment from Russia. The enduring ties between New Delhi and Moscow have rubbed him the wrong way, never mind his jibe that he doesn't care what India does with Russia. "They can take their dead economies down together," he said with disdain. For the record, India is not only the fourth-largest economy in the world but also the fastest-growing among the major ones. Calling India a "dead economy" amid trade deal talks is a telltale sign: Trump is treading the path of provocation to test India's patience and resilience. What he wants is to browbeat Delhi into conceding America's demands, such as duty concessions in the agriculture and dairy sectors.

Piling it on, the President declared that the US had sealed a trade pact with Pakistan. He said Washington would work with Islamabad to develop the South Asian nation's "massive oil reserves" and even wondered if Pakistan could sell oil to India some day. All this is obviously unpalatable to India, but the challenge is to resist the temptation of hitting back at Trump. Delhi should hope and pray that this too shall pass — sooner or later, he might realise that he is barking up the wrong tree.

It's clear that Trump has taken upon himself the task of weaning India away from Russia. He is destined to fail if Delhi calmly holds its ground. Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal told Parliament on Thursday that the government would take "all necessary steps to secure and advance our national interest". It would be a tightrope walk for India — keeping trade negotiations with the US on the right track and also continuing with imports from Russia. Delhi is rightly unwilling to put all its eggs in one basket. Myriad options for exports as well as imports can hold India in good stead amid the Trump-induced turbulence.

Air safety audit

DGCA reassurance fine, but more expected

THE Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) has sounded a reassuring note after finding 263 safety-related lapses across eight airlines in their annual audits. The aviation safety regulator underscored that the high number of lapses is "entirely normal", particularly in the case of airlines with extensive networks and large fleets. The audit uncovered 51 safety violations by Air India in the past year. Although unrelated to the June 12 Boeing 787 crash, it puts the airline under renewed scrutiny. The DGCA's contention that audits and corrective action by all the airlines are robust processes is well taken. Its attempt to calm frayed nerves is also understandable. That should not in any way negate the seriousness of the matter. A diminishing trust factor does not augur well for the aviation sector.

India looks set to become the third-largest aviation market by the end of the decade, but the rapid expansion is falling short of passenger expectations. An ageing fleet and maintenance issues continue to dog the airlines, even as safety concerns demand urgent attention. The DGCA's findings are a stark reminder of why the Indian aviation industry needs improvements in safety protocols. The watchdog has also flagged lack of adequate training for pilots, use of unapproved simulators and a poor rostering system. Such shortcomings and violations warrant stringent action and fines. The DGCA must do more.

An encouraging change, according to the regulator, is self-reporting by airlines, indicating a growing culture of transparency. For a passenger, what is of paramount importance is the assurance that the airline adheres to the safety norms without fail. Any deviation that falls in the category of a safety risk can only be construed as a choice and not unintentional action. That calls for serious action by the DGCA.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SATURDAY, AUGUST 1, 1925

Tilak's triumph

THIS day five years ago, Bal Gangadhar Tilak quitted the scene of his earthly labours amid a demonstration of national sorrow unprecedented in the annals of this country, whether in its volume or sincerity. There had been great political leaders before Tilak, both in his own part of the country and in other parts. Dadabhai Naoroji, Pherozeshah Mehta and Gopal Krishna Gokhale in Bombay, Womesh Chandra Bonnerjee and Anand Mohan Bose in Bengal, G Subramaniya Iyer and Ananda Charlu in Madras and Ajudhya Nath in the United Provinces were all devoted sons of the motherland who, like Tilak, had consecrated their lives to the service of their country and the cause of its political advancement. But the country that mourned their passing away from the field of their activities was a comparatively small country, consisting for the most part of educated politically minded Indians. The masses of the people knew them not. It was the chief distinction of Tilak that he was the first among his contemporaries to realise the supreme necessity of enlisting in the great battle in which he was engaged the sympathy and support of the common people; and consequently he was the first among India's political leaders whose death was mourned not merely by tens of thousands of educated and comparatively well-placed people, but by hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of humbler people. And it is this very distinction, or rather what lay behind it, that is responsible for the fact that Tilak, though dead, is still the leader of the unfinished fight for his country's constitutional independence.

OPINION

India should play the waiting game

Sooner than later, the Trump administration will face adverse consequences of its tariff actions



SUBHASH CHANDRA GARG
FORMER FINANCE SECRETARY

AFTER wasting four months negotiating a trade deal with US President Donald Trump and his team, India is back to square one — 25 per cent tariff imposed by him on July 30 against 26 per cent threatened on April 2.

In fact, it is worse than where it all started. Trump has threatened to impose penal tariffs, not specified as of now, unless India stops buying Russian oil and defence equipment. He called India's tariffs the highest in the world and non-monetary trade measures "most strenuous and obnoxious".

What does Trump's shenanigans mean for India's merchandise trade with the US? How should India take it forward from here? Call off all negotiations or surrender?

Trump's objectives in this bilateral trade deficit elimination game started by him are crystal clear, however unpalatable these might be for the partner countries. He wants these countries with the US to close that gap by doing four things — (a) allow full market access for all US products at zero tariff; (b) accept tariffs of 15-25 per cent on most of their exports to the US; (c) buy additional US stuff — aircraft, energy, etc. to close the trade gap; and (d) invest in the US to manufacture goods.

The world exports to the US for two reasons: one, it is a big market (roughly 15 per cent of the total global exports), and two, the exporters do make profits.

If the imposition of commercially insane US tariffs on their exports kills US markets for the exporters or makes their profits



INEVITABLE: Eventually, Trump will roll back most of what he has unleashed or will suffer a political backlash. REUTERS

disappear (in case they choose to or are forced to absorb the cost of additional tariffs), it makes no sense for them to continue exporting. Indian exporters do not have the kind of margins to absorb additional tariff costs. Therefore, the government cannot, and should not, accept additional 25 per cent plus penal US tariffs.

While it makes eminent sense for India to liberalise agricultural trade by permitting imports of GM edible oil (no scientific study to prove GM oil has any adverse health impact) or dairy products (days of milk mountains and European subsidies are long gone) or poultry products (American chicken legs will improve consumer welfare) and the like, India has boxed itself in a corner so badly on this front in the name of protecting its domestic constituency that it cannot and will not offer concessions to the US on farm products.

Forcing India to buy American F35 jets or crude oil, which do not meet India's defence needs or are otherwise costlier, is plain blackmail. Giving in to such blackmail will expose India as a weakling.

India primarily is a foreign direct investment (FDI) receiving country and not an FDI

India has two options:
give in to Trump's demands or call off trade negotiations.

exporting one. India's outward FDI is small. Committing even \$50 billion investment in the US over 5-10 years is not a doable preposition for India.

India cannot meet any of the four Trump asks. Neither does it make commercial or political sense for India to meet any of the demands. A trade deal with Trump, therefore, is an impossibility.

President Trump is digging a grave of US consumerism and dollar exceptionalism. A few nations — Vietnam, Japan, Indonesia and the EU — have accepted all four of Trump's demands for the moment. How these deals will pan out is not certain.

Will the exporters of these countries reduce prices to absorb additional US tariffs or pass it on to US consumers to bear? Or will it be a mix of the two? If these exporting countries do not absorb or succeed in leaving the bulk of additional cost to be absorbed by US consumers, it is the US and its consumers who will end up losing.

Does the US have merchandise to export at zero tariffs? Does it matter to importing partners as their import tariffs were in any case close to zero? Moreover, while the government might lose a bit of tariff revenues, their customers actually stand to gain. Their acceptance of zero tariffs, therefore, does not make much difference.

Will they really buy the promised number of planes, energy products or defence equipment? There is a long time frame to do that. Moreover, they can demand reduced prices and/or tire them out with long-drawn product specification negotiations. The concession extracted by Trump on this account might not really materialise or turn out to be a fraction of a promise.

Additional investment should be fine for Japan and others if they can produce in the US at

competitive prices and quality. In any case, investment commitment takes long to materialise.

While Trump may celebrate that he has browbeaten these countries into conceding what he wanted, the actual outcomes might be vastly different from what he thinks.

There are two options before India. One, it surrenders and crafts a deal on the lines of what Japan, Vietnam, Indonesia and the EU have done and then try to protect Indian interests by employing the tactics outlined above.

Two, close all negotiations with Trump's trade team and let him impose whatever tariff he wants to. India should insist on its exporters to offer goods at their normal prices without absorbing any part of the additional tariff. If the US importers buy, it is good enough. If not, sell their products in other countries with no such insane tariffs and in the domestic market.

The option to find a middle ground on US import tariffs by conceding selectively on other three fronts is unlikely to take India any far. Choose option two and move on.

Sooner than later (3-6 months at most), the Trump administration will be facing adverse consequences of its tariff actions. The US imports will slow down (confirmed by April-June quarter numbers). While the US might get a few hundred billion dollars in tariff revenues, most of it would be paid by US importers and consumers, heaping misery on them. A consumer revolt is not far away.

The dollar is already facing considerable headwinds (bartering India). It is likely to further suffer. Contrary to what Trump wants, his misadventures will hasten world trade away from the dollar. Bond markets may also sell off.

As this scenario unfolds, Trump will either roll back most of what he has unleashed or will suffer a severe political backlash.

India should play the waiting game. It will be least costly.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

In a free market, no exchange takes place unless both parties benefit. —Milton Friedman

Retirement at 62 for MiG-21

WG CDR DP SABHARWAL (RETD)

HOW many 60-year-old cars do you see on the roads? Hardly any, except an odd one, and that too mostly during a vintage car rally. But you do see an aircraft more than 60 years of age flying in the sky, routinely. That's MiG-21, and there are 36 such aircraft (two squadrons) operating in India.

"Hats off to the engineers who keep these oldies fit enough to take to the skies," said one of my son's friends. I couldn't agree more with the youngster. I worked on this aircraft as an engineer during the mid-1970s. Routine maintenance was simple and easy. Nine technicians checked various systems both before and after the flight of just about 35-40 minutes. The systems checked were airframe, engines, electrical, instruments, radio, radar, weapons, photo equipment and safety systems. However, the scheduled maintenance (after 25/50/100 hours of aircraft operations) and snag rectifications were not so easy.

Whenever the ejection seat was to be serviced, a crane was needed to take it out of the cockpit as it weighed more than 110 kg. This was different from my experience with the Hunter aircraft, where the ejection seat of about 50 kg could be removed just by two technicians by hand. Engine change in MiG-21 was a cumbersome job. The rear fuselage had to be removed, the engine pulled out and a new one put in. This was followed by reconnecting of the fuselage and subsequent checks on various systems as many fluid and other pipelines were disconnected. It was a two-day job. In MiG-29, it could be done in just three hours! Well, I can understand the difficulties faced with a much older aircraft, with much more snags and defects, akin to old-age problems of humans. Yet, the aircraft were maintained in a flightworthy condition all along.

MiG-21 has often been dubbed a 'flying coffin' in the media. Yes, there have been many accidents in the past two decades, killing many young pilots. However, an old car is likely to develop some problem and break down in the middle of the road. But the driver can get out and push it to the edge of the road. This luxury is not available to the pilot of the ill-fated aircraft. He has only one way to get down to Mother Earth. Take a decision to abandon his first love, the aircraft, pull the ejection-seat handle to get out, and then land safely, hopefully so only if he has enough time to do it.

Chandigarh was the base where MiG-21s were inducted in March 1963 into No. 28 Squadron, making it the first squadron to operate supersonic fighters. Since then many updated versions of the aircraft have been operated by the Indian Air Force, the latest being MiG-Bison. It is thus Chandigarh from where the aircraft are going to retire on September 21. I, an old hand at this 'never too old an aircraft to get into the air', would like to give three salutes.

First to the technicians and engineers. The second to the pilots who had enormous faith in their technical personnel and took to the skies despite all odds. The third is to the aircraft itself for holding on for so long. May you rest on your laurels through the ages!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Pahalgam lapses sidestepped

With reference to 'When Parliament should have spoken as one', the writer has rightly stated that a parliamentary resolution indicating a united stand among all political parties on cross-border terrorism would have sent a strong message to Pakistan. The lawmakers, by and large, stuck to the usual rhetoric. The most important issue that the ruling dispensation tried to bypass was the security or intelligence lapses at an important tourist spot like Pahalgam. Unanimity on any matter was unfortunately missing in Parliament.

RAVI SHARMA, DHARIWAL

Focus on embarrassing the govt

Apropos of 'When Parliament should have spoken as one', after the much-sought-after debate on Op Sindoor was held, it emerged that the Opposition's insistence on the debate was aimed more at embarrassing the ruling dispensation than to address the issues of terrorism and national security. The Opposition had the right to ask the government about the details of the military operation. However, it was unbecoming of some Congress leaders to doubt if the Pahalgam terrorists were from Pakistan. Whatever be the differences between the Opposition and the ruling party, we should stand united on non-negotiable matters like national security.

HMS NAGRA, FARIDABAD

Exchange of barbs in Parliament

The debate on Operation Sindoor in the Lok Sabha should have been spurred serious introspection and national resolve. It sadly turned out to be a routine and superficial exchange. It appeared as though both sides were merely reading out news reports instead of doing a serious analysis. The ruling party, rather than addressing the issue with sincerity, was busy digging out old incidents to counter criticism. On the other hand, the Leader of the Opposition failed to explain the points he had raised himself at the outset — lack of willpower and a free hand to the armed forces. National security and the morale of the security forces should be given priority over political one-upmanship.

SK GARG, YAMUNANAGAR

Don't merge rural areas into MCs

With reference to 'Ailing panchayats', there is another disturbing trend that deserves attention — the systematic merger of rural areas into municipalities or municipal corporations via ordinances. This not only strips gram panchayats of their constitutional role under the 73rd Amendment but also burdens villagers with steep civic taxes without proportional improvement in infrastructure or services. Such top-down reclassification bypasses local consent and undermines the spirit of *Gram Swaraj*. Instead of empowering panchayats, state governments are curtailing their powers through administrative manoeuvres. This seems less about development and more about revenue generation.

HARSH PAWARIA, ROHTAK

Collective efforts required

Refer to 'Fight against drugs'; the decision of the Himachal Pradesh government to make it compulsory for government employees to undertake an oath of non-consumption of 'chitta' is a good pre-emptive move. Drug peddlers are not only using students but also teachers as conduits in this nefarious activity. Some officers and employees, too, have been found involved in the narcotics trade. The solution lies in taming and not shaming drug abusers. We have to make them a part of the mainstream. Checking the menace can't be left to the government alone. Parents, teachers, NGOs, Panchayati Raj Institutions — all should come forward to tackle the problem.

KR BHARTI, SHIMLA

Where does India stand?

Apropos of 'Trump hits India with 25% tariff plus penalty; will secure our interest: Govt', while the US President's announcement has caused concern, it's important to examine where India stands compared to other countries that have signed trade deals with the US. The UK faces 10% tariff, the EU and Japan are taxed at 15%, Indonesia at 19% and Vietnam at 20%. India's 25% tariff is relatively higher, but not as bad as that of some other nations. Over 90 countries are facing US pressure to sign one-sided trade deals, and many are yet to conclude any agreement.

SANJAY CHOPRA, MOHALI

A truce in Syria, at crossroads of empires



RAJENDRA ABHYANKAR
EX-AMBASSADOR TO SYRIA

SYRIA'S location at the crossroads of major religions, empires and economic and mercantile networks makes it a pivotal state in the Middle East. Its enduring proclivity to engender and synthesise diverse, often contradictory, streams of thought, religion and politics have made it a battleground for opposing ideas, beliefs and practices. It is rightly said that what happens in Syria affects the entire region.

This explains the continuing interest, both military and financial, of both regional and global powers during the long civil war by insurgent groups backed by regional powers fighting the Assad regime till its fall in December 2024. We see the same proclivities on the part of the regional and global powers after the takeover of the country by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) led by Ahmed al-Sharaa, the now rehabilitated terrorist group backed by Turkey and other powers from the region and the West.

Ahmed al-Sharaa, who became the de facto leader of the post-revolutionary caretaker government from 8 December 2024, has gained

backing from various regional and international actors, driven by strategic interest in Syria's stability and reconstruction, and to counter Iran's influence.

Key financial and political backers include the US, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey. Russia, along with the US and some European nations, is also undertaking cautious engagement with the removal of sanctions. Several nations, including Israel, retain a military presence inside Syria.

In a far-sighted move, India opened its first formal outreach only last week, on July 28, with Suresh Kumar, a mid-level officer at the Ministry of External Affairs leading a delegation to Syria to hold talks with Foreign Minister Assad Al-Shaibani. Their discussions covered ways of enhancing the bilateral relationship including possibilities of economic assistance to the new regime.

Located on the east coast of the Mediterranean, Syria with 22 million, mainly Sunni Muslims, borders Turkey to the north, Lebanon and Israel to the west and south west, Iraq to the east and Jordan to the south.

For the transitional government the fall of the Assad regime has become the benchmark towards Syria's democratic transition. Parliamentary elections will be held in September and the next presidential election within five years.

A staunch Sunni, al-Sharaa has promised an inclusive government with equal



OUTREACH: Syria's interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa visited Saudi Arabia in February. REUTERS

treatment to women and Syria's many minorities.

Internal Situation

The country remains geographically divided between various interest groups threatening its cohesion. HTS itself is not the only powerful militia in Syria's umbrella group of rebels leading to the fragmented control of the country.

The US-backed Kurdish-led Syrian Defence Forces (SDF) currently controls the northeast. They have gained ground, taking advantage of the collapse of the Syrian army, to capture the main desert city of Deir ez-Zor, and are determined to remain independent against the Syrian government and Turkey which views it as a terrorist group. The US has also repositioned its troops in eastern Syria.

The Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) has

taken control of parts of northwestern Syria. Although SNA is neither cohesive nor centralised, it remains the bulwark aimed at preventing Kurdish militias from threatening Turkey. This fragmentation has been the reason for internal military clashes that have undermined the status of the Syrian government. On March 6, 2025 the 'large and coordinated' ambush by Assad loyalist Alawites, in the town of Jableh near Latakia, was ruthlessly put down by Syrian government forces.

Similarly, fighting erupted between Druze and Bedouin Sunni groups in Sweida on July 13, 2025. Till a fragile peace, based on a US-brokered cease-fire, was restored after nearly 10,000 Bedouin exited Sweida with Bedouin clans announcing their withdrawal from the Druze-majority city.

President al-Sharaa urged

them to leave the city, saying they 'cannot replace the role of the state in handling the country's affairs and restoring security.'

The violence drew in Syrian government forces and prompted Israeli airstrikes supposedly in sympathy with their own Druze community. These armed disturbances killed hundreds of people and threatened to unravel Syria's fragile post-war transition.

Role of External Powers

Turkey's support for rebel groups such as HTS was critical to its recent offensive making it the most influential foreign actor in the country. Turkey with the most Syrian refugees has now promoted their return home. Its main interest remains to topple the Kurdish forces in the north, where the Democratic Union party (PYD), an offshoot of the banned Kurdistan Workers' party (PKK), operates. Ankara will also want to ensure that any government in Syria is friendly to Turkey, and not Iran.

Russia and Iran are no longer the major players in Syria. For Iran, the ousting of Assad was a huge loss denying a land bridge to the eastern Mediterranean, an important base for Iranian proxies such as Hezbollah, and a route through which weapons could reach Lebanon. The loss of Iran's strategic depth in Syria has weakened its ability to support Hezbollah, itself severely weakened by continuing conflict with Israel.

The loss is similarly huge for Russia. Moscow shored up Assad by sending thousands of Russian troops in 2015 and engaging in brutal airstrikes on Syrian rebel groups and civilian infrastructure.

With the continuing war with Ukraine, Russia did not continue its support to Assad and its Middle East project has been a spectacular failure. The future of Russia's Syrian naval and air bases, on long lease, in Latakia governorate, giving it a foothold in the eastern Mediterranean, remains uncertain.

Israel's belligerent attitude to the al-Sharaa government has led to their warplanes reportedly carrying out hundreds of airstrikes targeting Syrian Army military facilities. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) claims that it has destroyed around 80% of the Assad regime's military capability, ostensibly to prevent weapons falling into the hands of extremists and to support its Druze community, during Syria's post-Assad transition.

Israel has also seized control of all of the demilitarised buffer zone in the Golan Heights, on the ground that the 1974 disengagement agreement with the Assad regime had 'collapsed' with the rebel takeover of the country. The Golan Heights, a rocky plateau about 60 km (40 miles) south-west of Damascus, inhabited by the Druze, was partly seized by Israel in the 1967 Six-Day War and unilaterally annexed it in 1981.

The first parliamentary elections in Syria in September will go a long way towards ensuring interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa's commitment to building an inclusive polity.

Crash, cover-up and corporate collusion? India vs Boeing



ABHIJIT BHATTACHARYYA
LIFE MEMBER, AERONAUTICAL SOCIETY OF INDIA

THE comments made (on July 9) by the newly appointed Administrator of US Civil Aviation Administration (equivalent to India's Directorate General of Civil Aviation), Bryan Bedford, on India's Aircraft Accidents Investigation Bureau's (AAIB) ongoing inquiry into the June 12 crash of Air India (AI) Boeing-787 in Ahmedabad seem to be baseless and partisan.

Is Bedford resorting to pre-emptive defence to save the Boeing company's 787 twin-engine passenger jet and pressure the Indian establishment? His remarks imply: "Don't try to blame the US-made machine. Prepare an inquiry report to look into your own flying men's role and responsibility to begin with for the accident." The aircraft had crashed within 32 seconds after "lift" from runway 2305, killing 241 of the

242 aboard and 19 other persons on the ground.

But, an Indian may counter Bedford: "Why jump the gun? And why not wait for the Indian government's inquiry report?"

Bedford sanctimoniously pontificated on July 24 on the sidelines of the Wisconsin air show that the AI Boeing-787 fatal crash did not appear to be caused by a mechanical issue or an inadvertent movement of the fuel control unit or switches. "We can say with a high level of confidence that it doesn't appear to be a mechanical issue with the Boeing fuel control unit." How does Bedford know for sure or assume to know? The US CAA boss should avoid any controversy on such a serious matter.

Bedford would have done well to note what his boss Jennifer Homendy, Chair of the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), had said on July 18: "Recent media reports on the AI Boeing crash were premature and speculative."

The Indian probe into the crash must be given a fair chance to avoid premature conclusions.

My last piece published in this paper on July 9 had hinted at the likelihood that the US state system would not allow Boeing to fail and fall—"The stakes are too high for Boeing and it is bound to go all out to try and prove that its



DENIAL: The West appears intent on speculative narratives to shield its company and industry. SANDEEP JOSHI

787 craft, despite killing 270, is an excellent flying machine and that the mishap could be owing to anything or anyone except the manufacturer of the ill-fated aeroplane."

Boeing is too deeply embedded in the US state system's departments, agencies, Wall Street investors and MNCs. Giants have fallen in the past: Anglo-French Concorde, McDonnell Douglas DC10 and British Comet jet in the 1950s. But, Boeing is to move on. So much so that despite Boeing's inordinate delay to produce two 747 Air Force 1 for the exclusive use of the US President, Trump, in March, gave it a multibillion-dollar contract to build the "Next Generation" fighter F47 at the expense of combat aircraft specialist Martin Lockheed.

Boeing is too deeply embedded in the US state system's departments, agencies, Wall Street investors and MNCs.

Trump's action was reportedly aimed at saving Boeing, which has been facing poor sales, financial results and stock performance in the last five years owing to two 737 MAX crashes, which killed all 346 aboard. The US Justice Department (DOJ) is charging the company more than \$1 bn and \$445 mn compensations to accident victims' kin. Boeing avoided the DOJ criminal prosecution by paying cash.

Notably, NTSB Chair Jennifer Homendy had earlier this year admonished Boeing for the Alaska Air incident, saying: "This accident never should have happened."

The US FAA, therefore, should take note of the AAIB's preliminary public report on the crashed AI Boeing-787. It says: "Take-off clearance issued

8:07:33 UTC" (Universal Coordinated Time). Aircraft started rolling and smoothly "crossed the take-off decision speed V1 at 153 knots (285.356 km per hour) IAS (Indicated Air Speed); V2 (Take-off safety speed)", lowest aircraft speed indicator reading (ASIR) at which the aeroplane complies with handling criteria associated with climb following one engine failure; and "the Vr speed 155 knots (287.06 kilometres per hour) was achieved at 08:08:35 am." And in another four seconds, "the aircraft air/ground sensors transitioned to air mode, consistent with lift off 08:08:39 hour". AI 171 was airborne and climbing with accelerated speed and thrust to gain altitude to reach its Air Traffic Control designated flight level. From "take-off clearance" to being airborne it's one minute and six seconds.

However, exactly after 32 seconds in air, at 08:09:11 hours (Indian Standard Time 1:39:11 pm), "the EAFR recording stopped." AI 171 Boeing 787 perished with 241. And then started a barrage of misleading, speculative, and ill-intentioned propaganda of western media, determined to put the entire blame for the disaster solely on the cockpit crew of two dead men.

Western reporting seems to be deliberately ignoring that the entire crash boils down to 32 seconds of the airborne

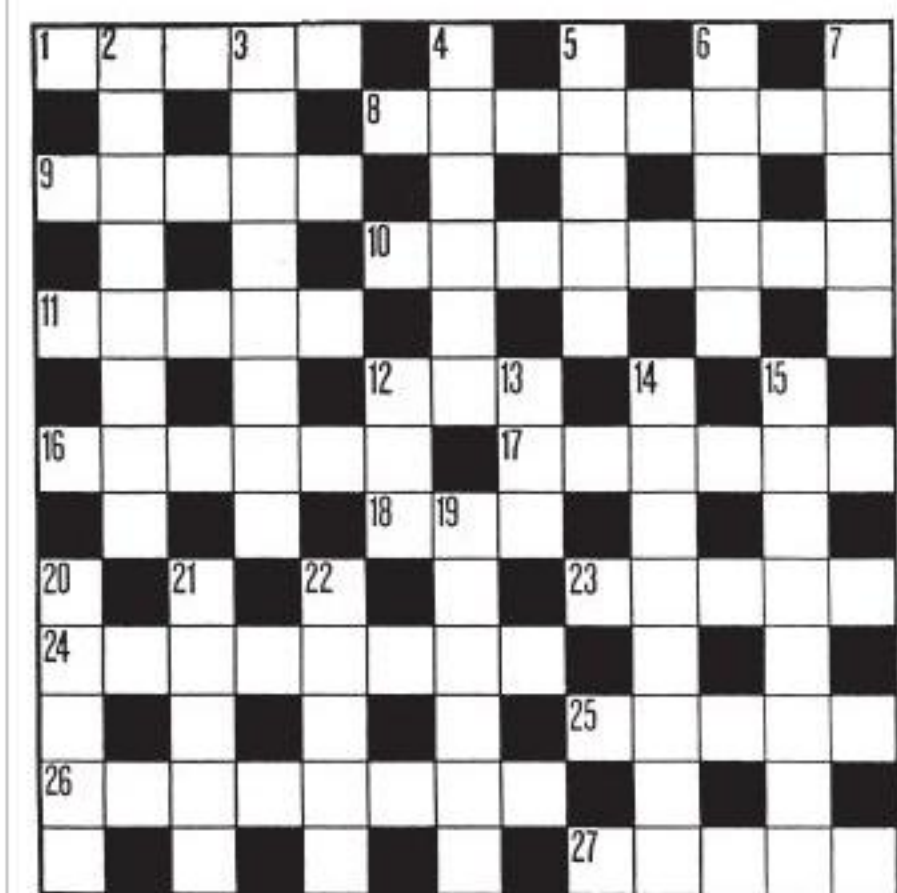
machine coming down with a bang and blast. Understandably, India is peeved and has warned those under the influence of some parties with the vested interest of ensuring that the Ahmedabad Boeing 787 doesn't go the same way as Boeing-737 MAX, which brought the US manufacturer's product quality and reputation to its nadir.

Numerous major air disasters have happened in the West. Yet, the West today is unusually perturbed. It is bent on giving its own divine-right-of-king-type verdict—just as it had tried to do earlier when two Boeing-737-MAX killed all 346 passengers and crew aboard in two separate crashes in 2018 and 2019.

Every Indian passenger should read the book, "Flying Blind: The 737 MAX Tragedy and Fall of Boeing" (2021) by Peter Robson. The West appears intent on speculative narratives to shield its company and industry. That is because if it is established that the Ahmedabad crash occurred due to a machine malfunction, the manufacturer would have to likely pay over a billion-dollar compensation to the victims' relatives. Hence, the defence mechanism is composing a cacophony to blame the two dead Indian men behind the mangled US machine.

Views are personal

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1 Likeness (5)
- 8 Mentally alert (3,5)
- 9 Gossamer (5)
- 10 Be involved (4,4)
- 11 To attempt (5)
- 12 Garden plot for flowers (3)
- 16 Manage with what is available (4,2)
- 17 Small insect with pincers behind (6)
- 18 Firearm (3)
- 23 Serpent (5)
- 24 Terminate prematurely (3,5)
- 25 Capital of Morocco (5)
- 26 Venture unlikely to succeed (4,4)
- 27 Briskly self-assured (5)

Yesterday's solution

Across: 1 Just in case, 6 Fuss, 10 Treat, 11 Bountiful, 12 Drawback, 13 Cited, 15 Prepare, 17 Pelican, 19 Indulge, 21 Syringa, 22 Heron, 24 Transfix, 27 Implicate, 28 Avert, 29 Salt, 30 Step by step.

Down: 1 Jute, 2 Spearhead, 3 In tow, 4 Cabbage, 5 Stuck-up, 7 Unfit, 8 Self-denial, 9 Stickler, 14 Split hairs, 16 Atlantic, 18 Confident, 20 Entrant, 21 Shake up, 23 Repel, 25 Shady, 26 Stop.

DOWN

- 2 Chief support (8)
- 3 Be on the way to success (2,6)
- 4 Chop apart (6)
- 5 Absolute (5)
- 6 An award for achievement (5)
- 7 Pier (5)
- 12 Wet spongy ground (3)
- 13 Lair (3)
- 14 Facade of building (8)
- 15 Payment for profitable favours (8)
- 19 Eradicate (6)
- 20 Chide (5)
- 21 Make amends (5)
- 22 Deep fissure in earth (5)

SU DO KU



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

3	2	7	6	5	4	9	8	1
4	5	9	7	1	8	6	2	3
1	8	6	3	2	9	7	5	4
5	3	8	9	7	6	1	4	2
9	6	2	4	3	1	8	7	5
7	1	4	5	8	2	3	9	6
6	9	5	1	4	7	2	3	8
8	7	3	2	6	5	4	1	9
2	4	1	8	9	3	5	6	7

CALENDAR

AUGUST 1, 2025, FRIDAY

■ Shaka Samvat	1947
■ Shravan Shaka	10
■ Shravan Parvishite	17
■ Hijari	1447
■ Shukla Paksha Tithi 8	
■ Shubh Yoga up to 5.30 am	
■ Swati Nakshatra up to 3.41 am	
■ Moon in Libra sign	
■ Shri Durgashtmi	

FORECAST

SUNSET:	FRIDAY	19:16 HRS
SUNRISE:	SATURDAY	05:42 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	31	24
New Delhi	34	24
Amritsar	29	26
Bathinda	30	26
Jalandhar	29	26
Ludhiana	30	25
Bhiwani	30	25
Hisar	30	25
Sirsa	32	26
Dharamsala	28	18
Manali	26	18
Shimla	24	17
Srinagar	31	19
Jammu	33	26
Kargil	28	15
Leh	26	15
Dehradun	32	24
Mussoorie	25	17

TEMPERATURE IN °C