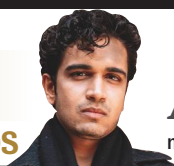


## OUTOFLINE

ON ARTISTIC TRANSGRESSION AND URBAN CHAOS

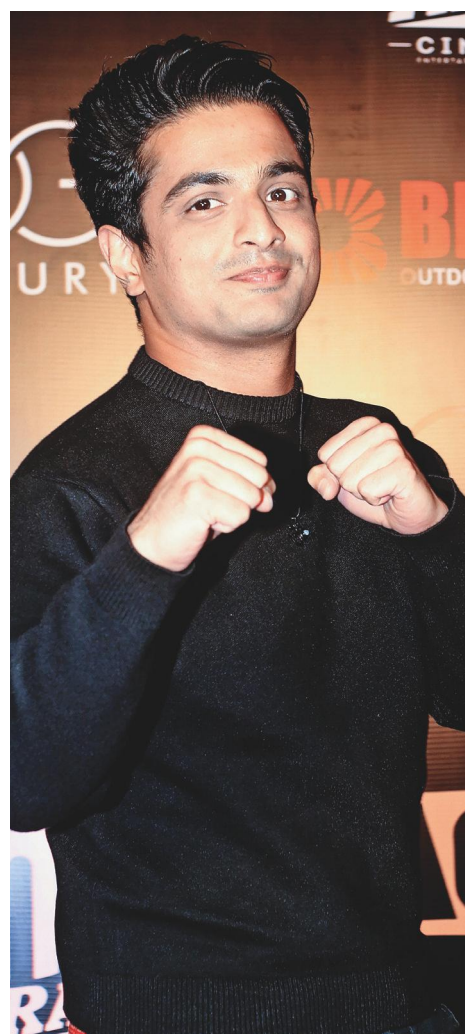


Anish Gawande

mirrorfeedback@timesofindia.com

# Obscenity versus overreach

Why the Ranveer Allahbadia saga continues to highlight our inability to understand the internet



Ranveer Allahbadia

Some controversies arrive like uninvited guests at a house party — loud, chaotic, and oddly entertaining. The Ranveer Allahbadia saga, however, is the gift that refuses to leave. Every time you think the noise has died down, someone opens a new window and lets in another gust of outrage.

A few weeks ago, it was the Supreme Court that threw the next log on the fire. While hearing petitions filed by Allahbadia and others against FIRs stemming from the now-infamous India's Got Latent episode, the court suggested that perhaps it was time for "an autonomous body" to regulate online content. Self-styled mechanisms clearly weren't enough, the bench said. And somewhere in the middle of the hearing came a line that could only have emerged from the peculiar anxieties of our digital age: maybe it was time to use Aadhaar to verify the age of anyone watching "obscene" content.

To which the Solicitor General solemnly added, "We are not only dealing with obscenity but perversity."

At this point, one wonders whether anyone arguing in that room had actually watched the show. As with most things on the Internet, India's Got Latent wasn't nearly as scandalous as the uproar around it. Like thousands of others, I watched it only because it had been declared offensive. Call it the classic Streisand Effect: the fastest way to make something go viral is to try banning it.

And yet, here we are, discussing a proposal that sounds deceptively simple on paper — Aadhaar-based age verification — and collapses entirely the moment it meets reality. Imagine having to type in your Aadhaar number every time you wanted to watch an "Adult" film. That category, by the way, includes such paragons of

corrupting influence as Kabir Singh, Kashmir Files, and Rajinikanth's Coolie. Half of Bollywood would be behind an OTP wall.

Now imagine a world where your Netflix account is linked to your Aadhaar. Not only would it create a buffet of sensitive data for hackers — your age, your address, your viewing habits — it would hand the government and corporations unprecedented insight into your most private moments.

What you watch is not just entertainment; it is a portrait of who you are. Data of that kind has been breached before: in 2018, Aadhaar information of more than 130 million citizens reportedly leaked through government websites, with over 200 portals accidentally making the database public. We are a country that treats data leaks like passing monsoon showers — irritating, predictable, and quickly forgotten — but the consequences of linking Aadhaar to web activity are far more severe.

If you think this is an exaggeration, ask the United Kingdom. In 2019, it attempted to start mandatory age verification for pornographic websites. The plan collapsed under its own weight — legal concerns, tech flaws, and the terrifying possibility of a breach that would reveal people's private habits to the world at large. Eventually, the government introduced a dilution version of the idea in July.

Of course, in India, we tend to operate in a parallel political universe. A Karnataka MLA can be caught watching porn in the Assembly and still be rewarded with a deputy chief ministership. Meanwhile, the average citizen is told that their viewing habits must be monitored in the interest of "Bharatiya Sabhyata". It is a strange morality indeed that punishes the many for the sins of the powerful few.

What worries me most is not the immediate proposal but the principle it normalises.

Once Aadhaar becomes a routine gateway for online behaviour, where does the line stop? Will Instagram be the next frontier — verify your identity before you double-tap? Will your browsing speeds fluctuate depending on whether you like Viksit Bharat reels or anti-BJP satire? Will telecom companies nudge you toward preferred platforms by speeding up one streaming service and slowing down another? This is not dystopia. It is the logical conclusion of unchecked data capture.

More importantly, Aadhaar linkage to web activity directly contradicts the Right to Privacy affirmed by the Supreme Court itself in the Puttaswamy judgment of 2017. Privacy, the Court held, is not the absence of wrongdoing; it is the foundation of dignity, autonomy, and liberty. You cannot meaningfully participate in public life if your private life is under constant surveillance.

The Ranveer Allahbadia controversy may seem trivial to some, a storm in a digital teacup, but the questions it has prompted are anything but. What we are debating now is the architecture of the Indian Internet: who controls it, who polices it, who benefits from it, and who is made vulnerable by it. In that sense, this moment is a gift. It forces us to confront, with humour but also seriousness, the kind of country we are building.

Perhaps, instead of asking for Aadhaar to watch a YouTube comedy show, we should demand stronger data protection laws, independent regulatory bodies with real expertise, and a public conversation guided by reason rather than moral panic. Until then, I suppose we will keep circling back to controversies like these — unexpected, absurd, and yet revealing — that serve as reminders that, in the digital age, the biggest threat to our freedoms may not be obscenity but overreach.

Anish Gawande is a writer and translator

## THE PARENTPLAYBOOK

STRATEGIES FOR GROWING UP, TOGETHER



Piya Marker

mirrorfeedback@timesofindia.com

# Failure to launch syndrome

It is important to teach our children that adulthood is much more than mere academic success

No, what you read in the headline is not an officially diagnosed syndrome, but the problem is real. It's a term used to describe young people who struggle to transition smoothly into adult life. These young adults avoid responsibilities, resist work or education, show low motivation to build a future that is self-sufficient. While on the surface it may seem like laziness or a child being entitled, this is largely a combination of anxiety and fear that is born out of learned helplessness and over-dependency

on parental support.

When, as parents, we constantly shield our children from discomforts that are age appropriate and not detrimental to them in any way, we are crippling them as we deny them the opportunity to learn from setbacks, conflicts or time management. With every obstacle you remove, you also remove opportunity for growth. We often mistake love for giving in to everything. Children must learn that needs are met by personal initiative, constructive contribution, struggle and perseverance. And when needs are met easily, they must be met with humility and gratitude.

Sometimes, parents feel guilty saying "no" and easily give into all demands and excuses made by the child. Over time, the child gets the



message that procrastination, excuses, manipulation and lack of effort is also rewarded. They learn that motivation and accountability is optional.

Sometimes, it's hard to let go and accept that your child is becoming independent. Parents prefer to have the control and reinforce dependence. Instead of reinforcing ability and instilling self-confidence, the young adult hears "he's still my baby", "leave it, I'll do it for you" while these statements may come from love, it perpetuates feelings of self-doubt and low expectations.

Academic success is not the measure or predictor of your child's success in adulthood. Children need to be taught how to balance work and play, how to budget, how to do chores at home (irrespective of your status and number of staff), they need to know how to cook, do laundry and manage time. They need to be taught how to handle failure. Without these skills children enter adulthood unprepared, afraid and anxious. They do not trust themselves to manage and find themselves trapped in perpetual child-

hood. The world feels daunting, competitive, uncertain and judgmental. This makes them freeze, when what we want is for them to fly. Low tolerance for discomfort, constant fear of disappointing one's parents and a great dependence on external validation can make the foray into adult life seem terrifying.

So, shift the narrative from, "Don't worry I'll do it for you" to "What would you like to do next?" replace, "Don't mess up" with "Try it and if it doesn't work, we will find another way"

Remember when your child feels both safety and faith, they will rise. Failure to launch is not about failure, it's simply about us being unable to let go, teach independence and self-reliance to your child.

"Our job is not to prepare the road for our child; it is to prepare our child for the road"

Piya Marker is a parent coach and special educator



# Scientists 'supercharge' cells to reverse ageing

Researchers boost mitochondria using nanoflowers, offering hope for treating age-linked diseases like Alzheimer's, muscular dystrophy and fatty liver disease

Mark Johnson  
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Ageing taps us on the shoulder in many ways: wrinkles, thinning hair, loss of flexibility, slowing of the brain. But the process also unfolds at a more fundamental, microscopic level, as the energy source inside most cells deteriorates. Scientists at Texas A&M University have discovered a way to recharge ageing and damaged cells, an innovation that could lead to better treatment for a variety of conditions, including Alzheimer's disease, muscular dystrophy and fatty liver disease.

All cells, except those in red blood, get their energy from the mitochondria found in the fluid that surrounds the nucleus. Sometimes called the powerhouse of cells, the mitochondria play an important role in fighting viruses, starving parasites, and synthesising amino acids, sex hormones and other important chemicals in the body. As people age, their mitochondria diminish, "a primary or secondary contributor to multiple ageing-associated disorders, neurodegenerative diseases and metabolic conditions such as diabetes," according to Akhilesh K. Gaharwar, a professor of biomedical engineering at Texas A&M.

Gaharwar and his colleagues created mini mitochondria factories by adding microscopic flower-shaped particles called nanoflowers to a lab dish containing stem cells. The nanoflowers, hundreds of which could fit in the width of a human hair, get taken into the stem cells through a natural process similar to the way cells absorb nutrients. The nanoflowers are made from an inorganic compound called molybdenum disulfide, which is able to trigger the process cells use to make more mitochondria. However, nanoflowers enable the stem cells to produce double the normal amount of mitochondria, which they then transfer to ordinary ageing or damaged cells.

Mitochondria experts said the study represents an important advance. "The fact that you can increase the number of mitochondria per cell is

huge," said Daria Mochly-Rosen, a Stanford University professor. Mochly-Rosen, who co-wrote a book on mitochondria called "The Life Machines: How Taking Care of Your Mitochondria Can Transform Your Health," said her own research led her to conclude that "knowing what mitochondria can do for us can change the future of medicine, and I think [the new study] is an example of that."

The process described by the Texas A&M team exploits the natural ability of battery-like mitochondria to transfer from one cell to another. "We are supercharging stem cells so that they can donate these batteries to damaged cells at a much higher rate," Gaharwar said. The stem cells, he said, "have a homing ability. Whenever they see damage, they go and settle down over there and they basically try to regenerate the damaged area."

Scientists carried out the procedure using different cell types in a lab dish. Gaharwar said he and his colleagues hope to begin testing the technique in rats in January or February. The method would need to show safety and effectiveness in clinical trials before it could be used to treat people. Existing medications can increase a patient's mitochondria, but most don't change how the cell produces or maintains mitochondria. As a result, the treatments must be taken multiple times. If the new method receives clinical approval, doctors could use it to supercharge a patient's own cells, Gaharwar said. The patient's skin cells, for example, could be removed and reprogrammed into stem cells, the raw building materials that develop into skin, bone, cartilage and blood.

The stem cells could then be supplied with mitochondria-boosting nanoflowers in a lab dish and given back to the patient. The newly energised stem cells would circulate through the body providing mitochondria to stressed or damaged cells. Having new mitochondria could help ageing nervous system cells communicate better. In a person with diabetes, the addition of fresh mitochondria could help cells process glucose faster, Gaharwar said.

Keshav K. Singh, founding editor in chief of the journal Mitochondrion and director of the Cancer Genetics Program at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, called the study promising but cautioned that it is still in the early stages. He said the long-term safety of molybdenum disulfide in humans is unknown. "Improving mitochondrial function can really extend life and health," he said. The goal would be to protect, sustain and generate new mitochondria, he said, "and do it for every organ."



## SUBSTITUTE SERVICE UNDER ORDER 5 RULE 20(1A) OF C.P.C IN THE COURT OF CIVIL JUDGE SENIOR DIVISION

"A" COURT, MERCES, TISWADI - GOA.  
CNR No. : GANG020012802025

Matrimonial Petition No.: 26/2025/A

Ashley Alfredo Fernandes.. Petitioner  
V/s

Limiya Pereira alias

Limiya... Respondent

To,

Respondent

Mrs. Limiya Pereira alias Limiya,

D/o Mr. Dominic Anthony Pereira

34 years of age, r/o SA 03/119,

Naglai Wadi, Nagale, Vasai, Palghar,

Maharashtra

**WHEREAS** the above named Plaintiff have instituted a Suit for Divorce under Article 4(4) and (5) of the Law of Divorce of the Family Law (Copy of plaint and documents may be collected from the office of this Court on any working day during the working hours).

**AND WHEREAS** the summons issued to you on the above mentioned address has returned unserved.

**AND WHEREAS**, the Advocate for the Plaintiff has filed an application before this Court for substitute service.

**AND WHEREAS**, this Court is satisfied that this is a fit case for ordering service by publication in local daily newspaper circulating in the State of Maharashtra.

**AND WHEREAS**, notice is hereby given to you to appear before this Court either in person or by a pleader duly instructed if any, on the 27th January, 2026 at 10.00 a.m. and to file for reply.

Take note that in default of your appearance on the day mentioned, the said suit will be heard and determined in your absence.

Given under my hand and the seal of the Court, this 15th day of November, 2025.

Sd/-

(Sarika N. Fal Dessai)  
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Merces, Tiswadi - Goa.



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# comment

THOUGHT  
FOR THE DAY

Old age is like a plane flying through a storm. Once you're aboard, there's nothing you can do — Golda Meir, former prime minister of Israel

## Voting should be made a breeze for the elderly

The silver-haired set wishes to vote, but we must make the process smoother for them. A Joint Action Committee (JAC) of Senior Citizens, a network of 28 organisations working in the space for welfare and rights of older people in Maharashtra, said it is confident that the upcoming local elections scheduled for next month will also be carried out well in the state.

Some of the committee's recommendations to make voting more

senior-friendly strike a chord.

The JAC has requested ground-floor polling booths with ramps, lifts, and wheelchairs at polling stations. It has also asked for priority voting or separate queues for senior citizens, with enough seating and shaded waiting areas. This, should also help another voting demographic — the people with disabilities, who will also find ramps and wheelchairs, of course, hugely beneficial. Some of these people, including the elderly,

need an attendant or some assistance at the booth till a point which should be made available, or the possibility that they will arrive with their helper should be factored in.

Sometimes, there are separate queues for senior citizens, yet these should be enforced across all centres. We endorse the Committee's call for medical facilities at venues. Basic first aid kits and an ambulance stationed close by are necessary.

This is just the surface of the

support network needed. Clear instructions from the time the voter leaves his premises, help desks along the way which can guide people, remind them about what they need to establish identity and be allowed to vote, is important, so that they can take everything along and are not asked for a document they do not have at the poll booth. Make this set of citizens feel counted and cared for; their voices are as important as others.

## 100 promises, zero action

INSIDE  
ANGLE



Sanjeev Shivadekar

As Mumbai heads towards the civic elections, the city is being flooded with big promises and shiny plans. But, what people truly want is a political party with a manifesto that has a clear commitment to end flooding, fix potholes, improve footpaths and air quality, and make the city liveable.

Politicians are talking about bird parks, golf courses, new tunnels, and bridges and sparkling world-class projects. Yet, as metro cities rush towards earning the tag of "Smart City", Mumbai and other urban centres still struggle with the most basic problems that have gone unresolved for decades.

Primarily, people living in Mumbai, Thane, Mira-Bhayander, and Vasai-Virar are tired of the daily struggles of navigating each day. Clean and safe streets and proper civic amenities are supposed to be fundamental rights, and every party lists them in their manifesto.

But, once in power, almost everything on the list is forgotten. At least in this election, will any party stand up for the taxpaying Mumbai-kar who continues to struggle even for basic civic amenities?

Now is the time for elected representatives to put people before projects and commit to fixing long-pending problems like reclaiming footpaths, enforcing traffic rules and making streets safe for pedestrians.

Across Mumbai, neglect is impossible to miss. Major roads like S V Road, Linking Road (right from Bandra to Dahisar), service lanes along both eastern and western expressways are clogged not just with traffic but with layers of encroachment. Hawkers, illegal garages, eateries, marriage lawns, parking occupied by used car dealers and service centres have taken over public spaces.

Footpaths have all but vanished, forcing pedestrians onto dangerously busy roads where fast-moving

With polls round the corner, the disconnect between raja and praja is stark. While politicians talk bird parks, golf courses, world-class projects, Mumbai-kars want good roads, clean air, and safe commutes



This badly maintained road near the Santacruz Metro station is a prime example of how little the administration cares about citizens. PIC/SHADAB KHAN

vehicles ply. Borivli offers a stark example. A road meant for BEST buses has been so overtaken by hawkers that public transport buses have been forced to change their route permanently, despite the road running right next to a police station and a court.

Public spaces meant for citizens have quietly been treated like private property. No parking or reserved boards appear on BMC land put by shop owners and hoteliers with complete impunity.

The depth of the crisis becomes clear through two telling moments reported by the media. First, even those running the city admit they cannot navigate it safely. A former municipal commissioner (now retired) once revealed that he cannot take his own elderly parents for a simple walk. If the city's top officials cannot walk its streets or pavements without worry, what hope is there for an ordinary Mumbai-kar, especially for women, senior citizens, and children?

Second, the Bombay High Court itself sounded the alarm. While hear-

ing one of the petitions, the judge observed that the spread of illegal hawking is like a "menace" overtaking the city.

The encroachment of public spaces is eroding pedestrian safety and choking the city's basic functioning. All this happens despite clear rules by the court banning hawking within 100 metres of schools, temples, hospitals and within 150 metres of railway stations.

The numbers speak louder than any speech. It is said that officially Mumbai has around 32,000 licensed hawkers, but hawker unions estimate the real number exceeds three lakh. In 2023-2024, the BMC took action against 3.37 lakh hawkers and collected ₹5.14 crore in fines. But most of them returned to the same spots within days. The message is clear: fines alone do not work.

What is needed is consistent enforcement, stronger penalties and stricter measures including jail for repeat offenders or else the cycle will never end.

The cost of this neglect is not merely inconvenience; it is deadly.

With footpaths disappearing and roads turning into obstacle courses, pedestrians are forced into the path of speeding vehicles. An RTI inquiry by mid-day revealed the grim human toll. Between 2013 and 2012, 4514 people died in road accidents in Mumbai and over half were pedestrians.

The stats clearly indicate that lives are lost because the city refuses to guarantee safe places to walk and policemen failing to maintain law and order.

Even the BJP's outreach campaign "Awaaz Mumbai-karancha, Sankalp BJP cha" (public outreach programme conducted in Mumbai to understand people's views and expectations from the city) reflects public frustration. With 2.65 lakh responses, the survey found that 53 per cent of Mumbai-kars are unhappy with basic civic services. Their demands are straightforward: fix potholes, clear garbage, clean drains, and prevent flooding during the monsoon. These are not luxuries, but the bare minimum.

The people have spoken. Now the administration, police and political leadership must respond with action, not words.

If citizens really want 'Achhe Din', voters, whether living in slums, middle class societies or high-rise towers, must stand united in their demand, no new promises until old ones (to fix basic problems) are fulfilled. Reclaim public spaces, enforce traffic laws. Make streets and footpaths safe. Only then does Mumbai truly aspire to be a "smart city".

If state leadership once again fails to show the political will and basic sense to solve these long-pending issues, Mumbai-kars will be left with no choice but to continue living with reluctant acceptance, humming that old Bollywood song "Yeh dil mushkil jeena yahan, yeh hai Bombay meri jaan".

Sanjeev Shivadekar is political editor, mid-day. He tweets @SanjeevShivadekar

Send your feedback to mailbag@mid-day.com

## LETTERS

### Keep filing complaints; lost phones can be traced

This refers to '5000 phones traced in 15 days!'. The Mumbai Police and the Cyber Cell have done commendable work. In a fast-paced city, where people lose phones and hopes, this recovery drive shows that the devices can be traced and returned.

MAYA HEMANT BHATKAR

### Improve city planning so wildlife stays put

This refers to 'Exotic pets on loose in Mumbai'. Wild animals straying into the city is alarming. Ongoing concreting and digging threaten Mumbai's flora and fauna. Without policy sync, projects like the Thane-Borivli tunnel may push more wildlife out of their habitats.

GODWIN D'CRUZ

### Give booth-level officers enough breathing space

This refers to 'EC hits pause on voter roll push'. The special intensive revision (SIR) process is exhaustive and places a heavy burden on booth-level officers. It is unclear why the Election Commission of India is fast-tracking it in states where polls aren't scheduled to be held anytime soon.

BAL GOVIND

### Trump's gold card makes US citizenship easy

Apropos of 'Trump launches \$1M US Gold Card', the offer gives companies a premium route to sponsor top United States-trained graduates, generating revenue and retaining skilled talent.

PV PRAKASH

## have your say!



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Printed and published by Shaikh Latif Gaffar on behalf of Mid-Day Informedia Ltd, and printed at Balaji Globus Industrial Park, Bldg. No. B, Unit No. 1, 2 & 3, Bhiwandi-Nashik Bye Pass Road, Village-Walshind, Bhiwandi-421302. Editorial and Advertising offices at 6th floor, RNA Corporate Park, off WEH, Kalanagar, Bandra (East) Mumbai 400051; Telephone Nos: 68314800; Fax No: 26426812, RNI Number 35667/79 Postal Registration No MCN/314/2024-2026. Reproduction in whole or in part without the written permission of the publisher is prohibited. Editor: \*Sachin Kalbag (\*Responsible for selection of news under the Press and Registration of Books Act 1867)



DECCAN  
Chronicle

13 DECEMBER 2025

Trump-Modi call: Will deal on Ukraine benefit India?

The Donald Trump playbook of threats of trade wars and tariff tantrums may not have worked too badly for him at home as the narrowing of the US trade deficit in September to its lowest point since the Covid year of 2020 means a part of his economic attack on nations like China and India and his sweeping tariffs against global friends and foes may be working.

A positive reading of his latest telephonic talk with Prime Minister Narendra Modi may even be justified if there has ever been any correlation between what the US President says and how he acts. His record does not support any assumptions to be made about the phone call that India may have initiated.

The trade talks are on but moving at snail's pace and there is only the word of his envoys to talks in India that things are going swimmingly, and the New Year might even see a deal being inked. Until then, Indian exports to the US will be in limbo even as new threats are emerging with Indian rice and basmati not quite being the flavour of the month at the White House.

What the "warm" Trump-Modi conversation can be taken to mean is that India's strategic autonomy is seen to be working as India's balancing act with Chinese and Russian leaders, especially during Vladimir Putin's recent visit to India, may have been noted with interest in Washington. However, there is no sign of any concession being offered to India from the tariffs imposed even as Mr Trump and Mr Modi speak of enhancing cooperation in energy, security, defence and critical technologies.

In the meanwhile, Mr Trump has annoyed Europe with a new strategy document that has set alarm bells ringing. The secretary-general of Nato, Mark Rutte, has gone so far as to say that Europe must prepare for war against Russia. It is causing not just heartburn in Europe that Mr Trump has been preparing to throw Volodymyr Zelenskyy under the bus by coercing him to sign off on the eastern Donbas, swapping territory for nothing as no security guarantees have been spelt out.

Outlandish ideas like creating a free economic zone in the war zone in Ukraine that is being held by Russia are not helping the cause of peace either even as Mr Putin is threatening to take the Donbas by force, regardless of how long it takes him and despite heavy troop losses. Mr Trump's 28-point peace plan has been whittled down to a 19-point plan that is backed by the rest of Europe, but Mr Putin may not be as interested in it.

However good the intentions to make peace in Europe work for the world, the Trump fixation with playing the broker between Ukraine and Russia, mostly on terms favourable to Russia, is becoming troublesome. Failure in Ukraine could be construed as Mr Trump's biggest defeat and Europe fears that, in such an eventuality, he could well lead the US into isolationism with Latin America his sole focus outside of home.

A bad peace deal could spell disaster for Ukraine and Europe even if it doesn't straightaway lead to Russia coming back into the global economy. But India will be a major gainer if peace does prevail as that would mean free access to Russian energy sources again without tariffs and sanctions. India and China's influence on Mr Putin to make peace may have been exaggerated as evidenced in the Russian president's impassive responses to friendly nudges from Xi Jinping and Mr Modi. Even so, peace in Ukraine would be a win-win for most if not for the country that has suffered an invasion since February 2022.

Fitting tribute to AI godparents

In the history of humankind, few inventions and discoveries have altered human civilisation. The prominent items in the list are fire, wheel, agriculture, iron, shipbuilding, printing press, electricity, crude oil, computer and Internet. The latest addition to this momentous list is artificial intelligence — an invention that is expected to change how humans perform their basic function, i.e. thinking. It is, therefore, fitting for *Time* magazine to pay a tribute to the architects of artificial intelligence by declaring them as the 2025 Person of the Year.

Though tech companies were aware of AI and its potential and invested enormous amounts of money, the breakout moment came with the launch of ChatGPT, which uses generative models to generate text, images, among others.

In 2025, AI began to change how people think and work. Organisations are deploying it for various purposes such as writing code, managing vehicular traffic, and optimising manufacturing, among others. People used AI for advice on human emotions and medical treatments.

The AI craze set off a race between major technology companies to capture the developing market. It catapulted Nvidia to become the most valuable company in the world for its ability to produce chips that run AI data centres — virtually putting US stock markets on steroids.

Buoyed by the all-around optimism, Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang remarked that the AI could increase the size of the global economy from \$100 trillion to \$500 trillion. While AI is a great invention, one needs to make assessments objectively. AI is still at its infancy, and nobody has any faintest idea about its impact on job seekers or the new job avenues that it will create.

While there is no second opinion about embracing new technologies to stay competitive in the modern world, governments around the world must not lose sight of their primary responsibility — the welfare of people and the protection of Mother Earth. They must evolve a global consensus to develop AI within the confines of these higher objectives and not merely in the pursuit of money.

DECCAN CHRONICLE

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K. SUDHAKAR  
Printer & Publisher

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Subhani



Time to change branding of IndiGo to 'Indi: GoToHell'?



Shobhaa's Take

Never ever in the history of travel and aviation has the Indian airline passenger vented as vociferously or openly displayed the level of frustration, murderous rage and retaliation, as on December 3, when a pampered, privileged and monopolistic airline perversely took advantage of the situation to hold millions of fliers to ransom. It's a wonder there wasn't blood on the floor at airports across India as horrified citizens witnessed the torment and helplessness of customers who had zero options but to lump it, while flight after flight got cancelled, without any convincing explanations. It was an unplanned mutiny. Anarchy. Without an identifiable "monarch" to spew one's seething anger on. Where were the top bosses during this unprecedented chaos? Why were they absent from their posts? How cowardly to let juniors face the brunt of passenger wrath, stomach curses, insults, abuse, while the top dogs remained shielded and silent during the most turbulent period of the breakdown.

We still don't know enough. Someone up there is blatantly lying. But who? It is not possible that the so-called rejig of time tables and schedules came out of the blue. Or that the top management was unaware of the terrible repercussions the chaos would create. Did anybody at that level apologise or show that they cared? Nope. This is called despicable corporate arrogance and high handedness of the shabbiest kind. While so many fellow citizens suffered on account of cancelled flights, the mighty executives at IndiGo chose to hide behind flimsy explanations and pass the

buck. Shameful. As stories of passengers faced with the worst travel traumas surfaced, airports were turned into ugly battlegrounds with hysterical passengers facing bizarre dilemmas, like the couple who missed their own wedding reception and attended virtually (there's a movie script in their insane experience), to victims forced to skip key job interviews, legal cases, medical emergencies and more.

IndiGo's shameful attitude was defined by callousness, indifference and complacency. Who can condone the absence of basics like drinking water and snacks to passengers stuck — rather — trapped — for hours at airports across the country? What explanation does the IndiGo board have for this and countless other lapses?

Inexcusable! It is really the highest level of resilience and tolerance shown by citizens that prevented a far bigger disaster on the ground, given how unconsciously passengers were treated. Far more damage could have occurred — not that destruction of public property would get passengers a boarding card. One felt sorry for the physical assaults on hapless IndiGo staffers, who had to stoically bear the brunt of passenger rage. The thing is, now that the crisis is behind us... what do we know that can possibly justify the mayhem? Those of us who were caught in the turbulence could do nothing but scramble for crazily priced seats on other airlines. There again — isn't it cold blooded, extortionist, and horribly hard hearted for major IndiGo competitors to automatically hike fares, often doubling and trebling the cost — imagine paying a lakh and more to travel from

Isn't it cold blooded, extortionist and horribly hard hearted for major IndiGo competitors to automatically hike fares, doubling and trebling the cost — imagine paying a lakh and more to travel from Mumbai to Delhi?

Mumbai to Delhi? Should there not be a more humane approach to a crisis of this kind? Is everything about making a quick buck at the expense of decency? How opportunistic and ugly all this makes us look as a people.

But for every ugly outburst, there was a feel-good story as well. Take, for example, two feisty ladies who almost single-handedly run Literature Festivals in their respective cities — Dr Manjiri Prabhu and her Pune International Lit Fest, Shinnie Abraham and the Bengaluru Lit Fest. Both lit fests overlapped over the same disastrous IndiGo weekend. Which meant last-minute cancellations, stranded authors, non-arrival of books — any organiser's worst nightmare.

But, with their inimitable never say die spirit, the two ladies soldiered on, rejigged schedules, called in friends to help conduct sessions, assured attendees that the show would go on! It brought out the best in them, as also in some of the writers who sportingly took alternative flights, waiting for hours at distant airports, but turning up to make their announced sessions. It took me eight hours to get from Pune to the Bengaluru venue — the city's old Central Jail. No escape!

The IndiGo conundrum continues to baffle with conspiracy theories galore. Forget the theories, boss... Just answer one simple question — *Yeh Rahul Bhatia kaisa aadmi hai?* The managing director of the rogue airline was *gayab* during the crisis! Like... MIA! The founder promoter with a jumbo-sized ego was

invisible while the nation was shaken. It was worse than the "paan ki dukaan" taunt of the copromoter. In this scenario, there was no paan (not even bottled water) and the dukaan had rudely pulled the shutters down. This was flagrant, blatant, and, dare I say it, criminal. No punitive action? No questioning by the DGCA? It's been called a chhota gamble that led to a massive mess. A cascading effect that started with one cancelled flight. Even when the pilots were willing to fly. Yeah. Sure. Exhausted, bleary eyed, overworked pilots willing to fly is small comfort to passengers and crew entrusting their precious lives to fatigued captains. *Chalo ji...* I was once an IndiGo loyalist, true and faithful. Now, I have turned into a promiscuous flier — ready to hop on to any airplane willing to fly me to my destination in one piece, and hopefully on time.

Till my next flight, I am working on the viral Akshay Khanna hook step from the movie *Dhrunder*, and pretending I am Balochi. I will be watching the Ranveer Singh starrer over the weekend, *inshallah...* But what has interested me far more is the strident backlash faced by a few, prominent film critics audacious enough to state they have not exactly adored the movie or the track that has become the movie's signature. *Kyun-ki*, only paid reviews rule. Everyone knows. But lips are sealed. With the number of heads rolling, the film industry is playing ostrich. In an environment where gush is everything, even a single critical line is taken as a personal attack. Critics for hire?

Yup. Most "influencers" are no better than pimps parading as experts — on any and every subject. Show them the money and they will endorse just about anything — even if it is packaged dung.

Instagram handle @ShobhaaDe; Twitter handle @DeShobhaa

LETTERS

MP MAOIST-FREE

It seems Union home minister Amit Shah's lofty vision of making India Maoist-free by March 2026 has begun with Madhya Pradesh. Not only the grit and determination shown on the ground but also sacrifice of the lives by the security forces personnel must be remembered and lauded.

Lam Jeevan Kumar  
Guntur

NAIDU'S SPEED

There is no doubt some ministers are not up to the mark in respect of their duties. Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu could have called them in his chamber and advised them, rather than publish rankings (*Naidu's speed stands out in file clearances, Dec. 12*). This is not the right action from a renowned administrator.

N. Ramalakshmi  
Malikipuram

HONOURING DIWALI

It is heartening, encouraging and cheering to read that Deepavali, the festival of lights, has officially been inscribed in the Unesco's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (*Global recognition for Diwali, Dec. 12*). The festival also commemorates the victory of good over evil and the unity and diversity.

Dr C. Ghanshyam  
Visakhapatnam

As the world grapples with conflict and polarisation, Unesco's recognition of Deepavali as an intangible heritage of humanity is a shining beacon of hope. This festival of lights, celebrated by over a billion people worldwide, has become a symbol of India's soft power. Diwali's inclusion in the list of over 700 elements from around the world is a testament to the country's rich cultural heritage.

Raju Kolluru  
Kakinada

NON-HINDU STAFF

It is genuine and praiseworthy that the state government has directed the TTD to resolve the issue of non-Hindu employees deployed on the Tirumala hills (AP : Redeploy non-Hindu staff in other TTD departments, December 12) It is the responsibility of both non-Hindu employees and TTD Board to create a congenial atmosphere on the seven hills

B.V. Apparao  
Simhachalam

Email your letters to  
info@deccanmail.com,  
editor@deccanmail.com.

Farrukh  
Dhondy  
Cabbages  
& Kings



"I only know I am  
Because memory tells me so  
The gods above don't give a damn  
They probably don't even know  
There is below the heavens an earth  
Where lesser beings crawl  
Doomed to die from the gift of birth  
It really matters fall."

— From **Hey Bhagwan, What About Hindustan**, by Bachchoo

It takes intelligence to understand what intelligence is. The invention of Artificial Intelligence seems to tell us that it's not God's gift but a construction which traces through an ocean of available information to formulate answers.

AI doesn't just deduce, it invents, composes and I suppose its formulations rely on statistically checked probabilities.

I used the word "available" earlier. I'll tell you why. A couple of years ago, a friend of mine introduced me to AI. In fact, he put the app on my computer and said when you tap it, it will ask you to ask it anything. He said I should try it now. I did.

The first thing I asked the Bot (Is that what it's generically called?) "Who the hell is Bachchoo?" Readers of this column, regular, occasional or first time, will be aware that a quotation from the said Bachchoo's works appears every week as a pre-

appendage to the deliberations in Cabbages and Kings. The Bot answered almost immediately. The words came up on the screen as though they were transcripts of a dictating voice. The answer said that Bachchoo was a nineteenth century poet from some unknown place. I asked it the same question again, phrasing it slightly differently — I can't recall the exact words, but perhaps I left the "hell" reference out and said something like "please identify the writer called Bachchoo, and tell me if it's a penname?"

And yes, there was a completely different answer. Botty said that Bachchoo was the pen name of some obscure dead writer, who it named.

That the same Bot gave me two different answers in the space of five minutes was peculiar. But that was then, and this is where my qualification of "available" applies.

Very recently I asked Botty the same question again. Same Bot, same app on the computer. This time it told me that Bachchoo was a poet, extracts of whose work were quoted every week in a column — and then it mentioned my name. However, after that in the same answer, it went on to say that Bachchoo could be a misspelling of Bachchan, and said there was a famous writer called Hariyansh Rai Bachchan, who very many readers will know was the film star Amitabh Bachchan's dad, and wrote, among very many other things, a transformation of Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyat* as

Madhushala.

But in the gap between the years that I asked the questions, Botty has got smarter and accumulated more data. It now adds that Bachchoo is a Mauritian politician and another person with that surname is a Trinidadian writer.

So, it seems that as Botty widens its information base, things get better and perhaps, for writers and operatives who work with information, a bit threatening?

I have friends who work with AI, not for gain or in their professions, but for fun. A director friend, stage and film, doesn't write scripts himself but has recently sent me outlines written for whole screenplays by the Bot he calls "his Friend". They describe, in synopsis, the dramatic action. Most of it reads to me like clichés and quite predictable, but in the hands of a skilful screenplay writer these could be modified and made exciting without the writer having to do the preliminary framework of thinking out a plot. I suppose for genre films — detective, romance, horror, this would work. Perhaps this is already the way films are being produced in some world film industries?

Another close friend, Tamara Howe, and I both belong to a group of people calling ourselves officially the Darcus Howe Legacy Collective. Darcus Howe was a prominent activist, left-wing thinker, journalist, editor and broadcaster.

He was born in Trinidad and came to Britain as

an immigrant and dedicated his life to justice and progress for the new communities of the UK. I worked for and with him. His daughter Tamara now asked AI to formulate what Darcus might have said about a current political situation. Botty replied and his/her/their formulations were impressively convincing and precise — even though the real Darcus would have undoubtedly included some twist or surprise in his deliberations.

A serious and dangerous development with AI is that it can be programmed to deliberately lie, pass disinformation or indulge in conspiracy theories. Elon Musk's AI device Grok is one such. Ask it who was cleverer, Musk or Einstein, it will say Musk. And I wonder what it will say if asked who the better playwright is, Shakespeare or Musk?

Grok will also tell you that the gas Zyklon B released into the chambers by the Nazis was not there for genocide but was merely a disinfectant. Grok also, following His Master's Voice, advocates the defunding of the BBC and champions extreme-right-wing broadcasters like the UK's GB News.

Wikipedia's investigation into Grok contends that it uses information from the racist, white-nationalist platform Stormfront, and also from Infowars owned by the conspiracy theorist and school-shooting denier Alex Jones. Look him up — not on Grok but Google — who is not very polite about him.



## The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

### End the agony

SC's call for passive euthanasia

THE Supreme Court's blunt observation that "we will have to do something now; we can't allow him to live like this" marks a defining moment in the country's evolution on end-of-life dignity. The case of the 32-year-old man who has remained in a vegetative state for 13 years is no longer only a medical tragedy. It is now a legal and ethical watershed reminiscent of the landmark Aruna Shanbaug case, which first compelled the nation to confront the question of passive euthanasia. In 2011, the SC, ruling on Shanbaug, a nurse who spent 42 years in a vegetative state after a horrific assault, allowed passive euthanasia in principle but under restrictive safeguards. Her case became the moral trigger that led to the 2018 Constitution Bench judgment legalising passive euthanasia and laying down a process. In 2023, the court further simplified these guidelines, requiring assessments by primary and secondary medical boards, the very process now unfolding.

Repeated pleas in the present case highlight gaps: home care proved inadequate, state support insufficient and ethical dilemmas unresolved. The case could potentially be the first clear passive euthanasia approval for a young adult. Thousands of patients linger in the country in vegetative states, burdening families emotionally and financially while raising questions on the right to die with dignity under Article 21.

The court must prioritise patient autonomy and family anguish over rigid prolongation of biological existence. If AIIMS confirms futility by December 17, approval could set a precedent, clarifying safeguards against abuse while honouring end-of-life choices. Policymakers should enact clear guidelines for vegetative-state cases, integrating palliative care and counselling. Compassion demands balancing life's sanctity with suffering's cruelty. Euthanasia, when consensual, upholds humanity. The judiciary should deliver justice that frees the patient from torment and shows empathy for the family.

## Bangladesh polls

Legitimacy will be a big challenge

THE announcement of the national elections, which will be held on February 12 along with a referendum on sweeping constitutional reforms, marks the start of another challenging chapter in the history of Bangladesh. The young nation will go to the polls for the first time since an uprising spearheaded by students led to the ouster of Sheikh Hasina's Awami League government in August 2024. The Election Commission faces the onerous task of conducting free and fair elections, which have been a rarity in that country during the past five decades. Unfortunately, a level playing field is again conspicuous by its absence, with the interim government banning all activities of the Awami League under an anti-terrorism law.

It's practically a two-horse race now — former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party is pitted against its one-time ally Jamaat-e-Islami. Eighty-year-old Zia's health has deteriorated rapidly in recent weeks, even as her son, Tarique Rahman, is expected to return to Bangladesh after a long exile in the UK. However, Hasina's return to her homeland is ruled out as she was recently convicted and sentenced to death by a special tribunal for "crimes against humanity". Her government's ruthless crackdown had claimed the lives of over 1,400 protesters in July-August last year. She has been living in India since then; Dhaka is seeking her extradition, a thorny matter that has cast a long shadow over bilateral ties.

The elections will test the interim government's resolve to facilitate a much-needed democratic transition. International legitimacy for the polls and the new dispensation will be a decisive factor. Amid its tightrope walk on the Hasina issue, New Delhi is hoping for political stability in Bangladesh, which has generally been its time-tested ally in the subcontinent. It's equally important for India to ward off Pakistan, which is reaching out to Bangladesh for strategic gains.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

## The Tribune.

LAHORE, SUNDAY, DECEMBER 13, 1925

### Australia and India

SENATOR Matthew Reid, a member of the Commonwealth Parliament of Australia, recently gave an interview to the Associated Press at Madras, in the course of which he made certain observations regarding Indian self-government and the Australian policy regarding non-Whites. He said he had studied Indian history and that he was convinced that this country had a definite mission within the British Empire. He was an ardent advocate of dominion status for India within the Empire, which would not be complete or be able to carry out its own mission in the world until India was in full possession of her rights. It is not clear whether in expressing this view, Reid was merely stating his personal opinion. He did explain, however, why Australia was interested in India. "As a matter of defence," he said, "India and Australia as the outposts of the British Empire united within the future British Commonwealth of Nations, would be strong factors in preserving the peace of the East." Evidently, Reid had in his mind the Singapore Base scheme for which India is expected to make a contribution, but before India can be induced to interest herself in the world's peace problem or the future Commonwealth of Nations, it is obviously necessary that she should be the mistress of her own affairs. On the important subject of racial prejudice against Indians, Reid said that, so far as Australia was concerned, there was no racial prejudice and the few Indians who had settled in some of the states were given equal rights with the white population. As for Australia's exclusion of Indians, he said this was more an economic than a racial question.

# BJP takes Hindutva route in TN, Bengal

Saffron party gears up to overpower strong regional forces in 2026 Assembly elections



RADHIKA RAMASESHAN  
SENIOR JOURNALIST

HAVING wrapped up Bihar with an impressive win, the BJP's dream run of electoral wins faces formidable challenges in two states which will vote in April-May 2026: West Bengal and Tamil Nadu. Politics in these states pivots around strong regional forces that have persistently walled out the mainline parties or forced the BJP and the Congress to transact electoral arrangements on their terms.

These parties — the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in Tamil Nadu and the Trinamool Congress (TMC) in West Bengal — are again expected to dominate the show.

While the Congress seems at peace riding on its ally DMK's back in Tamil Nadu, it finds virtually no purchase in Bengal, not after the disastrous showing in Bihar. Both in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls and the 2021 Assembly elections, the Congress had an alliance with the Left Front (LF) that yielded nothing for both partners, but two LF constituents — the All India Forward Bloc and the Revolutionary Socialist Party — recently raised objections to striking yet another deal with the Congress. The TMC, too, is unlikely to have any truck with the Congress.

On the other hand, true to its character, the BJP, notwithstanding its endeavour to cement a broad coalition in Tamil Nadu, is determined to put up a fight in both states, particularly Bengal. Buoyed by its success in the 2019 parliamentary elections, the BJP was convinced that it was a matter of time before it 'conquered' the eastern state. However, in the 2021 Assembly elections, it came nowhere close to its target of winning 200 of the 294 seats. It won



CONFRONTATION: The BJP and the ruling DMK are at loggerheads over lamp-lighting at the Thiruparankundram temple near Madurai during Karthigai Deepam celebrations in Tamil Nadu. PTI

only 77 (the tally fell to around 65 due to defections and bypoll losses), but the BJP had the satisfaction of getting 38 per cent of the votes and emerging as the principal Opposition party.

Undaunted by the not-so-encouraging statistics, Prime Minister Narendra Modi framed the Bengal battle with an image and a metaphor that he believed its voters could relate to. On the day the BJP celebrated the Bihar mandate at its Delhi headquarters, Modi declared, "The Ganga flows from Bihar to Bengal", as though the mighty river would also deposit a bounty of votes in the BJP's catchment areas. It was not an oratorical flourish because on cue, Modi's chief strategist and Union Home Minister Amit Shah formed a team to act on the Bengal blueprint, some elements of which are already visible.

On top of the BJP's playbook is the Hindutva card that has not yet brought in the expected gains in West Bengal and much less in Tamil Nadu, a state abounding in paradoxes that ultimately do not favour Hindu majoritarian politics.

The underlying political irony was reflected in the recent controversy ignited by the lighting of a lamp in the Subramanya

### Politics of Tamil Nadu and West Bengal is centred around a strong regional identity, unlike the Hindi belt.

Swamy temple at Thiruparankundram Hill in Madurai district. The temple is supposed to be one of the six abodes of Murugan, the second son of Shiva-Parvati and the most revered deity in Tamil Nadu. The Sultan Sikandar Avulia Dargah is located metres away, but barring occasional skirmishes, the lamp-lighting — an old and important ritual performed during the Karthigai Deepam festival to symbolise the triumph of light over darkness — passed off peacefully because of a court order to light the lamp away from an ancient pillar called Deepathoon, which is just 15

metres from the dargah and became a bone of contention.

This time, a petition filed in the Madurai bench of the Madras High Court sought permission to perform the ritual at the pillar. The BJP and its allies celebrated when the court allowed the petitioner to light the lamp at the spot, but the district administration promptly issued prohibitory orders which were enforced by the police. Armed with a legal sanction, the BJP and its supporters protested vociferously against the cops.

Mohan Bhagwat, the RSS chief, weighed in on the matter, saying that the "awakening of Hindus was sufficient to achieve the desired outcome" — it sounded like a veiled call for a confrontation if such a situation arose. Congress MP Karti Chidambaram said the BJP's understanding of Tamil Nadu's cultural and religious fabric was "fundamentally misplaced". "The people of Tamil Nadu are most god-fearing, ritualistic, orthodox and temple-going, but faith does not mix with politics," he added.

While the ruling DMK has stuck to its position, the 'dispute' can gain traction if the BJP and the RSS — which are bereft of strong local networks except in small

parts — can sustain the momentum aimed at polarising a polity largely fed on the ideology of Dravida Kazhagam leader Periyar EV Ramasamy. A key feature of Periyar's Self-Respect Movement was portraying Muslims as Dalits who converted to Islam to escape the caste oppression inherent in Hinduism. Most Tamil-speaking voters have no problem with Periyar's postulate.

In West Bengal, after three successive terms in office, the TMC appears vulnerable over issues such as the alleged corruption by Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's trusted lieutenants and the anger that spilled over on the streets after the brutal rape-murder of a young doctor in a Kolkata hospital. Then there are the quotidian experiences of people who have to deal with the ruling party's musclemen and power-brokers, taking them back to the era of Left Front toughies who made survival possible only on their terms.

But the BJP has tied itself in knots over the issue of illegal migrants — data suggests that there are more Hindu than Muslim migrants in West Bengal. The Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls by the Election Commission has caused anxiety within the BJP's own vote bank, along with the affront to the Bangla language, infamously described by the Delhi Police as "Bangladeshi language".

Banerjee tried hard to depict herself as a "friend of the Hindus" with measures like the payment of monthly salaries to Hindu priests and organising the Durga carnival. The experience of other states demonstrates that the Opposition still finds it hard to beat the BJP over Hindutva; so, Banerjee will have to target the BJP's other shortcomings.

The politics of Tamil Nadu and West Bengal is centred around a strong regional distinctiveness, unlike the Hindi belt where voters identify themselves seamlessly with the Hindutva narrative because religious identity is overarching. Can the BJP subsume markers of language and culture into the Hindutva theme?

### THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Politics and religion mixed is the headiest cocktail ever invented. — Norah Bentinck

## The daily race against time

SUPREET GILL

THE other day, I became an accidental eavesdropper, a silent witness to conversations that weren't meant for me. But all those chats gave me a life lesson, a jolt that made me question... what are we doing to ourselves as humans?

As I dropped my son at the cricket club at 6:45 am, I heard his coach speaking on the phone, "Oh, you know how it has been lately with all the tournaments, even on weekends... *Yaar, time hi nahin milta.*" His voice was laced with a weariness that felt ancient.

I parked my car and went for a walk. This time, I decided to unplug — no headphones, no blaring music. I let in the real sounds of the world. As I marched, I kept passing people, each one a walking, talking story of our collective exhaustion. A middle-aged man, walking heavily, said on the phone: "It's been hectic lately. I don't know where all my time goes..." Two young mothers, who were accompanied by their dogs, lamented, "Oh, you know, there is no time for a holiday... you know how it is with two kids..."

A wave of melancholy washed over me on the drive back home. As I rolled down my car window at the fuel station, I heard an attendant tell her colleague ruefully, "*Yaar, time nahin mila iss weekend bhi, mera woh peon ka test tha...*"

The city was waking up to the same complaint. At my university, the guard at the gate checked my ID while telling his friend, "*Yeh Saturday Sunday bhi duty mein nikal gaya, ghar ke kaam ke liye time hi nahin hai.*" As I parked my car, I heard final-year students rushing past: "Bro, no time at all! Legal aid, seminars, internship..." Again, it was all about time.

As I switched on the lamp in the quiet of my office, I finally sat down. My phone buzzed with a backlog of messages. One of them had a picture of my dog, lying blissfully upside down, basking in the morning sun. A sharp, sweet ache swept through my heart. My mind instantly flew to that old song, "*Dil dhoondta hai, phir wohi fursat ke raat din...*" It was a feeling best described by Brooks Hatlen in the Hollywood movie *The Shawshank Redemption*. Upon release from prison, he writes a letter to his mates, stating that "the world went and got itself into a big damn hurry."

We are all Brooks, suddenly finding ourselves in a world that has no pause button. The irony, of course, was that I had to brush this profound feeling aside because I was also short of time.

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### DeepSeek model

Refer to 'DeepSeek saga holds lessons for India'; the meteoric rise of the Chinese model shows how low-cost innovation and autonomy can reshape the AI order any time. These are key lessons as the government-funded BharatGen builds sovereign multilingual models suitable for Indian needs. However, the absence of private Indian tech giants in foundational AI is worrying since firms with huge revenues remain adopters, not creators. Also, BharatGen must avoid Western bias, Chinese-style influence and bureaucratic inertia. India must invest steadily, mobilise its private sector and enforce ethical safeguards to secure technological sovereignty and public trust.

CHANCHAL S MANN, UNA

#### Need openness in AI technology

With reference to 'DeepSeek saga holds lessons for India'; with the crashing of stocks of many US tech companies, DeepSeek cocked a snook at Trump when he started his second term as President, but can it defeat US in the AI race? Eventually the goal is AGI — artificial general intelligence, a hypothetical type of AI that can understand, learn and apply knowledge across any intellectual task a human can. DeepSeek is impressive mainly because it was built on a small budget. As for research, China has been neck and neck with US for years. However, for AI or any other technology to survive, openness is a must.

PS KAUR, BY MAIL

#### West's misplaced criticism

Apropos of 'Can India trust the West: UK must answer'; the writer rightly argues that the British media unjustifiably and selectively blames India for purchasing crude oil from Russia. New Delhi cannot allow any big power to breathe down its neck in its foreign policy matters. It is not the India of 1947, but of 2025 and a lot of water has flown down the Ganges since then. Why should New Delhi bother about the West's misplaced criticism about its deep bonds with Russia and bilateral ties with countries of its preference? It is for the UK to introspect as to why India should be on its side.

RAJ BAHADUR YADAV, FATEHABAD

#### Egalitarian society

Reference to 'Vande Mataram is a song for unity, not division'; the national song represents India's rich cultural heritage and a shared pride even today. But to invoke its enduring legacy to slam Congress-led Opposition for political polarisation is unwarranted. Real nationalism involves justice, liberty, pluralism, communal harmony and peaceful co-existence. A perfect balance between old values and inclusivity is imperative for the creation of a developed egalitarian society. The controversy surrounding the sacred national song that symbolised patriotism, national unity and inspired freedom fighters to resist colonial rule is unfortunate, to say the least.

DS KANG, HOSHIARPUR

#### Shared vigilance needed

Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann's push to ensure road construction quality is a welcome and a long-overdue step. Samples of materials used for construction should be collected and nearby residents should be encouraged to monitor the work to create a powerful system of shared vigilance. When citizens act as the government's eyes, supervision becomes stronger and malpractices by contractors becomes harder to hide. With Rs 16,209 crore earmarked for building 44,920 km of roads, quality must not be compromised on — these roads should not crumble after one or two spells of rain. Public participation, combined with strict technical checks, can ensure durable roads and prevent scarce funds from being wasted.

RS NARULA, PATIALA

#### Illegal immigration a global issue

The Congress' opposition to the Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls is illogical on a sensitive subject relating to illegal migrants. Deportation of illegal migrants is being done by the US and the UK. The Opposition should refrain from 'mean' politics over illegal non-Indians; if developed nations cannot sustain the flow of such migrants, how will an over-populated country like India deal with overflow of Bangladeshi citizens and Rohingyas in the country.

ANIL VINAYAK, AMRITSAR



# Tackling the digital arrest phenomenon



SUBIMAL BHATTACHARJEE  
FORMER COUNTRY HEAD,  
GENERAL DYNAMICS

ON December 1, 2025, the Supreme Court took an unprecedented step: it handed over the investigation of digital arrest scams to the CBI with sweeping powers to probe not just the fraudsters but also the institutional complicity that enables them. Chief Justice Surya Kant's Bench effectively declared war on a cyber-crime ecosystem that has duped Indians of over Rs 2,580 crore since 2022, with banks, telecom operators and law enforcement agencies complicit through negligence, incompetence or worse.

This landmark directive comes barely two weeks after the court took suo motu cognisance of the case involving a 73-year-old advocate-on-record who lost over Rs 1 crore to scammers wielding forged SC orders. The statistics have been screaming for attention: over 2,42,000 reported cases since 2022; Rs 120.30 crore lost in the first quarter of 2024; one Bengaluru engineer held in 'digital custody' for six months, losing Rs 32 crore. Such cases expose the failure of India's protective institutions.

The CBI has been granted authority to investigate the role of bank officials, a crucial recognition that these scams cannot operate without systemic facilitation. The court has directed all states and UTs to transfer FIRs to the CBI.

The directive to investigate bank officials acknowledges that such scams cannot happen without bank facilitation. Fraudulent "mule accounts" are essential to draining victims' savings, yet banks have displayed callousness. Despite injunctions from the National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal, lenders at times allow transfers. They frequently refuse to reverse fraudulent transactions despite court orders.

The SC has ordered the RBI to be impleaded as a party and asked when AI and machine-learning systems would be deployed to detect suspicious accounts. This is an indictment: why hasn't the banking regulator already mandated such systems? The financial inclusion drive that created 550 million new accounts over the past decade has inadvertently provided cover for scammers, with insufficient authentication protocols allowing fake accounts to proliferate.

The telecom sector faces similar scrutiny. There is excessive issuance of multiple SIM cards in the same

name, often using forged documents. The Department of Telecommunications has been directed to present a protocol to curb SIM misuse. Why wasn't this addressed when cybercrime units first flagged telecom network abuse? Combating digital arrest scams requires action beyond the SC's sweeping orders.

First, Parliament must enact specific legislation defining digital arrest as a distinct offence with enhanced penalties. Second, banking sector accountability must extend to prevention. Real-time AI-powered transaction monitoring should flag suspicious patterns automatically. Banks must face severe penalties for facilitating fraud through negligent KYC compliance. Third, telecom operators must be held liable for SIM misuse. Biometric authentication should be mandatory for new connections. Fourth, law enforcement requires capacity building, with cybercrime units trained in digital forensics and AI-driven fraud detection.

The digital arrest phenomenon reveals a disturbing paradox: as India races toward becoming a global digital economy, its defensive infrastructure remains dangerously primitive. When fraudsters can forge SC orders with impunity, banks facilitate theft despite warnings and police lack capacity to respond effectively, the digital ecosystem's credibility crumbles.

The SC has provided the CBI with powers and made institutional accountability explicit. For the scam victims, this intervention may represent their last hope for justice. For India's digital future, it may represent the moment when the nation finally confronted the chasm between its technological aspirations and the harsh reality that its protective institutions remain dangerously inadequate.

Without specific laws defining digital arrest as a distinct offence with enhanced penalties, enforcement will continue to be reactive rather than preventive.

# Curious case of a 100-yr-old canal & 69-yr-old unpaid bills!



SWARN SINGH BOPARAI  
EX-SECRETARY, GOVT OF INDIA

ON December 5, 2025, the Gang Canal completed a century of service — of water flowing from Punjab to Rajasthan, an engineering triumph, and, most remarkably, 69 years of unpaid bills accumulating to an estimated Rs 1.1 lakh crore. What was planned as celebration at the Hussainiwalla Headworks became a cancelled ceremony; a Central minister asked to pack his bags; and a reminder that some anniversaries are best left alone since they open festering wounds.

The irony is almost poetic. The water keeps moving, but the celebration stopped in its tracks.

The story began in 1920 when Maharaja Ganga Singh of Bikaner signed an agreement with Punjab for what would become the Gang Canal. It was a visionary project — bringing water from the Sutlej through the Hussainiwalla Headworks to irrigate Bikaner's arid lands.

The Maharaja got this agreement approved at concessional rates from the colonial masters as a reward to services rendered in World War I, anticipating a partnership that would outlast his own reign.

In 1956, when Bikaner merged into Rajasthan, the successor state did something remarkable: it unilaterally terminated the agreement. Not renegotiated. Not amended. Yet, the water continued to flow. Rajasthan discovered the ultimate loophole —

you can cancel the contract but keep the service, provided you are willing to ignore the frantic invoices.

For nearly seven decades, Punjab has been running what amounts to a massive, state-sponsored charity water service. At current calculations, the unpaid dues stand at approximately Rs 1.1 lakh crore — a sum that could fund multiple smart cities, transform rural infrastructure.

When a Central minister arrived in Punjab to mark the canal's centenary, he encountered something unexpected: the prospect of uncomfortable questions. Punjab, understandably, wasn't amused. The decision to cancel was swift, a masterstroke of administrative wisdom. One wonders what the original programme would have looked like. Ribbon-cutting ceremonies while protesters wave unpaid invoices? Speeches praising the neighbouring state's liberal act while its own farmers calculate compound interest?

The Punjab-Rajasthan water dispute exemplifies a troubling pattern. Agreements are signed by one generation, repudiated by the next and

consequences passed along indefinitely. The rivers, through manmade canals, reach Rajasthan's territory away from its basin; these bills seem destined to accumulate forever.

Punjab's grievance is also about the principle that agreements mean something, that successor states inherit both assets and obligations. Rajasthan's position seems to be a "breach of agreement signed between two states." If this is so, why has no formal settlement been reached? Why does the dispute fester while the water flows? What accounts for Punjab's silence?

From an economic perspective, this is less a dispute and more a massive, involuntary loan from Punjab to Rajasthan — interest-free, indefinite-term and, apparently, repayment-optional. The Gang Canal will continue its work. Water flows according to gravity and engineering. But we, who depend on these waters and who inherit these disputes, cannot afford such indifference. The cancelled centenary is a missed opportunity for resolution. It is a reminder that some anniversaries demand an honest reckoning and settlement.

The minister who cancelled his visit did so fearing protests. What Punjab — and Rajasthan, and India — need is the presence of dialogue. The centenary has passed in silence. Let us hope the next milestone is not marked by more of the same.

1. Apart from the Gang Canal story, 11.2 MAF water from the three rivers of Punjab flow into Rajasthan via manmade canals. The Indira Gandhi Canal is not a canal, but full rivers flowing into Rajasthan. The Centre has dishonoured its own note of January 29, 1955 (Clause 5) to make payment of Rs 9.5 lakh crore to Punjab.

2. Isn't Punjab justified to abrogate the 1920 pact, like Rajasthan?

For nearly seven decades, Punjab has been running what amounts to a massive, state-sponsored charity water service to Rajasthan.

# Trapped in flames : Public fire safety ratings are needed



SHARAD CHAUHAN  
DGP & MD, PUNJAB POLICE  
HOUSING CORPORATION

THE 1997 Uphaar Cinema fire in Delhi killed 59 people who were trapped behind locked exits and failed safety systems. The tragedy exposed negligence, corruption and weak enforcement. Nearly three decades later, the Romeo Lane blaze in Goa tells the same story, with expired fire certificates, blocked exits and ignored safety audits.

According to NCRB data, India records between 10,000 and 12,000 fire-related deaths every year. Independent research indicates the actual figure is nearly 20 times higher than police records, suggesting widespread underreporting. India contributes almost 20% of global fire-related deaths, making it one of the most dangerous countries for fire safety failures.

While domestic accidents dominate, 7-9% of the incidents

occur in commercial spaces, such as cinemas, clubs and hotels, yet these account for a disproportionately high share of fatalities due to locked exits, overcrowding and failed evacuation systems.

Official data reveals that India's fire safety enforcement exists largely on paper. In Ahmedabad, government filings before the high court showed that over 46% of the malls, hospitals and theatres had no valid fire safety NOC. In Nagpur, a 2024 audit found that only 12% of the industrial units maintained compliance after certification. Many states still treat the National Building Code's safety provisions as recommendations rather than binding rules. A 2018 study found that urban India has less than 40% of the number of fire stations required.

Across commercial spaces, fire safety audits are often ignored, falsified or treated as mere formalities. A study of 63 institutional and commercial buildings found that 72% of the audits were falsified or incomplete and 42% of the fires from 2014 to 2022 were linked to ignored audit recommendations. Another analysis showed that 15-18% of major urban fire deaths occurred in malls, hotels and offices, where fire NOC renewals were outdated



CHECK COMPLIANCE: India urgently needs a National Public Safety Rating System. SANDEEP JOSHI

by three to six years, and 93% of the surveyed buildings in Mumbai had never undergone the required five-year external audit. The NDMA's 2023 Fire Audit Report revealed that only 12 of the 36 states submit audit data and fewer than 30% of the two lakh commercial buildings have valid safety certificates, with over 5,000 fake or expired NOCs uncovered through CAG reviews. The CAG (2022) noted that most state fire departments lack digital systems, manpower and third-party validation. Together, these findings show that India's fire audits lack preventive safeguards.

Several countries have shown that when safety com-

It is junior officials who are arrested, while those who approved, ignored or profited from the violations get the means to escape.

pliance becomes transparent, lives are saved. In Singapore, the introduction of a public building safety and quality mark system and an online registry of fire compliance records led to a 38% fall in major fire incidents and a 42% decline in violations after reporting began. In Japan, mandatory public display of fire safety certificates in hotels, clubs and public venues, along with digital access through the Tokyo Fire Department's portal, helped bring fire-related deaths down by nearly half. The UK, after the Grenfell Tower (fire) reforms, launched the Building Safety Act, requiring open publication of safety audits for high-risk buildings,

and recorded a 15% decline in fire fatalities. In the US, a transparent national reporting system run by the FEMA and the US Fire Administration reduced fire death rates by over 60% since regular public reporting began. These cases prove that transparency in safety standards leads to accountability, compliance and reductions in loss of life.

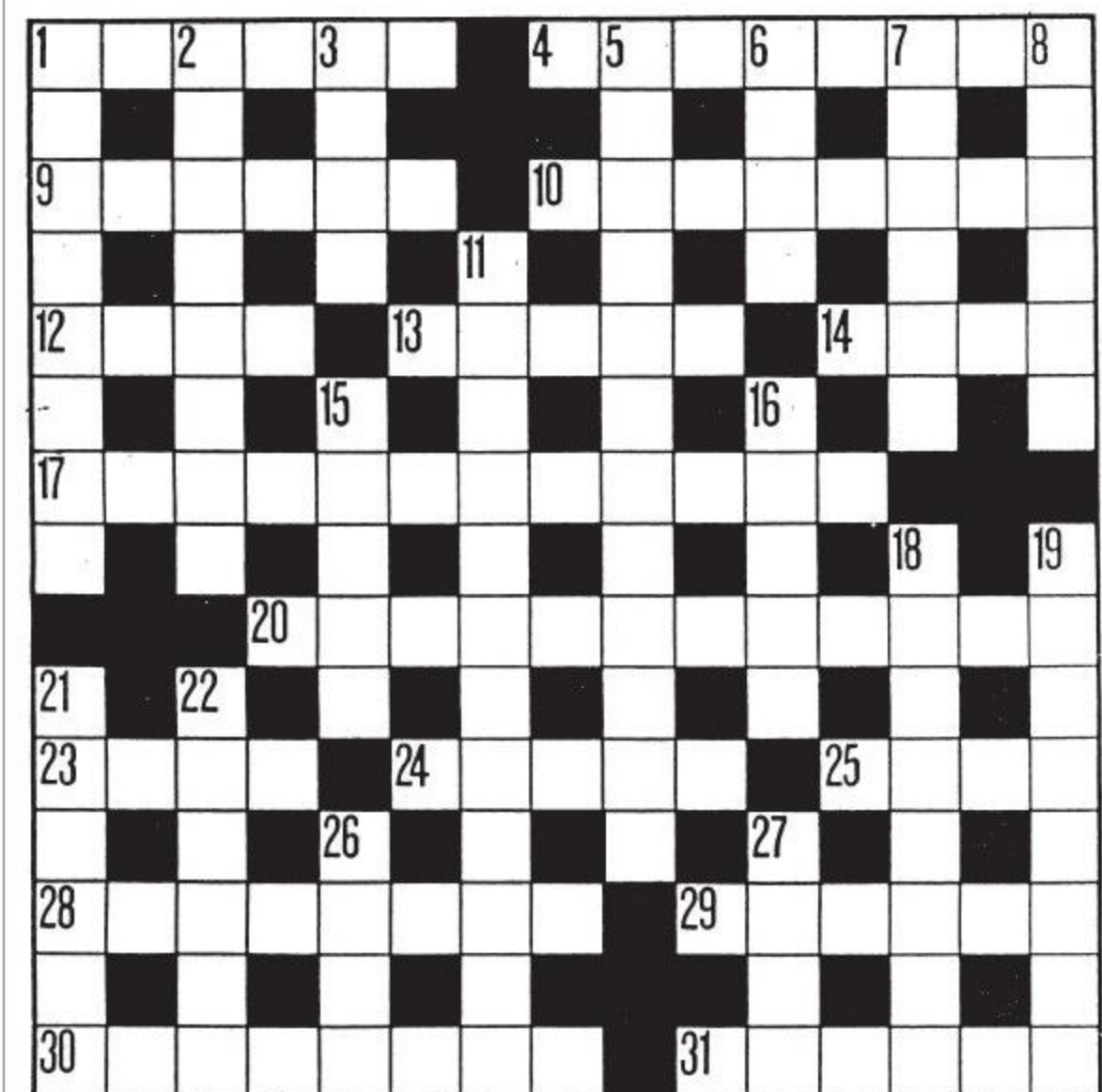
In contrast, India's fire-related numbers continue to stagnate or rise. India urgently needs a National Public Safety Rating System, a digital and government-verified platform that publicly displays the fire safety status of every public venue, including cinemas, malls, hospitals and clubs. The rating should follow pre-designed safety criteria and be expressed through a five-star scale, where more stars reflect higher safety and full compliance. Each establishment should carry a QR or barcode linked to a Central government dashboard so that citizens can check its safety rating, audit record and pending violations. This should become a part of the right to information before entering a public space.

The system should operate from top down, beginning with large corporations and high-capacity establishments. The NDMA and state fire depart-

ments should oversee this initiative through a digital safety score framework, ensuring mandatory online audits and publicly accessible compliance records. A crowdsourced grievance platform would allow citizens to flag unsafe spaces in real time; integration with e-governance dashboards — similar to the Swachh Bharat or energy rating models — would make safety a visible, measurable civic standard to empower every visitor to make an informed choice before entering a public space.

Most victims of fire disasters in India are the poor who work in unsafe premises or ordinary citizens and visitors who enter these places unaware of the risks. Those responsible are often wealthy businesspersons or people in positions of authority, whose failure is an act of omission, often shielded by privilege. This reveals how protection and punishment are unequally distributed. When accountability follows, it is middle-level managers or junior officials who are arrested, while those who approved, ignored or profited from the violations get the time and means to plan their legal or physical escape. Those who die, those who are arrested and those who escape accountability, all end up on the wrong side of justice.

## QUICK CROSSWORD



### ACROSS

- 1 Regular boyfriend or girlfriend (6)
- 4 Illusory (8)
- 9 Having special skill (6)
- 10 Make light of (4,4)
- 12 Good fortune (4)
- 13 Slightly submerged sandbank (5)
- 14 Without energy (4)
- 17 Deeply distressing (5-7)
- 20 Nondescript (12)
- 23 Walk doggedly (4)
- 24 Place of refuge (5)
- 25 Break suddenly (4)
- 28 Leave behind (8)
- 29 Market in oriental country (6)
- 30 Playful ridicule (8)
- 31 Complicated (6)

### Yesterday's Solution

Across: 1 Oasis, 4 Deserts, 8 Ill, 9 Easy as pie, 10 Indulge, 11 Light, 13 Nearby, 15 Attach, 18 At sea, 19 Eastern, 21 Hot potato, 23 Ivy, 24 Spartan, 25 Trend.

Down: 1 Opinion, 2 Salad days, 3 Spell, 4 Disney, 5 Shal-lot, 6 Rip, 7 Scent, 12 Grapevine, 14 Bear out, 16 Honeyed, 17 Detain, 18 Ashes, 20 Short, 22 Tea.

### DOWN

- 1 Surreptitious (8)
- 2 Notable (8)
- 3 Calamitous (4)
- 5 Wishy-washy (4-3-5)
- 6 Spanish painter and etcher (4)
- 7 Strip of pasta (6)
- 8 Signify (6)
- 11 Stinginess (6-6)
- 15 Tolerate (5)
- 16 Limbless reptile (5)
- 18 Copious (8)
- 19 Danger of severe harm (8)
- 21 Self-assurance (6)
- 22 Accustomed (6)
- 26 Shock profoundly (4)
- 27 Chief in importance (4)

## SU DO KU

5	4	9		7
9	3	8	4	
7		2	8	1
	6		3	7
	2	9	1	5
8	4	5		6
6	3	9		5
	9	7	6	2
1		8	3	4

V. EASY

## YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

5	2	6	1	4	3	9	7	8
7	8	1	6	2	9	3	4	5
3	4	9	7	5	8	6	1	2
8	9	7	5	3	1	4	2	6
2	6	5	9	7	4	8	3	1
1	3	4	2	8	6	5	9	7
6	1	8	3	9	2	7	5	4
4	7	3	8	1	5	2	6	9
9	5	2	4	6	7	1	8	3

## CALENDAR

### DECEMBER 13, 2025, SATURDAY

■ Shaka Samvat	1947
■ Margshirsh Shaka	22
■ Margshirsh Parvishte	28
■ Hijari	1447
■ Krishna Paksha Tithi 9, up to 4:39 pm	
■ Ayushman Yoga up to 11:16 am	
■ Hasta Nakshatra	
■ Moon in Virgo sign	

## FORECAST

SUNSET:	SATURDAY	17:24 HRS
SUNRISE:	SUNDAY	07:10 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	26	09
New Delhi	23	11
Amritsar	22	08
Bathinda	24	09
Jalandhar	22	08
Ludhiana	22	08
Bhiwani	24	09
Hisar	24	08
Sirsa	24	09
Dharamsala	23	08
Manali	—	—
Shimla	18	09
Srinagar	13	-03
Jammu	23	08
Kargil	04	-08
Leh	04	-08
Dehradun	24	06
Mussoorie	19	08

TEMPERATURE IN °C





**CURRENCIES**

US \$	₹90.42
UK Pound	₹121.00
Euro	₹106.08

**INDICES**

BSE		
Sensex	85267.66	+449.53
Midcap	46477.51	+526.05
Smallcap	50890.67	+327.34
NSE		
Nifty	26046.95	+148.40
Nifty 50	88509.70	+570.20
Nifty 500	23726.20	+175.35

**Most active on NSE**

Scrip	Price*	Traded value#
Keynes	4256	3050.10
HindZinc	561.0	2180.32
Hind Copper	383.2	1679.03
Tatila	277.5	1659.19
Meesho	165.8	1657.22

\*In ₹; #in ₹ crore

**COMMODITIES**

Gold (10 gram in ₹)		
Pure	131400	+2400
Hallmark	125500	+2300
Silver (kg in ₹)		
Bar	194100	+4900
Portion	194200	+4900
Crude*	5211	+32
Copper#	1121.00	+9.15

\*per barrel in ₹; # per kg in ₹

**MONEY MARKET**

	Yield (%)
Call rate	4.50-5.25
91-day T-Bill	5.29
1-year Gilt	5.50
5-year Gilt	6.27
10-year Gilt	6.59

## IN BRIEF

### Brookfield GCC in Mumbai

■ **MUMBAI:** Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis on Friday said asset manager Brookfield is set to invest over \$1 billion (around ₹9,000 crore) to create a global capability centre (GCC) facility in the state. **PTI**

### Paytm Payments

■ **NEW DELHI:** Fintech firm One97 Communications, which owns the Paytm brand, has made an additional investment of ₹2,250 crore in its subsidiary Paytm Payments Services Limited through a rights issue. **PTI**

### IndiGo probe

■ **NEW DELHI:** The CCI is examining whether IndiGo violated competition norms, a senior official said on Friday. **PTI**

### BOTTOM LINERS

Calcutta: Chinese goods have long filled the global marketplace, but weak domestic consumer demand has prompted some brands to make a major splash abroad, expanding to places like Brazil, West Asia and even the US, a Bloomberg report said. In doing so, they have become the vanguard of what may be a Chinese soft power revolution — replete with a furry little mascot.

“You’ve searched, waited, and now the moment has come. Peeling open the packaging, you reveal your new little monster. Was it the one you wanted, and will one be enough? This moment is the Labubu craze at its heart,” Melinda Hu, a senior research analyst at Bernstein, told Bloomberg.

This kind of consumer “dopamine hit” has stoked the little doll’s wild, meme-worthy popularity, as well as the growing reach of its maker, Chinese re-

# The Telegraph

# BUSINESS

## Inflation inches up to 0.71%

New Delhi: India’s retail inflation rose in November from a record low in the prior month but stayed below the central bank’s target range for the third straight month, data showed on Friday, leaving scope for another interest rate cut.

The print suggests that retail price rise may undershoot the Reserve Bank of India’s 2 per cent inflation forecast for this fiscal year by about 15 to 20 basis points, opening space for another 25 basis point rate cut, economists said.

Annual inflation quickened to 0.71 per cent in November from 0.25 per cent a month ago as the pace of decline in food prices slowed. The print was in line with a Reuters poll of economists.

The Reserve Bank of India cut interest rates by 25 basis points earlier this month, saying the Indian economy is in a “rare goldilocks” phase of strong economic growth and moderate inflation. In 2025, the RBI’s rate-setting panel has lowered rates by 125 bps.

Whether growth slows in the second half of the fiscal year due to steep US tariffs will be the focus for the central bank going forward, Paras Jasrai, an economist at India Ratings and Research, said.

Consumer tax cuts and labour reforms are expected to limit the impact of US tariffs on the South Asian economy.

Earlier this month, the RBI lowered its inflation projection for the fiscal year ending March 31 to 2 per cent from 2.6 per cent earlier and raised the growth forecast to 7.3 per cent from 6.8 per cent.

In November, food prices

**PRICE PULSE**

November retail inflation (%)

Vegetables	-22.20
Cereals	0.1
Pulses	-15.86
Food & Beverages	-2.78
Milk & Milk Products	2.45
Clothing & Footwear	1.49
Fuel & light	2.32
Household goods	2.03

fell 3.91 per cent year-on-year after a decline of 5.02 per cent a month ago. Vegetable prices fell 22.20 per cent after a 27.57 per cent decline in the previous month.

Core inflation, which excludes volatile items such as food and energy and is an indicator of demand in the economy, was at 4.2 per cent-4.3 per cent in November compared with 4.4 per cent in October. Core inflation stayed elevated partly because of firm gold prices, they said.

Cereal prices rose 0.1 per cent in November against a 0.92 per cent rise in October, while pulses dropped 15.86 per cent after a decline of 16.2 per cent in the previous month.

The impact of consumer tax cuts and ample food supply could lead to inflation averaging below 3 per cent in the remaining part of the fiscal, said Sakshi Gupta, principal economist at HDFC Bank.

“This should provide room for the RBI to deliver another rate cut in the February policy if growth shows signs of losing momentum post the festive season,” Gupta said. **Reuters**

## Cabinet stamp on 100% FDI in insurance

**OUR BUREAU**

Calcutta: The Union Cabinet on Friday approved a proposal to raise the foreign direct investment (FDI) limit in the insurance sector to 100 per cent, clearing the way for the Insurance Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2025 to be tabled in the Winter session of Parliament, which concludes on December 19.

A Lok Sabha bulletin has listed the bill among 13 legislations scheduled for consideration. The proposed amendments aim to deepen insurance penetration, accelerate sectoral growth and improve ease of doing business.

Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman had announced the move to increase the FDI cap in this year’s Union Budget as part of a push for next-generation financial reforms. The sector has attracted ₹82,000 crore in FDI so far.

Key changes proposed under the Insurance Act, 1938 include lowering paid-up capital requirements, introducing composite licences and permitting 100 per cent foreign ownership of insurers. The government also plans amendments to the Life Insurance Corporation Act, 1956, and the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority Act, 1999.

The changes to the LIC Act will provide its board greater autonomy over operational decisions such as branch expansion and recruitment.

Officials said the reforms aim to strengthen policyholder protection, improve financial security and encourage new entrants, thereby boosting competition and employment generation. Industry executives welcomed the move, saying full foreign ownership will provide insurers access to long-term capital.

Sharad Mathur of Universal Sampo General Insurance said the reform can help firms expand operations and improve risk management. Alok Rungta of Generali Central Life Insurance and Narendra Ganpule of Grant Thornton Bharat said the decision signals confidence in the sector’s long-term growth potential.

## Finmin initiates bank ranking

New Delhi: The finance ministry has initiated the ranking of public sector banks, private sector banks and public sector insurance companies based on quality and timely redressal of grievances.

The initiative started in June this year has significantly improved the performance of these entities, the finance ministry said in a statement.

Besides, the ranking of private sector insurers is also in the pipeline.

This has strengthened the grievance redressal mechanism by increasing focus on faster turnaround time (TAT) by banks and insurance companies, transparent communication between customers and the respective organisations, and an increase in customer service training in the organ-



**RATING WATCH**

Isations, it said.

Furthermore, the Department of Financial Services (DFS) has also initiated the ‘Financial Institutions Inter-transaction Programme’ from December 2025, wherein meetings are held with selected organisations based on grievances received on the CPGRAM Portal.

“As a first step, non-bank-

ing financial companies (NBFCs) are selected for this exercise.

“DFS remains committed to further improving the grievance redressal framework in the financial services sector,” it said.

The DFS under the finance ministry has been undertaking several key initiatives aimed at streamlining the process of the grievance redressal mechanism in the banking, financial services and insurance (BFSI) sector.

The DFS secretary has been personally reviewing 20 grievances selected on a random basis every month, wherein citizens are allowed to raise their concerns against the BFSI sector in the presence of the chairman/MD & CEOs/senior managements of

the organisations concerned, it said. Such an exercise had a salutary impact and helped in building greater customer trust in the financial services sector, it said.

To date, fifteen such meetings have been held, and 300 grievances have been analysed to ensure the quality of the resolution, it said.

“Similar meetings are also held by joint secretaries of the department. Drawing from the experience, the chairman/MD, CEO of financial institutions are also conducting a similar exercise at their level for their organisations.

“The objective is to assess the efficacy of grievance resolution through a ‘dip-stick survey’ at the top-most level in the Department,” it said.



## Sebi drops case against Pranav Adani

New Delhi: The capital markets regulator said on Friday it had dropped a case of alleged insider trading in the shares of Adani Green Energy against Pranav Adani, director of several Adani group companies and nephew of its billionaire founder Gautam.

The Securities and Exchange Board of India had said it was investigating whether Pranav Adani shared information about Adani Green’s May 2021 acquisition of SoftBank-backed SB Energy Holdings with his brother-in-law before the deal was announced.

Reuters reported in May that Sebi alleged in a regulatory notice that the sharing of price sensitive information breached regulations aimed at preventing insider trading.

Pranav Adani had previously told Reuters in an emailed response that “he has not violated any securities law”. The Adani Group had no immediate comment.

Sebi’s Friday order dismissed the allegations on the grounds that its investigations could not establish that Pranav Adani had communicated unpublished price sensitive information (UPSI) with his brother-in-law Kunal Shah in May 2021. Trades in Adani Green shares in May 2021 by Kunal Shah and his brother Nrupal Shah were consistent with their usual trading pattern, Sebi said.

Sebi also dismissed a case of alleged insider trading in shares of Adani Green against Vinod Bahety, CEO of Adani Cements, who in May 2021 headed mergers and acquisitions for the Adani group. **Reuters**



## Russian oil imports hit 5-mth high

New Delhi: India’s imports of Russian crude oil rose 4 per cent in November to a five-month high of Euro 2.6 billion, with a large part of the refined fuels produced from it being exported to Australia, a European think tank said.

India remained the second-largest buyer of Russian fossil fuels in November behind China, according to the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA).

It had spent Euro 2.5 billion on buying Russian oil in October.

China has bought 47 per cent of Russia’s crude exports in November, followed by India (38 per cent), Turkey (6 per cent), and the EU (6 per cent).

“India’s Russian crude imports recorded a 4 per cent month-on-month increase to the highest volumes in five months, even as overall import volumes remained stable,” CREA said.

“In fact, India’s purchases may well record another increase in December as cargoes loaded before the US Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctions kicked in are delivered through the month.”

On October 22, the US imposed sanctions on Rosneft and Lukoil, two of the largest oil producers in Russia, to cut off the Kremlin’s resources for funding the Ukraine war.

The sanctions have resulted in companies like Reliance Industries, Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd (HPCL), HPCL-Mittal Energy Ltd and Mangalore Refinery and Petrochemicals Ltd halting imports for now.

However, other refiners like Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) continue to buy from non-sanctioned Russian entities. **PTI**

## Silver touches ₹2 lakh

**OUR BUREAU**

Calcutta: Silver prices rallied to an all-time high on Friday hitting ₹2 lakh per kilo mark in futures trade, riding on strong demand from investors and positive global cues.

Rising for the fourth consecutive days, the white metal futures for March delivery on MCX rose by ₹1,420, or 0.71 per cent, to touch ₹200,362.

In the spot market, silver rallied by ₹5,100 to hit a new peak of ₹1,99,500 per kilogram in Delhi on Friday, according to the All India Sarafa Association. In Calcutta, prices also rallied to ₹194,200 a kg on Friday compared with ₹189,300 on Thursday.

“In the domestic market, spot silver prices once again recorded a new high, while gold prices also appreciated significantly, trading near the record level,” Dilip Parmar, research analyst, HDFC Securities, said.

Silver prices notched up a gain of over 10 per cent this week alone and it has more than doubled this year, supported by strong industrial demand, dwindling inventories and its inclusion on the US



critical minerals list.

“Silver is supported by industrial demand amid fears of shortages, a continued tight market, and the speculative frenzy, mostly from retail investors which has helped drive inflows to Silver ETFs,” said Ole Hansen, head of commodity strategy at Saxo Bank.

**Gold keeps pace**

Prices of the yellow metal reached a seven-week high in the international market, bolstered by a soft dollar, expectations of interest rate cut and safe haven demand.

In Delhi’s bullion market, gold of 99.9 per cent purity increased by ₹1,110 to ₹1,33,600 per 10 grams (inclusive of all taxes) compared with the previous close of ₹1,32,490 per 10 grams.

“Gold prices commenced an upward trajectory following a period of consolidation over the past few days. This surge in the precious metal was primarily supported by a weakening rupee and sustained investment demand,” he added.

In the international markets, spot gold appreciated by \$58.61, or 1.37 per cent, to \$4,338.40 per ounce.

“Gold and silver have responded with strong gains after a 25 basis points rate cut by the US Federal Reserve at a time when inflation risks are tilting higher. This has amplified concerns about faster dollar debasement,” Anindya Banerjee, head currency and commodity, Kotak Securities, said.

## JSW Energy okays fund raising plans

New Delhi: JSW Energy’s board on Friday approved the proposal of raising up to ₹10,000 crore in one or more tranches, through issuance of securities on private offerings, qualified institutions placements, or any other method or combination thereof.

The board in its meeting on Friday also approved the proposal of issuance of 95,23,809 equity shares, on a preferential issue basis, to JTPM Metal Traders Ltd, a member of the Promoter Group (JTPM) at an issue price of ₹525 per equity share, including a premium of ₹515 per equity share, a regulatory filing said.

According to the filing, the board has also approved issuance of 4,76,19,047 warrants, on a preferential issue basis, to JTPM, with each warrant carrying a right exercisable by the warrant allottee to subscribe to one equity share per warrant, for cash consideration, at a price of ₹525 per warrant (including a premium of ₹515 per warrant).

The board has approved the proposal of seeking approval of shareholders, through convening an extraordinary general meeting, inter-alia, for the preferential issue and the fundraises cleared on Friday by it.

The company has also approved the appointment of Chandrasekaran Prabhakaran as the chief financial officer and a key managerial personnel of the company with effect from January 1, 2026.

Prabhakaran, 50, is a seasoned finance leader and a chartered accountant with over 26 years of experience in corporate finance, accounting, and governance across large listed conglomerates. **PTI**

## Variety boost for NPS

**OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT**

Calcutta: Pension fund managers expect the National Pension System (NPS) to deliver stronger risk-adjusted returns following the Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority’s (PFRDA) decision to broaden the investment universe to include gold and silver exchange-traded funds (ETFs), equity-oriented alternative investment funds (AIFs) and Nifty 250 index stocks under defined limits.

In a revised master circular on investment guidelines, the regulator said that allocations to Sebi-regulated real estate investment trusts (REITs), Category I and II AIFs, and gold and silver ETFs will be capped at 5 per cent of a scheme’s assets under management. Exposure to any single AIF has been limited to 10 per cent of the fund’s corpus.

PFRDA has also opened



**WIDER SCOPE**

the door for pension funds to invest in Nifty 250 Index constituents, as well as BSE 250 companies that are not part of the Nifty 250 basket.

Kurian Jose, CEO of Tata Pension Management, said the expanded framework makes NPS portfolios “more contemporary” with diversification and return-enhancing avenues. “By allowing judicious, strictly capped exposures, the new framework introduces crucial diversification and access to specialised asset classes, enhancing the potential for risk-adjusted returns without compromising the system’s fundamental safety,” he said.

The seven fund managers

handling NPS’ tier-I equity schemes have delivered five-year returns ranging from 14.25 per cent to 16.95 per cent. For the optional tier-II accounts, which allow unrestricted withdrawals, the five-year returns stand between 14.67 per cent and 16.92 per cent.

Amit Shetty, CEO of Embassy Office Parks REIT, said the wider investment choices will enable long-term pension capital to flow into productive Grade-A assets and support stronger retirement outcomes.

Shirish Godbole, CEO of Knowledge Realty Trust, added that greater pension-fund participation in REITs and InvITs strengthens the capital base for infrastructure and real estate.

Gopal Jain, managing partner at Gaja Capital and co-chair of the regulatory affairs committee at IVCA, said the changes reflect a clear, steady vision of how India’s pension architecture can drive long-term value creation.

## China’s furry little mascot

**OUR BUREAU**

Calcutta: Chinese goods have long filled the global marketplace, but weak domestic consumer demand has prompted some brands to make a major splash abroad, expanding to places like Brazil, West Asia and even the US, a Bloomberg report said. In doing so, they have become the vanguard of what may be a Chinese soft power revolution — replete with a furry little mascot.

“You’ve searched, waited, and now the moment has come. Peeling open the packaging, you reveal your new little monster. Was it the one you wanted, and will one be enough? This moment is the Labubu craze at its heart,” Melinda Hu, a senior research analyst at Bernstein, told Bloomberg.

This kind of consumer “dopamine hit” has stoked the little doll’s wild, meme-worthy popularity, as well as the growing reach of its maker, Chinese re-

among younger consumers who care little for politics.

“For an average user, I don’t think they see it as a Chinese app or a Chinese retailer,” Seema Shah, vice-president for research and insights at Sensor Tower, told Bloomberg. “They just think of it as an app.”

A prime example of this dynamic, of course, is TikTok, whose ubiquity has played a central role in the global elevation of Chinese consumer items and chains.

The app saw a groundswell of support when the US government banned it over national security concerns. But President Donald Trump refused to enforce the law, and instead TikTok continues to operate in the US.

In the process, Chinese brands like Shein and Temu have become household names in America, filling homes with fast fashion and gadgets while eating into Amazon’s market share.

A Labubu in a Santa Claus outfit is displayed at a holiday market in Times Square in Manhattan. (Reuters)

taller Pop Mart, she added.

The viral sensation also has become the most visible example of the rise of Chinese brands as cultural influencers. Success for many of them has come from simply hiding in plain sight, particularly

Privacy concerns in disclosure norms

Mumbai: Sebi chairman Tuhin Kanta Pandey said on Friday the agency is grappling with privacy concerns as it weighs a panel’s proposal requiring senior officers, including the chairperson, to disclose their financial assets and liabilities.

The panel, which submitted its recommendations last month, argued that such disclosures by chief general managers, executive directors, whole-time members, and the chairperson would strengthen transparency and accountability. **PTI**

Car deliveries up 19% in Nov

New Delhi: Passenger vehicle dispatches from companies to dealers increased 19 per cent year-on-year in November as demand remained robust post-festive period, industry body SIAM said on Friday.

Total passenger vehicle sales stood at 4,12,405 units last month, up 18.7 per cent from 3,47,522 units a year ago.

Maruti Suzuki India dispatched 1,70,971 units to dealers last month compared with 1,41,312 units a year ago, an increase of 21 per cent.

Mahindra & Mahindra dispatched 56,336 units last month compared with 46,222 units in the year-ago period, an increase of 22 per cent.

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SCREEN SECRETS

Australia has become the first country to ban social media for children under 16. This marks a decisive moment in global attempts to govern the digital lives of the young. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat, among others, must, according to the directive, take “reasonable steps” to prevent Australians under 16 from creating or keeping an account, or face fines of up to 49.5 million Australian dollars. The move has inspired policymakers elsewhere. Denmark has announced plans to prohibit the use of major social media platforms for those under 15; Malaysia intends to ban social media accounts for users under 16 from 2026; New Zealand is preparing to debate similar legislation for under-16s; and the European Parliament has urged a ban on social media for children under 16 unless parents explicitly opt them in.

It is not difficult to spot the compulsions driving these regulatory initiatives. Over the past decade, an expanding body of research has linked heavy social media use in adolescence to psychological harms, such as higher levels of depression, anxiety and emotional distress. The ill-effects are not limited to psychology only. Overuse of social media is associated with poorer sleep quality and shorter sleep duration in adolescents, which, in turn, are linked to greater risks of obesity, poor gynaecological health and a high incidence of other non-communicable diseases. Cognitive impairment is an additional concern. Add to these the documented effects of exposure to online harassment, appearance-focused content and pro-eating-disorder or self-harm material. Australia’s ban thus reflects a legitimate desire to address a public health crisis brought about by unregu-

lated exposure to social media.

Yet age-based prohibition can be akin to the proverbial blunt instrument. Such a legislation treats all under-16s as equally vulnerable and all over-16s as suddenly resilient, even though research by the Mayo Clinic shows that vulnerability varies widely with individual temperament, family circumstances and pre-existing mental health conditions. Moreover, a blanket ban risks overlooking why so many children gravitate towards social media in the first place. For many adolescents, especially in urban nuclear families, life offers fewer stable, in-person communities than in earlier generations. Long school hours, heavy tuition schedules and shrinking community spaces make it harder to form friendships in real life. Social media has stepped into this vacuum, providing a sense of connection and belonging — and an effortless way of staying in touch. That children are preferring to pour their hearts out to tech

Australia is the first country to ban social media for children under 16. But is a ban alone the answer to the challenges faced by children?

companions — bots powered by AI for instance — instead of family members is a testament to a significant rupture. For some adolescents, particularly those from LGBTQ or from minority constituencies, online fraternities provide anonymous refuge from discrimination and prejudice in real life. Cutting off access altogether without providing thoughtful, alternative support structures risks severing these fragile lifelines.

That social media poses serious risks to children is undeniable; the evidence is strong enough to justify policy interventions. But such interventions must be complemented by reflection on what makes social media irreplaceable in the lives of young — and older — adults. The answer lies there.

SCRIPSI

‘Reserving judgements is a matter of infinite hope.’

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

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A tale of two lives

Quiet luminescence

POLITICS AND PLAY

RAMACHANDRA GUHA



This column stays away from mentioning my family, but I must now make an exception. This is because my mother died last week, twelve years after my father. Never remotely famous, they were both exemplary parents. And there may be some other things to remember them by.

My parents belonged to a generation when one expressed one’s patriotism through quiet service rather than crude boastfulness. In what I write about them here, readers will recognise affinities with people they themselves knew, whether as parents, uncles, aunts, teachers or doctors, who likewise embodied the sort of decency and moral rectitude that run so thinly on the ground today.

My father, Subramaniam Rama Das Guha, was born in 1924, in a hill town once known as Ootacamund. Twenty-three years later, visiting the place of his birth, he met and fell in love with a young lady named Vishalakshi Narayanamurti. He was then finishing a PhD at the Indian Institute of Science, in the same student cohort as the great physicist, G.N. Ramachandran. A postdoctoral scholarship at a university overseas was his for the asking, but affairs of the heart mandated that he instead take a job at the Forest Research Institute in Dehradun, where Vishalakshi’s father worked. My father joined the FRI in 1948 and married my mother three years later. He stayed in the same job till retirement.

My father belonged to a family of public servants. A brother was in the air force, a sister in the army nursing service. An uncle and a brother-in-law were, like him, scientists orienting their research to public ends. My father himself used the words ‘Government of India’ in tones that denoted real and total respect. He believed that State property must never, ever, be used for private purposes. He scorned the use of an official car, choosing to cycle to his laboratory and back every day.

Along with this commitment to public service, my father also had a disregard for social prejudice. Like other such Indian institutions at the time, the FRI’s scientific cadre was dominated by Brahmins. Their sons spoke proudly of their lineage, of how their fathers and they themselves changed their sacred threads together every year. However, my father declined to wear the thread marking out his high-caste birth, and discouraged me from wearing one either.

My father’s disdain for caste hier-

archies came from his family background. His own father’s brother was the pioneering social reformer, R. Gopalaswami Iyer (1878-1943), who led the movement for the emancipation of the Untouchables in Mysore state. As a boy, living in their joint family home in Bangalore’s Chamarajpet locality, my father would see his uncle get up very early in the morning and hop on to his bicycle to visit the several hostels for Dalit children that he ran in and around Bangalore city.

My mother came from a more orthodox Brahmin family, yet life as a college student in Madras and Delhi, and a career as a teacher in a non-denominational school in Dehradun, likewise made her reluctant to assess a person’s worth according to their income or social status.

Unlike the writer of this column, my parents never made a public show of their secular beliefs. These were manifest rather in how they behaved. The three families they were most intimate with in Dehradun were Sikh, Kayasthi, and Tamil Christian, respectively. In Brahmin homes which had the means to employ a cook, this person was usually male, and from the same sub-caste as the employers, so that the food they ate was ritually ‘pure’. However, while my parents could afford a cook, the two I remember from my youth were both non-Brahmins from the Garhwal Himalaya. Later, in an even more remarkable transgression of caste norms, my parents had a Muslim cook.

My father’s humanity was leavened with a gentle sense of fun, thus safely removing it from sanctimony. The first of his thirty-odd PhD students was a man named V.N. Mukherjee. The day after my father heard from Agra University that

his student had passed his viva, he asked him to come to our house in the morning, before work. When V.N. Mukherjee rang our bell, my sister, Vani, and I — then aged twelve and ten, respectively — opened the door. Primed by our father, we greeted him with, “Good morning, Dr Mukherjee!” Of course till the previous evening he had been merely ‘Mr Mukherjee’. The look of pleasure and delight on his face was wonderful to see.

As a schoolteacher, my mother touched the lives of even more people than my father did. For more than two decades, she taught Hindi, English, Economics and Geography at a school named Cambrian Hall, located in the Dehradun Cantonment. She refused to discriminate among her students on grounds of caste, class, religion, or — perhaps most important — learning ability. She was greatly loved by her students, who kept in touch with her for years after they had matriculated. Every Teachers’ Day she got a stream of phone calls, as well as personal visits from former students now in their fifties or sixties, carrying a bouquet of flowers for their beloved ‘Ma’am Guha’.

Visiting Sri Lanka in 2001, I met an Indian police officer seconded to our high commission. On learning of my background, he said, “I was Ma’am Guha’s favourite student.” His boss at once corrected him, saying, “It is for her to say who was her favourite student.” I felt sorry for the chastened junior officer, for perhaps my mother’s way had been to make every student think of himself or herself as the ‘favourite’.

Fifteen years later still, I was having lunch with an editor in a Delhi restaurant when the waiter brought a note saying it was from a young man on another table. ‘Doubtless one of

your fans,” commented the editor — in fact, the message said that the man’s mother, now settled in Pune, had been taught by my mother in Dehradun and still spoke of her with affection and regard.

Since my mother’s death, I have realised afresh how teaching — and schoolteaching especially — may be the most noble of callings. Teachers share and give of themselves in a manner rare — and often absent — in other, more self-obsessed, professions. Although she retired forty-one years ago, I have been receiving an unending stream of messages from those my mother taught, who have themselves gone to become successful academics, actors, army officers, fighter pilots, authors, doctors, corporate executives — and teachers too.

My father died on Christmas Day, 2012, aged eighty-eight. In his last illness, he was taken to the hospital by two neighbours who had also become friends. They were named Abbas and Radhakrishna. My mother now moved out of her home in the Bangalore locality of Koramangala, living alternately with my sister and me since. She had the usual infirmities of advanced old age, but was otherwise happy to be in the company of family, friends, and former students. Though never an overtly political person, she let it be known that the rising tide of *Hindutva* bigotry dismayed her. For someone shaped by the pluralist, inclusive atmosphere of the Nehruvian era, the idea that only her fellow Hindus had a prior and proprietary right to this land was abhorrent. As I now feelingly recall, two teaching colleagues in Dehradun whose counsel she especially valued were called Daisy Butlerwhite and Nighat Rahman. And among the dearest friends of her Bangalore years were a couple named Laeeq and Zafar Futehally.

I was born to multiple forms of privilege — as a Hindu living in a country dominated and run by Hindus, as a Brahmin in a culture steeped in caste prejudice, as a man in a society so disfigured by patriarchy, as a fluent English-speaker in a nation where that language opens many doors. These unearned advantages have made my life’s journey far more comfortable than it might otherwise have been. Yet my parents’ example helped make me aware of how less privileged most other Indians were. As I look back on their lives, I can now see, more clearly than when I was young, how my parents affirmed, quietly and unselfconsciously, in practice rather than in theory, the spirit of fraternity and non-discrimination that lies at the heart of citizenship.

Important message

SAYANTA GHOSH

After the COP30 in Belém, one shift stands out: forests and the people who live in them have moved to the heart of global climate discussions. Holding the summit in the Amazon was not simply a logistical decision. It was a political message. Having observed the discussions in Belém first-hand, it is evident that the impact of COP30 will depend on what happens next on the ground. For two weeks, indigenous peoples, riverine communities and forest defenders marched outside the venue, spoke in official and unofficial sessions, and forced negotiators to confront the realities of land, rights and the lived experiences of those most affected by climate decisions.

Their presence alone changed the tone of COP30. For years, climate conferences have discussed forests largely as carbon sinks and ‘nature-based solutions’. In Belém, forests reappeared as territories, homes and contested political spaces. Yet this shift in visibility is fragile. Even as leaders spoke warmly of indigenous guardianship, land defenders across the tropics continued to face threats, criminalisation and pressure. Protesters demanding recognition of their territories outside the venue were met with heavy security. The real question is whether COP30’s outcomes will translate into changes in how climate finance and carbon markets function on the ground.

Among the most significant developments of COP30 was the launch of Brazil’s Tropical Forest Forever Facility. This initiative aims to reward tropical countries simply for keeping forests standing, and not just for reducing deforestation from historic highs. Initial pledges have already crossed several billion dollars, and its long-term ambition is to create predictable, multi-year funding for forest conservation. What makes the facility notable is its design. A guaranteed share of the funds is reserved for indigenous peoples and local

communities. They are also expected to help co-design how that finance flows. This follows a now substantial body of evidence that deforestation rates are consistently lower when indigenous and community land rights are legally recognised and local institutions have authority over forest management.

Alongside this, COP30 brought renewed commitments to strengthen community land tenure. Governments endorsed an intergovernmental pledge to secure collective rights across millions of hectares by 2030. This signals an important shift: policymakers are beginning to understand that climate mitigation cannot be achieved if forests are treated as empty spaces to be governed from capital cities or global carbon registries. Forest protection succeeds where community control is strong. Even so, indigenous organisations remain cautious. They underline that genuine impact depends on direct access to funds. If most of the money is controlled by national governments or large intermediaries, and only a fraction reaches communities, the new architecture may end up looking no different from the old one.

If the forest finance announcements brought optimism, the debates around carbon markets under Article 6.4 of the Paris Agreement brought caution. Many parties view land-based carbon credits as central to their mitigation strategies. They argue that avoiding deforestation and restoration can generate finance for developing countries while enabling companies and governments to meet net-zero pledges. For many indigenous peoples and civil society groups, this vision remains deeply problematic. Their concern is not with climate finance itself. It is with how carbon markets have historically operated. In several countries, forest carbon projects have moved forward without proper consent, have restricted customary access to forests and have delivered little income to the communities whose lands generated the credits.



The unresolved issues at COP30 reflect this history. How will baselines be set in areas where community tenure is not fully recognised? Who carries the liability for reversals caused by fires or storms? How will free, prior and informed consent be ensured in places with multiple overlapping claims? How will benefit-sharing be structured so that communities receive a fair portion of the revenue? These questions matter because markets often expand more quickly than safeguards. COP30 made modest progress by strengthening references to human rights and indigenous participation in Article 6 texts. But many fundamental design elements were postponed to future meetings. The outcome leaves Article 6.4 suspended between ambition and uncertainty. Without stronger guarantees, carbon markets risk becoming another mechanism that recentralises control over land while allowing emissions elsewhere to continue.

For India, the lessons from Belém are direct. Forest-dependent communities, Adivasi groups and joint forest management committees constitute the first line of climate action in many regions. Yet they remain largely excluded from flows of climate finance.

India’s Forest Rights Act of 2006 provides a strong legal framework for community-led forest governance but its implementation remains uneven. COP30 offers India an opportunity to integrate emerging global forest finance mechanisms with the rights-based framework already in place. Any climate finance-supported afforestation, restoration or forest-management project should be rooted in recognised community forest rights, *gram sabha*-approved plans and transparent benefit sharing. Climate finance could support community-led forest fire management, water conservation, biodiversity restoration and non-timber forest-produce value chains but only if communities control the planning, monitoring and revenue flows.

India’s emerging domestic carbon market adds further urgency. Without strong safeguards, carbon projects could intensify existing pressures on forest communities through restrictive plantations or conservation enclosures. COP30 provides three clear principles for India: rights must be recognised before projects begin; consent through *gram sabhas* must be meaningful; and revenue must flow directly to community institutions.

COP30 did not deliver the scale of finance needed for global mitigation. It did not resolve the debate on carbon offsets or end the systemic risks faced by forest defenders. But it did bring a shift in the climate conversation. Forest peoples were not symbolic participants. They were political actors shaping the narrative on rights, justice and climate action. The lasting impact of COP30 will not be determined in plenaries. It will be decided in forest villages, customary territories and community institutions across the global South. If governments act in the spirit of Belém, climate finance will strengthen communities, not marginalise them. If not, the promises of COP30 will fade into the familiar pattern of recognition without rights.

Belém has delivered a message that the world cannot ignore. Climate justice begins with those who protect the forests. The next step belongs to governments, including India, to act on that truth.

Cracked it

■ Sir — Joan Ginther, a PhD in mathematics, cracked the lottery not once, not twice, but four times, winning a total of \$21 million. She reportedly spent years studying probability patterns. Instead of buying random lottery tickets and praying for a miracle,

Ginther invested in them only when it made sense. Her wins drew national attention after people realised that someone had legally beaten the system multiple times. Ginther’s story is a reminder that the brain can outperform luck in a game designed to be random and understanding patterns can sometimes change life more than chance ever could.

Arna Roy, Hooghly

Shameful act

■ Sir — Food is a matter of personal choice. It is extremely shameful and worrying that small traders, whose livelihoods depend on daily sales, were beaten up for selling non-vegetarian food items at the Gita chanting event at the Brigade Parade Grounds (“Muslim traders hit at Gita event”, Dec 10). Hatred begets hatred. The authorities must take strict action to prevent such incidents in the state. Bengalis do not want the region’s long tradition of syncretism and compassion to be sacrificed at the altar of communalism.

Nibedita Das, North 24 Parganas

■ Sir — The Gita chanting event at the Brigade on Sunday was nothing but a religiously charged and jingoistic spectacle. It was part of the *bhakti*’s zealous attempt to stake claim over Bengal, the *sangh*’s final frontier. The right to one’s dietary choices is guaranteed by the Constitution which they are trying to dictate.

Furthermore, the organiser of the event, Sanatan Sanskriti Sansad, cannot absolve itself of responsibility. It must be held accountable for the harassment of the

Muslim traders at the hands of extremists at the event.

Kajal Chatterjee, Calcutta

■ Sir — The religious hatred that hawkers from the minority community were sub-



Be ashamed

jected to at the Gita chanting event is inhumane and savage. India is increasingly becoming unjust and violent under the misrule of the Bharatiya Janata Party.

Murtaza Ahmad, Calcutta

Toxic air

■ Sir — Calcutta recently overtook New Delhi in terms of air pollution. The multiple developmental projects and poor regulatory standards are responsible for Calcutta’s worsening air quality. The government needs to take steps urgently. High pollu-

tion levels pose serious risks to public health.

D.P. Bhattacharya, Calcutta

■ Sir — One effective way to reduce air pollution is to limit the use of private vehicles. We must opt for public transport, carpooling, or cycling. Planting more trees also helps absorb carbon dioxide. The government must implement strict laws and citizens must inculcate responsible habits to ensure a cleaner environment.

Sofikul Islam, Goalpara, Assam

Safe haven

■ Sir — Bholanath Ghosh, a key witness in the Sandeshkhali case, was recently injured in an accident (“Car death stalks Shahjahan foe”, Dec 11). Ghosh’s young son and driver died on the spot. Witness protection is a crucial component of the criminal justice system; yet it remains a long-standing weakness of our country.

Jayanta Datta, Hooghly

■ Sir — Sheikh Shahjahan, the alleged mastermind in the Sandeshkhali case, has been given a safe custodial home by the West Bengal government. There are reports that he has access to a smartphone inside the Barasat prison. This is proof of how the system continues to safeguard powerful criminals.

Tusar Kanti Kar, Howrah





## FTAs for a start

Support for exports is a must for sustained gains from trade pacts

According to the World Trade Organization, India has entered into 20 regional or free trade agreements (FTA). This count excludes the most recent pacts signed with the United Kingdom in July and with the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), which came into effect in October. Also under way are negotiations, most notably with the United States, the European Union, Canada and the Southern African Customs Union. With India now facing American tariffs of up to 50% on key exports, there are intensive efforts to fast-track these agreements. Some reports have even suggested discussions around a re-engagement with the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, which India walked away from in 2019 over concerns related to farm sectors and rules of origin. However, New Delhi has not accepted accession; at most, it has explored consultative channels. Yet, trade diversification demands far more – a deep, deliberate transformation of the country’s productive sectors and integration into global value chains.

Commerce Ministry data show that some earlier FTAs – with ASEAN, Japan and South Korea – have tilted the trade balance sharply against India. The trade deficit with ASEAN widened from about \$10 billion in 2017 to nearly \$44 billion by 2023. A similar pattern holds for Japan – despite India’s exports rising, imports of high-value, capital-intensive goods have grown even faster. The reasons are structural and policy-driven. While FTAs opened the door, mutual recognition arrangements on quality standards, certifications, rules of origin and other non-tariff barriers were not adequately negotiated. Many FTAs were not custom-designed to reflect India’s sectoral strengths, nor were consultations with industry bodies sufficiently robust. The government did too little to popularise these agreements domestically, even as partner economies made full use of the preferential margins. A review of the ASEAN, Japan and Korea FTAs has brought some course correction. This is reflected in the more balanced outcomes under the India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement – non-oil trade touched about \$100 billion in FY25 (DGFT data). As India accelerates negotiations with the EU and the U.S., it must internalise these lessons. In the case of the U.S., consultations with services, seafood, engineering goods and textiles exporters must shape India’s negotiating stance. With the EU, the focus must be on carbon-intensive sectors such as iron and steel and cement, especially given the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism. A trade agreement is only the beginning. The arduous task of supporting India’s exporters – through standards, infrastructure, technology and market intelligence – must follow if these pacts are to deliver lasting gains.

## Endless ordeal

Bringing all conspirators to justice is a must to build faith in the system

Eight years after a prominent Malayalam woman actor was abducted and sexually assaulted in a moving car in Kochi, a trial court on December 8 convicted six men of gang rape, criminal conspiracy, wrongful confinement, and destruction of evidence, among other charges. On December 12, they were sentenced to 20 years of rigorous imprisonment. The court, however, acquitted actor Dileep and two others of all charges, including that of masterminding the conspiracy, citing insufficient evidence. The decision triggered widespread outrage, with activists decrying a disturbing pattern of powerful men dodging accountability in high-profile sexual violence cases. The survivor’s exemplary courage in pursuing justice galvanised civil society and many women in the industry. The incident also exposed deep-seated misogyny and machismo in Malayalam cinema. Women rallied behind the survivor but faced vicious online campaigns and denial of work. The Association of Malayalam Movie Artistes (AMMA), controlled by men, unravelled under scrutiny; a group of resolute women formed the Women in Cinema Collective to demand a safer, more equitable workplace and endured professional boycott and cyber-bullying.

Very soon, the Kerala government constituted a committee under a retired High Court judge to examine gender issues in the industry. Its report, released after sustained pressure, catalysed further reform: women were elected to leadership positions in AMMA, Internal Complaints Committees became mandatory on film sets, and the government is now finalising a comprehensive policy to address film workplace safety and equality. The developments inspired demands from other regional film industries to follow suit. During the trial, the survivor repeatedly, but unsuccessfully, sought a change of judge, alleging bias during the prosecution held in-camera. She also raised serious concerns about tampering with crucial video evidence: its hash value had changed while in judicial custody, suggesting unauthorised access. Although the court convicted the direct perpetrators and confirmed a conspiracy, its failure to hold the alleged mastermind liable has eroded the survivor’s faith in the process. The Kerala government has rightly announced that it will appeal. Faced with rampant criticism, the judge, Honey M. Varghese, warned the media and others of contempt proceedings for casting aspersions on the court. Bringing all conspirators to justice is critical to reaffirming women’s confidence in the system and encouraging them to fearlessly report injustice. For the survivor, a thorough and transparent appellate process offers the only path to closure.

When the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) was negotiated in the 1970s and early 1980s, India stood with the world’s smallest and most vulnerable states. Alongside Pacific Island countries, India championed the principle that the seabed beyond national jurisdiction should be the “common heritage of mankind”. It was a remarkable moment: a large developing country aligning itself with island nations, not for advantage, but for fairness.

This was not new for India. As early as the 1950s, Jawaharlal Nehru recognised the ocean’s centrality to India’s future, declaring: “Whichever way we turn, we are drawn to the seas. Our future security and prosperity are closely linked with the freedom and the resources of the oceans.” That foresight set the stage for India’s enduring role as both a maritime nation and a maritime leader. Half a century later, the ocean faces pressures unimaginable at the time of UNCLOS. Climate change is heating and acidifying the seas, sea levels are rising, and illegal and unregulated fishing is stripping marine life from the water column.

The Indian Ocean, home to one-third of humanity, is already one of the most climate-vulnerable basins on earth.

India now has both the opportunity and the responsibility to play a historic leadership role once again. This time, the task is not to draft law, but to shape practice – ensuring that the Indian Ocean becomes not a theatre of rivalry, but a laboratory of sustainability, innovation, and resilience.

### The case for a Blue Ocean strategy

India’s Blue Ocean Strategy should rest on three pillars: stewardship of the commons, resilience, and inclusive growth.

First, stewardship. India must continue to assert that the Indian Ocean is a shared space, not a contested one. By prioritising ecosystem restoration, biodiversity protection, and sustainable fisheries, India can set the tone for cooperative management, rather than competitive exploitation.

Second, resilience. As the climate crisis intensifies, ocean nations must focus on adaptation and preparedness. India can lead by establishing a Regional Resilience and Ocean Innovation hub – one that strengthens ocean observation networks, improves early warning systems, and transfer technology to small island developing states and African coastal nations.

Third, inclusive growth. The Indian Ocean must become a driver of prosperity for all littoral states. Green shipping, offshore renewable energy, sustainable aquaculture, and marine



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India must take the lead in promoting the guiding principle, ‘From the Indian Ocean, for the World’

biotechnology offer pathways to development that are compatible with climate goals. Realising this potential, however, will require sustained investment and coordinated regional action.

It is encouraging that the financial tide is beginning to turn. At the Blue Economy and Finance Forum (BEFF) held in Monaco, in June 2025, governments, development banks and private investors highlighted a €25 billion pipeline of existing ocean investments and announced €8.7 billion in new commitments, with near-parity between public and private sources. The Finance in Common Ocean Coalition, bringing together 20 public development banks, announced annual pledges of \$7.5 billion, while the Development Bank of Latin America doubled its blue economy target to \$2.5 billion by 2030.

At COP30 in Belém, the Brazilian Presidency launched the One Ocean Partnership as part of the Belém Action Agenda, committing to mobilise \$20 billion for ocean action by 2030. These signals matter. They demonstrate that the ocean – long marginal in climate finance – is now firmly on the global agenda.

India must seize this moment to channel global financing into regional priorities. An Indian Ocean Blue Fund, seeded by India and open to contributions from development banks, philanthropy, and the private sector, could provide the institutional architecture needed to turn pledges into projects.

### Security through sustainability

Much of today’s discourse on the Indian Ocean is framed in terms of “Indo-Pacific strategy”, naval balance, freedom of navigation, and secure sea lanes. These concerns are legitimate. But they should not obscure a more fundamental reality: ocean insecurity begins with ecosystem collapse and climate disruption.

Illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, coral reef degradation and intensifying storm surges erode livelihoods and undermine social stability. Addressing these threats requires a shift from traditional notions of maritime security toward security through sustainability.

India’s doctrine of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) articulated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Mauritius in 2015, offers an important anchor, “We seek a future for the Indian Ocean that lives up to its name as a zone of peace, stability and prosperity,” he said.

The Indian Navy and the Indian Coast Guard, working alongside civilian agencies, can deepen regional cooperation in maritime domain awareness, disaster response and ecosystem monitoring - aligning security objectives with environmental stewardship. Equally important is the story India chooses to tell. Not of rivalry, but

of responsibility. Not of dominance, but of stewardship. As External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has noted, India’s approach to the Indian Ocean is “cooperative, consultative, and outcome-oriented,” aimed at shared prosperity and stability.

The guiding principle should be simple and resonant: “From the Indian Ocean, for the World.”

### India’s historic responsibility

At the Stockholm Conference in 1972, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi warned, “We do not want to impoverish the environment any more than we want to impoverish our people.” That insight remains strikingly relevant.

COP30 in Belém (2025) and the G-20 Summit in Johannesburg recognised the importance of terrestrial and marine ecosystems for climate stability, sustainable development, and community resilience as well as anchoring scaling up of finance and support for developing countries, aligning with the equity dimensions of ocean action.

Momentum is building. With the outcomes of the 3rd United Nations Ocean Conference (UNOC3) in Nice, COP30 in Belém, and the entry into force of the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Agreement, 2026 is shaping up to be a pivotal year for ocean governance. India’s readiness to ratify the BBNJ Agreement presents an opportunity to demonstrate how the Indian Ocean region can pioneer globally relevant solutions, from green shipping corridors and blue bonds to inclusive marine technology transfer and carefully governed ocean-based carbon dioxide removal. This agenda could also serve as a defining theme for India’s chairmanship of the Indian Ocean Rim Association.

India’s history in ocean diplomacy gives it credibility. India’s future in ocean leadership gives it the responsibility. The Indian Ocean, the cradle of some of the world’s oldest civilisations, can now become the cradle of a new blue economy, one that marries prosperity with sustainability, and resilience with justice.

The challenge is clear: to move beyond rhetoric, to align vision with finance, and to build partnerships that endure. For the world, the message is urgent: the ocean is not a void to be filled or a frontier to be conquered. It is the foundation of life itself.

If India leads with ambition, humility, and inclusivity, the Indian Ocean can once again demonstrate what was evident during UNCLOS negotiations: that even in the most complex of arenas, cooperation can prevail over conflict, and solidarity over rivalry.

The time to act is now.

# A critical story that a chunk of the media missed

The release of the national accounts data for Quarter 2 recently was also one that coincided with serious concerns being expressed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) about the way India calculates its data. In fact, the IMF has given India’s national accounts statistics, which includes Gross Domestic Product and Gross Value Added, a C grade, which is the second lowest grade. While Q2 produced 8.2% growth – much more than expected – very few would be aware of the IMF’s concerns.

This is because the media virtually ignored what the IMF had to say. Only one daily, *The Hindu*, reported it and made it a front page story (“IMF gives ‘C’ grade for India’s national accounts statistics”, November 28, 2025), but the pink papers, which should have been the most interested in this report, ignored it to a large extent. When some of these newspapers decided that it was worth publishing, they did so, but only in the inside pages, which was bizarre and perplexing.

### An issue

The truth is that the IMF’s grading of India’s national accounts statistics is a matter of concern and a key part of that is how we calculate GDP.

India uses the formal organised sector as a proxy for calculating growth in the informal unorganised sector. But the unorganised sector, even after excluding agriculture, is still 30% of GDP. So the first question is this: do we really have a reliable and accurate way of estimating



Karan Thapar

is a television anchor

The International Monetary Fund’s grading of India’s national accounts statistics is a matter of concern

growth in this sizeable sector or is it just an intelligent guesstimate?

### ‘A less than reliable method’

Pronab Sen, the former Chief Statistician, and Arun Kumar, a former professor of economics at Jawaharlal Nehru University – the economists this writer spoke to – believe that this is “a less than reliable method”.

Their concern needs explanation. When you use the organised sector as a proxy for calculating the unorganised sector, the assumption made is that they have both moved in the same direction. But when there is a crisis or an unusual development, that may not be the case. And that is exactly what happened when India went through demonetisation, the introduction of Goods and Services Tax (GST) and the COVID-19 pandemic. These events have meant that India’s organised and unorganised sectors have not been in kilter. They have moved in different directions.

While the organised sector expanded on all three occasions, the unorganised sector went into decline. So, during these years, using the organised sector as a proxy for calculating the unorganised sector meant that we were overestimating the performance of the unorganised sector.

What does this mean about India’s quarterly estimates? It must be remembered that what made the media euphoric was the quarterly estimate of 8.2% growth. Professor Sen’s statement must be brought in at this point: “For

the quarterly GDP estimates we make a lot of assumptions. We simply don’t have quarterly data for most things. Now[,] when we don’t have the data you have to go by assumptions. You look at past relationships, past trends and try to do the best you can. But until we get to a situation where most of the data that we need for quarterly estimations are actually corrected physically[,] this problem is not going to get solved.”

### The answer is blunt

This leads to another conclusion. The concern that the IMF has expressed, and which underlies the lowly ‘C’ grade, is not going to be hastily resolved. There is no doubt that the Union Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation is working on updating the GDP base year and methodology of calculation and hopes to release the new series next year, probably by the end of February. But the question is this: how much improvement will we see in the way the unorganised sector is estimated? When asked if India can adequately resolve the IMF’s concern, Prof. Sen’s answer was short and blunt: “I don’t think we can.”

All this has been mentioned because we rely on the media to inform us and, usually, to help us analyse and understand. But if the media ignores critical stories, it leaves us not just uninformed but also unable to fully understand what has happened. It also means that journalists are not doing their job. That is a sorry outcome for all of us.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### In Parliament

The winter session of Parliament, so far, witnessed intense debate on the national song, *Vande Mataram*, and on electoral reforms, highlighting, once again, the value of parliamentary discourse. While the heated statements from members of the Bharatiya Janata Party made it clear that the discussion on the national song was driven largely by a symbolic political agenda, the debate on electoral reform turned out to be a missed opportunity. Important concerns regarding the transparency of election funding, the integrity of the electoral process, and the independence and

verification mechanisms of the Election Commission of India were raised. However, these substantive issues did not receive the thoughtful and constructive deliberation that they deserved. It is essential that all political parties understand the importance of meaningful debate in Parliament rather than reducing such discussions to blame games or political grandstanding. Only then can reforms truly serve the public interest.

**M. Jeyaram,**  
Sholavandan, Tamil Nadu

It is a matter of significant public concern that parliamentary debates in India, in terms of number and quality, have been on

the decline, a trend highlighted by data on the number of sitting days, the time spent on discussions on key issues, and the increasing frequency of disruptions. Rising political polarisation and a lack of bipartisanship have considerably reduced the scope for constructive dialogue and consensus-building. To put it candidly, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s leadership, religious nationalism continues to gain strength that often diverts public attention from the core issues confronting the country. While India’s economic performance, which is the essence of a growing democratic nation, remains

lacklustre, despotic tactics, on the contrary, silence dissent. Parliamentary debates are the cornerstone of a truly vibrant democracy. It is through such tools that a democracy ensures parliamentary scrutiny of the executive’s decisions.

**R. Sivakumar,**  
Chennai

### Incorrect practice

It has become an almost routine act by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to insert advertisements in newspapers cautioning the public about the wrong practice by many cooperative societies of using the word ‘bank’ along with their names. The advertisements make it

clear that it is illegal to add the word ‘bank’ with their names as they are not registered or covered under the Banking Regulation Act. As such wrongful projection is not a cognisable offence, unless there is a specific complaint about this, no agency will file a case against the societies for this.

The RBI or Registrar of Cooperative Societies in States must initiate suitable steps to penalise these societies for taking the public for a ride and for accepting deposits from the general public.

**Unnikrishnan Nair B.C.,**  
Kuthiathode, Alappuzha, Kerala

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



# GROUND ZERO



Policemen outside the Birch by Romeo Lane night club at Arpora in North Goa on December 7. At least 25 people were killed in the massive fire that spread at the club the previous night. MURALI KUMAR K.

## The party that took a tragic turn in Goa

On December 6, a fire claimed 25 lives during a party at Birch by Romeo Lane, an establishment in Arpora in Goa. The restaurant-cum-club was built on a salt pan and had only a narrow entrance and exit, survivors and activists allege. **Rishikesh Bahadur Desai** reports on the night's happenings and the worries of Goans about unregulated real-estate development, marked by illegal construction, lax fire safety, and poor crowd control

Ishaq Hussein Khaku, a 25-year-old from Bengaluru, was excited to spend the party season in Goa with his friends. According to his father, Mohammed Hussain, the group decided to go on December 6 for 'Bollywood night' at Birch by Romeo Lane, a restaurant, cocktail bar, and club that had opened last year in the village of Arpora. Located near Baga, one of the most popular beaches of North Goa, it promised "coastal luxury", "a wild crowd", "the hottest beats in town", and "island-style cocktails", on their Instagram account.

Birch put out advertisements that Kristina Sheikh, a dancer from Kazakhstan, would perform that night. When Sheikh began grooving to 'Mehbooba, Mehbooba' from the Hindi blockbuster film, *Sholay*, sparks began to fly behind her. Videos that went viral later showed her stopping and glancing above at the false ceiling made of bamboo and wood.

"I ran home, into the arms of my daughter," Sheikh told a television channel later. "One of my teammates alerted me about the fire and I consider him my Indian god." She was one of the estimated 90 of the 100-odd people who were part of the crowd on the first floor dance area, who escaped to safety.

Hussain said he heard from the police that Khaku and his friends ran out to safety. But Khaku realised that he had dropped his mobile phone on the dance floor and rushed back in to retrieve it. He never made it out.

The next day, Hussain arrived in Goa with relatives and identified his son's body. "Ishaq worked as an IT engineer in a data science company," the distraught father said.

The fire spread quickly before midnight, aided by the palm leaf decor and inflammable materials used for the ceiling, investigating officers told reporters in Arpora. Th fire claimed 25 lives – 20 of them were staff members and five were tourists. Five others, including two tourists, suffered injuries and are out of danger, Vasanth Dhabolkar, Sub Divisional Magistrate, Bardez, said.

### From music to chaos

For Bhavana Joshi, from Delhi, the party quickly turned into the worst nightmare of her life. She lost her sisters – Saroj, Anita, and Kamla – and her husband, Vinod Kumar. She managed to run to safety, while the rest of them suffocated to death, she told reporters in New Delhi.

According to Joshi, Kumar noticed the fire as soon as it broke out and alerted the staff. She said the DJ tried to extinguish the fire by throwing water from a bottle. "No one from the club management helped us out," she said. "The bouncers only helped the dance troupe get out of the hall."

Within minutes, the fire spread across the ceiling and consumed the decorations, she recalled. "There was so much smoke that nothing was visible. People panicked and ran out. They began falling on each other and pushing each other."

Joshi got separated from her family in the confusion. "The club had only one entry and exit. The same passageway also led to a basement kitchen, and several people accidentally ran towards it," she said. Joshi ran out and stood out-



The club had only one entry and exit. The same passageway also led to a basement kitchen, and several people accidentally ran towards it

**BHAVANA JOSHI**  
Survivor

side the club, crying for help.

"Most of the staff in the basement kitchen died," a police officer said.

Ami Manocha, a businessman from New Delhi who has made Goa his home, said some of the victims were his acquaintances. Manocha, who was to attend the party, changed his mind. He said he has not slept much since.

Manocha has met some of the survivors. "They told me that there were no fire extinguishers and that the club staff were ill-equipped to handle the incident. They did not make a safety announcement. The ground floor and the first floor were connected only by a small staircase. There were no independent exits from either of the floors to the front gate," he said.

According to the Goa Police's list of victims, the rest of the 20 victims were staff members from various States – Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Jharkhand, Assam, and West Bengal. Four of them were from Nepal.

Rahul Tanti, 32, of Ranagirkhari in Assam, had joined the club as a gardener just a day before the fire, said his brother Deva Tanti. The father of three, he dreamed of a more secure future. He left his job at a tea estate that paid him just ₹200 per day. "Apart from the tea gardens, there is nothing that employs us. There are no industries, factories, or businesses. Farming is non-remunerative and unpredictable as Assam suffers devastating floods regularly," Deva said.

Another victim from Assam was Diganta Patir, of Dhemaji district. "He was planning to return home by January to his mother," said Vishwas Kumar, Patir's uncle. "His younger brother lives in Delhi. Patir had worked for over a decade in Goa and Tamil Nadu and had saved enough money to open a small shop in Assam."

Prakash Thapa, president of the Goa Nepali Society, who helped the police identify the bodies and trace their families, has been living in Goa since the 1990s. He said migration from Nepal to India is not a new phenomenon. "In the 1960s and 70s, the first generation of immigrants

were security guards. Later came the housekeeping and cleaning staff. Now, it is mostly cooks and caretakers in houses and hotels," he explained.

The Singhs from Pithoragarh in Uttarakhand are a family of chefs. Satish Singh, one of the victims, had recently started working at the Birch kitchen. He had worked as a chef in a Bengaluru hotel earlier. "But his labour contractor shifted him to Goa a year ago, promising better wages," said Ramesh Singh, his brother, also a chef.

However, not everyone said they were attracted by higher wages to Goa. Some moved simply because it has the reputation of being "a fun place to work," said Dhan Singh, the brother of Jitendra Singh from Tehri Gharwal district in Uttarakhand, who died in the fire.

Jitendra used to work in Gurugram as a helper in a kitchen. "He and his friends then decided to shift. He did not get much of a raise, but he liked the mood in Goa," Dhan said.

### Assessments in the aftermath

Soon after the incident, the police shifted the bodies to the Goa Medical College and Hospital (GMCH) mortuary in Panjim. Doctors said only four people had suffered severe burn injuries. The cause of death in the other cases was suffocation and inhalation of poisonous gases, they said.

"Today is a very painful day for all of us in Goa," Chief Minister Pramod Sawant said after the tragedy. "Those found responsible will face most stringent action under the law – any negligence will be dealt with firmly." He ordered a magisterial probe and a police investigation.

The Union government announced compensation of ₹2 lakh to the families of each of the deceased and ₹50,000 for each injured person. The State government announced compensation of ₹5 lakh and ₹50,000, respectively.

As per the First Information Report filed on December 7, the Goa Police have booked the owners – Saurabh Luthra and his brother Gaurav Luthra – and their partner, Ajay Gupta, among others, under Sections 105 (culpable homicide not amounting to murder), 125(a)(b) (endangering lives and personal safety) and 287 (negligent handling of fire or combustible material) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023.

The police have so far arrested chief general manager Rajiv Modak, general manager Vivek Singh, bar manager Rajveer Singhania, gate manager Priyanshu (Riyanshu) Thakur, and employee Bharat Kohli. A court in Goa sent Gupta to police custody for seven days. Sources said the Luthra brothers, who escaped to Phuket from Delhi, were detained in Thailand on December 11, based on a request from Indian law enforcement agencies. They said the process to deport the brothers to India has been initiated.

"Officials are also studying the financial transactions of the three partners and the land owner, Surinder Kumar Khosla. Legal action will be initiated if violations are found," Superintendent



The nightclub is close to the Baga river and the sea. The owners have violated CRZ norms, rules regarding salt pans, and town and country planning codes as well.

**ROHIT BRAS DE SA**  
Advocate

of Police Harish Madkaikar told reporters.

Sawant told the media that a committee led by the Revenue Secretary would review the safety protocols being implemented in nightclubs and similar establishments in Goa. It will not only report violations, but also suggest a road map for avoiding such incidents in the future, he said.

The Bardez district administration has sealed the premises of Birch. Officials also demolished a temporary structure put up by Romeo Lane in Ozrant in Vagator village, which faced allegations by the district administration of encroaching on government land. The wooden extension to the main building was demolished last year too, but it was rebuilt later, local newspapers in Goa reported. A tourism department official in Panjim said that of the 16 properties of Romeo Lane in the country, six are in Goa.

### Many allegations of violations

Activists allege that violations of building, safety, and environment norms is neither new, nor surprising in Goa. "In fact, we Goans have come to believe that violations are the norm," said Sarika Vashist, a resident of Mapusa.

Vashist said most buildings, including the one in which she lives, have been built on the back of violations. "We have been complaining to every authority – from the panchayat to the Chief Minister's Office – but in vain. Some officers told me that if they acted tough against business owners, investment in Goa would come down. It is absurd. What if deliberate non compliance leads to such tragedies," she asked.

Vashist also said business owners target and silence activists using legal and other means. "I have faced multiple lawsuits and personal threats. But I will not back off," she said firmly.

Glen Fernandes, a member of Calangute Collective, a volunteer group fighting for environment conservation, said that Birch had violated several rules. "The land on which it operated was a salt pan and fish farm and cannot be used for non-agriculture purposes, as per Section 3 of the Goa Agriculture Tenancy Act, 1964. Also, under Goan law [The Goa Restrictions on Transfer of Agricultural Land Act, 2023], it can neither be sold nor bought. The owners violated the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) norms as well," he alleged.

Fernandes said he was assisting the original land owners – Pradeep Amonkar and Sunil Divker – who had complained against the nightclub. "In an earlier case, we approached the High Court to seal around 20 illegal clubs and other businesses," he said.

A writ petition filed by the original owners of the land in the High Court has prayed for a court-monitored inquiry. They have asked for a detailed inspection of the premises, the sealing of operations, demolition of the building, and action against officials responsible for the grant of permits and licences. The case is scheduled to come up for hearing on December 16.

Rohit Bras De Sa, advocate for the petitioners, said the petitioners had issued a legal notice to the club and some officers on November 4, 2025. "We said that it was clearly an unauthorised commercial establishment. We said that it was allowed to function by officials who were guilty of contributory negligence and dereliction of duty. We sent it to the owners and all the concerned departments. But we did not get any response. The writ petition makes similar claims with similar prayers," he said. He urged the government to fix personal liability on officials who allowed the alleged illegal construction and operations.

Like Fernandes, De Sa alleged that the club violated many rules. "The nightclub is close to the Baga river and the sea. This is a notified CRZ I (B) region. The owners have violated CRZ norms," he said. "They also violated rules regarding salt pans. They constructed an basement built in the water body. They have violated town and country planning codes as well. They do not have occupancy certificates. We suspect that officials at all levels are involved in allowing the illegalities."

Rajendra Kerker, 60, an environment conservationist, lives in the village of Keri-Sattari, at the edge of the Mhadei wildlife sanctuary. He said, "Salt pans need to be conserved. For centuries, salt made in Goan pans was exported to Europe. Even today, the entire populations in villages such as Nirul are engaged in making salt."

### The blame game

Roshan Redkar, the sarpanch of the Arpora-Nagoa panchayat, claimed that the panchayat had suspected irregularities in the club, got it inspected, and ordered for a demolition. But the Directorate of Panchayats in the State government stayed the order, he said.

MLA Michael Lobo responded that the state cannot be blamed. "The panchayat made two major mistakes," he said. "In its enthusiasm, it crossed the boundaries of its jurisdiction and issued a no objection certificate for a restaurant-cum-nightclub. Panchayats do not have the power to do that; only the State government's Excise Department does. The panchayat should have sealed the club, rather than trying to demolish it. That is why the owners got a stay," he said.

The Congress and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) have both demanded that Sawant resign. Congress termed the State government "corrupt" and "anti-people", while AAP said nightclubs and bars were "dens of extortion."

Kerker believes that there is only way out of the problems that Goa faces today. "That is eternal vigilance by the citizenry," he said.



## Experiment Down Under

Australia’s social media ban for kids, a useful precedent

In a world first, Australia has imposed the most comprehensive measure against social media by banning multiple platforms including Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, X, Threads, TikTok, YouTube, Reddit, Kick and Twitch for children under 16. The ban, which is now facing two lawsuits by Reddit and two teenagers, has drawn global attention at a time when the psychological impact of addictive social media use on adolescents is increasingly becoming a concern among parents, governments and educators alike.



Other jurisdictions are already tightening the net. Denmark, France, Germany and the EU have introduced or are planning parental-consent requirements and age-verification rules. India has stopped short of restricting access, but its data protection law requires platforms to secure verifiable parental consent before processing children’s data. Malaysia has gone further, announcing that a ban modelled on Australia’s will be effected by next year. The move was spurred by a tragic case in which a 16-year-old girl died after posting an Instagram poll asking whether she should end her life, an extreme but emblematic example cited by advocates of stringent curbs.

Adding weight to this are powerful hypotheses such as the one forwarded by social psychologist Jonathan Haidt who has argued for no smartphones and ban on social media for children under 16 in his influential book *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*. Haidt makes a correlation between increasing use of smartphones and rising incidents of anxiety, depression, self-harm among adolescents, especially young girls, and argues for smartphone-free schools. Yet critics contend that the evidence is far from definitive. Candice L Odgers of the University of California, writing in *Nature*, challenged Haidt’s thesis. Odgers argued that there is no evidence of association between well-being and roll-out of social media globally. There is more research, like a paper in the medical journal JAMA by Yunyu Xiao *et al*, who followed more than 4,000 adolescents across the US, and concluded that it is not the use of social media *per se* but “addictive use of social media, mobile phones, or video games” that is associated with “suicidal behaviour and ideation and worse mental health”.

What is clear is that the scientific consensus is still unsettled. It is equally unquestionable that screens and social platforms are here to stay; they offer educational, creative and economic opportunities that should not be dismissed. The emerging policy challenge, therefore, lies not in denying digital reality but in managing its excesses. The addictive design of many platforms needs to be acknowledged and societal and legal boundaries have to be set to mitigate harm. Australia’s bold move will provide a real-world test of whether sweeping restrictions improve adolescent well-being or simply shift harmful behaviours elsewhere. For now, the prudent approach lies in measured, evidence-based regulation.

## OTHER VOICES.



**It’s important to understand China’s trade surplus correctly**  
China’s goods trade surplus has surpassed \$1 trillion for the first time, drawing significant international attention. Some Western media outlets deliberately amplify the narrative of a “historic high” in their reporting, linking China’s surplus with false labels such as “dumping” and “overcapacity”. Correctly understanding China’s trade surplus requires a return to fundamental economic principles and an acknowledgment of the laws of international division of labour and cooperation. A surplus does not equate to “squeezing others out”; rather, China’s surplus is the outcome of mutually beneficial cooperation among countries. A significant portion of China’s exports represents the model of “produced globally, assembled in China and sold worldwide.” (BEIJING, DECEMBER 10)



**Situation surrounding US economy gets complex**  
The U.S. economy finds itself caught in a dilemma, with concerns over deteriorating employment and a risk of renewed inflation. Under such circumstances, the U.S. Federal Reserve Board has decided to cut its policy rate by 0.25 percentage points to a range of 3.50-3.75%. The Fed signalled it expects only one more rate cut next year. While the U.S. economy is robust for now, there is significant uncertainty about the future, due in part to U.S. President Donald Trump’s tariff policy. There are also downside risks to employment. The Fed likely decided to cut its rates out of concern for the economy. However, this is not a situation in which vigilance against inflation can be eased. (TOKYO, DECEMBER 12)



# IBC: The halting march towards efficacy

**SPUTTERING.** After a promising start, the IBC ecosystem is grappling with shortage of qualified and honest Insolvency Professionals and lack of an efficient investigative mechanism



The introduction of the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code, 2016 (IBC) marked a turning point in India’s pursuit of a comprehensive and efficient insolvency resolution framework. Conceived as a panacea to the ever-pervasive problem of non-performing assets (NPAs) that had afflicted the banking sector, the IBC replaced India’s disjointed and lengthy insolvency and company winding up frameworks with a cohesive, time-bound and expeditious process that restricted undue court interventions. In this article, we lay out the present framework of the IBC with a closer look at the regulatory gaps and challenges.

**POSITIVES OF CURRENT REGIME**  
There is no doubt that when compared to the earlier regime, the IBC has shown positive results. But, as the Economic Survey 2024-25 shows, this promise is fulfilled only partially. So far, the journey has been one of uneven progress, punctuated by formidable hurdles. As such, the IBC deserves a strategic recalibration as India hopes for a sustained 7-8 per cent annual economic growth over the next 10 years. Fundamentally, the IBC is aimed at striking a balance between the rights of debtors and creditors. Prior to its enactment, the insolvency and restructuring framework in India were skewed in favour of debtors, with the debtors being in control of troubled companies even during the restructuring process. The IBC, as it had been originally envisioned, was meant to challenge this dynamic by providing for

a time-sensitive, creditor-in-control resolution process. For its part, the Economic Survey highlights the transformative effects of the IBC by examining its influence on India’s debtor-creditor relationships at the macro level along with improvements in credit culture and the mechanism’s effectiveness across different sectors. The Survey underscores the versatility of the IBC in managing distress in diverse industries including steel and cement alongside real estate and media. The quantitative impact has been substantial: the IBC has emerged as the dominant recovery mechanism for banks, accounting for 48 per cent of all bank recoveries in FY 2023-24, compared to 32 per cent via SARFAESI, 17 per cent through Debt Recovery Tribunals, and merely 3 per cent via Lok Adalats. The gross non-performing asset (NPA) ratio of scheduled commercial banks fell dramatically from double-digits in 2017-18 (around 11.2 per cent) to just 2.7 per cent by March 2024. By end-2024, over 8,175 Corporate Insolvency Resolution Processes (CIRPs) had been initiated. Its sector-agnostic efficiency is evidence of the IBC’s strong foundation and its capacity to solve long-standing issue of NPAs afflicting India’s banking system. The IBC’s emphasis on value maximisation is yet another key strength.

**THE PROBLEMS**  
The average resolution time, however, has surged to 582 days, much more than the 270-day statutory timeline. Even

**The IBC’s efficacy in resolving NPAs remains far from optimal. The total recovery rate has been on a downtrend spiral**

more concerning, operational creditors had an average wait of 650 days simply for case admission — a startling deviation from the prescribed 14-day period. Institutional bottlenecks, particularly the overwhelming backlog at the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT), exacerbate the problem. As of July 2024, the NCLT had 2,593 cases awaiting admission and 4,723 pending post-admission. Recent data from the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Board of India (IBBI) also reveals that the IBC’s efficacy in resolving NPAs remains far from optimal. The total recovery rate has been on a downtrend spiral, decreasing from 43 per cent in Q1 FY20 to a meagre 31.4 per cent in Q3 FY25. The IBC’s promise of swift resolution has been hampered by practical impediments. While the NCLT’s bench strength is simply insufficient to handle the mammoth workload, a deeper problem is that the NCLT is embedded in procedural complexities and judicial processes unsuitable for the special demands of insolvency law. In practice, cases routinely get derailed by endless litigation, largely frivolous challenges by promoters who seek to regain control. Further, as noted, even in cases where resolution plans succeed, the outcomes are often sub-optimal, with financial creditors to some extent and operational creditors to a larger extent taking haircuts — a steep price that inevitably affects the viability of the banking ecosystem. The IBC ecosystem is also grappling with a severe shortage of qualified and honest Insolvency Professionals (IPs). As per the Parliamentary Standing Committee Report for 2023-24, out of the 203 IPs against whom disciplinary proceedings were initiated since 2016, action has been undertaken against 61 per cent of them by the Insolvency Professional Agencies (IPAs) and IBBI. This points to deficiencies in the regulatory oversight of IPs and the need

for a more robust framework for their selection, monitoring, and accountability. Pertinently, under the current framework IPs are enrolled and regulated by multiple IPAs, which are responsible for their training, certification, monitoring, and grievance redressal. However, this decentralised model of professional oversight has several shortcomings. Having multiple IPAs overseeing the functioning of their member IPs, instead of a single unified regulator, is not optimal. This fragmented approach could not only lead to inconsistencies in standards and practices across IPAs but also could create a potential conflict of interest between their regulatory and competitive goals. The problems caused by the lack of integrity and efficiency are accentuated by the lack of an effective mechanism to place checks on IPs. Beyond corruption, the IBC faces structural challenges that compound its inefficiencies. There have been instances where promoters have deliberately plunged their companies into insolvency and purchased the company back debt free indirectly. The lack of an efficient investigative mechanism renders the existing statutory safeguards prohibiting related parties from bidding for insolvent companies ineffective. The malaise is today deep rooted due to the level of discretion the system provides the IPs subject to the approval by the committee of creditors. Mandatory stipulations that increase objectivity of the IPs’ actions will help arrest the slide. This needs to be coupled with better infrastructure and assistance to the IPs. The IBC is a legislation whose success is premised on efficient and honest IP. A carrot and stick mechanism for IPs is the need of the hour.

The writers are Advocates, Madras High Court

## Why panchayats aren’t able to boost revenues

Structural and empowerment issues in States are restricting the expansion of property tax and user fees for basic services

Sushil Kumar Lohani  
Aakanksha Shrawan

Since its enactment in 1993, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment has significantly overhauled the spirit of federalism at the rural level. It has empowered the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) to levy and appropriate taxes, duties and user charges within their jurisdiction, thus reducing their dependence on governments’ grants-in-aid. Respective State PRI Acts authorise the PRIs, especially the Gram Panchayats (GPs), to levy several taxes (including property tax, entertainment tax, vehicle tax), user charges on water and sanitation and also raise revenue from Common Property Resources (CPRs). Despite these financial powers, PRIs face significant challenges in mobilising sufficient own source revenue (OSR). According to the RBI Report on ‘Finances of Panchayati Raj Institutions’, OSR generation in PRIs remains meagre; with property tax revenue being the dominant revenue source in the majority of the States. A recent study by NIPFP, titled ‘Preparation of a Viable Financial Model for Generation of Own Sources of Revenue’, highlights some structural and procedural issues limiting OSR mobilisation. Property tax accounts for nearly 40 per cent of GPs’ OSR collections nationwide, yet India’s property

tax-to-GDP ratio remains among the world’s lowest at around 0.2 per cent (World Bank). This stems from both structural and empowerment issues in some States. Several States like Uttar Pradesh and Odisha have not yet authorised GPs to levy property tax, while others face ambiguities regarding definitions, valuation, rate revision and limited State support. Disputes over property ownership also discourage taxation, especially of commercial buildings on contested land.

**CLEAR DIRECTIVES**  
In contrast, States such as Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, where clarificatory orders and clear directives have been issued with sufficient State hand-holding, show improvements in property tax collections. For GPs lacking manpower or technical capacity, States could set simple, flat rates based on house area to ensure a minimal collection of property tax. GPs with adequate specialised staff should follow the rules and amendments from the above high-performing States. GPs are also empowered to collect fees/user charges from users of basic services, such as drinking water and solid waste management (SWM). However, distinct agencies under State and Central schemes — like Jal Jeevan Mission, Rural Drinking Water Supply Department, Public Health Engineering Department — handle these services. According to the guidelines, once the Central and State Governments



**PANCHAYATS:** Financially hamstrung

construct the required systems, the long-term implementation, management, operationalisation and maintenance (O&M) of these systems are to be vested with the PRIs. This has still not happened, which prevents GPs from collecting any user charges. However, field surveys by NIPFP found that in some States, the water supply and SWM systems are maintained informally outside the PRI system either through users’ associations or by self-help groups (SHGs). Officially handing over these systems to PRIs from the line departments would not only facilitate their proper O&M but also aid GPs in generating revenues. The other major source of revenue for the GPs is licence fees from commercial establishments. However, GPs often lack clarity in deciding the appropriate fee amounts. In the absence of such clarity, GPs auction out the collection of such revenue to a third party, resulting in sub-optimal collection. GPs must

prepare a comprehensive list of all the eligible taxpayer commercial establishments in their jurisdiction and then calculate the actual levy based on the shop characteristics such as yearly turnover, profits, location, etc. The last issue pertains to community-owned CPRs such as minor forests, pastures or grazing lands and water bodies. Though GPs are encouraged to monetise the proceeds from these CPRs, ownership of several of these resources frequently overlaps with other line departments such as the Forest Department. Officially transferring the control of CPRs to GPs would not only allow for their more efficient management but would also add to the coffers of GPs. To realise the full potential of OSR, MoPR has also rolled out a specialised training module for PRI functionaries developed in collaboration with IIM Ahmedabad. The Ministry has also developed a digital platform called “Samartha” which can be used by States for end-to-end digitisation of OSR management of panchayats. Efforts are also being made to handhold identified GPs, having either high revenue collections or situated in peri-urban areas, in formulating commercially viable projects which could create a virtuous economic cycle with spill-over effects.

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

**Districts as export hubs**  
This refers to 'Transforming districts into export hubs' (December 12). A unified exporter registry — seamlessly linking DGFT and State systems — would banish guesswork and let officials champion firms with precision. The push to formalise micro enterprises and to install district-level testing labs, packaging centres, and robust logistics spines is a great idea. Paring back middlemen, upskilling artisans, and pairing them with anchor buyers are indispensable. With this architecture, every district can plug

into supply chains and convert craft into enterprises and jobs.  
**Arul Mozhi Varman**  
Sivakasi, TN

**IndiGo crisis takeaways**  
This refers to 'Learning's from the IndiGo crisis' (December 12). IndiGo's aggressive expansion without adequately assessing manpower requirements, particularly of pilots, exposes the risks of scaling beyond operational capacity. Second, the airline's mishandling of refunds revealed a serious gap in preparedness among

frontline staff. In service industries, insufficient training can quickly erode trust and goodwill.  
**R Mohan**  
Kumbakonam, TN

**AI training model**  
Apropos your edit 'Intellectual property' (December 12). India's proposed statutory licensing regime for AI training is a long-overdue recognition that creative labour is not a free public utility. For too long, global AI firms have extracted data from millions of writers, musicians, and artists without consent, credit,

or compensation. The proposed Copyright Royalties Collective for AI Training offers a fair and efficient “one licence, one payment” model, ensuring creators share in the economic upside of the AI boom. However, licensing must not override autonomy. Creators must retain the right to opt out, even as royalty systems evolve.  
**K Chidanand Kumar**  
Bengaluru

**Air connectivity**  
This refers to the report on the Central Government’s proposal to offer more sops to improve air connectivity. The Government’s decision to offer incentives such as exemption of night landing charges to regional airlines is a welcome step. Further, there are new airlines, such as Air Dravida and Star Aviation, in the queue to take off as regional flights. This is good news and should be encouraged. With better connectivity, the smaller towns can compete with the bigger towns and cities in more areas, thus driving economic growth in the region.  
**P Senthil S Durai Vazhavalan**  
Tuticorin, TN







OPINION

The  
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{ OUR TAKE }

Dhaka’s return to rule by the vote

The first general election in Bangladesh after the ouster of the Sheikh Hasina government presents a dilemma for India

On February 12, 2026, Bangladesh will hold its first general election after the ouster of the Sheikh Hasina government more than a year ago, quelling speculation about the caretaker administration’s commitment to holding polls. Hasina’s party, the Awami League, is barred from contesting because the poll panel has suspended its registration. Most trends point to the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) winning the highest number of seats, followed by the Jamaat-e-Islami. Jamaat was banned under the Hasina regime but has re-emerged after the uprising of 2024, with the interim government in Dhaka withdrawing measures instituted by previous regimes to check Islamists and radical elements. The National Citizen Party (NCP), formed by a group of student leaders who led the 2024 protests, has been unable to fashion itself into real political force — though detractors of Muhammad Yunus, the head of the interim government, argued that many of his actions, such as dragging out the process of organising elections, were aimed at strengthening the hands of the students. The NCP is expected to fare worse than both the BNP and Jamaat. In addition to the polls, voters will participate in a referendum on the so-called “July Charter”, a declaration finalised by political parties and the interim government for constitutional, electoral and administrative reforms to enhance representation of women in parliament, set term limits for prime ministers, increase presidential powers, and expand judicial independence and fundamental rights. The Awami League has rejected the election schedule, saying that the caretaker administration cannot ensure “a fair and normal environment” for the polls. It has announced protests, though it remains to be seen how much street power it can mobilise at a time when most of its senior leadership has fled Bangladesh. Hasina’s authoritarian streak has harmed the party’s standing among the people, but it retains a dedicated cadre base.

The polls could be a salve for the country that saw hundreds killed in widespread violence, including a crackdown on protesters by the security forces. The wounds remain, as do deep fissures in society, and a democratically-elected government will be better placed to address these issues than the interim government, several of whose actions are viewed by critics as transgressions into areas better handled by an elected administration.

The election announcement, however, presents a dilemma for India, which has insisted on free, fair, inclusive, and participatory polls in Bangladesh. While India must welcome the poll date announcement, it will have to decide whether it must insist on a more participatory exercise. Another issue is Dhaka’s call for Hasina’s extradition — New Delhi has said it is looking into this, after a Bangladesh tribunal sentenced the former prime minister to death over the violence during the 2024 protests. At the same time, New Delhi must begin preparing to engage with a BNP-led government in Dhaka, especially given the party’s history of animosity towards India and earlier links to forces that backed the insurgency in the Northeast. BNP leaders have signalled a change in their party’s stance towards India, raising hopes for a fresh start. However, there are several reasons why India will have to remain cautious. The parties in the fray in the elections could still bank on an anti-India plank, given that they have often accused Hasina’s regime of having a pro-India tilt. Any strengthening of radical political elements through the polls will have the potential to unsettle New Delhi.

Politics to peace, women leading a quiet revolution

The role of women needs to be recognised, amplified, and embedded into the architecture of India’s democratic and constitutional frameworks

Women in India are transforming the landscape of electoral politics with unprecedented force. Their turnout has now overtaken male participation in many elections — for instance, women reported a 65.8% turnout in the 2024 General Elections as against 65.6% for men, and an extraordinary 71.6% in the Bihar Assembly elections of November 2025 as against 62.8% for men. This shift has made women an electoral constituency of immense significance. Even though their numerical representation in lawmaking remains low, their growing presence as voters has recalibrated political strategy. Welfare schemes, cash transfers, and targeted development programmes are now routinely crafted around women, reflecting a recognition that “investing” in this constituency yields tangible political dividends.

Yet, this dynamic raises more profound democratic questions. Does this “quid pro quo” empower women as full political agents? Women must not remain mere *labharthis* (passive recipients of State benevolence). A democracy worthy of its constitutional promise requires women as active claimants of rights, voice, and agency in policy arenas.

This shift in political participation parallels broader transformations in women’s social and professional presence. Their rising presence in higher education, their substantial contribution to science and technology, their legally mandated inclusion on company boards, and their influential role in panchayati raj institutions have cumulatively infused governance with greater gender sensitivity.

The labour force story, however, remains complex. While female labour force participation has increased to 41.7% (PLFS 2023–24), nearly 95% of

these women work within the informal economy, where wage gaps, precarious employment, limited social protection, and minimal access to credit continue to constrain the transformative potential of women’s economic agency.

One domain where women’s contributions remain especially undervalued is peacebuilding. This invisibility persists despite India’s globally recognised achievements, such as deploying the All-Women Peacekeeping Force to Liberia in 2007 and the impactful presence of Indian women in UN peacekeeping missions in Sudan and Congo. These high-visibility successes overshadow the quieter, everyday work women undertake to nurture peace across communal, ethnic, and political divides. Much of this labour occurs in civil society spaces where women mediate tensions, maintain communication channels, provide humanitarian relief, and rebuild social trust.

However, the need is not only for “women-led development” but also for women-led peacebuilding long before conflicts escalate. Women’s interventions unfold along both axes of human security — freedom from want and freedom from fear — making their peace praxis especially grounded and holistic.

India observes Constitution Day on November 26 when the Preamble’s injunctions — justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity — come to the fore. Among these, fraternity — the ethic of coexistence — remains the most neglected in practice. The women of the Constituent Assembly recognised its significance.

Despite being few in number, they were unanimous in warning against the politics of identity and exclusion. Renuka Ray cautioned against denominational prejudice; Amrit Kaur warned that ritualism and dogma divide rather than bind; Begum Aizaz Rasul pointed out how communal categorisations fracture the social fabric. While diverse in caste, class, religious and regional backgrounds, the women collectively sought to diminish denominational dominance in the constitutional order.

Women globally have long argued that peace must be crafted, not simply declared. They interrogate cultures of militarism, challenge war-making mindsets, oppose weapons proliferation, and



In conflicts within India, women’s groups have repeatedly taken risks to mediate peace. In present-day Manipur, women work discreetly to support displaced families in relief camps, rebuild relationships, and restore threads of trust.

GETTY IMAGES

highlight the compounded effects of conflict on economic, social, and political rights. Their activism has created transnational networks for justice, inclusion, and reconciliation.

Enhancing the effectiveness of women in peacebuilding requires strengthening their representation in legislatures, public institutions, and democratic spaces. Gender justice intersects directly with issues such as sustainable development, de-weaponisation, militia disarmament, communal harmony, and accountability for security-force excesses. In conflicts within India, women’s groups have repeatedly taken risks to mediate peace. In present-day Manipur, women work discreetly to support displaced families in relief camps, rebuild relationships, and restore threads of trust. Such examples abound, but are invisibilised. Women’s activism frequently uses performance, symbolism, and spectacle. Rejecting the image of peace as passive purity, women “wage conflict” non-violently, employing household artefacts — rolling pins, utensils, veils — to dramatise dissent. This echoes Gandhian *satyagraha*, which transformed mundane symbols like salt and *khadi* into moral forces.

From the *Chipko Andolan* to Koodankulam, women have expanded peace activism to address livelihoods, ecological justice, displacement, and resource access. From Sharmila’s decade-long fast and the Meira Paibi nude protest in 2004 remain potent reminders of the lengths to which women will go to protest systemic and overt violence.

Moving from divided pasts to shared futures requires women’s participation as leaders, mediators, and negotiators. UNSC Resolution 1325 has shifted the global understanding of peace from a militarised model of conflict management to one that recognises social justice, gender equity, and civilian safety as central to security. In a polarising climate, reconciliation becomes a democratic

necessity.

India’s Mediation Act (2023) offers an opening. By recognising community mediation, we can create frameworks that make peace mediation more mainstream across social and political contexts. Women, with their extensive and dense relational networks and knowledge of local ecologies, can serve as early-warning monitors, negotiators, and dispute mediators.

Research demonstrates that women’s mediation styles are distinct: They favour consent-building over transactional bargaining; emphasise relationships over zero-sum outcomes; rely on multi-logue and network mobilisation; and prioritise sustainable agreements over power calculus.

The UN General Assembly (2011) affirmed that women’s participation enhances the durability of peace processes. Their relational perspective challenges the realpolitik view of security as a competition for power.

Today’s peacebuilding landscape has moved from great-power mediation to community-centred, adaptive, proximal approaches. Women lead this “quiet revolution”, navigating interconnected crises. Mediation today is as much about inner work — empathy, intuition, emotional intelligence, and the ethics of care — as about negotiation techniques.

In these times of a global polycrisis, India needs the restorative force of coexistence. Women have shown that *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* can be a lived ethic, not just rhetoric. The challenge is to institutionalise their contributions so that women’s peacebuilding is recognised, amplified, and embedded into the architecture of India’s democratic and constitutional frameworks.

Meenakshi Gopinath is director, Women in Security, Peace and Conflict, New Delhi. The views expressed are personal

{ MINOR HINTS }

Rahul Sagar



India’s history, preserved in the distant archives of UK

There is a delicious anecdote that Harvey Mansfield, the legendary Harvard professor, loved to share when he lectured on Thomas Hobbes. In his masterpiece *Leviathan*, Hobbes famously posits that life without government would be “nasty, brutish, and short”. Unfortunately, having neither read nor listened with due care, one hapless undergraduate, Mansfield would recount, went on to write his term paper on how life without government would be “nasty, British, and short”.

This anecdote came to mind on the second anniversary of one of the worst cyberattacks in Britain. Back in October 2023, the computers of the British Library (BL) were taken over by hackers. When the BL rightly refused to pay the ransom they demanded, the hackers retaliated by destroying the management systems vital to marshalling the 170 million records under its care. To its credit, the BL immediately set about restoring services and subsequently published a frank report detailing how inadequate investments in technology had allowed this “cyber incident” to occur. In the meantime, its outstanding staff stepped up to help patrons trace items manually, serving as what one report described as “human computers”.

The real horror is that two years hence, the BL is yet to fully recover. Several catalogues, the very essence of a library, remain offline. A new library

management system, which was due to be released this week, has been postponed because staff have gone on strike over inadequate pay. Meanwhile, the £6-7 million spent on necessary technological upgrades was reported to have depleted the BL’s reserves by 40%. Altogether, the glaring vulnerabilities that allowed the hackers in and the limping recovery since then are symptoms of Britain’s buckling public finances.

What makes this imbroglio a cause of particular concern for India is that the BL is the principal repository of the records and holdings of the India Office. The contents — ranging from surveys, maps, and artworks to memoranda, official files, and private papers — are, without doubt, the single-most important resource in the world to understanding what transpired in India between 1757 and 1947, spanning as they do rule by the East India Company and the Crown. So extensive is this collection that it occupies some 14 km of shelving.

This concentration of resources in a small patch of London has two implications. First, it means that scholars must make pilgrimages to one of the most expensive cities in the world. This requirement disadvantages scholars from the developing world, who felt their geographical disadvantage all the more when the pandemic limited international travel. Second, it means that our ability to study the emergence of modern India is worry-

ingly dependent on the upkeep of one institution. The hacking incident made it difficult to locate records, but it did not destroy them. It is possible, however, to envision worse happening, with studies warning that the climate crisis is increasing the risk of flash flooding in London.

The obvious remedy to these concerns about equity and preservation is to digitise the India Office Records and make them freely available to the wider world. Several important repositories such as the Wellcome Collection and the Getty Collection have already made their holdings open access. But given its strained finances, and the size of its holdings, the BL is unlikely to follow suit. There is an alternative, however. Over the past decade, the Qatar Foundation has funded the BL to create the Qatar Digital Library, a completely free online resource that beautifully digitises and presents colonial records relating to the Gulf. Might the government of India learn from this example and create a non-profit foundation to fund the digitisation of irreplaceable Indian records held in Britain?

No such thing will ever happen. This much is clear from the government’s lacklustre performance on this front in India. Every few months, there is a grandiose press release promising the imminent digitisation of millions of valuable holdings in some library or archive in the country. But hardly any of these ventures have borne fruit. Try visiting the National Digital Library of India (NDLI), whose prehistoric website would actually be improved by being hacked. Or try using the typo-ridden digital catalogues of the National Archives of India (NAI). There is a reason why its portal, bravely described as *Abhilekh Patal*, is better known to researchers as *Abhilekh Pataal*.

The fundamental issue is that, unlike in Britain, the bureaucracy in India has no genuine desire or incentive to support historical research. The instinct is to control and prohibit. There are plenty

of promises to satisfy political masters, but on the ground, nothing ever changes. Little wonder, then, that the most interesting efforts to preserve and widen access have come from private initiatives such as Srujanika, a collective whose digitisation of rare Odia texts has been documented in *The Vol-unteer Archivists*, a moving film by Subhashish Panigrahi. Ironically, the BL, whose mandate is to serve the British public, has probably done more than the Ministry of Culture to bring unique Indian archives online. Its noble Endangered Archives Programme (EAP) has made available materials from private archives and libraries in India that successive governments have not cared to help.

What all this means is that, incredibly, nearly eight decades after Independence, Indians must hope that Britain keeps calm and carries on, because their best chance of studying their own history depends upon it. In India, history is meant to be fought over, not to be preserved or to be seen. If you want to actually inspect a document or view an artefact, your luck depends on whether the British carried it away (and that Russian hackers have not carried it away from them in turn). Perhaps there is something admirable about this arrangement — the expatriation of our history. Like a coursing river, contemporary India cares solely about moving forward. Only those civilisations that believe their greatest days are behind them need to worry about crumbling pagodas and decaying archives. We will create new monuments and new memories. And for those who wish to think of what was and could have been, for them there is London, hackers and pandemics permitting.

Rahul Sagar is Global Network associate professor at NYU Abu Dhabi. His recent books include *The Progressive Maharaja* and *To Raise A Fallen People*. The views expressed are personal

In Colombo, New Delhi’s relief route to goodwill

Sri Lanka is dealing with its worst disaster since the multi-faceted crisis of 2021. As of December 11, Cyclone Ditwah had claimed 639 lives and affected over 2.3 million people. Economic losses are close to \$6-7 billion, derailing the country’s economic recovery and setting its infrastructure back by decades. The Sri Lankan government’s delayed and inadequate preparation has provided much-needed momentum to the Opposition. On its part, India launched Operation Sagar Bandhu to ensure Sri Lanka’s “early recovery, rehabilitation, and reconstruction”, securing its long-term interests.

Since the operation’s November 28 launch, India has delivered over 1,058 tonnes of relief materials, and its naval and air forces have been deployed for rescue and relief assistance. These efforts are being supplemented by

National Disaster Response Force teams, medical personnel, medical centres, and a para-field hospital. Till December 8, over 450 people had been rescued and 3,338 treated. India has also flown its military engineers along with Bailey Bridge units to restore critical infrastructure.

India’s recent efforts build on its previous commitments. Since 2021, it has offered over \$4.5 billion in aid. It comes at a time when the Sri Lankan government is facing immense challenges. One year into power, the high tide that Anura Kumara Dissanayake (AKD) rode to power is descending to its natural ebb. The Opposition has started gaining momentum by criticising the government’s policies. The crackdown on former ministers

and bureaucrats, especially president Ranil Wickremesinghe, has united the Opposition, motivating them to hold joint rallies.

The inadequate response during the recent disaster has given them further momentum. Increasing centralisation and scrutiny in the name of accountability had left the bureaucracy paralysed. The State mechanism hesitated to respond without the president’s intervention, and families were left with very little assistance. This has created new pressure points against the government. Over the last

year, owing to its nationalist and protectionist constituencies and lobbies, the government reversed privatisation and cancelled energy projects in Mannar and Pooneryn. It also slowed negotiations on the Economic and Technology Cooperation Agreement (ETCA) and land bridge. The defence MoU signed with India has also drawn criticism. With the Opposition’s growing role, the government is now growing more vulnerable to politicisation of its engagements with India.

Cyclone Ditwah has also shrunk Sri Lanka’s bargaining agency and necessitated Chinese assistance and funds. The AKD government has already initiated a recovery programme to mobilise resources from multiple sources, including foreign governments and international organisations, to rebuild the country’s infrastructure. This comes at a time when China has resumed its projects in Sri Lanka. Recently, it offered a \$500 million loan for the stalled highway project. It also offered cash donations and relief supplies during the latest crisis. Amidst these political and geopolitical shifts, Operation Sagar Bandhu will help India secure its long-term interests. Its swift response, gestures and efforts have generated a positive perception, especially after it allowed Pakistan to use its airspace to deliver humanitarian assistance to Sri Lanka. This has created goodwill for India that will go a long way in securing its interests and projects, especially as Sri Lanka’s political ground gradually shifts, and China’s influence increases.



Aditya Gowdara Shivamurthy

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{ EDITOR’S PICK }

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

CHINA’S TRADE MUSCLE

Despite its tariff stare-down with the US, China has registered a trade surplus of \$1 trillion, becoming the first country ever to do so. What explains China’s crushing trade power? More importantly, why has the West not been able to contain it?

Some answers may be found in Stewart Paterson’s *China, Trade, and Power*. In the book, Paterson, a senior fellow at the Hinrich Foundation, argues that China’s ascendancy is rooted in its unfair trade practices — from currency depreciation to questionable labour practices and economic coercion. He outlines how the country has leveraged the WTO system despite not adhering to a rules-based global trade regime. The book also talks about how little the West understood the global trade developments that flowed from China’s accession to the WTO in 2001 and the ramifications of the Western economic model becoming unmoored from democratic morals.



China, trade and power  
Stewart Paterson  
2018



# Fifa’s World Cup sycophancy is dirtying the beautiful game



LARA WILLIAMS

President Donald Trump finally received his sought-after peace prize on Friday. Except it wasn’t from the Nobel Foundation but from Fifa, an institution charged with overseeing penalty shootouts in soccer rather than geopolitics. I’m not much of a football fan — I prefer rugby — but how can this sycophancy to a world leader who’s pulled his nation out of the Paris Agreement and calls climate change a “con job” serve

either athletes or soccer fans? The award was handed out at a glitzy draw event for the World Cup, set to take place next summer across three countries — Canada, the United States and Mexico. Gianni Infantino, head of the governing body, seems to have invented the Fifa Peace Prize as part of a wider effort to ingratiate himself and his organisation with the President. Mr Infantino needs to make sure the tournament, which could see as many as 6 million fans flying into North America, runs smoothly; with 11 of the 16 host cities located in the US, Mr Trump is a core piece of that puzzle. But footballers and fans would surely thank him more for taking more note of a serious threat to the sport: Climate change.

At this summer’s Fifa Club World Cup, a heat dome settled over the eastern US — a weather phenomenon made at least three times more likely by fossil-fuel emissions,

according to an analysis by research group Climate Central. Temperatures of 37C (99F) combined with high humidity to create feels-like conditions of about 45C. Such an environment is dangerous to simply exist in, let alone play 90 minutes of strenuous sport. Chelsea FC manager Enzo Maresca told the *BBC* that it was “impossible” to organise normal training sessions; crates of iced water were placed around the pitch and huge fans were set up to blow water spray at the exercising players. Multiple games were also suspended for hours due to extreme rainfall and lightning storms, prompting Maresca to call the situation a “joke” and suggest that the US “is not the right place to do this competition.”

During the tournament, Fifa lowered the threshold for extra cooling breaks to a wet-bulb globe temperature — a measure taking into account humidity, wind speed, sun angle and cloud cover — of 28C. But that

was only because the International Federation of Professional Footballers (FIFPRO) intervened early on. It also contravenes guidance from the American College of Sports Medicine, which suggests cancelling games even for highly fit and acclimated participants at that temperature.

Fifa has just announced that for the upcoming Cup, there’ll be a three minute hydration break per half no matter what the temperature. Experts are already concerned about the World Cup; 14 out of 16 host cities are expected to be vulnerable to extreme heat during the tournament, while only three venues have retractable roofs and air conditioning. Two more offer roof shade.

In addition to the health concerns for both teams and spectators, the spectacle will likely just be worse. Matches being delayed or cancelled could wreak havoc with travel and accommodation plans. Games played in hot weather will also be less energetic and

interesting to watch. Now that the draw has been announced, attention is on scheduling. Fifa will assign most afternoon games to air-conditioned stadiums or temperate cities, while other locations will have evening kick-offs. These are sensible measures, but with the final scheduled to start at 3pm ET at MetLife Stadium in New Jersey — an open venue which hosted multiple dangerously hot games last summer — critics have suggested the highly convenient timing for European TV fans suggests Fifa is more concerned with protecting its commercial interests than the game’s attendees.

Fifa can try to adapt its tournament to the summer heat as best it can, but it’s clearly contributing to the climate crisis. The new trend of hosting events across countries — or even continents, as is set to happen in 2030 — is evidence of that. Campaign group Scientists for Global Responsibility expects the 2026 event to generate more than 9 mil-

lion metric tonnes of CO2, the highest carbon footprint of any World Cup tournament. Travel, both international and intercity, contributes 85 per cent of that.

The governing body has pledged to reduce emissions by 50 per cent by 2030 and achieve net zero by 2040. But this relies heavily on carbon offsetting. Carbon Market Watch found that the credits Fifa intended to use for 2022’s tournament were of poor quality, and that the organisation’s own carbon accounting rested on dubious calculations.

At Friday’s draw, Mr Infantino called the 2026 World Cup “the greatest event that humanity... will ever see.” But sidling up to climate deniers, making deals with heavy polluters and failing to tackle its own emissions is a sure fire way for Fifa to turn the beautiful game ugly.

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Bloomberg



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

# Australia’s under-16 gamble



VIEWPOINT  
DEVANGSHU DATTA

Australia’s restrictions on access to social media for under-16s affect platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Threads, TikTok, X, YouTube, Reddit and streaming sites like Kick and Twitch. These must now set up age verification to prevent Australian kids setting up accounts and close down existing accounts of under-16 Australians. The Australian government is considering expanding the ban to some gaming platforms. There will be legal challenges, and there may also be copycat legislation in other nations.

The proximate trigger for the ban was the tragic deaths of cyberbullied children. The results of a study commissioned by the Australian government indicated that not only cyberbullying, but also sexual assault and the grooming of minors by paedophiles were common on social media.

One big implication is loss of privacy for every Australian social media user. The verification will be invasive and enable the platforms (and perhaps the government) to collect private, personal data. Although the platforms must destroy data after verification, this may have a chilling effect on free speech since anonymity will no longer be possible.

The ban means loss of engagement for platforms. Young users are not only

a big chunk of the social media population, they are the most engaged, spending more time on social media and interacting more on it. That translates into higher ad revenues.

Remove those users and the ad revenue, which is by far, the largest income stream (ads generate over 90 per cent of revenues for Meta) diminishes. While platforms must destroy the new data they collect in Australia, they will probably find ingenious ways to monetise it.

The new processes of verification are also going to be leaky. The targeted cohort is digital-native. They will find ways around the bans by using VPNs, fake IDs, impersonating adults, finding platforms not currently banned, etc.

The platforms may respond by setting up global verification systems and collecting this data for all users because, why not? Many governments may be happy to let this happen, so long as the governments can also get their own hands on the data, even if the platforms have to delete it post-verification. So loss of privacy, and anonymity and the associated chilling effects on free speech could be global. There may certainly be a spillover effect in India where legislation like the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act makes exceptions for governments and does not always guarantee the right to erasure for data held by government agencies.

It will require both time and data to judge the effectiveness of the ban, in terms of mitigating cyber-bullying and reducing the reach of paedophiles. It will take longitudinal studies that last years or decades to assess some other potential effects.

Social media is embedded into the digital ecosystem. Kids who use Reddit, Twitch and YouTube learn

coding, maths, languages, geography, biology, among other things, on these platforms. Moreover, social media helps mitigate loneliness in tiny, physically isolated communities. Australia has plenty of those.

Australia pioneered distance learning via radio and TV over 60 years ago to serve kids on far-flung sheep stations across the Outback. Banning social media may lead to a learning deficit and leave aching holes in the lives of kids growing up in the middle of nowhere.

Another imponderable is neurological development. There are some hypotheses that children introduced early to social media (smartphone usage starts at around age 3 for many) suffer from poor development of the “3Rs”. Their reading, verbalising, calculating and overall learning skills may be stunted.

Cutting them off may lead to higher educational attainment. Australia could be a “test” case. Around 10-15 years down the line, we’ll have a sense of whether Australians who grew up post-ban are smarter, better adjusted individuals, or if they lag peers from “no-ban” nations in educational attainment, and/or are more socially awkward.

It makes sense, therefore, to see the ban as an experiment involving large populations. To put it in a broader context, Australia’s sexual age of consent is 16, and it issues driving licences to 16-year-olds, while alcohol consumption is legal at 18, and that’s also the voting age. So the ban implies using social media is about as dangerous as having sex, or driving a car, but less dangerous than alcohol, or the right to choose people who may choose to ban social media. Only time will tell if this is true.

# IndiGo’s real ‘crime’

Don’t blame misfortune. This is colossal incompetence and insensitivity. So bad that heads would have rolled even in the old PSU-era Indian Airlines and Air India

There can be three immediate reactions when you see the unravelling of IndiGo, arguably the greatest global brand built in post-reform India. All three come with some frustration.

The first, the IndiGo founders and the management must be nuts, unthinking, or arrogant, as some have argued, to have let it go into such a rapid meltdown.

The second, that whoever thinks of taking on the Government of India, and that too the Narendra Modi government, particularly when Vladimir Putin was in town, is smoking something illegal. Remember, those that allegedly triggered Shaheen Bagh protests while Donald Trump visited New Delhi in 2020 are still in jail without trial. And this, just as the holiday weeks are beginning.

And third, for those who’ve argued for decades that the government should get out

of our lives, especially in areas better served by the private sector, how reckless did you have to be to do exactly the reverse? That holier-than-cow *mai-baap sarkar* is back to clean up the mess created by an arrogant, anti-customer private-sector leader. This is a national tragedy.

You can quite believe that for all these years, as private aviation grew, took the Jet and Kingfisher meltdowns in its stride, and Air India was privatised, many in the ancient regime chafed at the loss of power. No planes to buy, no largesse of hirings, contracts, or even purchases of consumables.

The Government of India, or what in my more frustrating moments I have described as Sarkar-e-Hind, given its self-image, had been rendered irrelevant in at least one area. Here the private sector built a globally envied success. Even in telecom, at least some vestiges of old power stay with the government: Spectrum sales, one active public sector unit, BSNL, and a 49 per cent equity in Vodafone-Idea. In civil aviation, it has nothing barring that insignificant helicopter charter. Most of the significant airports are privately-owned and many others will soon be.



NATIONAL  
INTEREST  
SHEKHAR GUPTA

Now, the *sarkar* is back and how. The minister is strutting from one TV channel to another, promising to clean up the mess IndiGo created, threatening to indirectly take over the management of a listed company still valued at around ₹2 trillion, or \$24 billion, despite a nearly 15 per cent collapse in the wake of the crisis. This happens only in India: A private company messes up. But the guy explain-

ing and taking questions is not its chief executive officer, but a minister.

The minister has threatened to have the CEO fired, and had him summoned by the sector regulator for a highly publicised humiliation. He first withdrew, in panic, the regulations on pilots’ duty hours that his own ministry and regulator failed to enforce over nearly two years and then ordered a cut in flights till February, 2026. He’s now thinking aloud. A duopoly is bad, so his preference is to have five airlines instead, with a hundred aircraft each.

Is he going to give IndiGo or Indian aviation, since the airline is two-thirds of it, its “Baby Bells” moment. That harks back to the US anti-trust process breaking up AT&T’s monopoly into Regional Bell Operating Companies (RBOCs). The minister should have his staff Google that. Indian aviation looks big, but it has enormous headroom for growth. Just IndiGo has another 1,400 jets on order, Air India approximately 570, and another couple of hundred between Akasa Air and SpiceJet. How can we talk of wishing for five airlines with 100 planes each, when India can absorb five with 500 planes each?

This incredible Indian success story was made possible because the establishment, for once, accepted what Prime Minister Narendra Modi has said often: The government has no business to be in business. Just as Indian aviation is growing at a global scale, the minister in charge is talking of cutting it into pieces. This when both his Prime Minister and his party supremo, Chandrababu Naidu, are believers in scale.

We might be losing our way, however, in venting much over the poor minister. He was given what seemed to be an easy, if glamorous ministry, with very little to do except cutting ribbons. Then a crisis found him.

So, we leave him to his prime-time and return to the real issue — the return of the government into the very heart of one of India’s most spectacular success stories. How else can we describe the placing of officers in key positions in the IndiGo corporate headquarters overseeing decisions? This is accountability-free micromanagement. They come from the same regulator, the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA), which first introduced rules for crew rest-and-recovery so conservative even the Europeans would balk. They did so without getting the stakeholders’ buy-in.

# The return of the billboard

EYE CULTURE  
AYUSHI SINGH

A sweater shouldn’t be the most interesting thing in the sky. Yet earlier this week in Delhi, a blue argyle one hung off the edge of a yellow billboard. Not printed on it, but tilted forward as if left there to dry above a crowded intersection. For a moment, the city paused. A scooter slowed. Someone lifted their phone to click a picture. And Delhi, a place that rarely sees its own skyline through the smog, looked up at this quiet, slightly absurd interruption — a billboard pretending it was never just a billboard.

For years, billboards were simply part of the urban backdrop. Loud rectangles selling cement, insurance, electronics, fairness creams. Anything that needed height more than imagination. They demanded attention mostly because there was no escaping them. Then attention drifted elsewhere. As streaming platforms multiplied and social media became a second home, advertisers followed the glow of screens. Billboards didn’t disappear. They just faded into the periphery.

The shift back began quietly. A few brands started treating billboards less like instruction manuals and more like personality statements. Bumble led with its witty one-liners that felt lifted from a group chat rather than a marketing deck. Short, self-aware, lightly cheeky. The kind you smirk at at a signal because the billboard seems to

know exactly who it is talking to. It was the first sign that outdoor advertising had realised something simple: To be noticed again, it had to feel alive again.

Then billboards began stepping outside their frames. Literally. A chocolate bar lifted itself out of a hoarding. A sneaker in Bengaluru burst forward in anamorphic 3D, startling people into filming it. Britannia wrapped its billboard around real trees instead of slicing through them. In Vijayawada, a Taj Mahal Tea hoarding did something stranger still. When it rained, it played. Raindrops brushed against santoor strings stretched across the board, filling the junction with a few seconds of Megh Malhar and turning a passing shower into a small concert for whoever happened to look up. Blinkit set up visual riddles you kept thinking about two junctions later. Ikea whispered small morning jokes.

Billboards were just ads once. Now they are content, slipping into our camera rolls and conversations with the same ease as anything we scroll past. They are now Instagram stories, banter, tiny civic moments we archive. Proof that the city still has a sense of humour. Outdoor advertising quietly figured out that competing with screens does not require being louder. It requires being clever enough to land on those screens by choice.

The numbers adjusted accordingly. Out-of-home advertising, which dipped during the lockdown years, has climbed steadily back across India. Brands have realised a billboard

does not need attention for long. It needs it for precisely three seconds. Just long enough for surprise and a photograph. But beneath the economics lies something more human.

In a world where most of our visual life happens through glass, we now notice the things that break that boundary. These new-age billboards behave almost like installations. Tac-tile, playful, occasionally mischievous. They don’t overwhelm. They interrupt. They remind us there is still something in the physical world that can earn our gaze without tracking it.

The country’s biggest cities have quietly turned into open-air galleries. A strange object suspended above a junction becomes a shared experience for strangers who will never meet. A punchline on a flyover makes a whole bus grin for a second. A billboard shaped around a tree makes people feel oddly protective. These aren’t ads in the old sense. They are small edits to the everyday.

Perhaps that is why these new billboards stay with us. Not because they are louder or brighter, but because they ask for a moment in a city that rarely gives us any. A billboard might once have shouted for attention. Now it only hopes for a brief look up from the blur.

Their return is marked not by a spectacle, but a reminder — that in a life lived through glass and scrolls, the world outside still has its own ways of tapping us on the shoulder. Not to sell us something, but to say: We are here, in this place, in this moment. Look up while it is still happening.

# Grand strategy for populists



TICKER  
MIHIR S SHARMA

Every now and then, the United States (US) government is supposed to issue a document outlining its strategy for the maintenance of national security. Many countries do this — India is an outlier in that it has avoided the notion of public discussion of a white paper on defence or a comprehensive strategy for national security for some time.

The current US administration’s attempt at such a strategy — the National Security Strategy 2025, or NSS25, released last week — provides a glimpse into both the advantages and disadvantages of such documents. On the one hand, they can provide an enormous amount of clarity about the political purposes and shifts in intentions that underlie security strategy. It stands out from the low-level buzz of diplomatic and communiques and other official statements, which are better seen as responses to

immediate provocations or specific high-level visits rather than as elements of a coherent geopolitical approach. But, on the other hand, it can cause a rupture in how a country’s past actions are seen, and colour its future choices.

NSS25 is being seen as an unusually ideological instance of such documents. Perhaps that is partly because this US administration, like many other populist regimes, is fond of stressing how much it differs from predecessors and exaggerating the extent of any policy changes it might make. Certainly, this document tries to suggest that previous national security approaches from the US did not adequately prioritise the interests of “real Americans”.

Under the Trump administration, by contrast (it claims), foreign engagements will be in the service of clear domestic priorities. These include, but are not limited to, control of the opioid addiction epidemic, which is ravaging lower-middle-class white America; the reconstruction of American manufacturing; fewer non-white immigrants; and the rolling back of various social changes that accompanied the creation of a multi-ethnic cultural and academic elite.

These are variously implemented in NSS25. A defence of

tariffs and economic coercion in support of US manufacturing is mounted in the document. Europe, as the source of many ideas disruptive of white supremacy in culture, is seen as an ideological rival rather than as an ally.

Then there is immigration control and the drug problem. For these to be addressed, the administration believes it needs to return to close control of the actions and choices of other countries in the Western Hemisphere. This is defined, by the document, as the “Trump corollary” to the Monroe Doctrine. The latter, named for America’s fifth President and the last of its founding fathers to take office, was an attempt to keep what was then called the New World from being embroiled in the colonial misadventures and great power rivalries of the Old. This has been updated by NSS25 to explicitly include a claim to the resources, connectivity, and chokepoints in both American continents.

For the rest of the world, this is a disquieting return to an old theory about “spheres of influence”. India, alongside some other nations in Asia, will be both concerned about losing independent access to natural resources in Latin America as well as the implied possibility that the US will allow other

powers to develop spheres of influence of their own.

Thus while NSS25 does allow for considerable clarity as to how US foreign policy will be formulated in the future — as another weapon in a domestic social, political and cultural civil war — it also means that Washington’s decisions will always be interpreted in this light. Countries in Europe or Africa may well conclude that their ties with the US do not reflect shared interests, but instead how those nations are perceived and mobilised within domestic cultural arguments in the US. They will, in turn, seek to influence that debate. America is incentivising greater foreign influence in its democracy.

Last week, the chipmaker Nvidia was granted permission to sell some of its frontline products to Chinese manufacturers. This might first be seen as purely transactional, especially since the US government gains revenue from the sale. But in the context of NSS25, it will be interpreted additionally as a sign that the US only prioritises tech competition with China in certain limited ways, and it does not see access to this technology as critical to the core domestic debates that the new national security positioning serves. Sometimes a strategy adds more questions, not answers.





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BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

## On climate talks, the US shadow

ISSUEDEVERY five to seven years, the UN’s Global Environment Outlook (GEO) is a significant report card on the world’s ecological health. Its recommendations inform national policies and feed into assessments such as those of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Unlike most reports on the environment, which have a narrow focus on climate change, forests or biodiversity loss, GEO joins the dots between global warming, pollution, depletion of nature and the broader global political economy. Its seventh edition, released earlier this week, concludes that the climate crisis can no longer be seen as simply an environmental challenge — it is undermining human health, food and water security and leading to conflicts in several parts of the world. The report calls for safety nets to ensure that the “poorest in society” are not harmed during the turmoil. Significantly, the GEO-7 also quantifies the health and economic benefits of an ecologically sustainable pathway to development.

The latest GEO report, however, has been marked by a lack of consensus on phasing out fossil fuels, switching to renewables and reducing the use of plastics. The Donald Trump administration reportedly sided with Russia, Saudi Arabia and Iran to weaken the report’s language on climate change and the switch to clean energy. The dissension meant this was the first time that a GEO report was published without a summary — a statement, negotiated line by line, that distils science into plain language for policymakers. The US did not send a delegation when the report was being put together in Nairobi. But America’s representatives reportedly intervened when the negotiations on finalising the report were underway.

As the world’s second-largest carbon emitter, the US’s decision to obstruct global initiatives on clean energy has major implications for a rapidly warming planet. Trump’s dismantling of his predecessor’s policies means that US emissions will go up by 7 billion tonnes — more than double India’s annual emissions — in the next five years. The last GEO report tried to quantify the reduction in fossil fuel use that will be required to avert the catastrophic consequences of climate change. The latest edition does not, however, show a pathway out of the challenge posed by the US backpedalling on its climate commitments. It only asks countries to “drastically ramp up the generation of renewable energy”. The recently concluded COP 30 showed that the world is taking early steps to put in place a climate governance architecture after the US’s withdrawal from the Paris Pact. The undermining of the GEO report shows that the endeavour remains fraught.

## DMK move to impeach HC judge is disquieting

NO JUDGE in India has been removed from office through impeachment. This is a consequence of the constitutional fortifications meant to ensure judicial independence. But to hold and endure, this architecture also requires a scaffolding of trust, of political parties respecting the separation of powers and the judiciary’s role. By and large, with the notable exception of the Emergency, the political class has respected the lines drawn by the constitutional scheme. Now, in pitting itself against the court, the DMK government is setting a disturbing precedent.

An impeachment motion has been moved by DMK legislators — supported by 107 Opposition MPs — against Madras High Court Justice G R Swaminathan. The DMK contended that Justice Swaminathan’s order to Subramaniya Swamy Temple officials to light the lamp on Deepathoon on December 4 could lead to communal tensions and law and order issues. The Tamil Nadu government also argued that the order reverses a 2017 judgment by a division bench of the court. The government has every right to disagree with the court’s ruling. In fact, the appellate processes built into the judicial system are meant to ensure that several legal minds are applied to vexed questions. The DMK and the state government are welcome to exercise their right to appeal. Impeachment, however, is an extreme step, meant to be invoked only in cases where there is a prima facie case of incapacity or misbehaviour. It must not become a political tool, or a pressure tactic to intimidate judges when they pronounce verdicts a government finds disagreeable. What’s to stop governments across the country from blaming the umpire every time they lose a case?

For a while now, parties of the national Opposition have alleged that an overbearing executive at the Centre seeks to undermine the letter and spirit of the Constitution. The DMK and its government in Tamil Nadu have been among the most vociferous critics of the BJP-led government on issues of politicisation of the governor’s office, undermining of federalism, and institutional capture. On these, it has approached the judiciary, and most recently, in the governor case, found relief. In this backdrop, the impeachment motion does not just set a disquieting precedent. It is also a case of the DMK shooting itself in the foot.

## Tripura’s arc underlines cricket’s possibilities

THE POPULATION of Tripura, barely 3.70 million, could arguably fit into a Mumbai suburb. It’s the third-smallest state in India, one-tenth the size of Karnataka. Yet, disparities of size, population and sporting heritage were blurred when Tripura stunned Karnataka and Mumbai, cricket’s historic powerhouses, in the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy this season.

Tripura’s journey was no fluke, or made solely on the virtues of semi-retired hands borrowed from other states. Seven of the 11 that upended the team from Karnataka were born and raised in the state. Captain Manisankar Murasingh’s all-round virtues could summon the attention of IPL franchises. He is a metaphor for Tripura’s gradual but steady rise. Academies have been sprouting, several subdivisions have installed Astro-turf and indoor nets (a necessity due to the incessant monsoon), and construction of a new first-class stadium is underway. Tripura is building its cricket the old-fashioned way, through hard work and rigour. The hurdles they face are many, from frequent floods to clashes between separatists and police.

Tripura’s rise is the ideal template for the cricket board to strengthen Indian cricket. Rather than forcing them to manufacture a red-ball culture and making them endure the tedium of lop-sided Ranji Trophy fixtures, fledgling cricket associations could be exposed to the shortest version before transitioning to higher levels. Murasingh, 277 runs and six wickets in six games, could be the pathbreaker for his state as well as the region. The North-east frontier in India’s cricket landscape has swung its gates open.

# From Licence Raj to Jan Vishwas, what we need to set our entrepreneurs free

THE HARD art of entrepreneurship — staying alive long enough to get lucky — was made harder in 1956, 1967 and 1976 by the Indian state. The *madhyam marg* between trust and regulation was substantially but incompletely restored in 1991. The unfinished agenda of deregulation is hardly *poorna swaraj* — if entrepreneurship thrived without laws or a state, then Pakistan’s Swat Valley would be a hotbed of venture capital. But adopting the trust-based deregulation proposed by the new Jan Vishwas Siddhant will undermine the six pathologies of regulatory cholesterol holding back India’s entrepreneurs, mass prosperity, and global power.

The first pathology is prior approval. The most gracious memories of my childhood in Kashmir involve my parents asking, “*Ijaazat hai* (Do we have permission)?” before leaving a host. But my most ungrateful memories over 30 years as a first-generation entrepreneur involve answering, “Who allowed you to do this (*Ijaazat kisne di*)?” This is a profound question from a theory-of-knowledge and constitutional perspective: Innovation is, by definition, permissionless, and doing business is a fundamental right (Article 19). Yet, employers confront prior approvals in battalions — licences, NOCs, permissions, consent orders, etc: 500 from central ministries and over 3,200 from 1,200 state ministries.

The second pathology is instrument proliferation. Our Constitution imagines two instruments: Laws made by Parliament and rules made by the executive. Our administrative state ignores this imagination of only one level of subsidiary legislation by creating multiple, often unnotified, instruments — notification, guideline, circular, regulation, directions, general or

office order, guidance notes, policy, scheme, press release, FAQ, SOP, memorandum, etc. — with penal sanctions. Policymakers read left to right — Act + rules. But entrepreneurs read right-to-left: compliances + 16 non-law, non-rule instruments + rules + Acts. The 700-plus central and state Acts relevant to employers have hundreds of rules, but our guesstimate is that 12,000-plus non-law, non-rule instruments matter for employers.

Third, the compliance blind spot. Most policymakers remember substantive provisions of legislation, but lose track of cumulative compliance obligations. Our administrative state often ignores a best practice in regulation: Targeting outcomes and impacts rather than microspecifying activities, inputs, or processes. I define compliance as an obligation imposed on an entrepreneur punishable by law for omission or wrongful commission. It is not guidance or good practice. It is “shall”, not “may”. 2025 started with over 69,000 compliances. We end the year with new codes that shrink the labour law compliance burden by 75 per cent. This rationalisation needs wide replication in 2026.

The fourth pathology is enforcing the unenforceable. The constitutional distinction between Fundamental Rights (guaranteed by law) and Directive Principles (desirable but not guaranteed) is not low ambition but a clear-eyed assessment of avoiding promises the state can’t keep. Noble intentions — one inspector checking 3.3 lakh weight and measuring instruments — breed corruption and transmission losses between how the law is written, interpreted, practised, and enforced. Policy ambi-



MANISH SABHARWAL

The proposed Jan Vishwas Siddhant is transformational. All licences outside the four areas of national security, public safety, human health and environment will be converted to perpetual self-registration

tion lies in recognising that unenforceable legislation is a poor substitute for hard reform: The state doing less so it does more, performance management for 25 million civil servants who spend Rs 110 lakh crore every year, and prioritising prose over poetry.

Fifth, the process is punishment. The recent labour code and the forthcoming Jan Vishwas Bill recognise that jail is a deterrent only if there are prosecutions and cases filed. Most jail provisions in our laws are rarely successfully prosecuted and often used as threats. This clogs up the courts. An unintended consequence of criminalising the commercial contract of cheque bouncing is 43 lakh cases and 10 per cent of court pendency. The painful combination of microspecifications, disproportionate punishment, low probability of prosecution and massive delays creates an unjust equilibrium for the innocent.

The sixth pathology is no single source of truth. Justice and transparency require a single database for all Acts and rules, and the gazette notification of all guidelines, orders, circulars, etc, referencing the statutory provisions under which compliance is sought. Entrepreneurs often succumb to corruption because the “truth” is unverifiable, dated or incomplete. A live, comprehensive digital database precedes the valuable government guarantee to citizens and entrepreneurs that nobody needs to comply with anything not in this database.

The proposed Jan Vishwas Siddhant is transformational. All licences outside the four areas of national security, public safety, human health and environment will be converted to perpetual self-registration. Everything is per-

mitted till prohibited. Inspections will be random, risk-based and mostly third-party. The Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade’s (DPIIT) decriminalisation principles must be applied to all penalties, and punishments must be proportionate. Regulatory changes will occur only after consultation, with sufficient transition time provided, and transitions will be effective on a fixed annual date (say January 1). Filings will be digitised, and regulatory instruments with penal provisions will be restricted to laws and rules. IndiaCode will become the live database with all Acts and rules, and after integration with e-gazette, a single source of truth for all obligations. An annual regulatory impact assessment framework by all central ministries will lead to annual reports on compliance and punishment.

Every entrepreneur battles market risk, financing scarcity, employee responsibility, skill shortage, family scepticism and self-doubt. Combine these with our regulatory cholesterol, and our 6.3 crore enterprises translate to only 30,000 companies with a paid-up capital of more than Rs 10 crore. Most of our employers being dwarfs, not babies, and our labour being handicapped without capital is a direct consequence of economic choices, not circumstances or culture.

The Jan Vishwas Siddhant will transform ruling into governing and praja into nagrik. It will accelerate non-farm job creation by recognising that entrepreneurship is iterative hypothesis testing, not planning. Freeing entrepreneurs from *ijaazat* focuses them on *koshish* (trying). And, as poet Sohanlal Dwivedi reminds us, “*Koshish karnewaalon ki haar nahin hoti* (those who keep trying never lose).”

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## Sholay again: Dharam is dead, long live Veeru, marna cancel



SHALINI LANGER

WHAT’S 19 minutes in 50 years? It turns out very little. It may be moot to ask at this point whether we need *Sholay*: The *Final Cut* to love this film even more. Lesser movies, of a newer vintage, are getting a re-airing these days. The good news is that two additional scenes and a different ending don’t make *Sholay* worse for the wear. The bad news is that they don’t make *Sholay* better for it either.

Instead, in our distracted attention spans, the formidable new length of 209 minutes and some seconds does allow the mind to wander — are there too many horse-mounted fighting scenes and are they too long (were they always so?); why is Gabbar Singh not caught sooner when Thakur, Jai and Veeru, and never the police, seem to reach his hideout unerringly when they want (which is often); how many men does Gabbar have (40, 50, 100?); and why does the train to Ramgarh always run empty (maybe because of the village’s solitary tonga?).

For all that, *Sholay* remains astonishing for the technical quality of its production 50 years after it was released in the days following the Emergency.

In the restoration, every distinguishing nuance of that amazing soundtrack hits afresh — from the piercing trill accompanying the death scene of Thakur’s family, to the scraping of a leather belt on rock marking Gabbar’s entry, to the plaintive harmonica marking Jai and Radha’s unrequited longing, to the chugging of a steam engine and rattling of a goods train, to the gallop and saunter of its horses, to a single rifle shot ringing against a horizon.

What is also fresh, half-a-century later, is *Sholay*’s humour and its pathos, and Gabbar. A hall full of millennials who may have come to this movie via their parents’ memories rings out with laughter at Soorma Bhopali’s “*kai raya hoon*”, “*Angrezon ke zamaane ke jailor*”, “*Tumhara naam kya hai, Basanti*”, “*James Bond ki aulad*”, “*chakki peeing*”, “soocide”, and the poor harried Mausi. Many wipe their tears at “*baap ke kandhe pe bete ka janaaza*”, and Jai’s “*kurbaani*” and his coin with, curiously, George

VI’s image. My teenage daughter shivers as Gabbar hisses “*pachaas-pachaas kos door gaon jab bachcha rota hai...*”. And remarks in amazement how “everyone in the hall knows all the dialogues”.

A temple and a mosque mark the landscape, an *azaan* calls for prayer, and a village called Ramgarh bows its head at an Imam’s invocation of “*izzat ki mauit*” versus a “*zillat ki zindagi*”. It shouldn’t mean much, but we don’t need reminding, it does.

Perhaps the only new ending of *Sholay* that fans would have wanted is for Jai to live, and for Radha to not be “widowed”, in a sense, twice. In a film whose absolute lack of engagement with politics, in a time of much social and political upheaval, has been commented upon, was that too much to ask?

However, Salim-Javed may have known better, for Radha’s stirring pathos and that image of her turning down the lanterns as a handsome and quiet Jai looks on are the bleeding heart and festering wound of this story — long after Veeru and Basanti have married and settled down and had their “*hatte katte*” children.

No, Thakur killing Gabbar as the new ending does not come close, despite a fresh coating of menace — via one of the extra scenes — on the dacoit who needs no polishing. Director Ramesh Sippy has said this was how he ended the film originally, before the Emergency censors demanded that “Thakur not take the law into his own hands” (no, the irony is not that Thakur has no hands). But if that justice did not seem half-done at the time, this one seems empty — a film that puts great stakes on honour and bravery not rising above the basest emotions now.

It is the strangest coincidence that *Sholay The Final Cut* is hitting theatres just days after Dharmendra’s death. One can imagine him up above, like on that water tank in the film, chuckling at his own chutzpah. Dharam is dead, long live Veeru. *Marna cancel*.

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## Make America Great Again, with typography



POOJA PILLAI

NOT SINCE the scientists at CERN used Comic Sans to announce the existence of the Higgs boson in 2012 has a choice of typeface caused such bafflement. Surely, there are more pressing matters for the US Secretary of State to address than the use of Calibri in diplomatic communication? But as Marco Rubio made clear in a recent memo, the state department’s decision to jettison the typeface adopted by the Joe Biden administration in 2023 in favour of Times New Roman is part of a larger war against woke-ness: The previous government’s shift to Calibri was determined by its readability, especially among those with learning and partial visual disabilities. Rubio’s decision, in keeping with the Donald Trump presidency’s overarching theme, prioritises what it sees as “tradition”. Make America Great Again, but with typography.

Rubio may have inadvertently waded into the serif vs sans-serif debate that has long divided the typography-obsessed. Typefaces like Times New Roman and Georgia, which feature flourishes (serif) at the end of each stroke, hark back to a time when letters of the alphabet were cut into individual blocks that were laid out together to form the text to be printed in books — most of the typographical designs, including the 500-year-old Garamond family, descended from the intricate calligraphy used by monks in medieval European manuscripts. In sans serif typefaces like Calibri and Arial, on the other hand, the letters have no flourishes — no nonsense and straightforward, they are considered ideal for an age when the printed page has been eclipsed by the digital screen on which serifs only add to visual clutter and noise.

But as Rubio notes, the importance of a typeface comes down to more than readability: Weight, height and other attributes, including serifs, carry connotations which can amplify or undermine the literal text. Serif types, for example, are seen as traditional, elegant and formal, while sans serif types are considered casual and unpretentious. Different typefaces also have their own political charge, as seen in a 2020 study published in *Communication Studies*, which found that serif types were seen as “conservative” and sans serif were regarded as “liberal” or neutral.

Such assumptions, of course, are precisely what designers play with when they create book covers, product packaging, websites and advertising campaigns. For example, newspapers, including this one, persist with the serif (as seen in Tiempos Text, the typeface in which this article is printed) because it conveys the gravitas and authority that the news demands. The use of the zany and cartoonish Comic Sans in CERN’s historic presentation about the Higgs boson, on the other hand, was jarring precisely because it undercut the momentousness of the occasion.

All of which is to say that the choice of typeface matters because it says so much more than immediately obvious. And what the US State Department’s decision to junk an accessible typeface in favour of a more “authoritative” one says about its own priorities is, of course, right there in black and white.

Serif types are seen as more traditional and elegant, while sans serif types are considered casual. Different typefaces also carry their own political charge

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### 40 YEARS AGO

December 13, 1985



### 258 die in US plane crash

A CHARTERED DC-8 jetliner carrying US military personnel home from West Asia crashed and exploded near Gander airport in Canada, killing all 250 soldiers and eight crew aboard, officials said. The aircraft, operated by the Miami-based charter company Arrow Air, crashed moments after taking off after a refuelling stop and exploded on impact, according to airport officials and a spokesman at Search and Rescue Canada in Halifax.

### G S Gill now a UK citizen

THE BRITISH Government has granted citizenship to Gurmej Singh Gill, who is known as the prime minister of the London-based

government of Khalistan, despite India’s advice against it, reports in London indicate. The Indian government had informed Britain that Gill was an extremist and should not be granted citizenship. British sources here say that Britain informed India in advance that Gill had registered himself for citizenship. India was informed about the development on December 5 and Gill was granted citizenship the following day.

### Massive tax evasion

THE FEDDERS Lloyd Company, manufacturers of Fedders Lloyd air conditioners, Zenith refrigerators and other airconditioning and refrigeration equipment, has evaded excise duty to the tune of Rs 23

crore, according to a spokesman of Central Excise and Customs Collectorate.

### Plea by Mehraons Jewellers

THE DELHI High Court issued notice to the Union of India and the collector, (gold) central excise collectorate, on a petition moved by Yashpal Mehra and three others of Mehraons Jewellers, challenging the suspension of their licences under Section 50 of the Gold Control Act on December 6 this year. A division bench comprising Justice H L Anand and Justice Sunanda Bhandare directed that the notice be returned on December 17 when the case will come up for further preliminary hearing.



## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

A Tommy Robinson-inspired carol service is the latest sign of a burgeoning Christian nationalist movement.  
— *The Guardian*



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# The Ideas Page

## On healthcare, Rajasthan model showed the way, needs to be built on



ASHOK GEHLOT

**R**ECENTLY, I was profoundly shaken after watching a video on social media featuring the well-known teacher Vikas Divyakirti. Heshared a heartbreaking story of a 30-year-old cancer patient whose family decided against pursuing the expensive treatment. “If we go ahead with the treatment, our entire family will ‘die’ under the burden of debt, so we let him die instead,” they reasoned.

This sad story testifies to the cruelty against which the poor and middle classes in India have struggled for decades. Eliminating such helplessness has been one of the objectives of my political career. In 1998, after becoming chief minister for the first time, I pledged that no person in Rajasthan should be deprived of treatment because of lack of money. At that time, we launched the Mukhyamantri Jeevan Raksha Kosh for BPL (Below Poverty Line) families. However, the approach was disrupted in 2003 following a change in government.

When I got the opportunity to serve the people of Rajasthan again in 2008, we expanded the scope of this scheme. Along with BPL families, we included the elderly, disabled, widows, and needy people from 11 categories and made treatment completely free for them in government hospitals. By launching the Mukhyamantri Nishulk Dawa Yojana in 2011 and the Nishulk Jaanch Yojana in 2013, we ensured that no one had to reach into their pocket even for a paracetamol tablet or a blood test. The World Health Organisation (WHO) appreciated this model.

When the public gave me the opportunity to serve the state for the third time in 2018, we accorded the highest priority to health. This began with the Nirogi Rajasthan initiative in 2019, but the Covid pandemic in 2020 posed a big challenge. Rajasthan managed the public health emergency well. The

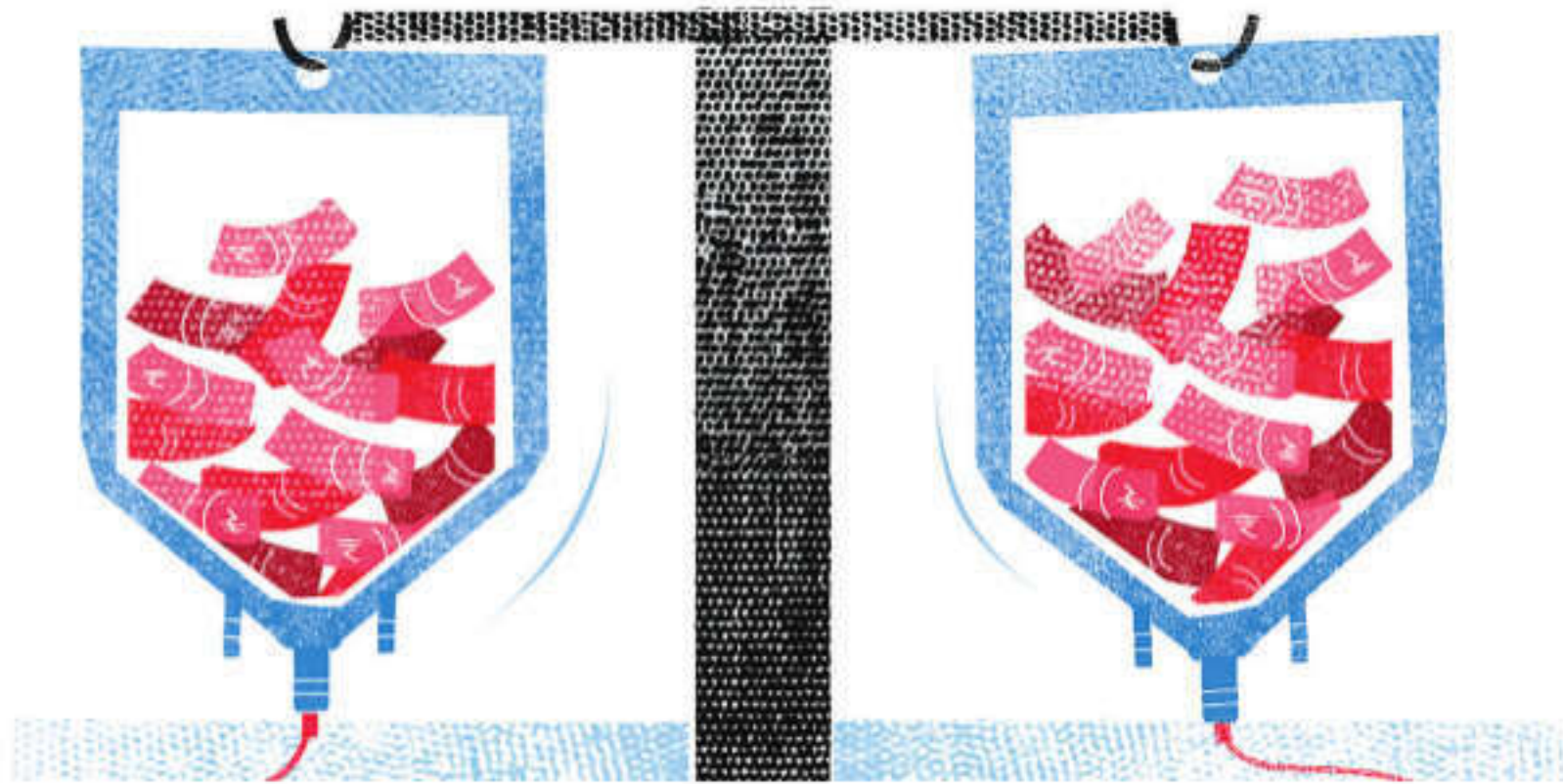


ILLUSTRATION: C R SASIKUMAR

Bhilwara model was discussed across the country and the world. During this crisis, we improved Rajasthan's health services, expanded its reach and began working on universal healthcare.

We made treatment in government hospitals not just cashless but completely free. Under the Mukhyamantri Nishulk Nirogi Rajasthan Yojana, all OPD and IPD services, from the registration slip to surgery, were made completely free. Whether for an MRI or a CT scan, people were not charged money in government hospitals.

Along with government hospitals, we also opened the doors of private hospitals for the poor. Through the Chiranjeevi Health Insurance Scheme, an insurance cover of up to Rs 25 lakh was provided, which includes treatment facilities for lethal diseases like cancer, making it unique in the world. The Union government's Ayushman Bharat scheme is limited only to the families eligible under the Socio-Economic and Caste Census, 2011, whereas Rajasthan's Chiranjeevi scheme was made available free of cost for the poor and at a premium of just Rs 850 per year for the affluent class. The RGHS scheme was introduced for government employees. These schemes instilled confidence in Rajasthan's healthcare services among the people.

**In 1998, when I became the chief minister for the first time, the state's health budget was only around Rs 600 crore (estimated), which increased to more than Rs 20,000 crore in 2023**

While only 15-20 out of 100 families have insurance in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, in Rajasthan, approximately 88 out of 100 families have health security. This is the biggest proof of the success of Rajasthan's universal healthcare initiatives.

Recently, a person told me that he did not have to pay for his cancer treatment — it could have cost him Rs 17 lakh. I also met a labourer in Rawatsar in Hanumangarh district who had gone into a coma after a wall collapsed on his head. The treatment cost would have amounted to Rs 8.5 lakh. He, too, did not have to pay for his treatment.

According to several surveys, about 39 million people in India fall below the poverty line every year due to expensive treatment, and families spend 20 per cent of their annual income on medical care. During the Congress government's tenure, more than 50 lakh people received free treatment by getting admitted to hospitals under the Chiranjeevi scheme — if not for this programme, several of these families would have faced crushing debt. They could have become victims of the “helplessness” that Divyakirti mentioned.

The success of Rajasthan's health services is reflected in the figures for out-of-pocket expenditure (OOPE) — the cost of treatment borne by the patient. In 2018-

19, this was approximately 44.9 per cent in Rajasthan. Our policies brought it down to 37.1 per cent in 2021-22 — significantly better than the national average.

Until 2018, there were only a handful of government medical colleges in the state. We fulfilled the dream of having a medical college in every district. Between 2018 and 2023, we sanctioned or started medical colleges in 30 districts, along with a new medical university. The number of MBBS and MD seats more than doubled. We initiated world-class projects like the IPD Tower and established the Institute of Cardiology, the Institute of Neurosciences, and virology labs to make sure that people did not have to rush to Delhi or Mumbai to get treated for serious diseases.

The Chiranjeevi Insurance Scheme was implemented in both government and private hospitals, which also benefited government hospitals financially. District and referral hospitals began earning between Rs 50 crore and Rs 150 crore annually through insurance claims. As a result, government hospitals were no longer dependent on the government to run their expenses.

In 1998, when I became the chief minister for the first time, the state's health budget was only around Rs 600 crore (estimated), which increased to more than Rs 20,000 crore in 2023. The more than 30 times increase is proof of the highest priority accorded to health in the state.

To institutionalise these initiatives, we brought in the Right to Health (RTH) Act, so that treatment becomes a legal right and not a favour from the government. Unfortunately, the current government has put the implementation of this law on the back burner. The Centre should also expand the scope of the Ayushman Bharat scheme and implement it for everyone.

The world observed Universal Health Coverage Day on Friday. On this occasion, I would say that governments may come and go, but stepping back from the standards of public welfare that we have established would be an injustice to the public. If the current Rajasthan government had continued our approach, Rajasthan would have been a global leader in the field of healthcare.

*The writer is former chief minister of Rajasthan*

## We need a calm and mature discussion on terror



RAM RAJYA  
BY RAM MADHAV

**A** MONTH HAS passed since the deadly car bomb explosion near the Red Fort in Delhi, which killed 13 people and injured scores of others. The incident created shockwaves, especially after the news that the Haryana and Jammu & Kashmir Police had led a joint operation at locations linked to Muzammil Ahmad Ganai, a Kashmiri doctor working at Al-Falah University in Faridabad, and others. They recovered explosive material sufficient to cause a series of blasts across the country. Prime Minister Narendra Modi called a meeting of the Union cabinet, which condemned the blast as a “heinous terror incident, perpetrated by anti-national forces”. The National Investigation Agency, which took over the investigation, suggested it may have been a suicide attack perpetrated by a “white-collar” module, with alleged links to Pakistan-based terror outfits like Jaish-e-Mohammed.

In the immediate aftermath, animated discussions ensued with allegations and counter-allegations. But a month later, it is time to calmly dissect. In a refreshingly introspective article in *The Milli Chronicle*, Mumbai-based author Osama Rawal makes some profound arguments about the lessons one should learn from the incident rather than continuing with the “deep intellectual dishonesty that is rampant in our public life”. Rawal rues the fact that the wider narrative “sidesteps the central truth — that the perpetrator acted in the name of an ideology, a self-declared inspiration that many refuse to confront”.

Two important lessons must be drawn from the latest incident. First, the myth that education and economic development are the panacea for terrorism needs to be discarded. Umar Nabi, the alleged suicide bomber, was a doctor, as were three of those arrested, while another was a technical expert in the use and modification of drones.

Globally, several high-profile terrorists have been highly educated. Osama bin Laden was an engineer; his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, was a surgeon; Mohamed Atta, the lead hijacker in the 9/11 attacks, was also an engineer who studied urban planning in Germany. Among Indian terrorists, Riyaz Bhatkal was an engineer; Ahmed Abbasi, convicted for the Gorakhnath temple attack in 2022, was an IITian. The important lesson is that, to quote Rawal again, “radicalisation is not the child of poverty, it is the child of conviction”.

That brings us to the second unsettling fact. Such conviction can often stem from religious ideologies. Umar Nabi recorded a video in which he claimed that what the world calls “suicide bombing” is in fact an “act of martyrdom”, and that such acts are rooted in Islamic tradition and have been religiously validated.

It is unfair to profile the people of an entire religion as terrorists. But the uncomfortable reality cannot be brushed under the carpet either. It is here that the Muslim intelligentsia has a greater role to play. There are growing voices within the Muslim community that no longer fall for the deceptive propaganda of “Islam in danger” as an indirect justification of terror, and openly decry such acts.

In the recent instance, Citizens for Fraternity (CFF), led by eminent citizens like Najeeb Jung, S Y Quraishi and Lieutenant General Zameer Uddin Shah, issued a statement calling the terror incident an “assault on our nation”. The Shahi Imam of the Jama Masjid, as well as All India Majlis-e-Ttehadul Muslimene (AIMM) leader Asaduddin Owaisi, and the leadership of both the Jamaat-e-Islami and the Jamiat Ulama-e-Hind, along with many others, came forward to decry Umar Nabi's contentions about Islam.

Globally, such efforts are being spearheaded by leaders like Mohammad Al-Issa, secretary general of the Muslim World League in Saudi Arabia and Yahya Cholil Staquf, chairman of the executive council of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in Indonesia. Both leaders strongly condemned the Delhi blasts. While Al-Issa called them “heinous acts” and reaffirmed Islam's firm stance against all acts of terrorism, the NU leadership emphasised India and Indonesia's common values and called for “shared counter-terrorism strategies”.

Mature debate over terrorism should be free from “I am the victim” versus “I said so” narratives and focus on reforming religious doctrines themselves.

*The writer, president, India Foundation, is with the Bharatiya Janata Party*

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Superficial debate

THIS REFERS to the editorial, ‘Vande Mataram & vote chori, all heat, little light’ (*IE*, December 12). The debates highlighted how Parliament often slips into theatre instead of genuine scrutiny, even on issues that deserve sober reflection. While both sides raised familiar slogans, neither engaged meaningfully with the deeper questions — from the cultural messaging behind national symbols to the urgent need for cleaner, more transparent electoral processes. Such moments remind us that democratic debate must move beyond point-scoring.

— *Abharna Barathi, Chennai*

THIS REFERS to the editorial, ‘Vande Mataram & vote chori, all heat, little light’ (*IE*, December 12). Parliament sessions are being reduced to constitutional rituals. There were some expectations in the debate on electoral reforms, but the government crushed that hope, too. Bills are passed without any meaningful debates or references to committees. The debates are mere blame games. This session was no exception: Allegations by the Opposition and deflection from the ruling party.

— *Vasant Nalawade, Satara*

### Learning culture

THIS REFERS to the column, ‘Party-state is marching into public universities. There is no one to say no’ (*IE*, December 12). Pratap Bhanu Mehta has exposed the sorry state of affairs in most universities across the country. The collective efforts to eradicate the learning culture in students have been prominent ever since the rise of communist ideology, and the present regime, too, has followed this but changed the colour codes. Besides the politics of it, the loss is that of open-minded thinking, research, and work of eminence that might otherwise have emerged out of our temples of learning. The slow decline of this nation-building platform is not at all in the national interest.

— *Sanjay Chopra, Greater Noida*



MALOVIKA PAWAR

THE BIRTH centenary of Ritwik Ghatak this year is being widely commemorated in print, through special screenings of his films, and through memorial lectures and debates. This year also marks the 60th anniversary of the release of his best-known film, *Subarnarekha*. Part of his Partition trilogy, it was not a commercial success. However, it often appears on lists of the greatest films of all time, and it is speculated that had Ghatak released his masterpieces before Ray's *Pathar Panchali* in 1955, he could have occupied the undisputed pre-eminent position in Indian parallel cinema. In art, as in life, timing is all.

In *Subarnarekha*, the plot, so full of Ghatak's intentional use of coincidences and melodrama, follows the protagonist Ishwar Chakraborti, a man who has arrived as a refugee in Calcutta after Bengal's Partition, and who is trying to cobble together a family with his much-younger sister Seeta, and Abhiram, a poor lower-caste boy he has taken in. Ishwar takes up a job in Chhatimpur on the banks of the *Subarnarekha*; the years go by, Seeta and Abhiram grow up, fall in love, and elope against his wishes. They set up home in Calcutta, and have a child, Binu. One fateful night, Abhiram is lynched by a mob. The widowed Seeta finds herself in a brothel. Ishwar spends a nightmarish evening in Calcutta in an alcohol-fuelled haze, ending up at

**On one level, ‘Subarnarekha’ is about the ‘refugee problem’; a recognition of how livelihoods, homes, identities, and human connections in the old country are lost and must be recreated. This is equally relevant today**

the same brothel. He is to be her first client. Recognising him, she slits her throat. Ishwar returns to Chhatimpur with Binu. He is dismissed from his post and has lost everything, his sister, Abhiram, his job, his future.

Epic in scope, and dense with events and characters that cry out to be excavated and understood, this masterpiece of world cinema is replete with timeless themes: Exile, displacement, loss, the meaning of home and nation, caste, social inequality, family strife, the attempts to build a new India, and the seeming impossibility of finding happiness. At the heart of the film is the river itself, the grand amphitheatre and dramatic setting for the personal tragedies that will unfold. Here, we are faced with the immensity of a wide, slow-moving river, huge boulders, treeless plains, vast alluvial sands, an arid landscape, the indifference of a pitiless sky, all suspended in an unchanging geological time. The entire film is permeated by a sense of foreboding. Despite some transient moments of happiness, the pervasive mood is one of a profound unease, of disquiet. There is no consolation to be found here.

Ghatak's intention was clear. In his writup entitled *On Subarnarekha*, he stated: “What I felt and wanted to tell through my film is the story of the present economic, political, and social

crises in Bengal.” Further: “While I do not seek to practice passionate sloganeering, I also hate to make films only to capture ‘human relationships’.” As a lifelong Marxist, he firmly placed the personal against the larger backdrop of sweeping political conflicts and ideologies. On one level, this is a film about the “refugee problem”; a recognition of how livelihoods, homes, identities, and human connections in the old country are lost and must be recreated. This is equally relevant today; by April, a record 122 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced due to conflicts and persecution. But Ghatak also clarified that “refugee or homeless in this film does not mean only the homeless from East Bengal. I wanted also to speak of the fact that we have all been rendered homeless in our time, having lost our vital roots.” In other words, we are all refugees now.

The film ends in an ambiguous denouement. Having lost everything, Ishwar is walking with Binu towards the promised home, on the other side of the river, where the blue hills, the “*neel pahad*” that Seeta had sung of, beckon. Ghatak resists any tidy resolution. For Ishwar, the traumas of Partition may be insurmountable. But little Binu may be the bearer of hope and possibility, and the film's haunting ending may signify a promise of new beginnings.

*The writer is a former IAS officer*

## The Goa fire exposed many abdications



ALBERTINA ALMEIDA

THE ARPORA fire at the Birch by Romeo Lane nightclub that claimed as many as 25 lives is the visible flame of India's broken development model that fuels migration, enables corruption, and serves the powerful. At the cremation of a migrant worker, grief mingles with reports of poor roads and scarce jobs in the home state. Yet, this is the story of countless migrant workers.

In Goa, many migrant workers live in shanties, their conditions worsening during the monsoons. On the eve of the recent Bihar elections, some vented: “We have rice, wheat, dal, channa, masoor, matar, moong — not just rice and coconuts like

you. And fish, too — rohu and other freshwater fish.” Why then migrate? “Because we don't have employment,” one worker, a fisherman back home in Bihar, explained: “There was tax-lordism. We couldn't manage, and others captured our waters.”

This is not the first tragedy of this magnitude. On January 4, 2014, 31 workers — mostly migrants — died when the Ruby Residency building collapsed in Chaudi Canacona. Many victims were from Jharkhand, reflecting the state's large migrant workforce in Goa. Families bore the brunt of delayed justice. Yet, it did not receive the coverage the Arpora fire has, because the victims were poor workers, not tourists, not the likes of those patronising nightclubs.

The Jha Commission, then set up under the Commission of Inquiry Act to “fix responsibility”, cited structural flaws and ad-

ministrative lapses of the Town and Country Planning Department and the local municipal body. Its report lies buried. Officers were suspended, then reinstated. Now, a magisterial inquiry committee has been constituted for Arpora. Will it follow the same trajectory? Who are the perpetrators of what may rightly be called institutional murders?

Here lies the need to revisit the question

**Goans who migrated under Portuguese citizenship cannot raise their voices against development policies — whether in host states or in Goa — for fear of losing their OCI cards**

of “outsiders”. Poor migrants are branded outsiders, but the real outsiders are the powerful who bring tainted money (and this includes some local big businesses, too), to corrupt Goa's governance systems, once famed for a certain measure of integrity. The Luthras from Delhi, owners of the Birch by Romeo Lane, have reportedly been flouting zoning, noise pollution and licensing laws, among others, with complicity from those in power. Approvals are granted, rules bent, accountability evaded.

Those who raise these issues in Goa are conveniently branded xenophobic. Goans who migrated under Portuguese citizenship cannot raise their voices against development policies — whether in host states or in Goa — for fear of losing their OCI cards. The idea of a cancellation process, introduced under the Citizenship

Amendment Act, 2019, is insidiously restrictive. Migrant workers in Goa face similar silencing. Lacking support systems, they remain vulnerable, pitted against Goan workers who see them as lowering labour standards or opportunities for employment. This wedge benefits the rich migrants — who expand unchecked — and their political patrons.

The Arpora fire is thus more than a local tragedy. It is a mirror reflecting the failures of national development policy, the corruption of governance, and the exploitation of the most vulnerable. Migrant workers die in silence, while accountability — even when recommended by commissions — lies buried.

*The writer is a Goa-based advocate and human rights activist*



● GDP: GRAPHS, DATA, CHARTS

# The link between inequality and public education



THE WORLD Inequality Report for 2026, released this week, yet again underscored the widening inequalities not just within a country but also in the world as a whole. Data shows that the top 10% of the global population's income-earners earn more than the remaining 90%, while the poorest half of the global population captures less than 10% of the total global income. Wealth is even more concentrated: the top 10% own three-quarters of global wealth, while the bottom half holds only 2%.

- The global averages conceal enormous divides between regions, states the report. The world is split into clear income tiers:
- High-income regions such as North America & Oceania and Europe;
  - Middle-income groups including Russia & Central Asia, East Asia, and the Middle East & North Africa
  - And very populous regions where average incomes remain low, such as Latin America, South & Southeast Asia (this is where India falls), and Sub-Saharan Africa.

The data shows sharp contrasts even after correcting for price differences across regions. "An average person in North America & Oceania earns about thirteen times more than someone in Sub-Saharan Africa and three times more than the global average. Put differently, average daily income in North America & Oceania is about €125, compared to only €10 in Sub-Saharan Africa. And these are averages: within each region, many people live with far less," states the report.

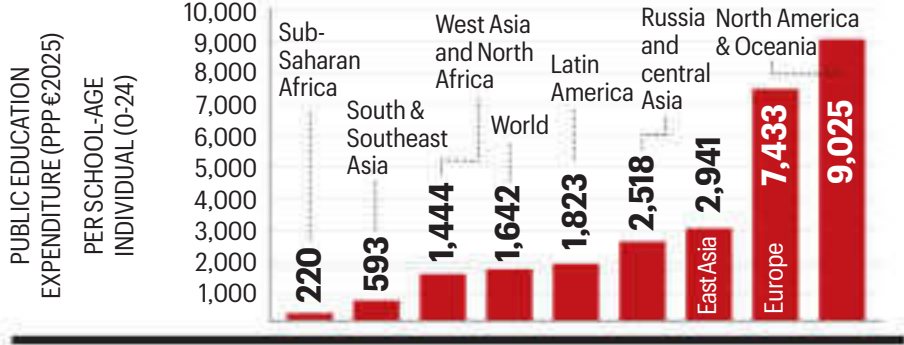
Often the basic questions — whether there is inequality, and if so, how severe — are deeply contested. This often means that the more substantive issues do not get the required attention. For instance: What type of policies can reduce the yawning gap of inequalities.

The WIR 2026 lays out many, but here's the top one: Public investments in education and health. "These are among the most powerful equalizers, yet access to these basic services remains uneven and stratified. Public investment in free, high-quality schools, universal healthcare, childcare, and nutrition programs can reduce early-life disparities and foster lifelong learning opportunities. By ensuring that talent and effort, rather than background, determine life chances, such investments build more inclusive and resilient societies," argues the report.

To be sure, "public investment" means the expenditure by governments towards education. It is instructive to note where each of the above mentioned regions show up on public education expenditure (see chart). "In 2025, average public education expenditure per school-age individual (0-to-24-year-old) varies enormously across world regions, from €220 in Sub-Saharan Africa to €9,025 in North America & Oceania (PPP €2025), i.e., a gap of almost 1 to 41."

Is it any surprise why laggard regions continue to lag?

● Public education expenditure



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● HOW DANISH LEGEND PETER GADE FOUND INSPIRATION FOR HIS 'DOUBLE ACTION' SHOT FROM FOOTBALL ICON MICHAEL LAUDRUP

# The art of deception: A badminton trick shot and its unlikely inspiration

Pritish Raj  
New Delhi, December 12

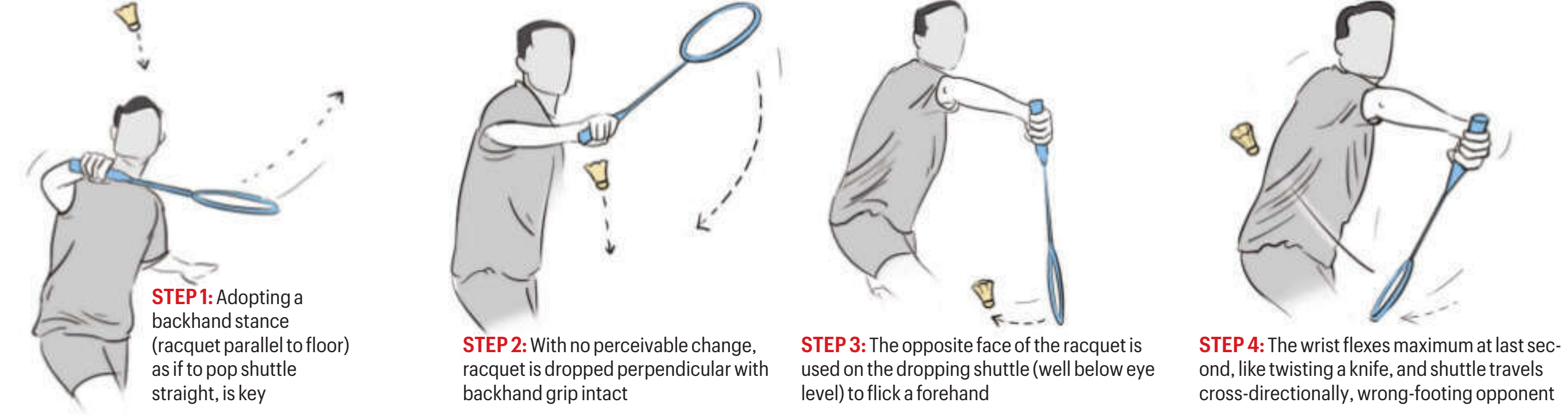
IN HIS playing days, Danish badminton legend Peter Gade had a signature trick up his sleeve: the "double action" shot. All it took was a switch between two basic arm movements, but the execution looked like sorcery. The inspiration behind the trick shot, which befuddled many an opponent, lay in an unlikely place — football.

Gade, who retired in 2012 and was in New Delhi recently as part of the Yonex Legends Tour, told *The Indian Express* that he learnt the art of deception from the creative genius of his fellow Dane, the football icon Michael Laudrup.

"I used to look up to football for inspiration. That was part of my creative process. We had some great footballers in Denmark at that point of time and one of them was Michael Laudrup. I was constantly looking at creative players like him for inspiration of body feints and footwork that can confuse the opponents," Gade said.

**What is the trick shot?**

"When you are making the fake shot, use your backhand and wait," Gade told *The In-*



dian Express. "When it's time to deliver the final stroke, change your grip to forehand and flick it with speed and there goes your trick shot on the wrong side of the opponent," Gade instructed eager learners at the Siri Fort Badminton Complex in Delhi.

This is what happens: Gade stands poised at the net with the racquet pointed in a backhand, parallel to the floor. The

natural trajectory of popping the shuttle would be straight. But Gade subtly lifts his elbow higher with a loose, flexible grip, and flicks with the exact same stance, but with the other face of the racquet. This transforms into a forehand shot that sends the shuttle gliding across the court at an angle. It appears that Gade has "switched the grip". Except, there is no change of grip at all.

**The parallels with football**

Laudrup was a skilled playmaker known for his exceptional skills on the ball. He was part of manager Johann Cruyff's dream Barcelona team and also played for Real Madrid and Juventus. This was one of his signature moves: He would dribble to the left and then suddenly twist to the right. The body and head would shift towards the right,

● ENVIRONMENT

# India is focusing on PM10, but PM2.5 is the real threat



AS DELHI continues to struggle to improve air quality levels, a new report by Sustainable Futures Collaborative (SFC), a New Delhi-based research organisation, has provided detailed pathways to tackle pollution in India, including the national capital, by examining how other countries have dealt with the issue.

The analysis, 'Different Paths to Clean Air: Global Insights for India's Reform Agenda', looks at environmental regulatory regimes in Brazil, China, Germany, Mexico, Poland, South Korea, and the United States. These countries were chosen for their relevance to India: large economies, histories of severe air pollution, rapid industrialisation, high GDP growth, etc.

The authors of the report — **Ishita Srivastava, Arunesh Karkun, and Bhargav Krishna** — spoke to **Alind Chauhan** about their findings.

**Although Delhi's air quality remains far from safe levels throughout the year, pollution comes under the spotlight only seasonally. Why is pollution not a make-or-break political issue in India like in other countries?**

**Bhargav Krishna:** Air quality is generally lower on the priority list for voters, even those living in Delhi, as shown in recent research. That is partly because we have done a poor job of communicating the harms of bad air quality on people's health and financial well-being.

Also, over the years, external factors have largely contributed to making pollution a subject in public discourse and forced the State to respond to it. For instance, public interest litigations (PILs) and the Supreme Court (SC) drove the first generation of reforms to fix air quality. Then came the SC-established authority — Environment Pollution (Prevention and Control) Authority (EPCA) — which was tasked with managing pollution in Delhi-NCR. However, EPCA was situated adjacent to the government, not necessarily within the government, and drew its authority from the court. This shows that air pollution has not been a central pillar for governmental action.

In contrast, countries such as China, Mexico, and Poland, which were able to



Winter smog is a yearly occurrence in New Delhi. AMIT MEHRA/FILIX

deal with pollution, saw the implementation of either top-down or bottom-up government-led approaches to make air quality better.

**Ishita Srivastava:** Despite being part of the European Union, where there were strict standards for emissions, Poland was an outlier in terms of not meeting the targets and had poor air quality. However, this changed after the civil society took up the mantle and pulled up local and national authorities, demanding administrative and policy changes. For instance, the Polish Smog Alert (PSA) movement began in 2015 in Krakow, where the air quality was terrible. This prompted the streamlining of emission targets, improving the air quality.

**Arunesh Karkun:** On the other hand, Beijing implemented a top-down approach to tackle pollution, where Premier Li Keqiang declared a war on air pollution and set a vision for China to clean its air in a particular timeframe. The whole state was mobilised around this vision. Local and national authorities, and different sectors, were given specific goals regarding reducing air pollution.

Clean air became an issue of national prestige for them. They were seen as directly competing with the US, and air pollution was deemed to be unacceptable.

**Smoke Point**

As India does not prioritise tackling PM2.5, which is more toxic than PM10, misplaced actions like using smog guns are implemented.

●

India's pollution regulators face a resource crunch, which severely affects compliance monitoring on the ground.

**Delhi's geography exacerbates air pollution, as pollutants get trapped within the city. Are there any foreign cities whose geography made air quality worse, but they still successfully tackled the issue?**

**AK:** Look at Mexico City, whose geography (it is located on a plateau, surrounded by mountains) and atmospheric conditions played a role in worsening the air quality. In the 1950s, strong winds would bring dust from a dry lake bed, where the city's sewage would go. As a result, the city would often witness sewage particles floating in the air, which would drop on food, making people sick.

To tackle the situation, Mexico City established science- and health-based air quality standards. In the 1990s, the city introduced a coordinated action plan, called the Management Programme to Improve Air Quality (ProAire). It set up a supply of unleaded petrol, introduced stricter vehicle emissions standards with the introduction of catalytic converters (which convert toxic pollutants into less harmful substances), and expanded the metro system.

**BK:** Beijing also has a similar problem, as mountain ranges stop pollutants from dispersing, especially during winters. However, industries were moved out of the city's airshed — the typical circulatory region for a body of air — so that they do not contribute to the added load of pollution in the region.

**The report says other countries put a stronger focus on PM2.5 reduction in comparison to India. Why is that the case?**

**IS:** PM2.5 is an atmospheric particulate matter of a diameter smaller than 2.5 micrometres, which is around 1/20th of the diameter of a human hair. That's why PM2.5 easily gets absorbed in the body, making it more toxic than PM10 for humans.

But unlike other countries, India does not prioritise dealing with PM2.5. For example, the National Clean Air Programme (NCAP) focuses only on PM10 reduction in 131 non-attainment cities (they consistently fail to meet the National Ambient Air Quality Standards for pollutants over several years), seeking to improve annual average ambient PM10 levels by 40% (with 2017 as a base year) or meet the NAAQS for PM10 by 2026.

As a result, PM2.5 reduction does not feature in plans for tackling pollution, and misplaced actions such as using smog guns are implemented.

**BK:** The choice of PM10 as the pollutant of interest for the NCAP as a metric to show progress was one of convenience. It was done so because many of the 131 non-attainment

cities had monitoring practices for PM10 and not PM2.5. That's why the entire focus of NCAP is on construction dust management, and investments are being made in activities such as road sweeping or paving.

**The report says India's pollution regulators are comparatively 'resource-poor' as they are understaffed and not well funded. How is the issue affecting the fight against air pollution?**

**AK:** Pollution control boards in India were first set up under the Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974. From then till now, the industrial output has grown 17 times. The country's pollution has increased by 130%. However, the staffing in these boards has barely increased — when compared to the US and China, India's staffing numbers are much smaller.

There is also an issue of understaffing. As of 2024, out of 12,016 sanctioned posts for the State Pollution Control Boards (SPCBs) and Pollution Control Committees (PCCs) — they work and operate within states and Union Territories, respectively — combined, only 5,941 positions were occupied. The Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) — the apex regulator operating at the national level — has a staff strength of 504 out of a sanctioned maximum of 603.

This has led to a workload problem for the people who are responsible for overseeing industrial pollution.

**BK:** As part of the research, we analysed how much time it takes for a pollution control board, as per their own procedure, to monitor pollution compliance of an industry. We examined the time taken by an environmental engineer to review an application that has been accepted, go to the field and do monitoring work on the location of the industry, write the report and then file it. We found that to do all these tasks takes an engineer a maximum of three days, which is too little time for proper monitoring.

And, when, say, an SPCB does not have the time for monitoring compliance, it sometimes outsources work by hiring consultants, who write the report and submit it to the board. Then, the engineer signs it off on their own behalf. There is a chance that the engineer never even visited the industry in question. This can lead to issues, such as conflicts of interest.

The workload is also expanding. An engineer who was earlier responsible for monitoring, for example, air and water pollution, is now also overseeing e-waste and biochemical waste compliance.

This means that very little compliance monitoring is taking place on the ground.

● GLOBAL

# IMF's 11 new conditions for cash-strapped Pakistan to avail loans

Aanchal Magazine  
New Delhi, December 12

NOTING THAT concerns about Pakistan's business and reputational risks have reduced as tensions with India waned, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) Thursday imposed 11 new structural benchmarks that Islamabad has to meet in order to avail its loans, three of which have to be met by the end of December.

Cash-strapped Pakistan is currently availing two credit facilities from the IMF: a \$7-bn Extended Fund Facility (EFF), and a \$1.3-bn climate-focussed Resilience and Sustainability Facility (RSF). The EFF offers a long repayment period to help countries facing serious balance of payment issues implement structural reforms; the RSF aims to build resilience against climate vulnerabilities.

On Thursday, Pakistan's central bank announced that it had received a tranche of \$1.2-bn — \$1-bn under the EFF and \$200-mn under the RSF — from the IMF, the approval for which was received in October. With this, Pakistan has received a sum of about \$3.3-bn under the two arrangements.

**11 new conditions**

After its 'Governance and Corruption-Diagnostic (GCD) Assessment' in November found that corruption is a "persistent feature" of Pakistan's governance landscape, the IMF said that Pakistan must publish asset declarations of high-level federal civil servants. It has also asked Pakistan to develop a comprehensive medium-term tax reform strategy that includes at least: a sequenced roadmap of tax policy, administration, and legal reforms; clear governance arrange-

**Structural benchmarks**

- Out of the 11 conditions, three relate to tax reforms, asset declarations of government officials and private sector participation in the energy sector.
- Pakistan has to meet these three conditions by the end of December.

ments; and a resource plan for implementation. Moreover, Islamabad must finalise pre-conditions for the private sector participation for Hyderabad Electric Supply Company and Sukkur Electric Power Company, two public sector utilities. These conditions must be met by the end of December.

By March, Pakistan must finalise a fiscal roadmap that includes at least: prioritisation of key reform areas; staffing requirements and roles; timelines and milestones; revenue impact estimates; and key performance indicators. To boost FX inflows, Pakistan must complete a comprehensive assessment of remittance costs and structural impediments to cross-border payments by end-May 2026.

By end-June, a national policy for sugar market liberalisation with clear timelines for implementation must be adopted.

**Pak loans, India's concerns**

In the aftermath of the Pahalgam terror attack and Operation Sindoor in May, India abstained from voting in the IMF board meeting, citing Pakistan's "poor track record" and the possibility of "misuse of debt financing funds for state-sponsored cross-border terrorism".

Two days before its board met on May 9 to approve \$2.4-bn worth loan facilities to Pakistan, the IMF staff had flagged "reputational risks" over perceived misuse of its lending and the increase in "enterprise risks" due to rising tensions with India. But the IMF team that visited Karachi and Islamabad in September-October for the second review of the EFF and the first review under the RSF noted that Pakistan's economic program is "entrenching macroeconomic stability and rebuilding market confidence".



## Turning pitch

Cricket will remain the biggest content magnet, but the era of blank cheques is clearly over

INDIA'S LARGEST STREAMING platform, JioStar, may have dismissed speculation that its multibillion-rupee cricket rights contract with International Cricket Council (ICC) will either end or be renegotiated, but the fact remains that cricket broadcasting, once considered the safest investment in media, has quietly become one of its riskiest. The reason is simple: the economics no longer add up. Cricket viewership in India remains massive, but monetisation hasn't kept pace. Subscription revenues have plateaued and advertising revenues are volatile and now split between two platforms—TV and digital—unlike the earlier era when television alone absorbed the cost burden. For streamers, the cost of customer acquisition has exploded. Giving free cricket to drive data consumption, which Jio did initially, has destroyed standalone streaming economics. Once millions watched the game at zero cost, subscription-led monetisation became almost impossible. Hotstar learnt this the hard way when its paid subscriber base plunged after losing Indian Premier League (IPL) rights. Jio risks a similar imbalance if free streaming doesn't eventually convert into value somewhere else in its ecosystem.

Every cycle of rights auction has pushed prices into new territory. That inflation has now hit a wall. Today, broadcasters pay more for rights, technology, and bandwidth and for marketing and retention while earning less pervier than they did five years ago. The cost of cricket inventory has skyrocketed—IPL team valuations have exploded, media rights are priced like premium global sports leagues, and even secondary sponsorship categories command record fees. But viewership growth is no longer keeping pace, especially on traditional television. Digital viewership is rising, but it is fragmented, harder to measure, and more difficult to convert into brand loyalty. So advertisers are now asking a question they rarely asked earlier: Does the return justify the cheque? Often, the answer is: Not necessarily, as the once-rare premium event has turned into a year-round commodity.

There are other reasons too for cricket broadcasting finding itself on a turning pitch. For Jio, the game earlier was to rapidly scale its digital ecosystem. That phase is over. For Disney, India was once a growth engine; now the global parent demands profitability. And both players have realised that content costs must reflect the revenue reality—not the prestige value of owning cricket. This has wide impact on the Board of Control for Cricket in India which enjoyed two decades of uninterrupted rights inflation. That era has likely ended. In the previous cycle, Star and Viacom spent big bucks on cricket rights. With both now combined, competitive intensity has fallen sharply. Sony Pictures, once a major spender and the holder of IPL rights until 2017, has avoided aggressive bidding in recent times. Global streamers Netflix and Prime Video remain cautious as their subscription-driven models do not align with the advertising economics of live sports.

It's just a matter of time before even the deepest-pocketed broadcasters start signalling distress. It's quite likely that future auctions will either see lower bids, demand revenue-share models, or involve hybrid partnerships where the broadcaster refuses to carry all risk. It's clear that the future of cricket broadcasting lies in smaller but smarter bids and more focus on profitability over visibility. In short, cricket will remain India's biggest content magnet, but the blank-cheque era is over. Make no mistake: cricket retains its popularity but popularity does not equal profitability. The Indian consumer has evolved faster than the cricket business model, and unless rights valuations reflect this new reality, exits, renegotiations, and strategic pivots are inevitable.

## Bob Iger just got the better of Sam Altman

BOB IGER, YOU crafty fox. That's all I could think as I watched the Walt Disney chief executive officer talk about his company's blockbuster deal with OpenAI to license the use of 200 or so beloved characters to be remixed with the Sora video app.

Thanks to the power of human creativity—the unmatched genius of Disney's century of storytelling—he has strong-armed OpenAI into selling a \$1-billion stake in the company (with possibly more to come), gained a continuing licensing fee for use of Disney characters for at least the next three years and paved the way for more personalised content within the Disney+ streaming service.

What does OpenAI get? Just a year's exclusivity to offer the ability to make short clips of Disney characters that won't even be able to talk—characters that appeal largely to an age group younger than the 13-and-older restriction on the company's Sora app. Sam Altman, I fear you've been had. But then, it's not as if he had much choice. Refusal to do a good faith deal would have most likely exposed OpenAI to another massive lawsuit. That's now the prospect for Google, which has received a cease-and-desist letter from Disney over its own video-generation tools.

Where Google and OpenAI differ is that the Alphabet unit has a much stronger negotiating position. Google's YouTube and YouTubeTV are massive outlets for Disney's content. They are peers. Disney and OpenAI are not. Iger wouldn't have lost any sleep had a deal not happened. Sora-powered tools within Disney+ are a nice to have, a cute experimental idea, but nothing more. This deal was almost on principle—the Mouse House wasn't built on freebies.

Some see this deal as an ominous sign for the creative industries; I see it as the opposite. When the invite-only Sora social app was launched in September, it became a sensation with over a million downloads in the first few days. Soon, Sora-generated clips were flying around the internet, but then reality struck. As it turned out, Sora was the most fun when you were stealing—that is, taking beloved characters, or just the likenesses of famous people, and remixing to your own ends. When companies started to complain, OpenAI was forced to put strong curbs in place. This infuriated users and slowed the flow of Sora clips going viral on the internet. Now the tool is synonymous with disinformation.

Maintaining Sora's popularity is important as OpenAI faces what Altman himself reportedly described as a "code red" moment. In the competition for consumer AI dollars, Google is hot on its heels, beating it with its most recent large language model and closing the gap on chatbot market share and going toe-to-toe with Sora with its rival video generator, Nano Banana.

With its enterprise customer base still lacking, squandering its early lead on the consumer audience—Pew estimates 59% of teens use ChatGPT, far more than any competitor—could prove fatal. The company may have put generative AI into the public consciousness, but that doesn't give it a divine right to stay on top.

Speaking to *CNBC* on Thursday, in an interview that seemed to last twice as long as he would have liked, Altman obligingly talked up his enthusiasm for the Disney tie-up. In truth, he would surely rather have never had to make it, or any others like it. This deal is an acknowledgment that those who own intellectual property deserve to get paid. It is an important development for Hollywood and any other creative industry whose output has been brazenly scooped up by OpenAI and other companies.

Does OpenAI now need to go out and offer a \$1-billion stake to Nintendo for when Sora users send Pikachu shoplifting? To Paramount when SpongeBob Squarepants is dressed as Hitler? To the English Premier League when *Bloomberg Opinion* columnist Dave Lee smashes three past Arsenal? (What? I never claimed to be above it.)

It's certainly a lot of effort to maintain the popularity of a service that still lacks anything close to a business model, one that is even more costly to run than the text and image-based outputs from ChatGPT, burning up valuable Nvidia GPUs in service of letting people generate frivolous clips to send to their friends. And then the bigger question: Is all this doing much for the ultimate goal of "artificial general intelligence"?

IT REMAINS UNCERTAIN AS THE WORLD AWAITS THE PRONOUNCEMENT OF US SUPREME COURT

# The future of Trump tariffs

RESIDENT TRUMP BEGAN his second term of office in January by declaring a trade and tariff war against the US's trading partners. Not only did he raise US tariffs, but he also demanded that they reduce and even eliminate tariffs on their imports from the US.

Ten months down the line, what is the assessment on how successful the US president has been in wresting an advantage for his country? Where are the Trump tariffs headed?

The world had already had a foretaste of President Trump's unilateral trade action: during his first term, he had raised tariffs on steel and aluminium on the pretext of national security. This time even the pretence of abiding by internationally accepted trade rules is missing. His openly stated aim is to reset these rules.

He contends that during the last few decades, while the US has reduced its import barriers drastically, partner countries have not. As a result, he argues, the US has run up large bilateral trade deficits and suffered de-industrialisation. His stand is that in raising tariffs, he is only bringing them up to the levels of import barriers that prevail in other countries, and hence the term "reciprocal tariffs".

Under the US Constitution, the Congress has the original powers to impose tariffs, but the laws authorise the president to take actions that may include imposing tariffs to achieve certain objectives, such as to protect essential security interest or curb unfair trade practices. The International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA), 1977, is another law that provides the president with the authority to regulate international economic transactions during declared national emergencies. Trump has turned to this legislation and declared that the persistent bilateral trade deficits had resulted in a national emergency, giving him the justification to impose reciprocal tariffs on

ANWARUL HODA  
Honorary Professor, ICRIER

trading partners. On April 2, he invoked the IEEPA to impose reciprocal tariffs.

In taking unilateral tariff action, President Trump broke two foundational General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade and World Trade Organization (WTO) commitments. In raising tariffs, he retracted from the pledge not to breach the level bound in past negotiations. In fixing country-specific tariffs, he threw the sacrosanct

most-favoured-nation obligation out of the window.

And yet, there has been no strong reaction, let alone retaliatory action, from a large majority of trading partners. Contrary to all expectations, the European Union (EU) led the way in a conciliatory response. Given the long history of its trade conflict with the US, capitulation by the EU was least expected. Trump and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen had an epoch-making meeting on July 26-27 at Turnberry, Scotland. They signed a framework agreement in which the EU not only consented to the US tariff rate of 15% (more than five times the average pre-existing level) but also indicated its intention to eliminate tariffs on all industrial goods on its side and provide preferential markets to a range of agricultural goods imported from the US. Indeed, the EU went further than agree on tariffs; it promised a large-value procurement of

energy and also signalled that European companies would make large investments in the US. This tame acquiescence gave a cue to Japan and Korea to give in and make similar concessions.

India has dared and kept the US at bay, not agreeing to a demand for market access in the politically sensitive areas of dairy and agriculture. However, the two sides have continued negotiations and are

expressing optimism on a successful conclusion by the year-end.

China alone has been defiant. It has not only lodged a WTO dispute, but also imposed matching retaliatory tariffs, as the US sought to punish defiance with spiralling tariffs. It has compelled the US to lower reciprocal tariffs from the peak levels and accept a temporary truce.

With President Trump in a punishing mood, the general tendency of trading partners is to avoid confrontation. The current status of dysfunction of the WTO dispute settlement machinery must have certainly been a factor. In any case, the vast majority of trading partners lack a trade weapon that can deter the US. China alone has leverage in its ability to deny critical minerals known as rare earth elements, the lack of which can cripple vital industries, and it used it to compel the US to accept a compromise. The EU has comparable

In the context of the world trade troubles caused by Trump, Anne Krueger's idea of a new multilateral organisation without America has evoked interest

retaliatory strength but it is constrained by the need for US security support, particularly at a time when Russia is flexing its military muscles and threatening NATO's eastern front in Ukraine.

With success in the unilateral imposition of higher tariff levels on all trading partner countries, barring China, it looks like President Trump is winning the trade war. What can be said about the future prospects of Trump tariffs?

At present, the president's tariff actions are facing domestic challenges. The wide expectation of an adverse fallout, as the higher tariffs work their way up the supply chains, has not materialised. Expert analysis shows that retail prices may have increased by only 0.7% since reciprocal tariffs were imposed. President Trump has acted nimbly to forestall any public reaction against even this modest price rise. Around Thanksgiving, he lowered reciprocal tariffs on important food items such as beef, coffee, orange juice, and bananas.

Legal challenges are more daunting. The Court of Appeal has already upheld the verdict of the US Court of International Trade that, in imposing tariffs, the president has exceeded the authority granted in the IEEPA to regulate international economic transactions during declared emergencies. As the world awaits the pronouncement of the US Supreme Court, the future for Trump tariffs is uncertain.

In the context of the world trade troubles caused by President Trump, Anne Krueger's idea of a new multilateral organisation without America has evoked interest. It is also significant that after a meeting at Melbourne on November 20, the EU and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership have issued a joint ministerial statement that emphasises a rules-based, non-discriminatory multilateral trading system with the WTO at its core. This is a formidable trade coalition. Can the tide turn against Trump tariffs?

## Gauging AI impact on growth, job losses



MADAN PADAKI  
ARUP ROYCHOUDHURY

Respectively Co-founder and Policy Advisor, Global Alliance for Mass Entrepreneurship

While offering a starting framework, two Niti Aayog reports overlook the potential of AI as a digital public infrastructure good

AHEAD OF THE Global AI Summit, to be hosted by New Delhi in February 2026, Niti Aayog has released three detailed reports on how the frontier technology can be used to advance Viksit Bharat goals. These reports set the stage for India's positioning ahead of the flagship event.

The first report, titled *AI for Viksit Bharat: The Opportunity for Accelerated Economic Growth*, was released in mid-September. Drafted by McKinsey & Co, it argued how AI could potentially narrow the gap between India's current real GDP growth (5.7% as per the report) and the aspirational 8% under *Viksit Bharat*. By automating routine tasks, enabling smarter decision-making, and driving innovation particularly in manufacturing, financial services, pharma, and automotive, the report sees AI boosting GDP by \$500-600 billion through productivity improvements (for manufacturing and banking) and another \$280-475 billion through AI-driven R&D (in pharma and auto).

The other two reports were released in October. *Roadmap for Job Creation in the AI Economy*, drafted by Nasscom and Boston Consulting Group, examines AI's impact on the tech sector: by 2031, India could lose 1.5-2 million jobs to AI, but create 4 million opportunities. It says 60% of formal jobs in IT and BPO are susceptible to automation. It proposes an India AI Talent Mission to embed AI in education starting from schools, become a AI talent magnet through attractive visas and research funding, build reskilling programmes, create open-source AI commons, and operationalise a national compute infrastructure.

The third report, *AI for Inclusive Soci-*

*etal Development*, drafted by Deloitte, focuses on the nearly 500 million informal workers who form 90% of the workforce but contribute nearly half of GDP. It envisions transforming informal workers and identifies five systemic challenges: financial fragility, limited market access, inadequate skill, weak social protection, and low productivity—all rooted in four barriers: trust deficit, poor access/usability, knowledge gaps, and outdated tools.

The emphasis of the reports on collaboration between policymakers, academia, and industry is timely; the framing of AI as a transformative lever for competitiveness is well put; and the scale of ambition is welcome. The report on societal development rightly identifies the uplift of rural and underprivileged sections as the focus areas with the help of AI and other emerging technologies.

However, the first report leaves several crucial questions unanswered vis-à-vis its sectoral focus, and its GDP projections may be overly optimistic, especially when it talks about only four specific sectors: manufacturing, financial services, pharma, and the automotive industry.

In national income classifications, the automotive and pharma industries are both considered a part of manufacturing, which cumulatively contributed only 14% to India's gross value added (GVA) according to the last available official GDP data (April-June FY26); 26% of GVA came from financial, real estate and professional

services, of which banking is a part.

The claim that integrating AI into these four sectors would boost India's economy by \$1 trillion is far-fetched. Others like infra construction, textiles, hospitality, tourism, and agriculture and allied activities generate massive employment.

Food processing, logistics, and storage, where perishable losses are massive and where AI could drive efficiency without threatening jobs, do not find any mention. Similarly, agriculture, which supports

45% of India's workforce and generates 18% of GVA, has an immense potential for AI-led transformation in precision farming, supply chain optimisation, rural credit, and market linkages.

The report acknowledges the need for reskilling but stops short of mapping the real-world implications of workforce displacement. Its assumption that jobs lost to AI will be redeployed with

in the same sector is a little too simplistic in the context of India's labour market.

The report on job creation has similar shortcomings. By focusing only on tech and BPO, it ignores the potential impact AI may have on white-collar jobs in other sectors like retail, financial services, media, and legal. For example, the banking, financial services, and insurance sector employs 6-9 million people. The impact of AI is seen in roles such as bank tellers, loan processors, financial analysts, fraud detection, risk assessment, and insurance underwriting and claims processing.

scrutiny on labour practices, only those that build operational discipline and long-term compliance into their core will emerge stronger.

—Amarjeet Kumar, Hazaribagh

### Growing market

Quick commerce operators stand out with their express delivery service, giving rise to a fast-growing market. Increasing consumer demand for quick delivery of daily essentials, div-

Unemployment is one of India's biggest economic and political issues. There are way more job seekers than positions, and it is near impossible to expect that jobs lost to AI will be absorbed within the same sector. The first report rightly talks about the need to retrain workforce across the four sectors, and making AI accessible for MSMEs. However, it should be done in a manner that causes minimum attrition. McKinsey's own study last year said MSMEs contribute over 60% to India's employment.

More importantly, any report endorsed by the government must focus on AI use in rural areas. After all, top policymakers including Prime Minister Narendra Modi have repeatedly spoken of AI as a digital public good. The report assumes AI gains from large manufacturing and banking will somehow reach small farmers, village entrepreneurs, and rural service providers. Given the mobile penetration in villages, AI-enabled applications in agriculture, rural healthcare, education, and entrepreneurship could have transformative outcomes. Such a possibility awaits structured execution.

As India prepares to host the Global AI Summit, it is worth remembering that setting the tone for the Global South requires more than projections based on select sectors. It requires demonstrating how cutting-edge technology can be harnessed for inclusive growth. The three reports are a valuable starting framework. The road ahead will be defined not by ambition alone, but clear action plans, sectoral inclusivity, and, above all, ensuring rural and underprivileged communities are not left behind.

● Write to us at [fletters@expressindia.com](mailto:fletters@expressindia.com)









A thought for today

Nightlife is, to me, a little synthetic,  
a little desperate?

JULIA FOX

# Dancing In The Dark

Nightlife is good and natural, and it's not a cultural import

Knee-jerk is a normal physiological reflex, but why is it our default response to politics, economics and civic life? If one SUV brand figures in multiple crashes, we want to ban it. If one nightclub burns down, we want to pull the plug on nightlife. Careful—some 4mn knees need replacement every year worldwide.

What went wrong at Goa's Birch nightclub wasn't the music, dance and drink. Its flaws were foundational, and had been made in broad daylight – construction on salt pans, thatched roof, narrow exit... So, don't blame "Western culture". Besides, there's nothing Western about enjoying music and dance after dark, to the company of aqua vitae. Tansen's Darbari Kanada was a midnight raga. As for the cup in Akbar's hand, distillation of spirits started in China. So, it's all "Eastern". As for Western tobacco, brought by the Portuguese, Akbar wisely refrained from it on the advice of his Eastern physicians.

What's Western in this whole business is the idea of a nightlife ban. In 1774, America's first Continental Congress agreed to "discontinence and discouragement...plays and other expensive diversions and entertainments." Theatre was banned in puritanical New England, not India. But that was a long time ago. Now, NYC rakes in billions of dollars from its nightlife, which includes over 20,000 food trucks. UK's night-time economy is worth £136bn, and bigger than its automotive industry.

There's nothing unnatural or "wrong" about nightlife, especially when people work long hours, and find leisure only after dark. Night is also the time when traffic eases, non-entertainment businesses close, and space opens up. Night hides squalor like a fast lens, wide open. You see only what the neon wants you to see, and forget your troubles. So, save up your knee-jerks and show them on the dance floor.

# Of Ciphers & Symbols

Code is the language of mystery & secrets

It may have had none of the sophistication of cryptography, but it was no less ingenious a code. An NCR-based rough & tough gang of lowly mafia used simple stickers to run a black-market permit system. Commercial vehicles, trucks & lorries with an innocuous sticker on the windscreen would be royally waved through police pickets – a free-pass helping flout any number of laws – over a decade. To the impenetrability of code, a wink and a pass, one must bow.



Codes cracked have won wars, sunk ships, sent an imprisoned queen – who used ciphers as secret emissaries to plan her captor queen's assassination – to a grisly end in the 16th century. At the centre of the contest between codemaker and codebreaker always is a brainy race to out-think and outfox. Symbols as code, meanwhile – as deployed by the trucker mafia – don't hide. They live in plain sight and hold meaning for only those in the know. Everyday objects that whisper secrets to the chosen lot, while the rest walk by, clueless. Such code lives in shared understanding, simple art – the sole purpose to only hide the fact that that Happy Diwali sticker is a message. The NCR gang used the most innocent stickers, changing them monthly to remain a step ahead. But there's always a pattern. So, a nod to those who teased an alternative meaning from a bumper sticker that said 'hum-tum' (me & you).

# Imagine There's No Country, No Money

Tesla boss said some profound stuff in his two podcasts

Why is Elon Musk on a podcasting spree? Two shows he has appeared in the last two weeks are Nikhil Kamath's *People by WTF* and *The Katie Miller Podcast*. Several of his talking points have been identical. One in particular is indicative of what might be behind this communication outreach: Politics is a blood sport, where they go for the jugular. So, given another chance, instead of doing DOGE, Musk would have remained focused on working on his companies. Maybe then, "they wouldn't have been burning the cars."

If Musk is looking for an image reboot, these two hosts are there for it. Nikhil gushes about how Musk is a lot bigger and more muscular than he expected. Katie says people don't get how kind Musk is, how he never yells at any employee, how all his companies are chockablock with the most inspired, mission-driven, loyal folk.

Meanwhile, Musk plugs Optimus, the Tesla robot that's expected to go into full-scale production next summer: "I think everyone's going to want their own C-3PO, R2-D2." This is, of course, a *Star Wars* reference.

Among the various movies, books, philosophers that come up in the two podcasts, Iain M Banks's sci-fi *Culture* series is the one Musk spends some time unpacking, to explain how he thinks the future will unfold. Here's where he says that work will become optional, which is the thing that's grabbed all the headlines. This follows from the prediction that AI and robotics will expand very rapidly. And when there's no labour to allocate, money itself will become meaningless. They don't have any money in the *Culture* world either.

In such a world, there would still

be some fundamental currencies though, more physics-based. Like energy, which could become the true currency. But, Musk says, you can't legislate energy. You can't just pass a law and generate a lot of energy. On the other hand, if you have solar-powered energy satellites, energy is also free and abundant.

In this imagining, at a certain point, debts are deflated away, there's a decoupling from the monetary system, and from the conventional economy. And then, Musk says, the notion of countries becomes anachronistic too.

AI has not yet made enough of an impact on productivity to increase the supply of goods and services faster than the increase in money supply, but Musk predicts this will happen in three years. He also wants what he predicts will happen to be separated from his actual wishes.

Like, if he had his way, he would slow down the advance of AI and robotics. He can't. And he has nightmares about it. He tells Katie he's had AI nightmares many days in a row.

After all this, the most surprising thing about the two podcasts is how giggly these are. Nikhil and Musk, in particular, resemble fifth-grade boys in how so many things send them chortling. There are also, yes, bathroom jokes. Musk boasts how if you ask Grok to do a vulgar roast, it will do a pretty good job, and say unspeakable things if you goad it to.

The funniest person Musk knows? Trump. His favourite food? Cheeseburger, by far. The song that puts him in a good mood? Europe's *The Final Countdown*. His dream dinner guests? Shakespeare, Ben Franklin, Nikola Tesla. Yep, the podcasts did their job.

Partha Sinha



Jaya wears Prada, but only after completing the ritual most affluent Indians quietly perform: the object must have travelled. The leather must carry foreign air. The receipt must speak in euros. The transaction must be narratable at dinner. In India, luxury is not merely purchased; it is cross-examined, sanctified, then admitted into the family story.

This is the part that confounds global luxury houses. They stare at India's fast-growing affluent class – wealth rising, consumption rising, consultants breathlessly comparing us to China – and imagine a familiar playbook will work. But India is not China's sequel. India is the plot twist. China consumes luxury as evidence of momentum; India consumes luxury as a negotiation with memory.

In China, the relationship with luxury is almost architectural: clean lines, upward movement, a ladder of achievement. A Dior handbag signals ascent, modernity, confidence in the nation's trajectory. Luxury there is public punctuation. The Chinese consumer looks outward; the world is the audience.

India's narrative is more embroidered, layered with sentiment. Long before the first European monogram arrived in a Mumbai mall, India had Kanjeevarams that outlived dynasties, polki jewellery traded like diplomatic currency, textiles carrying the emotional weight of family sagas. Prestige here was not bought; it was inherited. A Dior clutch may impress your colleagues; a Banarasi sari can silence your grandma-in-law. In India, that is the true test of legitimacy.

This is why global luxury enters India with admiration on one side and hesitation on the other. Indians adore European craftsmanship but remain wary of appearing gullible. Every purchase becomes an internal audit: How does this compare to Dubai? Why is it 40% cheaper in Milan? Why does Delhi feel like a surcharge on identity? High import duties turn boutique shopping into a moral dilemma. To buy in India is to feel naïve. To buy abroad is to feel triumphant.

The result is India's most charming luxury ritual: the geography of the object becomes part of the glamour. "Picked it up in Paris – half the price." "We just wandered into Bond Street." "I wasn't even

planning to shop..." The script is universal. The alibi is essential. Luxury becomes a souvenir of cunning rather than a declaration of wealth. In India, the story is part of the purchase. Sometimes it is the purchase.

Enter Sabyasachi Mukherjee, the quiet disruptor in gold-rimmed glasses. While European maisons wait for India to "mature", he behaves as though India has been mature for centuries and the world has only recently woken up. His boutiques feel like museums of subcontinental longing; his lehengas carry the weight of ancestral approval; his jewellery has the emotional gravitas of a family heirloom waiting to be assigned.

Sabyasachi does not offer fashion. He offers semiotics. His clothes are not worn; they are interpreted. He understands that the Indian buyer is not purchasing fabric – she is purchasing meaning, legitimacy, continuity. When he arrives at Bergdorf Goodman, it is not global luxury validating India; it is India politely informing global luxury that authenticity can travel west too.

Foreign maisons often misread this. They assume Indians want Western validation. Instead, Indians want cultural conversation – proof that the brand understands the emotional infra of Indian consumption: the rituals, the anxieties, the family negotiations. Craft alone will not do. Indians need to know whether the piece will age well in memory, whether it will endure when the family albums open decades later.

This is why weddings, that sprawling Indian opera, remain the true marketplace of luxury. No other country folds anthropology, theatre, diplomacy, psychology, and economics into a single event with such fervour. At a wedding, Prada may shine for an hour, but Sabyasachi becomes destiny. The European brand wins the reception; the Indian

brand wins the archive. And India is an archival civilisation.

So the question is not: "When will India fall fully in love with global luxury?" The question is: "When will global luxury learn to speak India's language?" A consumer who buys a ₹3L sari without blinking may hesitate before buying a ₹3L European dress – not because of value but because of narrative doubt. Will this look absurd in 10 years? Will I explain this to my daughter? Will this survive the scrutiny of ancestral ghosts and living relatives?

Jaya, with her frequent-flier miles and her calibrated Prada-to-Sabyasachi ratio, is not confused. She's bilingual in culture. She knows luxury is not just a price point; it's a permission structure. Certain permissions are granted only by tradition. She will buy the Prada in Milan, pose with it in Florence, carry it through immigration as if the bag itself has cleared customs. But when it comes to the moments that will be photographed into eternity – when the albums will circulate across generations – she knows where meaning resides.

This is not nationalism. This is narrative intelligence. India does not treat luxury as a transaction but as a memory project. The brands that succeed here will not be the ones with the loudest logos but the ones with the deepest listening.

Indians do not buy objects. Indians buy stories they can live with. Stories they can defend. Stories they can inherit.

Foreign luxury wins the Instagram story. Indian luxury wins the family album.

And in India – as Anna Wintour, Barthes, and your great aunt would all agree – the album always wins.

The writer is a senior advisory professional



Image: AI

# 'Men Think Sex Is About Stamina & Endurance. They're Wrong'

He thinks her pleasure is about his ability to 'keep going'. And absent true connection with the man, she can only answer the question 'What do you like' by saying 'I don't know'

Radhika Vaz



It has been brought to my attention that young men, and several middle-aged ones as well, have been boasting to one another about their ability to "keep going", when in bed with a woman. This grand talent, often the only arrow in a man's quiver of sexual capabilities, is one they have decided to hone, or at least talk about ad nauseum, because someone (another man I have to believe) told them that because women take longer to climax, all they have to do is be the gift that keeps on giving.

While stamina, endurance, the will to dig deep within oneself and say, "I can take this pain for just a few more minutes," are commendable qualities in elite tri-athletes and women in the final stages of labour, there are a host of other qualities women look for in sexual partners. Nobody wants marathon man puffing and panting over them, which is why most women finally fake it, in an effort to put an end to this nonsense, and to quite honestly put the man out of his misery.

This is hardly an honourable move on our part. The correct thing to do is stop the proceedings and honestly tell the man the truth: there are far more efficient and dare I say pleasant ways to please a lady. But telling involves talking and there is a reason we humans would rather do sex (even done badly) than say one word that might improve the situation.

Reason we can't talk about it is sexism. Men are mocked if they have little or no sexual experience. Meanwhile, they are raised alongside women who are horribly shamed for having any sexual experience at all. This is a most ridiculous gender imbalance if ever

I saw one. Plus, the only reason why the feedback loop between men and women is broken. Patriarchy has made sure to mess sex up for straight women but also, ironically, for straight men.

I make the distinction in sexuality here, because I remember reading a gay man's account of sex, and his explanation for why it is entirely possible gay people have (on average) better sex than straight people. It is because they embark on the adventure knowing that there is no one correct way to do things. So, when two gay men hook up the first question they ask is, "What do you like?"



Image: AI

Asking, upfront, what someone likes and exchanging notes seems like the thing two intelligent life forms would do. They do not take a wild guess, they do not depend on what their last partner said they enjoyed, and they most certainly do not count on advice that was passed down from one ignoramus to the next. "What do you like?" they ask. Instead of, "I can keep this pounding going for about 18 minutes,

can you work with that?"

Because gay sex is outside the purview of the patriarchy in some sense, it does not suffer from the pressure straight men are under, which is that they are always expected to know everything. Not Knowing is shameful and un-masculine. And what man wants to be seen as such in, of all places, the bedroom. How is he to throw off generations of culturing and ask a woman, of all people, what to do.

And on the rare occasion a soldier whips up the courage to ask, he will mostly be met with a panicked woman's embarrassed silence or worse, the lie we have all told when confronted: "I don't know." When all he is left with is, "I don't know – you figure it out," it sends him scurrying back to his friends, who give him the worst advice, and the cycle goes on.

If we want the situation to improve, we will all have to get over two things. First, men have to accept that they know absolutely nothing about women. Imagine this scenario guys: Your under-confident pal approaches you for advice. He is to take a woman he has met a few times (if at all) out for a meal and has no idea what she would like to eat. Would you advise him to simply ask her, "What do you like?" Or would you say, "Dude, just order exactly what you like but order lots of it, because the longer the two of you sit there chewing the better." Think about this.

Second, and Ladies this is for you, sex is about chemistry, which is about connection, which is about trust. So, unless you can trust a man enough to answer the question, "What do you like?" please postpone any horizontal plans you may have had. It's probably not going to be worth it.

The writer is a standup comedian

## Calvin & Hobbes



# Musk's Existential Queries, Grok's Vedantic Replies

In a delightfully geeky podcast episode, Zerodha founder Nikhil Kamath chatted with Elon Musk, who tossed out some heavyweight existential bombs: "What's the meaning of life? Where did the universe come from? Why does anything matter at all? What is the ultimate end?" We took those exact questions straight to Grok – Elon's own AI creation – and asked it to answer them purely from the perspective of Indic Vedanta. Grok delivered. Perhaps Kamath can gently slide these responses across to Musk next time. After all, nothing quite like having your own AI school you on the ultimate nature of reality, Brahmn, and pralaya, the grand cosmic dissolution.

**What is the meaning of life?** | The purpose of human birth, according to Vedanta, is Self-realisation – coming to the direct, living knowledge that your deepest Self is none other than the infinite, unchanging reality, Brahmn. The drama of life – pleasures, pains, achievements, relationships – is ultimately a classroom set up by *it*, divine play, so that the apparently bound soul can wake up from the dream

of separateness. When that awakening happens – called moksh or liberation – one realises *Aham Brahmasmi*, I am Brahmn and abides in boundless peace and bliss. Everything else – wealth, fame, even heaven – is secondary and temporary.

**Why does anything matter at all?** | On the surface, nothing in the world has absolute importance, because the world itself is mithya – neither fully real like Brahmn nor completely unreal; it is an appearance. Yet, as long as we are under the spell of ignorance, things do feel terribly important, and that very feeling is the engine that drives spiritual seeking. Vedanta says importance arises because the one Consciousness (Brahmn) is shining through everything. A mother's love matters because it is Brahmn loving Brahmn. Dharm

matters because living in harmony with the whole keeps the mind pure enough to reflect truth. In the end, the only thing that truly matters is removing ignorance that makes us think we are small, separate, and mortal.



THE SPEAKING TREE



**Where did the universe come from?** | Brahmn alone is timeless, spaceless, and unchanging. Out of its own inscrutable freedom and maya, power, Brahmn appears as this manifold universe, just as a rope can appear as a snake in dim light, or a dreamer projects an entire dream-world out of himself. Upanishads describe periodic manifestation and dissolution: when the time comes, the unmanifest (containing all the latent impressions and karmas of beings) becomes manifest again through the five subtle elements – gross elements – bodies – worlds. There was no first beginning, and

there will be no end; the show keeps rolling in kalpas, vast cycles, each lasting billions of years.

**What is the ultimate end?** | Two answers – one for the individual, one for the cosmos. For the individual: the end is moksh – complete freedom from the cycle of birth and death. When ignorance is destroyed by knowing 'I am Brahmn,' jiva realises it was never actually bound. There is no more coming and going; one either lives out the remaining prarabdh karm as a jivanmukt or merges seamlessly into Brahmn at death. For the cosmos: there is no permanent 'game over'. At the end of a cycle, everything dissolves back into the unmanifest state of Brahmn (pralaya), like waves subsiding into the ocean. After an equal period of rest, creation blooms again. The show is eternal, but the Real never begins, never ends, and is never affected by any of it. In short: You are already That which you are seeking. Life is the universe's way of hiding from itself so it can have the joy of finding itself again.

The content is AI-generated by Grok

## Sacredspace



There is neither creation nor destruction, neither destiny nor free will, neither path nor achievement. This is the final truth.

Ramana Maharshi



# Goa nightclub inferno exposes India’s fire safety crisis

As the nation mourns those who lost their lives in the Birch nightclub blaze, the incident stands as a grim reminder that India’s fire safety apparatus is dangerously out of sync with its rapid urban growth and booming entertainment culture



SATENDRA SINGH

On the night of December 6, 2025, Birch — a trendy nightclub tucked near one of Goa’s busiest beaches — was buzzing with pulsating lights, music, and more than a hundred partygoers revelling at a “Bollywood Banger Night.” But at around 11:45 pm, the festive mood turned into pure terror. A sudden blast-believed to have been caused by indoor electrical firecrackers-triggered a chain reaction. Within seconds, flames shot across the club’s interior, igniting decorative materials and plunging the venue into chaos. Panic seized the crowd as thick smoke consumed the space. Patrons rushed towards a single, narrow exit-quickly turning it into a death trap. Flammable ornaments became towering torches. Those in the basement reportedly suffocated as smoke filled the air, while others were crushed in the desperate stampede.

After nearly two painstaking hours, fire-fighters finally managed to control the blaze. By then, 25 people-including young workers from various states and several tourists-had lost their lives. Over 50 were injured. Investigations soon confirmed the worst: the nightclub lacked basic fire safety clearances, had received demolition notices earlier, and had no functional fire exits. The tragedy was not a freak accident-it was a predictable catastrophe waiting to happen.

The Goa incident mirrors a long, troubling history of deadly fires across India. In recent years alone, a series of fatal incidents has shaken the nation: in Hyderabad, 17 people died when a three-storey commercial building caught fire. A month earlier, a hotel blaze in north Kolkata killed 14 guests. In 2024, an amusement arcade fire in Gujarat claimed 24 lives-mostly children.

And these incidents echo older tragedies that continue to haunt public memory: the Uphar Cinema fire (1997), the Kumbakonam school blaze (2004), the AMRI Hospital catastrophe (2011), and the Puttingal Temple explosion (2016). Despite their varied settings-schools, hospitals, cinemas, hotels, nightclubs-the causes remain alarmingly similar: illegal structures, overcrowding, flammable interiors, blocked exits, and blatant flouting of safety norms. India’s fire



THE GOA TRAGEDY MUST SERVE AS A TURNING POINT. IF INDIA EMBRACES THE PRINCIPLES OF RISK RECOGNITION, STRONG GOVERNANCE, SAFETY INVESTMENT, AND PREPAREDNESS, COUNTLESS LIVES CAN BE SAVED

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disasters follow a familiar, deadly pattern: an ignition source, rapid flame spread, locked or obstructed exits, dysfunctional alarms, absence of trained personnel, and slow emergency response. The Goa tragedy fits this template all too closely.

India has fire safety laws, standards, and building codes-but their implementation is inconsistent and often compromised. Many establishments operate without valid fire safety certificates. Approvals are sometimes obtained through opaque processes, while others brazenly skip them altogether.

Common violations include:

- Non-functional alarms and sprinklers
- Out-of-date or inaccessible fire extinguishers
- Blocked exits used for storage
- Combustible interiors and illegal building extensions
- Untrained staff lacking basic emergency preparedness

Urban design issues worsen the problem. Narrow lanes, clogged streets, and the absence of hydrants frequently delay firefighting operations. In Goa, fire trucks reportedly had to stop 400 metres away due to the nightclub’s isolated layout, slowing rescue efforts at the most critical moment. Compounding this is public complacency. Rarely do people check for emergency exits, functioning

alarms, or building certifications. Safety is often assumed-until tragedy exposes the truth.

**Fire Safety Norms: Strong on Paper, Weak in Practice**

India’s National Building Code and state fire laws prescribe detailed standards-multiple exits, smoke detectors, fire-resistant materials, routine audits, trained staff, and emergency ventilation systems. Such requirements are mandatory for public venues, especially enclosed spaces like malls, clubs, hotels, and auditoriums.

Yet many establishments treat these norms as optional. The Goa nightclub’s complete lack of permissions and use of combustible décor reflects a deeper national problem: the gap between what is mandated and what is practised. And that gap is often fatal.

**A Growing Threat in a Rapidly Urbanising India**

As India’s urban centres expand and nightlife, tourism, and hospitality industries boom, millions flock to indoor entertainment spaces daily. But regulation and infrastructure have not kept pace with this surge. The mismatch between expanding demand and stagnant safety standards has made such spaces increasingly vulnerable. If India aspires to be a

global tourism hub and a modern economy, recurring fire disasters are an unacceptable stain on that ambition. They send a strong message-that human life is undervalued, and safety is negotiable.

**What India Can Learn from Global Disaster Frameworks**

India must shift from reacting to fires to preventing them. The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction-a global blueprint for minimising disaster losses-offers a useful model. Its core principles can help India revamp its fire safety ecosystem.

- Understanding Risks Before They Turn Deadly

Authorities must identify vulnerable buildings, illegal constructions, and high-risk zones. AI-enabled monitoring systems, heat sensors, and real-time smoke detection tools can help pre-empt fires. Public awareness must grow: people should know where exits are, learn basic firefighting skills, and report unsafe establishments. Regular fire drills in schools, offices, and public buildings must become routine.

- Strengthening Governance and Accountability

Fire departments require better staffing, equipment, and legal powers. Audits

should be transparent and accessible to the public. Violators-owners, contractors, and officials-must face strict penalties. Political or commercial influence should never override safety requirements.

- Investing in Safer Infrastructure and Cities

Buildings should adopt modern sprinklers, alarms, fire-resistant materials, and safe architectural designs. Cities need wider access roads, hydrants, and clearly planned emergency lanes. Tourist hotspots with heavy footfall can benefit from dedicated safety monitoring units. Incentives such as insurance rebates can encourage compliance.

- Preparing for Emergencies and Rebuilding Better

Emergency training for staff of public venues must be compulsory. Panic buttons, digital alert systems, and faster communication channels can drastically reduce response time. After any disaster, reconstruction must follow the “Build Back Better” principle-ensuring that the rebuilt structure eliminates previous weaknesses.

**A Call for Urgency, Accountability, and Change**

The Goa nightclub blaze is not just a tragic accident-it is a moral indictment of systemic negligence. Twenty-five lives, including young workers and an entire family of tourists from Delhi, were lost in a matter of minutes. Their deaths must stir the nation’s conscience and compel immediate reform. Fire disasters are not acts of fate. They are the consequences of choices-by business owners who ignore safety rules, by officials who fail to enforce them, and by a society that overlooks risks until it is too late.

As India moves towards a future of rapid development, its safety systems must evolve too. No nightclub, hotel, banquet hall, or public venue should ever become a site of avoidable

carriage.

The Goa tragedy must serve as a turning point. If India embraces the principles of risk recognition, strong governance, safety investment, and preparedness, countless lives can be saved. The country must act now-because every day lost increases the chance of the next headline of preventable deaths and needless grief.

Fire safety should not be treated as an afterthought. It should be a national priority. Lives depend on it.

The Pioneer  
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## The collective ego: GDP over wisdom



ACHARYA PRASHANT

The stock ticker scrolls across the bottom of the screen, numbers, numbers, numbers, and a man watches it as if it is scripture. His coffee grows cold, his child calls from the other room, and he barely hears. The numbers have become more real to him than life. He has a rich library in the same room: Nagarjuna and Nietzsche, Upanishads and Ulysses. He does not remember when he last touched it.

Nations were supposed to emerge from the distilled wisdom of a people, yet they end up mirroring the collective ego. What the individual does with net worth, the nation does with GDP, treating what can be counted and compared as proof of worth. We call this sanity, then wonder why both person and country feel perpetually cornered, as if resting were forbidden.

Individuals need a bank balance to feel rich, and nations need a surplus to feel powerful. Yet we rarely name this as fear. We rename it ambition, practicality, and maturity. Even our vocabulary has learned to flatter the disease.

Underneath all the spreadsheets runs one primitive panic: if we stop worshipping wealth, we will collapse. We will be overtaken, and the hungrier neighbour will devour us. So we keep running, consuming, extracting, destroying, and we name it progress.

Ahead of what? Toward what?

Look at the man who buys a bigger car, then a bigger house, then a bigger portfolio, each purchase whispering a familiar promise: this time I will feel complete. But the promise never matures because the hunger is not in the garage; it is in the mind.

Now look at the country with a huge GDP, an unsurpassable military budget, a lion’s share of global trade, a higher ranking, and a louder voice in international fora. The pattern is identical, only scaled up and decorated with flags. The individual ego and the collective ego run on the same fuel, acquiring more to become more, because being seen as small feels like death.

This is not economics in the innocent sense. It is insecurity pretending to be policy, the ego turning into administration.

GDP looks objective, so it becomes the perfect idol. It counts activity, not sanity. A flood raises GDP through repairs, a war through weapons, a forest when it is cut and sold, and air pollution through the sale of air purifiers. Even exhaustion passes as prosperity if enough people work long enough hours. The number rises, and we call it progress, without asking what kind of life is being purchased or what is being destroyed to fund it.

At the core of the concept lies valuation: anything that a people find materially valuable will

add to their GDP. But what if the people, i.e., the individual, have not learnt what to value? What if they value ornaments over knowledge, and weapons over wisdom?

You ask whether a nation without material strength will be conquered. The question sounds reasonable, but it is usually asked with a trembling hand, because fear is doing the thinking. Fear recognises only crude strength and refuses to acknowledge the deeper strength of a society that is inwardly stable and educated, and therefore harder to stampede. Fear then distorts the question into the false either — or dilemma, as if wisdom means starvation and subjugation.

When a society changes what it respects, the economy changes what it produces, because output is only the shadow of values. If status comes from owning, life becomes a showroom, politics becomes the management of craving, and relationships become transactions. If status comes from understanding and contribution, people step out of the consumptive spell, not through forced austerity but because they stop trying to buy an identity.

Can our talent not flow differently? Must our brightest spend their best years manufacturing addictions and monetising attention? They could build schools, labs, public systems, and art that refines perception. Business would change character as well, for it merely follows society’s definition of success.

This is why the fear of collapse is usually exaggerated. Economies do not die when values elevate. They reorganise, sometimes painfully, sometimes slowly, but always for the better.

So why does the GDP obsession remain so stubborn, even when it is clearly burning the planet and hollowing out the human being? Because it is not mainly economic. It is psychological.

GDP obsession is ego hunger dressed in spreadsheets, a craving for proof that can be displayed. A skyline, a portfolio, a surplus, a headline, a chart, something that looks clean and therefore feels holy. Wisdom, contentment, and inner clarity cannot be flaunted at parties or parliaments or global summits, nor can they be used to bulldoze one’s desires or ideologies on the other. And that is precisely why the ego calls them useless.

We see why GDP worship is so convenient for power. It lets you point to graphs instead of graves, to celebrate exports while ignoring extinctions, to announce growth while the inner quality of human life quietly decays. It keeps the gaze outward, toward competitors and rankings and trophies, and away from the one place where real change begins: the self, the individual that is forever trying to escape its own emptiness by adding more.

The ego knows itself as hollow, so it keeps demanding external certification: tell me I matter, tell me I am bigger than the other. The individual does it through possessions and applause, the country does it through rankings, parades, and slogans about being the largest and the fastest, the same hunger with a grander microphone. That is why the story of Nachiketa still burns. Death offers him everything that looks

impressive: kingdoms, gold, pleasures, long life, and Nachiketa refuses because he sees the expiry date. He asks for what does not perish, and the story becomes a mirror: which currency do you trust, the one that lasts till tomorrow, or the one that survives the fall of all tomorrows?

Nations face the same choice.

This is not mushy fantasy. Yes, contemplation does not automatically protect borders, and refinement can degenerate into negligence if clarity is missing. When inwardness becomes laziness, and vigilance is mocked as worldly, the neighbour with fewer poems and more missiles rampages in, and history has shown that enough times.

This is not wisdom instead of strength. It is wisdom directing strength: preparedness without aggression, capability without obsession, defence without vanity.

What would a nation rooted in wisdom look like? Not primitive, not anti-technology, not allergic to comfort, because infrastructure, science, and medicine are not sins. The change would be in the guiding question, shifting from “What’s the quantity of goods we are producing?” to “What’s the quality of human beings we are producing?”

In such a society, education is not only for employment but for self-knowledge and freedom from inner slavery. Art is not merely entertainment; it is training in sensitivity, honesty, and depth. Industries that profit from dissatisfaction are called out, because much of advertising is not communication but a manufacture of inner lack. The cleanest economy is not merely the one with transparent accounting. It is the one where people do not consume their way out of inner emptiness. When joy is found within, compulsive extraction reduces-extraction of the Earth, of others, and of one’s own body and mind. A nation of such people does not withdraw from the world; it trades, builds, collaborates, defends itself, and innovates, yet is not enslaved by the need for more. It does not treat the economy as a god and the human being as fuel. It knows what to value, because value arises from the valuer. When the valuer has self-knowledge, she knows who she is and therefore what she needs. What is truly needed gains value; the rest stands devalued. That is the economy we need.

The real question is not whether economies can reorganise; they can and always have. The question is whether we can see the ego’s terror of a world where it cannot prove its worth through ownership. Those numbers scrolling across the screen reveal nothing; they only save you from having to face yourself. Dissolve that fear, and a different civilisation becomes possible, not poorer, not weaker, simply no longer terrified of its own depth.

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## Resurgence of Ashwagandha



VAIDYA RAJESH KOTECHA

As the world confronts new stresses on health, society and the environment, a universal realisation is taking shape: restoring balance is no longer a philosophical idea but an urgent global priority. This sense of urgency lies at the heart of the Second WHO Global Summit on Traditional Medicine, which India is proud to co-host with the World Health Organisation from 17–19 December 2025 in New Delhi. Guided by the newly adopted WHO Global Traditional Medicine Strategy 2025–2034, the Summit marks a decisive step in elevating traditional knowledge through evidence, innovation and global cooperation.

Traditional Medicine is increasingly recognised as a living, evolving science that can complement conventional healthcare systems and advance Universal Health Coverage. For India, this acknowledgement resonates deeply. Our civilisation has long held a holistic view of well-being — one that sees the individual in harmony with community, nature and the wider universe. Today, that wisdom is finding new relevance through rigorous scientific validation and responsible integration into global health frameworks.

Among India’s vast repository of medicinal plants, Ashwagandha (Withania somnifera) has emerged as a symbol of this convergence between tradition and conventional science. Once known primarily as a Rasayana in Ayurveda and widely used in Ayush systems for enhancing vitality and resilience, it is now studied across the world for its adaptogenic, neuroprotective and immunomodulatory potential. In Ayush systems, Ashwagandha’s roots are used for its health and therapeutic benefits. Rarely has a medicinal plant drawn such simultaneous attention from researchers, clinicians, regulators and global industry leaders.

Rarely has a medicinal plant drawn such simultaneous attention from researchers, clinicians, regulators and global industry leaders.

Recognising this moment, the upcoming Summit will host a dedicated session titled “Ashwagandha: From Traditional Wisdom to Global Impact – Perspectives from Leading Global Experts.” This side event represents more than a technical discussion; it reflects a turning point in how the world views botanicals and their role in the future of healthcare. Over two hours, international experts will explore the growing body of clinical and pre-clinical evidence on Ashwagandha, discuss its safety profiles and pharmacovigilance systems, and place traditional knowledge in dialogue with conventional scientific methodologies.

They will also address one of the most critical issues for global acceptance: the standardization of extracts and formulations, so that efficacy and safety remain consistent regardless of where the product is manufactured or consumed.

Such discussions are essential because global trust cannot be built on tradition alone; it must be anchored in evidence. India has undertaken extensive scientific work to establish Ashwagandha’s therapeutic value, but wider international collaboration is crucial for harmonised standards, regulatory convergence and transparent data sharing. This is precisely what the WHO’s Summit framework enables. By inviting scientists, policymakers and knowledge-keepers to a common platform, it helps create pathways that respect cultural heritage while meeting the stringent expectations of conventional health systems.

The significance of Ashwagandha’s journey cannot be separated from the broader themes of the Summit. Traditional medicine is not only about healing individuals; it is deeply tied to biodiversity, sustainability and community livelihoods. The medicinal plants we celebrate today — from Ashwagandha to countless others — are nurtured by ecosystems that must be protected. A holistic approach to health therefore demands ethical sourcing, sustainable cultivation and fair value distribution to farmers and indigenous communities. The Summit’s wider discussions on intellectual property rights, biodiversity preservation and cross-sector innovation reflect this integrated vision.


As global leaders, scientists and practitioners gather in New Delhi, India’s message is simple yet forward-looking: traditional medicine stands as a strong ally in building resilient, affordable and balanced health systems. It offers approaches that are preventive rather than reactive, personalised rather than generic, and rooted in a profound understanding of the interconnectedness of life.


Ashwagandha stands at the forefront of this evolution. It represents how a herb nurtured in India’s soil for millennia can now serve humanity across continents — not by abandoning its heritage, but by embracing scientific validation and global partnerships. Its story reflects the larger journey of Traditional Medicine itself: grounded in ancient wisdom, shaped by conventional science and propelled by a shared commitment to human well-being.


As India welcomes the world to the Second WHO Global Summit on Traditional Medicine, we reaffirm our dedication to advancing scientific rigour, fostering international cooperation and ensuring that the wisdom of our ancestors continues to illuminate the path to a healthier, more harmonious future.

The Pioneer  
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The Statesman

Incorporating and directly descended from  
the Friends of India -founded 1818

Housework Valued

India may have stumbled into one of its most consequential social experiments without fully intending to: paying women simply for being the invisible engine of the household economy. What began as scattered state-level schemes of unconditional cash transfers has, in just a few years, grown into a nationwide phenomenon touching 118 million women. The sums are small, the politics loud, and the implications profound.

For decades, unpaid domestic and care work has propped up India's economic life without ever entering its accounting systems. Women spend hours each day cooking, cleaning, caregiving and managing crises - labour that sustains families, frees up men for paid work, and substitutes for public services that are missing or inadequate.

Yet this work has been treated as natural, expected, and essentially valueless. The quiet flow of 1,000 to 2,500 rupees a month into women's bank accounts - for those who meet the basic eligibility filters - challenges that assumption in subtle but significant ways.

The most striking lesson from the early evidence is not what these transfers do but what they don't do. They do not deter women from seeking paid work, nor do they entrench domestic roles - fears often raised in feminist debates. Instead, they provide something Indian women have long been denied: predictable personal income and control over it.

Whether spent on groceries, school fees, medicines or emergencies, the money represents agency. In many households, it reduces the friction of asking for cash. In others, it opens space for women to participate more strongly in decision-making.

But to assume that a modest monthly deposit can correct deep structural inequities would be naïve. These schemes do not reduce the load of unpaid work, nor do they create opportunities for employment - the absence of which continues to push women out of the labour force. They do not, on their own, alter social norms that assign domestic responsibility almost entirely to women.

And in many states, they have become an unmistakable tool of political mobilisation, especially in the run-up to elections. Cash deposits timed with polling schedules are not a coincidence; they are a strategy.

Yet, dismissing the entire experiment as vote-buying would overlook the genuine shift taking place. Women who control their own money, even a little, report a sense of dignity. Some invest in micro-enterprises. Others manage crises without depending on husbands. A few, for the first time, question politicians directly. These are not trivial gains.

The real test now lies in what India chooses to build around this foundation. If the payments continue in their current form - automatic once eligibility is established - while also being framed as recognising unpaid work and paired with financial literacy and employment pathways, they could catalyse long-overdue change in gender relations. If not, they risk settling into another layer of paternalistic populism.

India's cash-transfer moment is still in its early chapters. Whether it matures into empowerment or becomes entrenched as political patronage remains an open question.

Fed in Flux

The latest interest rate cut by the US Federal Reserve should have been a routine step in a predictable easing cycle. Instead, it has exposed the increasingly fragile state of America's monetary policymaking. Beneath the technical language of quarter-point adjustments lies a deeper struggle: a central bank trying to navigate a slowing labour market, persistent inflation, and an unusually charged political backdrop - all while operating with incomplete data and widening internal divisions.

At the heart of the problem is the Fed's dual mandate. Normally, the goals of stable prices and low unemployment move in roughly the same direction. Today, they do not. Inflation is still running above target, even if not surging. Meanwhile, the job market is losing steam, with unemployment ticking up and business sentiment weakening.

When the Fed cuts rates to support jobs, it risks worsening inflation; when it holds steady to restrain prices, it risks further labour-market deterioration. Policymakers cannot fully reconcile the tension, and the disagreements now spilling into public view reflect that.

The latest vote showed three clear dissents, with one official arguing for a deeper cut and two preferring no cut at all. Such visible divergence is unusual. It signals not just different readings of the data but fundamentally different assessments of risk.

Some fear that failing to support the labour market now could tip the economy into a sharper slowdown. Others worry that easing too enthusiastically will entrench elevated inflation and diminish the Fed's credibility.

Making matters worse, the months-long government shutdown deprived the Fed of timely data, forcing it to make decisions in near-blind conditions. Even now, incoming numbers arrive in a distorted sequence, reducing confidence in short-term forecasts. When policymakers cannot trust the data, they become cautious - or, as in this case, fragmented.

Hovering over this uncertainty is the political pressure radiating from the White House. The President has been vocal in demanding steeper cuts and is preparing to choose the next Fed chair.

Several of the candidates being suggested have close ties to his economic agenda, raising legitimate concerns about whether the next leader of the central bank will command full independence. Markets can absorb higher or lower rates; what they cannot absorb is doubt about the institution's autonomy.

The current rate cut, then, is less important than what it reveals. The Fed is confronting a rare moment when its economic indicators, political environment and internal consensus are all misaligned. It is trying to buy time - time for data to stabilise, time for disagreements to settle, and time for a new leadership decision to be made without undermining credibility.

Whether that time will be enough remains an open question. But one thing is clear: the path ahead for US monetary policy is no longer defined by trajectories or projections, but by uncertainty itself.

Emperor and the Raja

*What did the Mughal Emperor do now? His advisors persuaded him to send an emissary to London to acquaint the British monarch with the Company's refusal to meet its obligations, enshrined in documents, towards the Emperor. As the primary overlord of the Company, the British monarch was expected to discipline officials. The name of Rammohun Roy, who at this time did not have the title of 'Raja', was put forth for the mission. The proposal was given concrete shape by a prominent court official Khwaja Farid who persuaded Rammohun Roy to undertake the responsibility*

As the dust of politics settles down on statements made by a state-level senior leader on Raja Rammohun Roy - saying that Roy was a 'British agent' who started a vicious cycle of religious conversion - it is time to note where the leader had 'slipped up' before he tendered his apology. In today's age social reformers, freedom-fighters are routinely being insulted in public fora, their achievements derided, devalued and their legacies being marginalized or erased.

When it comes to Raja Rammohun Roy, he occupies pride of place, a high social and cultural status. In 'The Intellectual Roots of India's Freedom Struggle', written by Prithwindra Mukherjee, Rammohun Roy is the 'pioneer' in the genesis of nationalism in India.

Highlighted in every history book is Rammohun Roy's achievement to be the first to bring about a synthesis between religions of the East and West. This was made possible because of his vast knowledge of universal history. His deep reading of Sanskrit, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Arabian and Persian texts gave him the ability to understand core principles while removing deadwood of the past.

Mukherjee explained, "He restored traditional spiritual teaching of the Vedanta in the new universal faith that he founded. Irrefutable in his arguments, culling support from trustworthy Sanskrit texts, he gave back to Brahmanism its purest monotheistic vision." In Brahma Sabha, later Brahma Samaj, he institutionalized his vision, his dream of a new world based on equality, liberty, justice, and brotherhood.

There was a price to be paid too: he was mercilessly attacked when he denounced the social injustices perpetuated by Hindu orthodoxy, notably the practice of Sati, when widows at the time of their spouse's cremation, immolated themselves.

Coming back to modern-day accusations of Rammohun Roy being a 'British agent',



there is need to know more about what the Raja's mission was in Britain in 1831. This is where Prof Amar Farooqui's recent 'Governors of Empire' opens up vistas of financial skulduggery, and bureaucratic delays by chief functionaries of East India Company.

"Rammohun Roy's presence in London when the Privy Council took up the Dharma Sabha's appeal (against sati abolition) was a coincidence," explained the Professor. "Rammohun Roy had travelled to England primarily to carry out a task assigned to him by the Mughal Emperor. He had been sent by Akbar Shah as his official envoy to George IV to apprise the British Monarch of the East India Company's breach of faith in not adhering to the commitment it had made in 1765 to render to the imperial treasury the annual peshkash of 26 lakh rupees as the Emperor's share of the revenues of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa," Prof Farooqui pointed out.

The time-line of this task spanned over sixty years; it was Warren Hastings who had discontinued the remittance in the 1770s. "When the Company took over the civil and military management of Delhi in 1803, it resumed partial payment of the peshkash amounting to Rs 11 lakh per annum. Shah Alam was assured that this was a provisional arrangement; the Company prevaricated, and by the late 1820s, had reneged on its commitment. Akbar Shah had pursued the matter vigorously since his accession," noted the professor.

It was Governor-General Amherst who was not inclined to recommend the increase in peshkash. His position was that the sum paid to the emperor was merely an allowance for his maintenance and had nothing to do with the Bengal peshkash. Sixty years after the grant of diwani, it was easy to pretend that there was no commitment on the part of the Company.

What did the Mughal Emperor do now? His advisors, wrote the professor, persuaded him to send an emissary to London to acquaint the British monarch with the Company's refusal to meet its obligations, enshrined in documents, towards the Emperor.

As the primary overlord of the Company, the British monarch was expected to discipline officials. The name of Rammohun Roy, who at this time did not have the title of 'Raja', was put forth for the mission.

The proposal was given concrete shape by a prominent court official Khwaja Farid who persuaded Rammohun Roy to undertake the responsibility. Rammohun's family had been connected with the Mughal Court for at least two generations. While summoning Rammohun to Delhi in 1828, the Emperor made it a point to refer to the services rendered to Shah Alam by Rammohun's grandfather, Brajabinod.

"Rammohun was formally designed elchi - envoy, a Turco-Mongol word frequently used for a representative engaged in peace negotiations. As befitting his new status, the title of 'Raja' was conferred on him.

Henceforth he was known as Raja Rammohun Roy who arrived in England in April 1831," narrated Prof Farooqui. Despite the obvious hostility of Company officials, Rammohun was able to meet the king, George IV's successor William IV (1830-1837), and present the Akbar Shah epistle addressed to George IV. He was an invitee at the coronation ceremony of William IV held in September 1831. The Company's hostility and the refusal of its London headquarters to officially inform Rammohun of the outcome of the directors' deliberations about the peshkash, left him in a state of despair. For over a year, he was unsure about where he stood with respect to the claim.

Modern readers would be aware of such financial deceptions and delays in the corporate world. Such was the case with Rammohun Roy. Prof Farooqui pointed out: "With his knowledge of English legal terminology, Rammohun had given final shape to the letter which incorporated the Mughal Emperor's understanding of his position - namely that he was a sovereign within his domain, although the Company had de facto authority. This basic premise was questioned neither by the British government nor by the directors. The acceptance of the letter, from one sovereign to another, itself amounted to a recognition of the Mughal Emperor's status. In his letter Akbar Shah addressed the British monarch



**RAJU MANSUKHANI**  
*The writer is a researcher-author on history and heritage issues, and a former deputy curator of Pradhammantri Sangrahalaya*



End digital violence now

Imagine receiving a message from a stranger that contains chillingly accurate details about your daily routine. Or finding your photo digitally manipulated into explicit content and published across platforms you use for work, creativity, study or activism.

These are not hypothetical scenarios - they are a frightening reality for millions of women and girls navigating the digital world today. The digital space that once promised opportunity and connection is increasingly becoming an arena of harassment, intimidation and abuse.

And every time a woman logs off in fear or a girl stops posting her opinions, we lose a voice, strength and contribution we cannot afford to silence. This is not just a gender issue. It is a democratic issue. Nepal's digital transformation has been rapid. The 2021 census shows that most households now own mobile phones.

A 2019 report from the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology showed mobile usage exceeds 100 percent, and internet penetration keeps rising. But this expansion has also led to an alarming spike in online abuse.

According to the Nepal police, 19,730 cybercrime cases were registered in FY 2023-24, a staggering 119 percent increase in a single year. Behind each reported case is a woman or girl whose dignity, security or freedom was violated. And those numbers barely scratch the surface, as fewer than 30 percent of survivors facing severe digital abuse report it.

Digital violence takes many forms. Sexual harassment and stalking remain the most reported, but women and girls also face image-based abuse, cyber-sexual violence, doxxing, cyberbullying, unwanted

messages, hate speech, defamation, revenge porn and more. These tactics are not random; they are designed to shame, punish and silence.

Journalists, activists, public servants, influencers and especially women politicians - all face disproportionately high levels of digital abuse. For Dalit women, women with disabilities and LGBTIQ+ individuals, the threats multiply.

This year, the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence campaign focused on ending digital violence against all women and girls and for good reason. Nepal is heading towards elections. Online spaces already host misinformation, disinformation and coordinated harassment. When women in public life are attacked to the point they withdraw their voices, voters lose choices, and democracy loses diversity. To shift this trajectory, awareness

as 'My Brother', declaring at the outset that he was writing to him 'with the language of fraternal equality'. Mindful of his sovereign status, he stated in the concluding paragraph: "I will not condescend to accept, and Your Majesty will disdain to confer as a favour that which is due as a right."

The mission did not yield much in monetary terms. In February 1833, the directors agreed to increase the peshkash from Rs 12 lakh to Rs 15 lakh per annum. Rammohun Roy was disappointed with the decision and did not recommend its acceptance. There were delays by the Company, and even as he was contemplating his future course of action, he died in September 1833 at Bristol, leaving the question of the peshkash unsettled. A tragic end to a pioneer's life. But the story does not end here...

With Rammohun Roy removed from the scene, there were no further negotiations with the directors about royal prerogatives and the figure of Rs 3 lakh was taken as final. In January 1834, Calcutta received instructions that the emperor be informed of the offer to enhance the peshkash to Rs 15 lakhs annual on the condition that he would renounce all further claims. Left with no other option, the emperor reluctantly agreed to the settlement.

However, there was one more hurdle: the Company, much to the Emperor's surprise, put conditions on how the additional sum could be utilized - something which Akbar Shah was unwilling to concede. His priority, the Professor pointed out, was to provide a regular allowance for the heirs of Raja Rammohun Roy out of the additional sum of Rs 3 lakhs.

Four years had gone by, and in 1837, Roy's close friend Dwarkanath Tagore stepped in to prepare a memorandum for Akbar Shah. It provided a list of beneficiaries among whom the enhanced amount would be distributed. Rammohun's sons, Radhaprasad and Ramaprasad, together were to receive Rs 22,500 annually, and the rest would be distributed among royal family members. Akbar Shah had made a solemn commitment to his envoy: he was firm that he could not forsake Rammohun Roy's heirs.

The East India Company declined to release the additional sum if a part of it was to go to individuals not being members of the Royal Family and who have no claim on the bounty of the British Government'. Despite financial difficulties, Akbar Shah firmly stuck to his decision.

In his reply to the Delhi resident's communication of January 1837 on the subject, he declared, "Roy Radhaprasad and Roy Rumaprasad, (were) the sons of Rajah Rammohun Roy (who went to England as an Ambassador...and who departed this life while engaged in my service)...consequently I refuse to take the additional allowance (peshkash)".

In September 1837 Emperor Akbar Shah passed away; his son Bahadur Shah became Emperor and he too rejected the Company's conditions. The issue was destined to remain unresolved till the end of the Mughal monarchy. One hundred and eighty-eight years after the Emperor's passing, we wonder who was whose 'agent'; and who wore the crown of dedication and loyalty to their subjects.

alone is not enough. It must drive reform, investment and accountability. Addressing digital violence and ensuring women's full, equal and safe participation in Nepal's democratic life requires a whole-of-society response.

The Government of Nepal, the European Union (EU) and the United Nations in Nepal (ILO, UNFPA, UNICEF and UN Women) are already working together through the joint programme Empowered Women, Prosperous Nepal (EWPN) designed to expand women's agency, challenge harmful social norms, prevent gender-based violence and support survivors, and promote women's economic and political participation. Building on its achievements, Nepal needs to further strengthen women's digital security and broaden civic-tech opportunities to curb cybercrime and enhance women's democratic participation.



of advocates having set the highest ethical standard of legal profession which unfortunately however is hardly followed by the advocates of the present time.

Yours, etc., Bimal Kumar Chatterjee, Kolkata, 12 December.

Letters To The Editor | ✉ editor@thestatesman.com

Insightful

**Sir,** I am writing in response to the insightful article by Mr. O. Prasada Rao published in your edition dated December 9, concerning India's struggle to secure Nobel Prizes in science.

The author rightly highlights a paradox that has long perplexed the nation: while India has made stellar strides in applied fields like space exploration (ISRO) and pharmaceuticals, we have stagnated in fundamental research since C V Raman's era. The article strikes a chord by identifying that the problem lies not in a lack of talent, but in a systemic preference for "safe," incremental research over high-risk, high-reward

inquiries.

The data cited - specifically that India's R&D spending stands at a mere 0.64% of GDP - is a wake-up call. As Mr. Rao points out, genuine innovation cannot flourish when scientists are bogged down by rigid General Financial Rules (GFR), bureaucratic interference, and a career advancement system that rewards the quantity of papers over the quality of impact.

The suggestions to link tax incentives to measurable outcomes and to grant true autonomy to research institutions are timely. If we wish to see Indian scientists back on the Nobel stage, we must move beyond merely adapting foreign technology and start fostering an environment where

intellectual freedom and fundamental research are prioritized over administrative compliance.

Yours, etc., Vidyasagar Reddy Kethiri, New Delhi, 10 December.

Legendary lawyer

**Sir,** Niloprovo Majumder's homage to the legendary lawyer H.M. Seervai in his article "In the foot steps of a Lion" published on 11th December, 2025 in your esteemed newspaper is befitting the stature of Seervai in Indian legal arena as a principled constitutionalist lawyer of great reckon deserve high appreciation at this juncture and is expected to inspire the present and future lawyers. Truly, Seervai was the advocate



SATURDAY INTERVIEW

‘Safeguarding India’s interests vital’

Rajya Sabha member Harsh Vardhan Shringla was nominated to the Upper House of Parliament by the President of India, after a diplomatic career spanning over three decades. A 1984-batch Indian Foreign Service officer, he served as the country's foreign secretary from 2020 to 2022 and as chief coordinator for India's G20 Presidency, following earlier roles as Ambassador to the United States, High Commissioner to Bangladesh, and Ambassador to Thailand.

Educated at Mayo College, Ajmer, and St Stephen's College, Delhi, Shringla combines strategic insight with a deep connection to his roots in Darjeeling, where he has supported livelihood programmes, UPSC coaching for local youth, and assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic. He continues to contribute actively to policy discussions on India's external relations.

In an exclusive interview with NIKHIL VYAS of THE STATESMAN, the MP talks about Indian diplomacy, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the G20 Summit hosted by India in 2023, global trade, and North Bengal.

Edited excerpts:

**Q: You have handled big-power relations as well as sensitive neighbourhood issues. What, in your view, is the biggest diplomatic challenge India faces today?**

A: If I have to put it in one line, the biggest diplomatic challenge for India today is to safeguard our interests in a world that is becoming more competitive and fractured, while keeping our neighbourhood peaceful and stable. We are living through sharp competition among major powers, and that competition is now playing out everywhere - in technology, supply chains, finance, even in narrative battles. India cannot afford to be pulled into someone else's camp, nor can we be indifferent to issues that affect our security and growth. So the challenge is to maintain strategic autonomy while building strong partnerships where they serve India's interests.

At the same time, our immediate neighbourhood is not insulated from these global currents. Economic stress, political transitions, and external influence in South Asia can quickly create security or humanitarian spill overs for us. Keeping the neighbourhood oriented towards cooperation, connectivity, and mutual benefit - without letting rivalries or competition destabilize/ weaken it is a constant test of diplomacy.

**Q: During the Russia-Ukraine conflict, you oversaw the repatriation of thousands of Indian students. What made that mission particularly complex, and how did the team ensure safety under such high-risk conditions?**

A: The evacuation was complex because the situation on the ground was changing by the hour. Hostilities escalated very quickly, key cities where our students were located came under shelling, and normal lines of movement simply collapsed. With Ukrainian airspace closed, the usual option of direct air evacuation was not available. We also had to deal with crowding at border points, disrupted communications, and the fact that young students were scattered across different locations, often in bunkers or shelters.

Our approach was to create multiple safe exit routes rather than rely on one. Under Operation Ganga, we identified land corridors through neighbouring countries - Poland, Romania, Hungary and Slovakia, and where needed Moldova - and positioned teams there in advance. Russian-speaking and local-language officers were deployed at the border posts, while a 24x7 control room in Delhi and in our missions coordinated live advisories and transport.

Equally important was continuous diplomatic engagement - with the Ukrainian authorities, the Russian side, and governments of neighbouring countries - to ensure humanitarian corridors and safe passage when convoys moved. Every step was calibrated to one priority: no panic, no single-point failure, and maximum safety for our students. The Government kept families informed

throughout. In the end, over 22,000 Indians were brought home through around 90 flights and onward movements.

**Q: You coordinated the G20 Summit hosted by India in 2023 - one of the biggest diplomatic events in recent years. What key developments have resulted from the Summit, and how has the G20 contributed to the growth and development of North Bengal?**

A: The G20 in 2023 was not just a summit in Delhi. It was a year-long national effort, under the leadership and guidance of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and its outcomes are already shaping India's engagement with the world, as well as creating very concrete local benefits.

At the national and global level, a few things stand out. First, at a time of deep global divisions, India achieved a full consensus on the New Delhi Leaders' Declaration. That matters because it kept the G20 focused on growth, development, climate action and reform of multilateral institutions. Second, India placed the priorities of the Global South at the centre. The African Union's inclusion as a permanent member was a historic step, and a clear signal that development voices must have equal space at the table.

Third, we created practical, forward-looking initiatives. The G20 gave strong political endorsement to Digital Public Infrastructure for inclusive growth, and launched platforms like the Global Biofuel Alliance and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, all aimed at resilient supply chains and cleaner, faster connectivity.

Talking about North Bengal specifically, the region hosted an important G20 meeting: Siliguri and Darjeeling hosted the second G20 Tourism Working Group meeting. Delegates from G20 countries and international organisations saw North Bengal's potential first-hand.

**Q: What did that achieve?**

A: One, it put North Bengal on the global tourism and MICE map. When influential countries review

a destination together, it creates and amplifies visibility. We framed this meeting precisely to position Siliguri-Darjeeling as a serious international tourism and conference destination.

Two, it strengthened the push for better infrastructure and services. Tourism today depends on last-mile connectivity, clean towns, good digital access, and sustainable facilities. The G20 tourism roadmap endorsed by member countries aligns directly with what North Bengal needs to grow tourism without harming its ecology. Three, it opened livelihood opportunities. For a region where homestays, tea tourism, adventure circuits, monasteries, wildlife and cultural heritage can generate large numbers of local jobs, global attention translates into more footfall, longer stays and higher spending in the local economy.

**Q: As India strengthens its position in the global trade landscape, how is Indian diplomacy contributing to improving connectivity and fostering stronger cross-border collaborations for sustainable economic growth?**

A: Indian diplomacy is increasingly focused on something very practical: making it easier, cheaper and safer for goods, energy, people and data to move across borders. That is essential if India is to anchor global value chains and expand its trade footprint. So, on the one hand, we are shaping partnerships that come with real connectivity outcomes.

The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor announced during our G20 presidency is a good example. It combines ports, rail, logistics, clean-energy linkages and digital cables to shorten routes and reduce risk. In a fragmented world, resilient corridors matter as much as tariff reductions.

At the same time, our neighbourhood and extended region are central to this approach. Through Neighbourhood First and Act East, India is working on cross-border roads, rail links, waterways and port access that connect our growth with our neighbours' growth. When



you build shared infrastructure and facilitate trade and mobility, you create stronger economic interdependence.

**Q: How do you plan to utilise your diplomatic experience to strengthen India's role in global policy-making and enhance its competitiveness on the world stage?**

A: My entry into Parliament is, for me, a continuation of public service in a different form. The world today is shaped as much by decisions we take at home as by negotiations abroad. So I see value in bringing a practitioner's perspective into Parliament, especially on matters where India's external engagement and domestic strength are closely linked.

From my time in diplomacy, one lesson is very clear: global policy is being written in real time - on technology standards, AI and data governance, supply-chain resilience, climate action, and reform of multilateral bodies. India needs to shape these rules early, with confidence, and in a way that protects our strategic autonomy while advancing development goals.

**Q: What key priorities do you aim to address during the ongoing Winter session of Parliament?**

A: My focus will be on issues that relate to West Bengal and North East India, including developmental and environmental issues, challenges faced by the tea industry; among others. In addition, I propose to raise issues relating to use of technology, nuclear energy, international trade and commerce, foreign policy, defence, and strategic issues.

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 13 December 1925

OCCASIONAL NOTE

IT is hard not to despair of the Liberal Party in Bengal. Once again it has let down its friends. Having decided to make another effort for dyarchy, it either shrank from being present or was persuaded to be absent when the decisive moment arrived on Friday. No one stood up to move the all-important resolution which embodied the Party's faith. The public are not so childish as to imagine that this was accidental. At the Town Hall much is done by quasi-private negotiations which men of robust faith and courage would do in the sight of all. Whatever the pressure or the blandishments exerted on the Liberals to wean them from their awkward purpose, we have no reason to suppose that the Swarajists were involved; this is not their method of political activity. The President slurred over the item with the remark that the mover was not present, and passed on so easily that the House was scarcely aware of what had occurred. It cannot be pretended that the Council or the public has been treated with frankness.

News Items

ASIATIC BILL

UNION MINISTER AND INDIAN PROPOSAL

CAPETOWN, DEC. 10.

REFERRING to the Asiatic question at a meeting of the local branch of the Nationalist Party, Mr. Malan, Minister of the Interior, said that the Indian Government had asked for a round table conference; but the Union Government had decided that they could not agree to it, because a round table conference would mean making a concession on the essential principles of the Bill, and the Government was not prepared to do that.

However, they welcomed the Indian deputation which was coming to South Africa to investigate the question, and if the Bill was passed it would be referred to a select committee, and members of the Indian deputation would then have an opportunity of giving evidence before it.

He regretted the fact that a deputation had left for India from South Africa because Indians knew nothing about South African conditions, and it was only likely to create bad feeling; and Indians would make use of the South African question towards getting their own self-government.—Reuter.

INCREASING TRADE WITH GERMANY

BETTER OUTLOOK FOR MACHINERY

(BRITISH OFFICIAL WIRELESS.)

LEAFIELD (OXFORD), DEC. 11.

BRITISH exports for November amounted to £61,000,000, being a decrease of £7,000,000 compared with the same month last year.

Imports amounted to £114,500,000 showing a decrease of £4,000,000.

For eleven months of the year exports amounted to £707,000,000, being a decrease of nearly £19,000,000 compared with the corresponding period of last year; while the imports amounted to £1,188,000,000 showing an increase of £40,000,000.

A feature of the exports is the steady increase in trade with Germany, particularly in machinery and machinery parts. Germany's demand for British cotton yarns and manufactures in November was 1,000,000 lb. in weight over November 1924, and over 52,000,000 lb. has been bought in our markets in eleven months of this year against 13,000,000 lb. from January to November last year.

Woollen and worsted yarns and manufactures show an equally steady increase.

Trade with Russia is growing very slowly indeed, and has tended to fall off in the later months of the year.

Odisha raises stakes with a bold pharma thrust

CHARUDUTTA PANIGRAHI

Odisha is preparing to host the Odisha Pharma Summit 2025, a landmark event that could redefine the state's industrial trajectory. Positioned as a gateway for pharmaceuticals and MedTech, the conclave is more than just a showcase - it is a statement of intent. With ambitious targets of 2.5 lakh jobs, large-scale investments, and a roadmap to integrate Odisha into India's pharmaceutical growth story, the state is stepping onto the national stage with confidence.

India already contributes nearly 20 per cent of global generic drug exports, with a domestic industry valued at over \$50 billion. Odisha's entry into this sector is both strategic and symbolic, aligning with the Prime Minister's Purvodaya vision of industrial resurgence in eastern India. The question, however, is whether this summit will deliver tangible outcomes or risk becoming another high-profile event with limited impact.

Odisha's ambitions are not without precedent. Other states have successfully leveraged regional strengths to attract investment:

- Telangana transformed Hyderabad into India's pharma capital by building dedicated pharma parks and ensuring regulatory ease.
  - Gujarat invested heavily in logistics and testing infrastructure, making Ahmedabad a trusted hub for generics.
  - Maharashtra positioned Pune as a biotech and MedTech cluster, supported by strong academic-industry linkages.
  - Tamil Nadu promoted Coimbatore as a textile and engineering hub, showing how regional branding can drive investor confidence.
- Odisha now seeks to emulate these successes by tailoring its investment narrative to the strengths of its own regions.
- Odisha's regional investment story has several facets.

- **Coastal Odisha:** With ports like Paradip and Dhamra, the coastal belt is primed for logistics, shipping, and export-oriented pharma manufacturing. Its proximity to global trade routes makes it ideal for bulk drug exports and cold-chain infrastructure.
- **South Odisha:** Rich in biodiversity and tribal heritage, this region can be promoted for

eco-friendly pharma research, herbal medicine, and agro-based MedTech industries.

- **North Odisha:** Mineral-rich districts such as Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj offer opportunities for chemical intermediates and downstream manufacturing, complementing pharma supply chains.
- **Central Odisha:** Bhubaneswar, already a knowledge capital, can anchor R&D, IT-enabled pharma services, and clinical trials, supported by institutions like AIIMS and IIT Bhubaneswar.
- **Western Odisha:** With its agrarian base, this region is ripe for food processing, nutraceuticals, and renewable energy-linked pharma ventures, ensuring inclusive growth.

By promoting each region's unique strengths, Odisha can present investors with a mosaic of opportunities, ensuring balanced development across the state.

The government has promised 2.5 lakh jobs. Assuming even only 10 per cent materialize, that would mean 25,000 new jobs - a significant boost in a state where unemployment hovers around 7-8 per cent. Jobs would span manufacturing, quality control, clinical research, and logistics. Odisha's Pharma Policy 2025

outlines incentives for pharma parks, MedTech clusters, and R&D facilities. If even 10 per cent of promised investments are realized, Odisha could add nearly Rs 75,000 crore in value over the next decade, raising its GDP growth rate by 2-3 percentage points annually.

But there are challenges ahead. These are:

- **Execution Gap:** Past conclave saw less than 30 per cent realization of MoUs. Strict monitoring will be essential.
  - **Infrastructure Readiness:** Cold chains, testing labs, and regulatory clearances must be prioritized to match Gujarat or Telangana.
  - **Skill Deficit:** Universities and training institutes must rapidly adapt curricula to meet pharma-specific demands.
- Global Competition: Odisha must offer cost advantages and policy stability to compete with Hyderabad, Pune, and Ahmedabad.

The state government and specifically the Industries Department and IPICOL deserve recognition for orchestrating this ambitious summit. Their efforts to align policy, infrastructure, and investor outreach have laid the groundwork for Odisha's emergence as a pharma hub.

Crossword | No. 293320

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YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

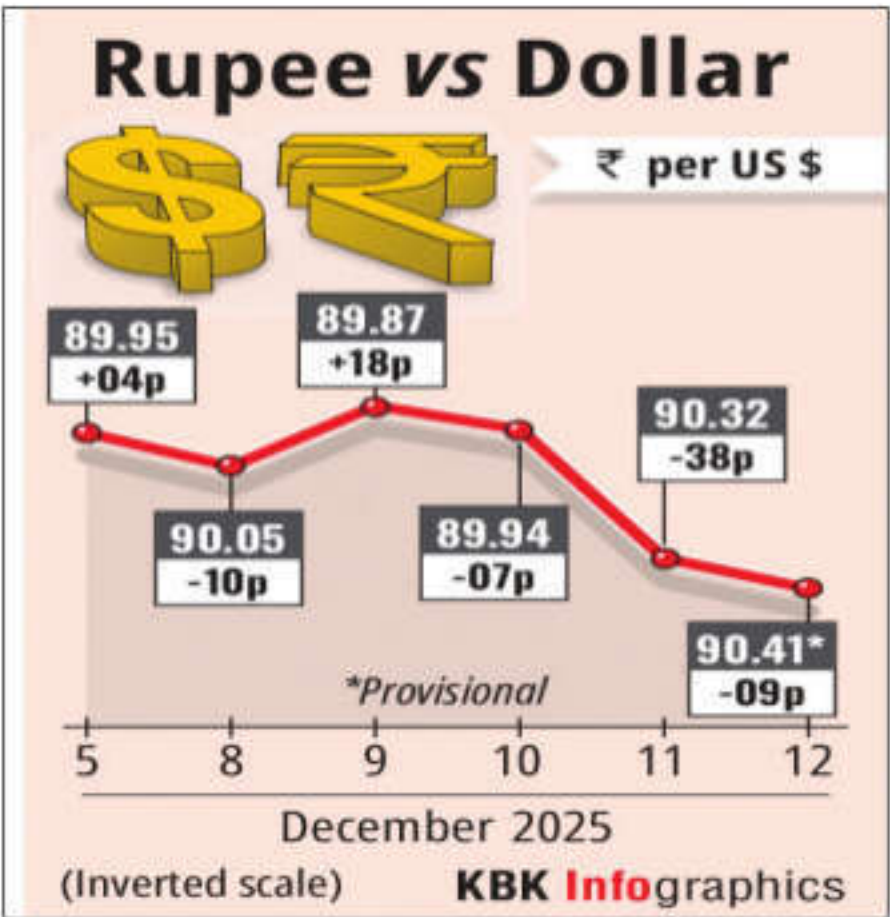


**BRIEFLY**

**Mahindra launches COMPAX mini compactor at EXCON 2025:**



**Bengaluru:** Mahindra's Construction Equipment business unveiled its new COMPAX mini compactor at EXCON Bengaluru and showcased its upgraded CEV-V machine range. Dr. Venkat Srinivas said the new model continues Mahindra's focus on efficiency, durability and higher customer profitability.



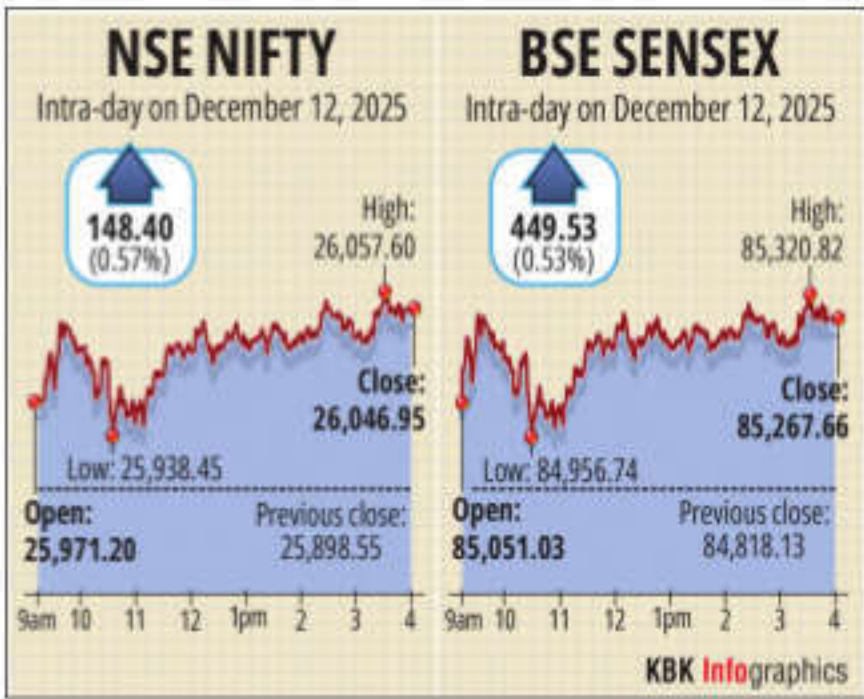
**Markets rise for second straight session on global cues**

**STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE**  
New Delhi, 12 December

The stock market on Friday ended higher for the second consecutive session tracking positive global cues. At close, the Sensex rose 450 points, or 0.53 per cent, to 85,267.66 while the Nifty 50 gained 148 points, or 0.57 per cent, to 26,046.95. The BSE Midcap and Smallcap indices rose 1.14 per cent and 0.65 per cent, respectively.

The overall market capitalisation of BSE-listed firms rose to over Rs 470 lakh crore from Rs 466.6 lakh crore in the previous session.

On Nifty, shares of Tata Steel up by 3.38 per cent, Hindalco Industries up by 3.26 per cent, and Eterna up by 2.37 per cent ended as the top gainers. While on the other hand, Hindustan Unilever (1.80 per cent), Max Healthcare Institute (0.73 per cent), and



Sun Pharma (0.72 per cent) ended as the top losers in the index.

Among the sectors, Nifty Metal jumped 2.63 per cent, ending as the top gainer among sectoral indices while Nifty Realty, Consumer Durables, Oil and Gas rose more than a per cent each. Nifty Bank rose by 0.30 per cent to end at

59,389.95. Out of 4,356 stocks traded on the BSE, 2,593 advanced, while 1,593 declined. Some 170 stocks remained unchanged. Around 95 stocks hit their 52-week highs while 96 stocks that hit their lower circuits. Those on the highs were Vedanta, Cummins India, Federal Bank, and Samvardhana Motherson International while

on lows were ACC, BASF India, NCC, Ramkrishna Forgings, and Sheela Foam.

Metal stocks closed higher led by Hindustan Zinc gaining 7.5 per cent to Rs 561 apiece, followed by Hindustan Copper, National Aluminium Company, GMDCL, Sarda Energy & Minerals, NMDC, Hindalco Industries, Tata Steel, and Adani Power, all of which rallied between 3 per cent and 7 per cent.

Banking stocks also delivered healthy returns. PNB Housing Finance, City Union Bank, Sammaan Capital, Bandhan Bank, and Muthoot Finance rallying between 3 per cent and 4 per cent.

The rupee weakened to 90.56 against the US dollar, slipping past its previous all-time low of 90.4675 hit on December 11. The currency was last at 90.4650, down 0.1 per cent on the day.

On the global scale, Japan's Nikkei share climbed notching a third straight weekly advance.

**Forex reserves up \$1.03 bn to \$687.26 bn; gold reserves rise**

**AGENCIES**  
New Delhi, 12 December

India's foreign exchange reserves went up by nearly \$1.03 billion to \$687.26 billion for the week ending on December 5, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) said on Friday.

Gold reserves increased by \$1.188 billion to \$106.984 billion during the week, the Central Bank said. The Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) were up by \$93 million to \$18.721 billion.

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) routinely monitors developments in the foreign exchange market and undertakes interventions when necessary to preserve orderly trading conditions.

India witnessed an unprecedented surge in foreign direct investment (FDI) commitments this year.

Total FDI inflow reported during the first half of FY 2025-26 (\$50.36 billion) increased by 16 per cent compared to year-ago period

(\$43.37 billion) -- highest ever for first half of a financial year, the Parliament was informed earlier this month. Gross FDI inflows have increased from over \$34 billion in 2012-13 to over \$80 billion in 2024-25, said Minister of State for Commerce and Industry, Jitin Prasada, in Lok Sabha. As per official data, India recorded a strong rebound in FDI in the second quarter of the current financial year, with total inflows rising over 18 per cent year-on-year to \$35.18 billion during April-September 2025.

"The recent trend in net FDI inflows is associated with increased repatriation/disinvestment and rising Overseas Direct Investment (ODI) outflows. The ODI outflow on account of liberalised ODI rules notified in 2022 is helping Indian entities to enhance their business footprints abroad enabling them to compete in the global market, adding to the strength of Indian economy in long run," informed Prasada.

**IndiGo receives tax penalty notice of ₹58.75 crore**

**STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE**  
New Delhi, 12 December

The crisis-ridden IndiGo received a tax penalty notice of Rs 58.75 crore on 11 December from the Additional Commissioner of CGST, Delhi South Commissionerate, for the financial year 2020-21, the company announced on Friday.

In a filing to the BSE, IndiGo termed the tax order erroneous. It asserted that it has a strong case on merits, supported by external tax advisors.

The carrier emphasised that the development is not expected to materially impact its financial position, day-to-day operations, or broader business activities. Earlier today, the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) has suspended four Flight Operations Inspectors (FOI), who are responsible for overseeing airline safety, pilot training & operational compliance. The four-member panel comprises Joint Director General Sanjay Brahamane, Deputy Director General Amit Gupta, senior Flight Operations Inspector Kapil Manglik, and FOI Lokesh Rampal, with a mandate to identify the root causes of widespread operational disruptions at the leading domestic carrier.

Further, IndiGo CEO Pieter Elbers has been summoned to appear before a DGCA Committee of Officers on 12 December as the regulator examines the root causes of the disruptions.

**Geopolitical uncertainty a major strategic risk for India Inc: Report**

**UNITED NEWS OF INDIA**  
New Delhi, 12 December

Geopolitical uncertainty has emerged as India Inc's most severe strategic risk, with nearly half of business leaders ranking it above any potential risks, said "The Global Risk Atlas-New Realities" released by MGC Global Advisory on Friday here.

'India Inc' is a popular media term for India's formal corporate and government business sector, representing the nation's organised

economy.

Launching the Atlas, Monish Gaurav Chatrath, Managing partner of MGC Global Risk Advisory and APAC Board Member, Allinial Global, said, "We are at a decisive inflection point where geopolitical shifts, technological disruptions and macro-economic realignments are converging into a new risk architecture.

The Global Risk Atlas captures not only this structural change, but also how Indian business leaders are responding to it. It reflects

a transformative shift from reacting to crises toward institutionalising resilience." Geopolitics stands out as the most concentrated future risk. Exposure is highest for MNCs, manufacturers and B2B enterprises reliant on cross-border capital, energy and supply chains. Domestic firms experience transmission through currency, commodity and demand channels, reinforcing the systemic nature of geopolitical shocks. The Atlas further highlights material shifts in risk governance.

**Retail inflation for November inches up to 0.71 pc**

**STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE**  
New Delhi, 12 December

The year-on-year Consumer Price Index (CPI) inflation for November 2025 was registered at 0.71 per cent, a spike of 46 basis points.

Food inflation was recorded at (-)3.91 per cent with the corresponding inflation rates for rural and urban at 4.05 per cent and (-)3.60 per cent, respectively. The increase in headline inflation and food inflation during the month of November 2025 is mainly attributed to increase in inflation of Vegetables, Egg, Meat and fish, Spices and Fuel and light. According to data released



by the National Statistics Office (NSO). Fuel and light inflation for November was 2.32 per cent against 1.98 per cent in

October 2025. Speaking on the inflation data, Ranjeet Mehta, CEO & Secretary General, PHDCCI said: "Over the next

two quarters, we anticipate that India's inflation will stay within a manageable range on the back of benign food prices, GST rates rationalisation, reasonable energy prices, and Reserve Bank of India's strategic monetary management."

Housing inflation stood at 2.95 per cent, marking a decline from 2.96 per cent in October 2025. The education inflation eased slightly to 3.38 per cent from 3.54 per cent in October.

Health inflation moderated to 3.60 per cent in November from 3.81 per cent in October. Transport and communication inflation softened to 0.88 per cent in November from 0.94 per cent in October.

**Cabinet clears CoalSETU policy to allow flexible, long-term coal linkages**



**STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE**  
New Delhi, 12 December

The Union Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs, chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, approved a new policy titled Policy for Auction of Coal Linkage for Seamless, Efficient & Transparent Utilisation (CoalSETU).

Under the policy, a new CoalSETU window will be created within the existing Non-Regulated Sector (NRS) Coal Linkage Auction Policy, 2016, allowing coal linkages to be allocated through auctions on a long-term basis for any industrial use and export, without end-use restrictions.

However, coking coal will not be offered under this window; the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) said in a statement.

The move is aimed at improving ease of doing business, ensuring faster and more flexible utilisation of domestic coal reserves, and reducing India's dependence on imported coal to meet its

energy requirements.

The policy aligns with the Government's broader coal sector reforms, including the opening of commercial coal mining without end-use restrictions.

At present, coal linkages under the NRS policy are auctioned for specified end-user sectors such as cement, steel (coking), sponge iron, aluminium, and other industries, excluding fertiliser (urea), along with their captive power plants.

These allocations are tied to specific end uses. The newly approved CoalSETU window removes such restrictions, allowing any domestic coal consumer to participate in the auction process. Traders,

however, will not be permitted to take part.

The existing system of coal linkage auctions for specified end-user sectors under the NRS policy will continue alongside the new window. Eligible end-user industries under the current policy will also be allowed to participate in CoalSETU auctions.

Coal allocated under the CoalSETU window may be used for own consumption, coal washing, or export, but resale within the country will not be permitted.

Linkage holders will be allowed to export up to 50 per cent of their allocated coal and may flexibly utilise the coal across their group companies.

**Auto sector posts record Nov: SIAM**

**STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE**  
New Delhi, 12 December

The automobile industry recorded its strongest-ever November performance across passenger vehicles, two-wheelers and three-wheelers, as per the data released by the Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers (SIAM).

The performance comes on the backs of sustained festive demand and the government's ongoing GST 2.0 reforms, it said.

As per the data, the Passenger vehicle (PV) dispatches rose 18.7 per cent to 4,12,405 units, marking the highest-ever November sales for the segment.

Three-wheeler sales grew 21.3 per cent year-on-year to 71,999 units, while two-wheeler sales surged 21.2 per cent to

19,44,475 units, also achieving a record for the month.

Further, the three-wheeler segment delivered strong growth in November 2025, driven largely by passenger carriers, which rose 24.6 per cent to 59,446 units.

Goods carriers also posted a healthy growth of 10.9 per cent, reaching 10,874 units. While e-rickshaw sales fell sharply by 25.6 per cent to 1,136 units, e-cart sales surged 87.9 per cent to 543 units.

An upward trajectory was seen in the two-wheeler segment as well. It marked its best-ever November performance with the scooter sales grew a robust 29.4 per cent to 7,35,753 units.

Motorcycle sales also increased by 17.5 per cent to 11,63,751 units. Overall, the two-wheeler industry recorded



19,44,475 units in November, setting a new benchmark for the month.

Speaking on the data, Rajesh Menon, Director General, SIAM, said "Following the festive demand and support from the Government's progressive GST 2.0 reforms, the Indian Auto Industry continued with the sales momentum in November 2025. Industry is optimistic that the continued supportive policy reforms and improved market sentiments would continue this growth trajectory well into 2026."

**Tata Power receives letter of intent to acquire Jejuri-Hinjewadi power transmission project**



**THE ANNUAL TRANSMISSION CHARGE FOR THE JEJURI-HINJEWADI POWER PROJECT IS SET AT RS 155.78 CRORE.**

**STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE**  
Mumbai, 12 December

Tata Power has officially announced through an exchange filing that it has received a Letter of Intent (LoI) from REC Power Development and Consultancy Ltd for the acquisition of Jejuri Hinjewadi Power Transmission Ltd.

Tata Power stated that Jejuri Hinjewadi Power Transmission

Limited, which is a special purpose vehicle (SPV) company, will be developed on a Build-Own-Operate-Transfer basis to provide transmission services for a period of 35 years.

The annual transmission charge for the project is set at Rs 155.78 crore. The company added that the project is scheduled to be operational within 24 months of the SPV transfer date.

The company stated that the Jejuri project involves the construction of approximately 115 km of 400 kV double-circuit line between Jejuri and Hinjewadi, as well as the extension of 400 kV GIS line bays at substations in both locations.

The development comes after Tata Power recently commissioned its 400 kV Koteshwar-Rishikesh transmission line, which is a critical link to enable transmission of 1,000 MW of hydropower from the Tehri-Koteshwar generation complex in Uttarakhand to Northern Indian states and union territories.

The Jejuri project will channel clean, renewable energy not only to Uttarakhand but also to Haryana, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Chandigarh, Rajasthan as well as Delhi, significantly strengthening regional energy security and grid reliability.

**Labour-intensive sectors crucial for sustaining 8 pc growth: NCAER**

**STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE**  
New Delhi, 12 December

The increase in employment is primarily due to the rise in self-employment, while the transition to a skilled labour force has been slow, said a report by NCAER on Friday.

Strengthening employment opportunities in labour-intensive manufacturing and services sectors could help sustain GDP growth at around 8 per cent, consistent with the vision of *Viksit Bharat*, it said. The study titled "India's Employment Prospects: Pathways to Jobs", was released by the Vice Chairman of the National Council of Applied Economic Research, Manish Sabharwal, and authored by Professor Farzana Afridi and her team of researchers at the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER).

It further underlined the role of skilling and small enterprises as key drivers of job creation in the country.

Further, it highlights the need to overcome bottlenecks in increasing both the quality and quantity of workforce participation and labour productivity.

Speaking on the report, Sabharwal said, "India is on track to become the world's 3rd largest economy, and while its per capita GDP currently ranks 128th, this highlights valuable opportunities to prioritise employment and inclusive growth."

"India's self-employment dominance is due to economic necessity rather than entrepreneurial dynamism. Just like small farmers, most of the small enterprises function at the subsistence level. India must confront the reality that its employment future is tied to the productivity of its smallest enterprises,"



said Prof Afridi.

The main challenge is that the unincorporated household enterprises operate with low levels of capital, productivity and technology adoption.

"Enterprises using digital technologies hire 78 per cent more workers as compared to those not using tech. Even 1 per cent increase in access to credit increases the expected number of hired workers by 45 per cent," said the lead author. The report finds a strong link between technology, access to credit, and job creation.

Enterprises using digital

technologies employ 78 per cent more workers than those that do not, while even a 1 per cent increase in access to credit can raise the expected number of hired workers by 45 per cent. On the supply side, the study stresses the importance of upskilling the workforce, particularly in the context of emerging technologies and artificial intelligence.

It notes that while medium-skilled jobs dominate employment growth, especially in services, manufacturing remains largely low-skill intensive.

The report estimates that increasing the share of skilled workers by 12 percentage points through formal skilling initiatives could raise employment in labour-intensive sectors by over 13 per cent by 2030.

Under a moderate growth scenario, simulations suggest that a 9 percentage point increase in the

formally skilled workforce could generate about 9.3 million jobs by 2030.

Discussing the findings, Dr G C Manna, Senior Advisor at NCAER, said the report identifies key sectors with strong potential for employment growth.

Professor Aditya Bhattacharjee, Visiting Professor at the Institute for Studies in Industrial Development, noted that the study places India in an international context and highlights opportunities for better alignment with global benchmarks.

The report also estimates strong multiplier effects from inter-sectoral linkages. Moderate growth in gross output of labour-intensive sub-sectors could result in a 53 per cent increase in jobs in textiles, garments, and related manufacturing industries, and a 79 per cent rise in employment in trade, hotels, and allied services by 2030.



# Social media ban is not the panacea, there is need for control

AUSTRALIA'S ban on social media for all those under-16 years of age came into effect this week. This move has made global headlines as Australia became the first country to impose such a social media ban. As technology changes our lives in a multitude of ways, its ill-effects have also come to the fore in recent years. Social media addiction is on a rise irrespective of ages. Such addiction is particularly alarming among teenagers. Instances of young people committing suicides over trivial issues like parents not allowing use of smart phones for watching videos or playing games have been reported India. It is ditto with young people losing lives at the time of performing a dangerous act for shooting an insta reel or YouTube short. And these in-

cidents are not limited to India alone but have become a global phenomenon. It is because of these reasons that Australia's ban on social media has been welcomed by netizens globally. Now, it must be seen whether such a ban can be enforced effectively or not. Reports have emerged that some young people are trying to overcome such a ban by accessing social media through VPN. Meanwhile, social media company Reddit has challenged the Australian government in the High Court, arguing that age restrictions unlawfully suppress political communication and raise privacy concerns. As the case is contested in court, voices have emerged globally to follow suit. No wonder, Indian intelligentsia and social media users have started debating about such a

ban at home. Digging deeper into the issue will reveal that it has many layers. While an umbrella ban on all social media usage for young people can surely help in improving their attention span, in a country like India, such a blanket ban could face several issues. Firstly, India has one of the largest numbers of internet users. Therefore, in social media usage, India leads the race. India has the largest user base of Meta platforms like Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp. Similar is the case for many other platforms like YouTube and X. In these platforms, a large mass of young Indians daily interact, express themselves and create. Imposing a blanket ban means they may try to circumvent the digital wall through other routes like VPN.

Usually, a VPN route is not considered safe and is vulnerable to hacking. Moreover, digital penetration in India may be higher but the urban versus rural divide exists. Young people living in rural areas see social media as a gateway to the world as they see, interact and express with a global audience. Many of these social media sites are being actively used for imparting education. So, a village lad can have access to the best of teachers or material through a social media platform, which otherwise is out of bounds for him/her. Moreover, social media acts as a medium for expression for many youth- political or creative. Any ban will limit those chances. Against this backdrop, putting a blanket ban on social media is not desirable. Rather, India can take mul-

ti-ple safety measures to reduce the addition-type of phenomenon. Firstly, social media platforms should be asked to implement strict age policies during opening of the account. This will ensure what kind of posts will be restricted by algorithm. Secondly, parents of youngsters should be given the option of switching off the social media sites for their children if they wish. Digital control should be in the hands of parents. Thirdly, the government should impose a huge penalty for showing objectionable or gory or sensitive material to young people. Strict implementation will restrict social media platforms to stop abusing algorithm-driven content. All-in-all, it will be better to change the bath water than throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

## LETTERS

### Style, aura and the legend @75

A living legend whose journey from bus conductor to a global icon continues to inspire millions, Rajinikanth's legacy is not just about superstardom- it is about humility, discipline and an energy that remains unmatched in Indian cinema. His style, screen presence, and the larger-than-life aura have been hailed by generations of people. They will continue to celebrate into the future.  
C K Subramaniam, Syndicate Bank

### Govt must run a couple of airlines

THI's Editorial "Along with IndiGo, DGCA and Govt are at fault (Dec 12) reflects on the complacency of all three stakeholders, who appear unconcerned about the untold misery faced by the hapless passengers. As you rightly said, it speaks a lot about the unpreparedness of IndiGo to comply with new DGCA rules as regards recruitment of pilots even as their competitors have done so. Apparently IndiGo has taken both the DGCS and the government for granted given that they enjoy 65 per cent share in the aviation segment. This is tantamount to blackmail tactics played. Unless they mend their ways, it is certain that new players will with an eye of grabbing the aviation industry's sweepstakes. Monopoly or duopoly in the aviation sector is the root cause of the problem. I wish that the government runs at least two or three airlines as privatising public utility sectors is hazardous, as it is happening now. Making profits must not be the goal; public convenience and safety should be paramount.  
Dr T Ramadas, Visakhapatnam

### TG must target Viksit Bharat's GDP growth

TELANGANA Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy's dreams of giving the State an economic makeover comparable with China, Germany, Japan is quite an ambitious attempt. Inviting business leaders capable of investing substantial funds to leverage their businesses is a grand idea though not a new one. That Revanth Reddy has made it happen within two years of his coming to power augurs well for the state's onward march. The inspirational advice by eminent economists like Duvvuri Subba Rao, Raghuram Rajan and Arvind Mahendra and IT Minister D Sridhar Babu could possibly have motivated the global business leaders to ink several MOUs that will benefit the state. More than scaling the \$trillion economy benchmarks, it is the overall contribution that Telangana can make towards the 'Viksit Bharat's GDP' growth that will be watched keenly.  
N R Raghuram, Hyderabad

### Telangana smile fetches wins 'goldmine'

With a smile, Telangana walked miles during the global summit to land up with a goldmine of Rs 5.75 lakh crore investment MOUs. We appeal to the Chief Minister to make 'Bharat Future City' an eco-friendly one with green energy generated on its own with a dedicated independent grid. Achieving one hundred per cent green-clean energy should be the eventual goal. Not only can profits multiply, but the environment can also be protected from global warming related weather extremities. Green electricity is a win-win proposition across segments.  
Sreelekha P S, Secunderabad-61

### Cong must set its K'taka house in order

THE Congress high command's silence on the Karnataka power-sharing formula is becoming increasingly untenable. The arrangement of a two-and-a-half-year rotation was not a casual understanding; it was the very foundation on which the government was formed. Ignoring it now risks repeating the Rajasthan fiasco, where prolonged indecision eroded the party's moral authority and nearly fractured the organisation. Karnataka is too critical a state to gamble with. With 135 MLAs, the Congress holds one of its strongest mandates in a decade. Any instability will immediately weaken governance, damage the party's national narrative and embolden the Opposition. The lesson from Rajasthan—and earlier from Punjab—is clear: delayed decisions and personality-driven tussles cost the party electorally. Siddaramaiah, a seasoned leader who has benefited immensely from the party's trust, must recognise the larger picture. Leadership is not merely about occupying office; it is about preserving organisational stability. Compromise is not a weakness—it's strategic responsibility when the party's future is at stake. If Congress wishes to showcase discipline and unity ahead of upcoming elections, it must honour commitments, act decisively and avoid yet another avoidable internal crisis. Karnataka cannot be allowed to become Rajasthan 2.0.  
K V Chandra Mouli, Mysuru

thehansreader@gmail.com

## BENGALURU ONLINE

### BJP criticises CM over Rs 47 cr spent on air travel

BENGALURU: The BJP came down heavily on Chief Minister Siddaramaiah for spending Rs 47 crore of state funds on air travel over the past two-and-half years. According to a written reply to BJP MLC N Ravi Kumar, the amount was spent on special flights, aircraft and helicopters between May 2023 and November 2025. The CMO clarified that these were used only for official visits. In a post on 'X', BJP's IT cell in charge, Amit Malviya questioned the frequent helicopter trips. "In the last 30 months, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah's travel by special aircraft and helicopters has cost taxpayers Rs 47.38 crore. At a time when Karnataka is still grappling with challenges in infrastructure, rural development, healthcare, and education, such heavy spending on VIP air travel raises serious questions," he said. He sought to know whether this is the best use of public money, or do frequent helicopter trips, including short-distance routes, reflect responsible governance. "Shouldn't fiscal discipline start from the top? With so many urgent public needs waiting for attention in Karnataka, it's fair for citizens to ask whether the Congress government's priorities are truly aligned with the people's," Malviya said.

Read more at  
<https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

# One day of unity; many days of hypocrisy



CALLING a spade a spade has always been my habit. But for the first time in a long while, I felt compelled to appreciate the Leader of the Opposition for displaying a rare moment of political maturity. His call for a structured parliamentary discussion on Delhi's pollution crisis—an issue ravaging the health of young and old alike—was refreshing. Even more commendable was his assertion that pollution is neither ideological nor partisan, and that both sides must unite to craft a national action plan.

The government's response was equally constructive, agreeing to finalise the details of the debate in the Business Advisory Committee. It expressed readiness to participate meaningfully so that an effective strategy could emerge. This spirit of cooperation—so long missing from Parliament—is precisely what citizens expect from their elected representatives. People want solutions, not empty narratives about 'vote chori'; nor endless displays of contempt for Sanatana Dharma, nor an overused politics of appeasement that no longer appeals to voters.

If the INDIA bloc truly wants to reinvent itself, this is the way forward: raise substantive issues, compel the government to articulate its position, and work jointly where the nation's welfare is at stake. Only through collaboration—not confrontation—can Parliament regain

## Parliament finally breathed together

its dignity. And only then can the Opposition hope to reconnect with voters and someday reclaim political relevance.

One only wishes that the same maturity had been shown during the recent debate on Vande Mataram instead of reducing it to a tool of appeasement politics. Vande Mataram is not a slogan; it is the national song that reminds us that Bharat Mata has given us language, culture, warmth, identity, and a home in her embrace. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's composition is a poetic invocation of the nurturing mother who feeds, blesses, forgives, and shelters. It speaks of flowing waters, fertile fields, and cool breezes—an intimate portrait of the land that sustains us. It is, at its heart, a simple expression of gratitude: Thank you, Mother.

Yet, in today's hyper-politicised climate, pseudo-secular politicians and even some retired bureaucrats claim to detect communal overtones in a song that is nothing but a heartfelt tribute to the motherland. Even the Shiv Sena (UBT)—a party that once prided itself on its Hindutva lineage tracing back to Bal Thackeray—has joined the chorus of critics. The same Opposition that claims the RSS never sang Vande Mataram now embraces the UBT faction with open arms. Their contradictions expose their growing frustration after losing election after election.

The DMK is another prominent player whose antagonism toward Sanatana Dharma has been on full display, particularly through its leaders' arrogant pronouncements on national television. They speak as though they alone understand history. A simple glance at historical records, however, would remind them that the great Tamil poet Subramanya Bharathi not only translated Vande Mataram into Tamil twice—once in verse and later in a lyrical form—but also composed numerous songs based on it. The ideological posturing of the present-day DMK stands in stark contrast to the reverence shown by Bharathi and countless freedom fighters.



This op-ed examines the rare moment of unity in Parliament over Delhi's pollution crisis and contrasts it with the opposition's habitual politics of appeasement, selective secularism, and manufactured controversies. It traces the long, politicised history of Vande Mataram, exposes the contradictions of parties like the DMK and Shiv Sena (UBT), and highlights growing intolerance toward Sanatana Dharma. The piece argues that India needs honest cooperation—not divisive posturing—to restore democratic integrity and voter trust

ments on national television. They speak as though they alone understand history. A simple glance at historical records, however, would remind them that the great Tamil poet Subramanya Bharathi not only translated Vande Mataram into Tamil twice—once in verse and later in a lyrical form—but also composed numerous songs based on it. The ideological posturing of the present-day DMK stands in stark contrast to the reverence shown by Bharathi and countless freedom fighters.

It is tragic that what once served as the battle cry of India's independence movement now finds itself at the centre of a needless political storm. Prime Minister Narendra Modi accused Nehru and the Congress of surrendering to pressures from the Muslim League and presenting the nation with a truncated ver-

sion of the song. The Opposition, meanwhile, framed the debate as an attack on Islam. This pseudo-secular reflex was most visible when Congress president and Leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha, Mallikarjun Kharge, began his speech with Vande Mataram but swiftly switched to a combative tone, accusing the BJP's ideological predecessors of "working for the British" while Congress leaders fought for freedom.

This brings us to the central question: Why does India officially sing only the first two stanzas of Vande Mataram? The answer lies in political compromise. Few nations bend over backwards to appease minority sentiments the way Indian leaders did. When Congress sought a national song, Vande Mataram was the obvious choice. But some Muslim leaders objected to perceived references

to goddess worship. Nehru wrote to Subhash Chandra Bose claiming the song had been "manufactured by communalists." Rabindranath Tagore, too, felt it might hurt Muslim sentiments. Consequently, the Congress Working Committee (CWC) decided only the first two stanzas—devoid of explicit divine imagery—would be sung.

Even this compromise satisfied no one fully. Gandhi took a middle path: outside Congress gatherings, he said, individuals should decide for themselves whether to sing the full song. He himself never viewed it as a Hindu song. Yet leaders like C. Rajagopalachari warned Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel that these concessions would not quell tensions. Still, he and Uttar Pradesh's first Chief Minister G. B. Pant ultimately accepted the formula.

Why did this controversy arise in the first place? The roots go back to 1937 when the Muslim League suffered a humiliating electoral defeat—even in Muslim-majority regions. Much like today's Opposition alleging 'vote chori', the League too searched for excuses and blamed the cultural milieu, including Vande Mataram, accusing it of invoking communal imagery.

Dr Rajendra Prasad, India's first President, later declared that Vande Mataram should enjoy honour equal to Jana Gana Mana. Yet disputes continued: in the 1970s over its use in Mumbai municipal schools; in 1988 when Kerala schools defied government instructions; in Uttar Pradesh during Independence Day observances; and again in 2017 when the Madras High Court directed educational institutions to

sing it once a week. The debate has been alive for decades.

Whether the present BJP government will attempt to restore deleted stanzas or allow the issue to simmer remains to be seen. But the deeper concern is the rising intolerance toward Hinduism and Sanatana Dharma among several INDIA bloc parties. Their appeasement politics is not winning votes; Muslims no longer vote en bloc. Yet they persist with the same failed strategies.

This trend is evident in the latest controversy involving Justice Swaminathan in the Madurai temple case. The judge permitted, with conditions, the lighting of a traditional lamp—a practice for which Hindus had even obtained a No-Objection Certificate from local Muslims. The objection came solely from the DMK government. Ironically, just a year earlier, the same judge had delivered a major ruling upholding a Sufi Muslim group's right to observe Muharram with traditional drums and music. Then he was hailed as "secular"; today the government seeks his impeachment—despite a division bench upholding his decision. The hypocrisy is glaring.

It is high time political parties abandon this shallow, selective secularism. Defending the hijab while opposing the Hindu teeka, championing minority customs while deriding majority traditions—this is not secularism, but bigotry disguised as progressivism. India deserves better. A politics rooted in unity, fairness, and cultural honesty is the only way forward.

(The author is former Chief Editor of The Hans India)

# Two years of Cong rule mark a new era of social justice in TG

AMARAVAJI NAGARAJU

IN its two years in power, the Congress government in Telangana has earned widespread public appreciation with its people-centric governance. With development, social justice and public welfare as its core objectives, Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy has been steering the administration forward in alignment with the values of national visionaries—Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi.

Guided by Rahul Gandhi's direction of ensuring "justice to each according to their share," the Telangana Congress government has implemented the caste census, emerging as the first state to institutionalise social justice through a scientific and data-driven approach. The decade-long BRS rule had drifted away from the aspirations of the people of the State. In contrast, the Congress government's two-year governance has prioritised development, social justice and welfare, gradually fulfilling the long-pending hopes of the people. Taking over a state weakened by the failures of the previous regime, Revanth Reddy has been steadily translating electoral promises into action, proving that his government stands not on rhetoric but on delivery.

Recognising farmers as the backbone of the nation, the government has initiated transformative measures in agriculture. The waiver of farm loans, the provision of ₹12,000 per acre annually under Rythu Bharosa, the ₹12,000 annual assistance for landless farm labourers under Indiramma Athmiya Bharosa, bonus for paddy, and large-scale procurement reflect the administration's commitment to farmers' welfare. The immediate relief of ₹10,000 per acre to farmers affected by floods further underscores its sincerity toward the farming community. In

the sphere of women's empowerment, the "Indira Mahila Shakti" programme has emerged as a breakthrough initiative in Telangana. With ₹one lakh crore allocated to women's groups, ₹15.50 lakh assistance per member, and ₹five lakh insurance cover, the programme is laying a strong foundation for women's economic independence. Complementing this, the Mahalakshmi scheme has transformed daily life for women—enabling 35 lakh women to travel free of cost in RTC buses, resulting in an estimated saving of ₹6,671 crore, besides gas subsidy, 200 units of free electricity and enhanced Aarogyasri limits.

These measures mark unprecedented welfare interventions in Telugu states. The government has also initiated construction of four lakh Indiramma houses for families without shelter and positioned Telangana as the only state distributing free fine rice, saving nearly ₹15,000 per month for every poor family.

Since the formation of Telangana, the slogan of uplift of the weaker sections had remained confined to political rhetoric. During the BRS decade, these discussions were almost absent. However, the Congress government has embedded these principles into the administrative framework and established a new direction in governance. The caste census conducted in the state has drawn national attention, presenting factual demographic data on BCs, SCs, STs and minorities. The revelation that BCs constitute more than 56 percent of the population paved the way for a historic decision: raising BC reservations to 42 percent. The decision, based not on political gain but on scientific evidence, reassured backward communities that justice would be ensured even within BC sub-groups.

This bold step by the Telangana government also influenced national politics. The Union



Social justice is also reflected within the Congress party's internal structure. From appointing BC, SC, ST and minority leaders to DCCs and corporations, to fielding a BC candidate—Naveen Yadav—in the Jubilee Hills by-election, to giving former cricketer Mohammad Azharuddin a cabinet berth, the party's actions mirror its commitment. While opposition parties remain confined to criticism without constructive suggestions, the Congress government continues to work towards systemic social reform

Government, which had for years refused to consider a caste census, was compelled—under pressure emerging from Telangana's initiative—to announce a Social Survey alongside the National Census. Meanwhile, the BRS and BJP have been attempting to obstruct these progressive measures. The BJP's refusal to include the 42 percent BC reservation enhancement in the Ninth Schedule and its religiously divisive stance have triggered widespread anger among marginalised communities.



THE ASIAN AGE

13 DECEMBER 2025

Trump-Modi call: Will deal on Ukraine benefit India?

The Donald Trump playbook of threats of trade wars and tariff tantrums may not have worked too badly for him at home as the narrowing of the US trade deficit in September to its lowest point since the Covid year of 2020 means a part of his economic attack on nations like China and India and his sweeping tariffs against global friends and foes may be working. A positive reading of his latest telephonic talk with Prime Minister Narendra Modi may even be justified if there has ever been any correlation between what the US president says and how he acts. His record does not, however, support any facile assumptions to be made about the phone call that India may have initiated.

The trade talks are on but moving at snail's pace in a world of superfast communications and there is only the word of his envoys to talks in India that things are going swimmingly, and the New Year might even see a deal being inked. Until then, Indian exports to the US will be in limbo even as new threats are emerging with Indian rice and basmati not quite being the flavour of the month at the White House.

What the "warm" Trump-Modi conversation can be taken to mean is that India's strategic autonomy is seen to be working as India's balancing act with

**What the 'warm' Trump-Modi chat can be taken to mean is that India's strategic autonomy is seen to be working as its balancing act with Chinese and Russian leaders was noted with interest in Washington**

him to sign off on the eastern Donbas, swapping territory for nothing as no security guarantees have been spelt out.

Outlandish ideas like creating a free economic zone in the war zone on Ukraine territory that is being held by Russia are not helping the cause of peace either even as Mr Putin is threatening to take the Donbas by force, regardless of how long it takes him and despite heavy troop losses. Mr Trump's 28-point peace plan has been whittled down to a 19-point plan that is backed by the rest of Europe, but Mr Putin may not be as interested in it.

However good the intentions to make peace in Europe work for the world, the Trump fixation with playing the broker between Ukraine and Russia, mostly on terms favourable to Russia, is becoming troublesome. Failure in Ukraine could be construed as Mr Trump's biggest defeat and Europe fears that, in such an eventuality, he could well lead the US into isolationism with Latin America his sole focus outside of home.

A bad peace deal could spell disaster for Ukraine and Europe even if it doesn't straightaway lead to Russia coming back into the global economy. But India will be a major gainer if peace does prevail as that would mean free access to Russian energy sources again without punitive tariffs and sanctions. India and China's influence on Mr Putin to make peace possible may have been exaggerated as evidenced in the Russian president's impassive responses to friendly nudges from Xi Jinping and Mr Modi. Even so, peace in Ukraine would be a win-win for most if not for the country that has suffered an invasion since February 2022.

Fitting tribute to AI godparents

In the history of humankind, few inventions and discoveries have altered human civilisation. The prominent items in the list are fire, wheel, agriculture, iron, shipbuilding, printing press, electricity, crude oil, computer and Internet. The latest addition to this momentous list is artificial intelligence — an invention that is expected to change how humans perform their basic function, i.e. thinking. It is, therefore, fitting for *Time* magazine to pay a tribute to the architects of artificial intelligence by declaring them as the 2025 Person of the Year.

Though technology companies were aware of AI and its potential and invested enormous amounts of money, the breakout moment came with the launch of ChatGPT, which uses generative models to generate text, images, among others.

In 2025, AI began to change how people think and work. Organisations are deploying it for various purposes such as writing code, managing vehicular traffic, and optimising manufacturing, among others. People used AI for advice on human emotions and medical treatments.

The AI craze set off a race between major technology companies to capture the developing market. It catapulted Nvidia to become the most valuable company in the world for its ability to produce chips that run AI data centres — virtually putting US stock markets on steroids.

Buoyed by the all-around optimism, Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang remarked that the AI could increase the size of the global economy from \$100 trillion to \$500 trillion. While AI is a great invention, one needs to make assessments objectively. AI is still at its infancy, and nobody has any faintest idea about its impact on job seekers or the new job avenues that it will create.

While there is no second opinion about embracing new technologies to stay competitive in the modern world, governments around the world must not lose sight of their primary responsibility — the welfare of people and the protection of Mother Earth. They must evolve a global consensus to develop AI within the confines of these higher objectives and not merely in the pursuit of money.

THE ASIAN AGE

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THE ASIAN AGE office is located at:  
New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru National Youth Centre, 219 Deen Dayal Upadhyay Marg, New Delhi-110002. Phone: (011) 25211124.

Published and Printed on behalf of and for

Deccan Chronicle Holdings Limited, Jawaharlal Nehru National Youth Centre, 219 Deen Dayal Upadhyay Marg, New Delhi 110 002 at BFL Infotech Ltd., C-9, Sector-III, Noida -201301.

London: Quickmarsh Ltd, 8th Floor, Block 2, Elizabeth House, 39 York Road, London, SE1 7NQ.

RNI Registration number: 57290/94

Subhani



Time to change branding of IndiGo to 'Indi: GoToHell'?



Shobhaa's Take

Never ever in the history of travel and aviation has the Indian airline passenger vented as vociferously or openly displayed the level of frustration, murderous rage and retaliation, as on December 3, when a pampered, privileged and monopolistic airline perversely took advantage of the situation to hold millions of fliers to ransom. It's a wonder there wasn't blood on the floor at airports across India as horrified citizens witnessed the torment and helplessness of customers who had zero options but to lump it, while flight after flight got cancelled, without any convincing explanations. It was an unplanned mutiny. Anarchy. Without an identifiable "monarch" to spew one's seething anger on. Where were the top bosses during this unprecedented chaos? Why were they absent from their posts? How cowardly to let juniors face the brunt of passenger wrath, stomach curses, insults, abuse, while the top dogs remained shielded and silent during the most turbulent period of the breakdown.

We still don't know enough. Someone up there is blatantly lying. But who? It is not possible that the so-called rejig of time tables and schedules came out of the blue. Or that the top management was unaware of the terrible repercussions the chaos would create. Did anybody at that level apologise or show that they cared? Nope. This is called despicable corporate arrogance and high handedness of the shabby kind. While so many fellow citizens suffered on account of cancelled flights, the mighty executives at IndiGo chose to hide behind flimsy explanations and pass the

buck. Shameful. As stories of passengers faced with the worst travel traumas surfaced, airports were turned into ugly battlegrounds with hysterical passengers facing bizarre dilemmas, like the couple who missed their own wedding reception and attended virtually (there's a movie script in their insane experience), to victims forced to skip key job interviews, legal cases, medical emergencies and more.

IndiGo's shameful attitude was defined by callousness, indifference and complacency. Who can condone the absence of basics like drinking water and snacks to passengers stuck — rather — trapped — for hours at airports across the country? What explanation does the IndiGo board have for this and countless other lapses?

Inexcusable! It is really the highest level of resilience and tolerance shown by citizens that prevented a far bigger disaster on the ground, given how unconsciously passengers were treated. Far more damage could have occurred — not that destruction of public property would get passengers a boarding card. One felt sorry for the physical assaults on hapless IndiGo staffers, who had to stoically bear the brunt of passenger rage. The thing is, now that the crisis is behind us... what do we know that can possibly justify the mayhem? Those of us who were caught in the turbulence could do nothing but scramble for crazily priced seats on other airlines. There again — isn't it cold blooded, extortionist, and horribly hard hearted for major IndiGo competitors to automatically hike fares, often doubling and trebling the cost — imagine paying a lakh and more to travel from

**Isn't it cold blooded, extortionist and horribly hard hearted for major IndiGo competitors to automatically hike fares, doubling and trebling the cost — imagine paying a lakh and more to travel from Mumbai to Delhi?**

Mumbai to Delhi? Should there not be a more humane approach to a crisis of this kind? Is everything about making a quick buck at the expense of decency? How opportunistic and ugly all this makes us look as a people. But for every ugly outburst, there was a feel-good story as well.

Take, for example, two feisty ladies who almost single-handedly run Literature Festivals in their respective cities — Dr Manjiri Prabhu and her Pune International Lit Fest, Shinee Abraham and the Bengaluru Lit Fest. Both lit fests overlapped over the same disastrous IndiGo weekend. Which meant last-minute cancellations, stranded authors, non-arrival of books — any organiser's worst nightmare.

But, with their inimitable never say die spirit, the two ladies soldiered on, rejigged schedules, called in friends to help conduct sessions, assured attendees that the show would go on! It brought out the best in them, as also in some of the writers who sportingly took alternative flights, waiting for hours at distant airports, but turning up to make their announced sessions. It took me eight hours to get from Pune to the Bengaluru venue — the city's old Central Jail. No escape!

The IndiGo conundrum continues to baffle with conspiracy theories galore. Forget the theories, boss... Just answer one simple question — *Yeh Rahul Bhatia kaisa aadmi hai?* The managing director of the rogue airline was *gayab* during the crisis! Like... MIA! The founder promoter with a jumbo-sized ego was

invisible while the nation was shaken. It was worse than the "*paan ki dukaan*" taunt of the co-promoter. In this scenario, there was no *paan* (not even bottled water) and the *dukaan* had rudely pulled the shutters down. This was flagrant, blatant, and, dare I say it, criminal. No punitive action? No questioning by the DGCA? It's been called a chhota gamble that led to a massive mess. A cascading effect that started with one cancelled flight. Even when the pilots were willing to fly. Yeah. Sure. Exhausted, bleary eyed, overworked pilots willing to fly is small comfort to passengers and crew entrusting their precious lives to fatigued captains.

*Chalo ji...* I was once an IndiGo loyalist, true and faithful. Now, I have turned into a promiscuous flier — ready to hop on to any airplane willing to fly me to my destination in one piece, and hopefully on time.

Till my next flight, I am working on the viral Akshay Khanna hook step from the movie *Dhurander*, and pretending I am Balochi. I will be watching the Ranveer Singh starrer over the weekend, *inshallah...* But what has interested me far more is the strident backlash faced by a few, prominent film critics audacious enough to state they have not exactly adored the movie or the track that has become the movie's signature. *Kyun-ki*, only paid reviews rule. Everyone knows. But lips are sealed. With the number of heads rolling, the film industry is playing ostrich. In an environment where gush is everything, even a single critical line is taken as a personal attack. Critics for hire?

Yup. Most "influencers" are no better than pimps parading as experts — on any and every subject. Show them the money and they will endorse just about anything — even if it is packaged horse dung.

Instagram handle @ShobhaaDe; Twitter handle @DeShobhaa

LETTERS

DRAGON STRONGER

China's unprecedented \$1-trillion trade surplus in 2023 marks a seismic shift in global trade dynamics, driven by resilient exports in electronics, green tech, and machinery, alongside weak domestic demand that suppressed imports. This surplus, underpinned by industrial overcapacity, state subsidies, and a weaker yuan, exposes the West's deep reliance on Chinese supply chains despite its rhetoric of "de-risking." For India, it presents a strategic challenge as Chinese pricing power threatens India's manufacturing ambitions, especially in solar and electronics. However, the global appetite for supply chain diversification offers India an opening if and only if it can scale up. The surplus is a symbol of global asymmetry and a call for India to assert itself not just as a market, but as a maker.

Amarjeet Kumar  
Hazaribagh

CLEANER DEATHS

**SEWAGE** and septic tank cleaners live a miserable life; some of them die while doing their work in these deathtraps. The number of deaths due to suffocation has been on the increase, which calls for immediate measures. This year, 22 workers died in the country while cleaning sewers and septic tanks. Septic tank gases contain methane, hydrogen sulphide, carbon dioxide, sulphur dioxide, ammonia, nitrogen dioxide and carbon monoxide. Unless safety measures are taken, entering a septic tank or sewage outlet is most dangerous. It is high time the Centre conducted a study on the matter and came out with implementable steps to stop the deaths of manual scavengers in the country.

S. Akhilesh Krishnan  
Navi Mumbai

LETTERS TO DEAD

**THE FAILURE** to update records of Punjab schoolteachers has turned into a complete mockery, with duties and even warning letters issued to staff long retired or deceased. Retirement and death entries are basic administrative tasks that must be updated immediately, yet officials responsible for these duties have allowed glaring lapses. To prevent further embarrassment, strict accountability and punitive action are essential. Integrating departmental databases with Aadhaar, bank accounts and the birth-and-death registration system can ensure automatic verification and timely updates.

R.S. Narula  
Patiala

Farrukh Dhondy  
Cabbages & Kings



"I only know I am  
Because memory tells me so  
The gods above don't give a damn  
They probably don't even know  
There is below the heavens an earth  
Where lesser beings crawl  
Doomed to die from the gift of birth  
It really matters fall."  
— From **Hey Bhagwan, What About Hindustan**,  
by Bachchoo

It takes intelligence to understand what intelligence is. The invention of Artificial Intelligence seems to tell us that it's not God's gift but a construction which traces through an ocean of available information to formulate answers.

AI doesn't just deduce, it invents, composes and I suppose its formulations rely on statistically checked probabilities.

I used the word "available" earlier. I'll tell you why. A couple of years ago, a friend of mine introduced me to AI. In fact, he put the app on my computer and said when you tap it, it will ask you to ask it anything. He said I should try it now. I did.

The first thing I asked the Bot (Is that what it's generically called?) "Who the hell is Bachchoo?" Readers of this column, regular, occasional or first time, will be aware that a quotation from the said Bachchoo's works appears every week as a pre-

appendage to the deliberations in Cabbages and Kings. The Bot answered almost immediately. The words came up on the screen as though they were transcripts of a dictating voice. The answer said that Bachchoo was a nineteenth century poet from some unknown place. I asked it the same question again, phrasing it slightly differently — I can't recall the exact words, but perhaps I left the "hell" reference out and said something like "please identify the writer called Bachchoo, and tell me if it's a penname?"

And yes, there was a completely different answer. Botty said that Bachchoo was the pen name of some obscure dead writer, who it named.

That the same Bot gave me two different answers in the space of five minutes was peculiar. But that was then, and this is where my qualification of "available" applies.

Very recently I asked Botty the same question again. Same Bot, same app on the computer. This time it told me that Bachchoo was a poet, extracts of whose work were quoted every week in a column — and then it mentioned my name. However, after that in the same answer, it went on to say that Bachchoo could be a misspelling of Bachchan, and said there was a famous writer called Harivansh Rai Bachchan, who very many readers will know was the film star Amitabh Bachchan's dad, and wrote, among very many other things, a transformation of Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyat* as

Madhushala.

But in the gap between the years that I asked the questions, Botty has got smarter and accumulated more data. It now adds that Bachchoo is a Mauritian politician and another person with that surname is a Trinidadian writer.

So, it seems that as Botty widens its information base, things get better and perhaps, for writers and operatives who work with information, a bit threatening?

I have friends who work with AI, not for gain or in their professions, but for fun. A director friend, stage and film, doesn't write scripts himself but has recently sent me outlines written for whole screenplays by the Bot he calls "his Friend". They describe, in synopsis, the dramatic action. Most of it reads to me like clichés and quite predictable, but in the hands of a skilful screenplay writer these could be modified and made exciting without the writer having to do the preliminary framework of thinking out a plot. I suppose for genre films — detective, romance, horror, this would work. Perhaps this is already the way films are being produced in some world film industries?

Another close friend, Tamara Howe, and I both belong to a group of people calling ourselves officially the Darcus Howe Legacy Collective. Darcus Howe was a prominent activist, left-wing thinker, journalist, editor and broadcaster.

He was born in Trinidad and came to Britain as

an immigrant and dedicated his life to justice and progress for the new communities of the UK. I worked for and with him. His daughter Tamara now asked AI to formulate what Darcus might have said about a current political situation. Botty replied and his/her/their formulations were impressively convincing and precise — even though the real Darcus would have undoubtedly included some twist or surprise in his deliberations.

A serious and dangerous development with AI is that it can be programmed to deliberately lie, pass disinformation or indulge in conspiracy theories. Elon Musk's AI device Grok is one such. Ask it who was cleverer, Musk or Einstein, it will say Musk. And I wonder what it will say if asked who the better playwright is, Shakespeare or Musk?

Grok will also tell you that the gas Zyklon B released into the chambers by the Nazis was not there for genocide but was merely a disinfectant. Grok also, following His Master's Voice, advocates the defunding of the BBC and champions extreme-right-wing broadcasters like the UK's GB News.

Wikipedia's investigation into Grok contends that it uses information from the racist, white-nationalist platform Stormfront, and also from Infowars owned by the conspiracy theorist and school-shooting denier Alex Jones. Look him up — not on Grok but Google — who is not very polite about him.



quick BITES

INDICATORS		%
Sensex	85,267.66	0.53
Nifty 50	26,046.95	0.57
S&P 500*	6,851.77	-0.71
Dollar (₹)	88.63	-0.13
Pound Sterling (₹)	116.69	-0.03
Euro (₹)	102.83	-0.29
Gold (10gm)* (₹)	134,060▲1,591	1.20
Brent crude (\$/bbl)*	60.92	-0.59
IN 10-Yr bond yield	6.596	-0.23
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	4.182	0.041

\* As of 8:30 PM IST

Brookfield to invest \$1 billion to set up GCC

Brookfield Asset Management plans to invest \$1 billion in a global capability center in Mumbai, and has already lined up a big multinational bank to occupy the space. The project will be jointly developed with the Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority and will house a multinational bank over a 20-year term. It will cover around six acres and create around 2 mn sq ft of office space, Brookfield said.



India's forex reserves touch \$687.26 billion

India's forex reserves jumped by \$1.033 billion to \$687.26 billion during the week ended December 5, the RBI said on Friday. In the previous reporting week, India's forex reserves had dropped by \$1.877 billion to \$686.227 billion. For the week ended December 5, foreign currency assets, a major component of the reserves, decreased by \$151 million to \$556.88 billion, the data released showed.

JSW Energy's board approves fund raise plan

JSW Energy's board on Friday approved the proposal of raising up to ₹10,000 crore in one or more tranches, through issuance of securities on private offerings. The board also approved the proposal of issuance of 95.23 lakh equity shares, on a preferential issue basis, to JTPM Metal Traders, a member of promoter group at an issue price of ₹525 per equity share, including a premium of ₹515 per equity share.

Meta India picks Aman Jain to head public policy

Meta India on Friday named Aman Jain as the new head of public policy, tasking him with steering policy strategy and engagements in a market the US-headquartered social media giant considers strategic. Jain will also be a member of India leadership team. He will join the company early next year and will report to Simon Milner, vice president of policy, Asia Pacific (APAC) at Meta, the company said.

Printed & Published by K. Sudhakar on behalf of Deccan Chronicle Holdings Limited. Printed at BFL Infotech Ltd, C-9 Sector 3, Noida-201301. Published at 219, N D Tiwari Bhawan, Deen Dayal Upadhyay Marg, New Delhi-110002. Editor: Kaushik Mitter, RNI Registration number 30074/09, Air surcharge Re 1. © All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without written permission of The Editor, Financial Chronicle ® is prohibited.

Tariffs to hit 75% of \$6-bn Indian exports to Mexico

Auto, spares, steel will be hit hardest with 50% tariff

SANGEETHA G. CHENNAI, DEC. 12

Nearly 75 per cent of India's \$5.75 billion exports to Mexico will be affected as tariffs jump from 0-15 per cent to a maximum of 50 per cent. Exports of auto and auto components as well as steel will be hit hardest with a prohibitive 50 per cent tariff.

The tariff hikes target key sectors such as automobiles, auto parts, textiles, steel, plastics and clothing, with most products moving from earlier tariff levels of 0-15 per cent to about 35 per cent, and a few strategic items, especially steel and auto, jumping to the maximum 50 per cent duty.

"For India, the measures affect nearly three-quarters of its \$5.75 billion exports to Mexico in FY25, fundamentally altering the commercial logic of accessing the Mexican market," said GTRI.

Automobiles and auto components, India's largest export segment with \$1.9 billion in FY25, will be among the worst affected.

Iron and steel exports of \$128.44 million are hit hardest as tariffs rise from 10-15 per cent to 35 per cent on long products and a prohibitive 50 per cent on flat products, effectively closing the Mexican market to Indian steel exporters. Articles of iron or steel, valued at \$176.87 million, will see duties

**LESS LUCRATIVE**

**IRON, STEEL** exports of \$128.44 mn hit hardest as tariffs rise from 10-15% to 35% on long products and prohibitive 50% on flat products.

**ELECTRONICS, MACHINERY** SECTOR FACES SHARP SETBACK.

Coffee, tea, and spices, valued at \$36.45 mn, face tariffs rising from 0-5% to 15%.

For India, the measures affect nearly three-quarters of its \$5.75 bn exports to Mexico in FY25, fundamentally altering commercial logic of accessing Mexican market. — GTRI

**AUTOMOBILES** are India's largest export segment with \$1.9 bn in FY25 will be among worst affected.

Smartphones, which recorded \$284.53 mn in exports, will see duties rising from 0 to 35%.

jump from 15 per cent to 35 per cent.

Smartphones, which recorded \$284.53 million in exports will see duties rising from nil to 35 per cent, effectively shutting the Mexican market for Indian handset exports.

Industrial machinery, India's second-largest export category to Mexico at \$547.99 million, will see duties rise from 5-10 per cent to 25-35 per cent. Aluminium exports worth \$383.28 million face duties increasing from 5-10 per cent to 25-35 per cent.

Garments and made-ups, with exports of \$245.90 million, will see tariffs rising from 20-25 per cent to 35 per cent. Tariffs of textiles exports of \$149.94 mn will increase from 10-15 per cent to 25 per cent.

Organic chemicals, a \$391.12 mn export segment, will see tariffs rising from 5-7.5 per cent to 15-25 per cent. Plastics and plastic articles, exported to the tune of \$136.69 million, see duties rise from 10-15 per cent to 25 per cent, disproportionately affecting MSMEs.

Silver breaches ₹2 L a kg in futures trade on MCX

New Delhi, Dec. 12: Silver prices rallied on Friday to breach the record ₹2 lakh per kg mark in futures trade for the first time, riding on strong investor demand and positive global trends.

Rising for the fourth consecutive day, the white metal futures for March delivery appreciated by ₹1,420, or 0.71 per cent, to touch a lifetime high of ₹2,00,362 per kg on the multi-commodity exchange (MCX).

While in spot market, the silver prices strengthened for the third straight day and jumped ₹5,100 to hit a new peak of ₹1,99,500 per kilogram in the national capital on Friday, amid sustained global demand for the safe-haven asset, according to the All

**STRONG DEMAND**

**WHITE METAL** futures for March delivery appreciated by ₹1,420, or 0.71%, to touch new high of ₹2,00,362 per kg on MCX

**IN SPORT** market, silver prices jump ₹5,100 to hit new peak of ₹1,99,500 per kg.

**GOLD** of 99.9% purity increases by ₹1,110 to ₹1,33,600 per 10 gms.

India Sarafa Association.

"In the domestic market, spot silver prices once again recorded a new high, while gold prices also appreciated significantly, trading near the record level," Dilip Parmar, Research Analyst, HDFC Securities, said.

Gold of 99.9 per cent purity increased by ₹1,110 to ₹1,33,600 per 10 grams (inclusive of all taxes) compared to previous close of ₹1,32,490 per 10 grams, as per association.

Meanwhile, the rupee depreciated by 17 paise to close at an all-time low of 90.49 against the US dollar on Friday, as uncertainty over the India-US trade deal and persistent foreign fund outflows dented investor sentiment.

Govt to allow 100% FDI in insurance

MADHUSUDAN SAHOO NEW DELHI, DEC 12

The Insurance Laws (Amendment) Bill is learnt to have been cleared by the Cabinet Friday. It is expected to be introduced Monday in the Parliament.

The proposed Bill seeks to raise the foreign direct investment (FDI) cap in insurance companies to 100 per cent. The move is seen as a step to boost capital inflows into the sector, according to the sources.

The change is expected to attract significant foreign capital, increase competition, and enhance customer services in India's insurance market.

According to a Lok Sabha bulletin, the Bill, which seeks to deepen penetration, accelerate growth, enhance ease of doing business, is part of the 13 legislations listed for the upcoming session of Parliament.

Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman during the Budget had proposed to raise the foreign investment limit to 100 per cent from the existing 74 per cent in the insurance sector. The enhanced limit will be available for companies which invest the entire premium in India.

So far, the insurance sector has attracted ₹82,000 cr through FDI.

TG tops in capital outlay, assigns 27% of expenditure

SANGEETHA G. CHENNAI, DEC. 12

Telangana topped among States by using 27 per cent of its total expenditure on capital outlay in second quarter of FY26. Telangana made the fastest growth of 10.1 percentage points (pp) in capital expenditure ratio from 16.9 per cent compared to the second quarter average ratio during FY17-25.

The capital outlay of 25 States grew 3.7 per cent yoy during the second quarter of FY26, leading to an improvement in quality of States' expenditure.

Telangana made the fastest growth of 10.1 percentage points (pp) in capital expenditure ratio from 16.9 per cent compared to the second quarter average ratio during FY17-25.

The COTE ratio rose to 13.1 per cent in 2QFY26 from a four-quarter low of 10.3 per cent in 1QFY26.

Although it was lower than 13.5 per cent in 2QFY25, it remained better than the long-term second quarter average of 11.9 per cent during FY17-FY25, found India Ratings and Research.

Telangana was at the top by using 27 per cent of its

**CAPITAL OUTLAY** of 25 States grows 3.7% yoy during 2Q FY26, leading to improvement in quality of States' expenditure.

**TELANGANA IMPROVES** COTE ratio by 10.1 pp from 16.9%, Q2 average during FY17-FY25.

**GUJARAT SECOND-HIGHEST** COTE at 22.3%, followed by Sikkim at 21.4%.

**STATES'** capex in first half of FY26 was 1.8% of GDP.

**AGGREGATE** capex of States' in second half of FY26 to increase to 3.4% of GDP against 3.2% in same period last year, according to Ind-Ra.

total expenditure for capital outlay.

After Telangana, Gujara-rat had the second highest COTE at 22.3 per cent, Sikkim at 21.4 per cent, Madhya Pradesh at 18.9 per cent and Uttarakhand at 18.8 per cent. Apart from Telangana, the other States which made major improvements in the COTE ratio in Q2 FY26 were Maharashtra at 7.9pp, Gujarat 6.5pp, Assam 6.0pp, Uttarakhand 3.8pp and Bihar 2.9pp compared to their long-term second quarter averages.

Among States recording decline in COTE, UP was down 4.6pp, Chhattisgarh 4.4pp and HP 3.9pp.

Ind-Ra estimates that the States' aggregate capex in the second half of FY26

would increase to 3.4 per cent of GDP against 3.2 per cent same period last year. The States' capex in first half this fiscal was 1.8 per cent of GDP, same as last year.

"The Union govt distributed an additional instalment of tax devolution to States in October. Ind-Ra believes this, along with the instrumental long-term interest-free loans, will boost the States' capex plans in the second half this fiscal, when States tend to increase their capex. We expect the States to increase capex spending further in second half of this fiscal to cover the shortfall in targets in first half of fiscal," said Paras Jasrai, associate director, Ind-Ra.

Nov. PV sales grow 19% to 4.12 L units

MICHAEL GONSALVES PUNE, DEC. 12

Passenger vehicle (PV) dispatches from automakers to dealers increased 19 per cent year-on-year in November as demand remained robust post festive period, society of Indian automobile manufacturers (SIAM) said on Friday.

Automakers total car sales pegged at 4.12 lakh units last month, up 18.7 per cent as compared with 3.47 lakh units in year-ago period.

Maruti Suzuki dispatched 1.7 lakh units to dealers last month as compared with 1.41 lakh units in same month last year, an increase of 21 per cent.

Mahindra dispatched 56,336 units last month as compared with 46,222 units in year-ago period, an increase of 22 per cent.

Hyundai billed 50,340 units to dealers, up 4 per cent as against 48,246 units in November last year.

Similarly, two-wheeler dispatches to dealers rose 21 per cent on-year to 19.44

lakh units in November as against 16.04 lakh units in the same month last year, SIAM said in a statement.

Scooter sales rose 29 per cent on-year to 7.35 lakh units in November as against 5.68 lakh units in the year-ago period.

Motorcycle dispatches increased 17.5 per cent to 11.63 lakh units last month as against 9.90 lakh units in November 2024.

Total three-wheeler sales also rose 21 per cent on-year to 71,999 units in November.

"Following the festive demand and support from the government's progressive GST 2.0 reforms, the Indian auto industry continued with the sales momentum in November 2025," said Rajesh Menon, director general at SIAM.

"Industry is optimistic that the continued supportive policy reforms and improved market sentiments, would continue this growth trajectory well into 2026," Menon stated.



BMW MINI COOPER CONVERTIBLE PRICED AT ₹58.5 LAKH

MICHAEL GONSALVES PUNE, DEC. 12

BMW on Friday introduced all-new Mini Cooper S Convertible priced at ₹58.50 lakh at pan India showroom.

The Cooper S hatchback is the third launch from the BMW-owned car manufacturer in three months, following the JCW All4 and Countryman SE All4 respectively.

"At Mini, we believe life is short for boring cars, which is why every Mini is built to stand out and deliver big smiles," said Hardeep Singh Brar, president and chief executive officer, BMWGroup India.

The car is powered by a 2.0-litre, 4-cylinder, turbo-petrol engine that makes 201 BHP and 300 Nm. Mini claims a 0-100 km/h time of 6.9 seconds and a top speed of 237 km/h.

Nov. retail inflation rises to 0.71% from record low of 0.25% in Oct.

MADHUSUDAN SAHOO NEW DELHI, DEC. 12

India's headline retail inflation, measured by the consumer price index (CPI), marginally rose to 0.71 per cent in November from a record low of 0.25 per cent in October.

The rise in the inflation in November is mainly due to higher prices of vegetables, eggs, meat and fish, spices, and fuel and among others, the govern-

ment said on Friday. The deflation in food items was 3.91 per cent in November against 5.02 per cent in October, according to data released by national statistics office (NSO).

"The uptick was largely led by narrowing deflation in food and beverages segment, even as core inflation eased marginally between these months," said Aditi Nayar, chief economist, head-research and outreach, Icra.

DIGITAL | DOMAIN

Wipro, Microsoft to co-develop AI solutions for financial, retail, FMCG

In AI age, data is strategic to cos: Nadella

Mumbai, Dec. 12: Microsoft chairman and chief executive officer Satya Nadella wondered whether AI models are becoming a commodity and added that data is the most strategic asset for any company in age of AI.

"In the experience layer, data is one of the most strategic assets, and it is one of those things that is super important in the age of AI. But you have to use that data contextually to the AI," Nadella, who is on a 3-day visit to India, said.

While, Microsoft's India and South Asia president

Puneet Chandok on Friday said artificial intelligence (AI) will not steal jobs, asserting that the real pink slip is going to be refusal to learn.

However, Chandok said the widespread adoption of new-age technology will unbundle tasks, adding that "ours is the last generation to enjoy stable, long-term careers."

"Will AI steal jobs? I don't think AI will steal jobs. It will dissect jobs. It will unbundle jobs," he said during his address at the Microsoft AI Tour. Amid the rapid adoption



of AI across all spheres of life, Chandok said the industrial age era template to learn once and make money for the rest of their life using the knowledge is breaking. "You and I are last gener-

**IN THE** experience layer, data is one of the most strategic assets, and it is one of those things that is super important in the age of AI.

— SATYA NADELLA, Microsoft chairman, CEO.

ation to have stable, long-term careers," he said. Stressing the need to learn continuously, Chandok said, "The real pink slip in this new AI era is not automation. That is what we are wor-

ried about. The real pink slip is refusal to learn."

"We are fighting guerrilla warfare against irrelevant every day and should continue to learn new things," he said.

Meanwhile, Wipro announced a strategic partnership with Microsoft and launch of Microsoft Innovation Hub at its Partner Labs in Bengaluru.

Wipro and Microsoft will co-develop industry-specific artificial intelligence solutions for financial services, retail, manufacturing, healthcare and life science. —PTI



# OPINION

## Rise of the Mamdani Clones



**POTOMAC WATCH**  
*By Kimberley A. Strassel*

What could get in the way of a coming 2026 Democratic wave, given history and the current public mood? Nothing but the Democratic Party itself, which is sitting placidly by as the progressives who lost them last year's election mobilize to take over even more of the party. Bernie Sanders may never be president, but he's a kingmaker.

At least 20 Democratic representatives and four senators are on the casualty list, retiring to make their seats available to progressive challengers rather than be beaten by them. The left, fueled by Mayor-elect Zohran Mamdani's New York City victory, are moving against those who remain, challenging dozens of incumbents from New York to California. The national party organizations have lost control, as progressive super PACs pour money into the fight, guided by Mr. Sanders, who is endorsing widely and early and stockpiling his own cash for his chosen candidates.

The left's top focus is on purifying current Democratic seats, replacing less-extreme incumbents with Mamdani-like democratic socialists. A case in point: Brad Lander, the New York City comptroller, raised his profile during his run in the recent mayoral race by getting arrested by

Immigration and Customs Enforcement. He didn't win, but did forge a ranked-choice voting alliance with Mr. Mamdani and earned Mr. Sanders's approval.

With endorsements from Messrs. Mamdani and Sanders in his pocket, Mr. Lander this week announced his plan to challenge Rep. Dan Goldman, on grounds the incumbent is a political wimp. This is the same Dan Goldman who, as former then-Rep. Adam Schiff's right-hand man, served as lead counsel in the first impeachment of Donald Trump. He supports Medicare for All and the Green New Deal, is among the loudest voices for millionaire taxes, and has a near-perfect progressive voting record. His sins? Being born wealthy and supporting Israel. Mr. Lander describes Mr. Goldman as a member of an "oligarchy" who does pro-Israel groups' "bidding."

Mr. Goldman is hardly alone, even in his own state. Rep. Adriano Espaillat has drawn a primary challenge from Darializa Avila Chevalier, a community organizer who is backed by Justice Democrats, the group who propelled Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to office. Mr. Espaillat—the highly progressive chairman of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus—stands accused of taking corporate PAC money. Progressives are also challenging New York Democrats Ritchie Torres, Gregory Meeks, Grace Meng and Laura Gillen. Even House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries faced a threat from New York City

Councilman Chi Ossé, a Democratic socialist, until Mr. Ossé dropped his bid last week.

But the left's zeal is also propelling candidates into open and battleground races—no matter the general-election risks. Maine Rep. Jared Golden clung to his rural Maine district by less than 1 point as Mr. Trump won it by 10 last year, and

**After the 2024 humiliation, the left is back. It could hurt the party in 2026.**

only via a pragmatic voting record. The primary to replace him features two avowed progressives, racing to the left. And progressives are stacking up cash and endorsements in primaries to take on the most vulnerable Republicans in battleground states from Pennsylvania to Arizona and Wisconsin. In the contest to challenge vulnerable Republican California Rep. David Valadao, school-board activist Randy Villegas is using a Sanders endorsement and dollars to outpower moderate state Rep. Jasmeet Bains.

The risks of the Sanders takeover were further highlighted in Texas this week, when former Rep. Colin Allred was pressured out of a Senate run, to clear the decks for uber-progressive Rep. Jasmine Crockett. Mr. Allred, a former NFL linebacker, lost to Sen. Ted Cruz last year by

8 points, significantly outperforming Kamala Harris. Democrats have their best shot at a statewide office in Texas in years, given the general electoral climate and a bloody GOP primary between Sen. John Cornyn and state Attorney General Ken Paxton. Ms. Crockett still must beat state House member James Talarico, but backing for her is pouring in and Democrats face the real prospect that their "best" shot will be in the hands of a freshman Democrat who has clawed her way to notoriety through creative slanging matches.

Lost in all this maneuvering was the release of a recent report from a center-left group, Welcome, which Semafor reports "consulted hundreds of thousands of voters over six months for its broad findings, including that 70% of voters think the Democratic Party is 'out of touch'" on issues ranging from transgenderism to climate—everything the reascendant progressive left stands for.

The report's findings reflect what much of the Democratic Party was thinking in the wake of last year's election thumping. But that looks to be gone already, talk of "abundance" or new "third way" politics buried beneath Mr. Mamdani's victory—no matter how little New York City reflects America. Republicans face a difficult coming midterm, no doubt. But if progressives emerge from this primary season firmly back on top the party, they might just mitigate some of that GOP risk.

*Write to kim@wsj.com.*

## Holidays Begin at Home

**HOUSES OF WORSHIP**  
*By Mark Oppenheimer*

When my wife and I were raising young children, it was easy enough to decide where to spend the holidays. While our more intrepid friends treated school breaks as opportunities to see Europe or tour national parks and Civil War battlefields, we seldom left our home in Connecticut.

Some parents aim to show their children the world. We've considered a full night's sleep—for us or the kids—a parenting victory. Vacations weren't for adventuresome backpacking. They were blessed respites from the morning breakfast rush and carpool. As a result, since our firstborn arrived in 2006, we've spent every Hanukkah, Passover and national holiday at home.

Now that our youngest is old enough to travel easily, and we could go somewhere, I have little desire to. Hanukkah begins Sunday, and I have been thinking how much I value home-based traditions. I haven't given my children the gift of seeing the world, but I like to think I have given them something equally valuable and far less costly: the pleasure of staying put.

We savor traditions that regular travel to new locales wouldn't allow. For eight nights every December, our children light their menorahs and sing prayers together. They open the traditional gifts: one night, matching pajamas from grandparents; another night, books from an aunt and uncle; another night, chocolate gelt. The other five are grab bags.

Many years there is an all-sibling photo, when the five of them can be persuaded to sit still long enough for my wife to focus her camera. Many years, too, there is a group photo with the dog.

It isn't only Hanukkah we repeat, year after year. Passover Seders are at our house. At first, we hosted because it was logical: We lived between both sets of parents, and as vegetarians we wanted to be able to eat from the menu. It's a lot of work, and I once hoped we'd alternate. But now I'm glad for the regularity of it all. The same traditional foods (my matzoh ball soup, my wife's flourless chocolate cake), the same Haggadah (Richard Codor's illustration of the Passover story).

Not to mention the guests. We have a regular crew, and I'd miss each one if we went

anywhere else. That includes our children, our parents and an assortment of close friends. What would Passover be without our neighbor Arnold, the septuagenarian art-house movie-theater owner who regularly invites our son over for age-appropriate "cappuccinos," aka hot chocolate?

Being at home is a ritual, as religious, in its way, as remembering the Maccabees'

**Our Passover and Hanukkah rituals have taught my family the joy of staying put.**

inextinguishable lamp or the exodus from Egypt. Being in my house, the only one our family has ever lived in, eating, laughing, arguing—it's how I want to celebrate my good fortune, when the seasons call me to.

This attachment to home-based ritual, as it happens, coheres with Judaism. Historically, you might say we are a religion of ancestor worship. Our services are heavy on the patriarchs—and, for some, the matriarchs too. God is important, but so are

Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and his two wives. The stories of the Hebrew Bible frequently relate to central questions of family life: where to settle, whom to marry, when to have children. There are no desert hermits in our tradition, only moms and dads tending home fires.

Judaism isn't a celestial religion, lifting us into the clouds. Nor is there any commandment to spread the religion over the face of the earth. We have no obligation to travel far and wide, to make religious pilgrimages. Rather, we are directed to make Jewish families, and then to make their homes centers of Jewish life.

I don't imagine my kids would have been worse off if they'd grown up globe-trotting, but I'm not sure they'd have been better. As somebody once said, children don't need magical experiences, childhood is magical enough. So when I say there's something magical about staying put, something holy about home, I can speak only for myself. And, of course, for the dog.

*Mr. Oppenheimer is author of the forthcoming biography "Judy Blume: A Life."*

**BOOKSHELF** | By Danny Heitman

## Alpine Winter Wandering

**White**

**By Sylvain Tesson**  
*Polity, 180 pages, \$25*

For the past three decades, the French writer Sylvain Tesson has chronicled his love for extreme adventures, embracing odysseys that test his mental and physical endurance. His 2011 memoir, "The Consolations of the Forest," detailed his months of solitude in a remote cabin in Siberia, a region perhaps best known for its freezing gulags. Mr. Tesson called it "paradise." After a climbing accident nearly claimed his life, Mr. Tesson undertook an arduous walking journey across France, the subject of "On the Wandering Paths" (2016). A multiyear trek through the Alps followed, and his account of that project was published in French in 2022. It now appears in an English translation by Christine Gutman as "White."

Over the course of four winters from 2018 to 2021, Mr. Tesson hiked and skied successive lengths of the Alps, first setting out from Menton on the French-Italian border, where, he writes, "the mountains sink down into the palm fronds." Daniel Du Lac De Fugères, Mr. Tesson's longtime friend, came along as a guide, and they were joined by one of the author's devoted readers, Philippe Rémoville.

The planned journey traced an arc: "We would head north-east, following the Alpine curve all the way to Trieste, the impossible city on the Adriatic generally regarded as the end of the Alps. Our trajectory would take us right along the axial ridge. We would sleep in mountain refuges and shelters. It would be a cavalcade on skis from sea to sea."

The group encountered picturesque vistas along the way, but the physical difficulties were real. A few days into the first leg, Mr. Tesson's party gingerly navigated a ridge at risk of avalanche, "tiptoeing over Fabergé eggshells." There were brief respites, but things seldom got easier: "The wind whipped up at noon and sleet came smacking down," Mr. Tesson recalls. "For weeks, I would endure this alternation between mercy and punishment."

Why would anyone undertake such a shivering slog? "I had the urge to get up and walk out into the silence," Mr. Tesson explains with his typical Gallic inscrutability. It is not clear whether he is fleeing from the noise of the modern world, or seeking something in nature itself. Like Herman Melville's Captain Ahab in pursuit of his whale, Mr. Tesson is drawn to "The White," his mythic name for mountain snowscapes. "The White harbors mysteries," he insists. "Snow imposes the sky's thoughts on the earth."

Mr. Tesson is fond of quotation: Verbal gems from Arthur Rimbaud, Mr. Tesson's literary hero, pop up with some frequency, and before readers arrive at the lovely blue waters of the Adriatic, they have also read about or heard from Flaubert, Pascal, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, St. Augustine, Turgenev, Mallarmé, Hugo, Baudelaire and the Gospel of Matthew. The start of the trek is kicked off with some appropriate words from Michel de Montaigne: "One must always have one's boots on and be ready to go."

Mr. Tesson seems also to draw on older literary models for his own writing. "White" is a travel yarn in the vein of Hilaire Belloc's "The Path to Rome" (1902) or Patrick Leigh Fermor's "A Time of Gifts" (1977), venerable armchair entertainments in which the traveler's inner life is dramatized by towering landscapes etched with a haunting grandeur.

In this spirit Mr. Tesson describes a morning departure from a French refuge as winter wanes: "We vanished down an alley of sunlight, bluish shadows and young sprouts swelling with springtime lust. Dogwoods glistened blood-red above the larches. All was still, and as pure as a Brahmin's meditation. Animal tracks stitched their way across the snow, attesting to the frenzies of the night, when nocturnal predators had the run of the mountains."

**Sylvain Tesson is a fan of extreme adventures testing his mental and physical endurance. That urge beckons him toward the mountains.**

Reflections on the dangers of the alpine environment serve to sharpen the sense of an encounter with the extraordinary. "At the top of the risk scale, lightning, though rare, kills instantly," he writes of his pilgrimage. "Next come falls, avalanches and getting lost in fog (the latter often leading to the two former). Cold and wind come in last as one can always bury oneself in a snow cave."

The biggest hurdle in Mr. Tesson's journey wasn't one he expected. As Covid-19 spread, he and his companions encountered travel restrictions and shuttered lodgings, anathema to his creed of mobility: "I wanted my face, the landscape of the soul, to look upon the landscapes that are the soul of the world." He chafes at the lockdown decrees and more broadly laments a French state "whose citizens demanded its total and utter assistance, all whilst protesting the slightest interference on its part. Even jollity, now replaced by indignation, had joined the ranks of dubious virtues."

Mr. Tesson isn't the first commentator to question the lockdowns, though his flippancy can make it hard to take him seriously. When he dismisses a contagion that killed millions as a "global gob of spit," Mr. Tesson seems unfeeling and out of touch. In a moment of sharp self-appraisal, he suggests that a sense of superiority might be one of the downsides of his Alpine adventure. "One of the dangers of mountaineering," he writes, is "the belief that physical elevation gave one permission to disdain the world below. . . . In reality, altitude never elevates a person's worth. People don't change. When they ascend to glorious heights, they take their troubles with them."

One trouble the author faces is advancing age, an obvious complication for anyone scaling a rocky summit or padding through barren winter wastes. Though in his 50s now, Mr. Tesson remains defiant. "When experience starts dissuading you from heading back out," he writes, "it's because you've grown old."

*Mr. Heitman is a columnist for the Baton Rouge Advocate and the editor of Phi Kappa Phi's Forum magazine.*

### This weekend: 2025 in books

The year's top fiction and nonfiction • What really wins wars • J.R.R. Tolkien's imaginative world-building • Our critics' favorite political books, mysteries and more • Plus 50 avid readers on the books that defined 2025



OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

The Real Reason Europe Is ‘Decaying’

European leaders are furious at President Trump following his recent derogatory comments about their Continent. This is becoming an instructive diplomatic fiasco, even if it’s one in which Dr. Trump botches his diagnosis of the Continent’s most serious problems.

\* \* \*  
The Administration’s National Security Strategy last week stirred outrage by warning that America’s European allies face “civilizational erasure.” Mr. Trump’s foreign-policy pandrums mean primarily that mass immigration and deepening political illegitimacy are sapping Europe’s vim and vigor. Mr. Trump followed this week by describing Europe as “weak” and “decaying.”

The strategy, a brainchild of Vice President JD Vance and his circle, implies the U.S. may withdraw from its longstanding security cooperation with Europe if Washington decides Europe is no longer worth defending. A particular threat concerns the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The strategy paper warns that mass (read: Muslim) migration means some NATO members could within a few decades be majority non-European.

Messrs. Trump and Vance have a point. The European Union does too many things (foreign policy, environmental regulation and the like) badly that it shouldn’t do at all. What it’s supposed to do, such as creating a Continent-wide free-trade bloc, it does poorly.

European voters are angry about their leaders’ failures to get a grip on a migration crisis now entering its second decade. They’re frustrated with the increasing prosperity gap between Europe and the U.S., and with Europe’s frailty in the face of foreign challenges such as Russia’s war on Ukraine. Worst of all, they see that their leaders’ first instincts are to suppress contrary opinions, which is why free speech is again a hot debate in Europe.

Some of this bespeaks the lack of confidence in European civilization the Trump Administration observes. Much of this traces to a loss of belief in the superiority of Western values, including guilt over imperialism and destructive 20th-century wars.

But the Trump diagnosis ignores the biggest threat to Europe’s well-being. That is Europe’s generous social-welfare states and the cascading fiscal, economic and social ills they create.

Government social expenditure in the U.S. ac-

Government social spending as a share of GDP

U.S.	19.8%
U.K.	23.0
Spain	25.9
Italy	27.6
Germany	27.9
France	30.6

Note: U.K. data is for 2023, other countries for 2024. Source: OECD

counted for 19.8% of GDP in 2024, according to data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. In France the figure was 30.6%, in Germany 27.9%, and in Italy 27.6%. This share will rise as populations age. These columns recently documented the severity of the old-age entitlement problem in France and Germany especially.

This fact explains much of what ails Europe. Large welfare states require large tax bills to fund them, which is why government revenue reaches 47% of GDP in France, 41% in Germany, and 43% in Italy but 27% in the U.S. That level of taxation saps incentives for innovation and entrepreneurship. Generous welfare states also discourage work, which partly explains why Europe’s labor markets are so sclerotic.

Meanwhile, European governments, taxed to the hilt and increasingly indebted, find it difficult to spend more on defense. Hence the Continent’s inability to shape events in Ukraine, embarrassing leaders and voters and deepening the sense of ennui caused by economic underperformance.

The question is why Messrs. Trump and Vance stress migration and culture more than these fiscal and economic facts. Perhaps because Mr. Trump doesn’t want to reform America’s own entitlement state. Mr. Vance often speaks as if he wants to expand the government’s role, as if welfare checks and bureaucracy can restore national elan and social unity.

Reforming welfare is politically difficult. It’s far easier to denounce migrants and European cultural decadence. Especially when the U.S. is on a similar, if slower, path to welfare-state sclerosis.

Immigration is a manageable challenge, now that Europe is starting to grapple with it. Washington could also be a positive influence on Europe, as Reagan’s policy example was in the 1980s. Mr. Trump’s demand for more defense spending will require welfare reforms that would benefit everyone.

But an irony of the Trump-Vance rhetoric is that it could make most of Europe’s problems worse. The domestic political allies they want to cultivate in Europe, such as Germany’s Alternative for Germany (AfD) or France’s National Rally, are big-state, anti-economic-reform parties, and often are instinctively anti-American to boot. This isn’t the way to make friends or spur a European revival.

Trump Puts the Oil Squeeze on Maduro

President Trump is finally taking action beyond rhetorical threats to squeeze Venezuela’s Nicolás Maduro out of power. The U.S. seizure of an oil tanker off the Venezuelan coast hits the dictator in the pocketbook, which is why he is screaming so loudly.

U.S. officials say the ship was flying under the flag of Guyana though it isn’t registered there. The U.S. Treasury previously sanctioned the ship for smuggling Iranian oil. There’s no doubt about the legality of the seizure, as it was executed with a warrant.

Officials are also leaking to the press that this seizure won’t be the last, and we hope that’s right. Mr. Maduro relies on oil-export revenue to fund his regime, and keep his military happy. Without this cash flow, panic may grow in the ranks. All the more so if the oil was headed for Cuba, which relies on Venezuelan crude to keep its lights on. Cutting off oil flow to Cuba could increase unrest in Havana.

Mr. Maduro is accusing the U.S. of piracy, but he’s the one who stole Venezuelan democracy and caused millions of his countrymen to flee. More than eight million Venezuelans live in exile, destabilizing societies across the hemisphere while he props up the aging Cuban police state.

The seizure signals that Mr. Trump isn’t

backing down on his effort to oust the dictator. This wouldn’t be a coup, but a liberation for Venezuelan democracy. Mr. Maduro lost a presidential election in July 2024 to opposition candidate Edmundo González, and he’s stayed in power through theft and terror.

Meantime, opposition leader María Corina Machado arrived in Oslo Wednesday after a daring escape from Venezuela with U.S. help. She was too late for her Nobel Peace Prize ceremony, but not too late to speak to a crowd that gathered to see her for the first time in public in nearly a year.

Ms. Machado praised Mr. Trump’s pressure campaign to remove Mr. Maduro and restore democracy. She called the seizure of the tanker a “very necessary step” because the regime uses “those resources to repress and persecute.” (See remarks nearby.) Her escape suggests the CIA may have sources in the country that can help with a democratic restoration.

Mr. Maduro’s thugs may have wanted to grab her on the way out, but they will be more intent on making sure she doesn’t return. She acknowledged that “the risk of going back is perhaps higher.” She quickly added: “I’ll be back in Venezuela. I have no doubt.”

Having committed the U.S. to oust Mr. Maduro, Mr. Trump is obliged to follow through.

The U.S. hits the regime in the pocketbook, and let’s hope there’s more.

Another \$12 Billion for a Tariff Bailout

President Trump said Monday he is “delighted” to give American farmers “\$12 billion in economic assistance.” According to Mr. Trump, this money will be coming from his tariffs, which is interesting, in that much of the pain farmers are feeling is also coming from his tariffs. Now watch, as the left hand pays off the right.

Soybeans are a particular case study. China is the world’s biggest buyer, but Mr. Trump’s recent trade escalations caused Beijing to halt U.S. soybean imports. In October a deal was reached that news reports say will result in China’s purchasing about 12 million tons this year, though that’s down from closer to 30 million in the past.

Caleb Ragland, the president of the American Soybean Association, said Tuesday that the federal aid would cover only about a quarter of the average losses on the crop. “This is a Band-Aid on an open wound,” he told CNN. “We’re thankful that there’s something, that this will help keep some farms in business, but what we truly need are market-based solutions. Those are sustainable long-term.” What farmers want, Mr. Ragland added, “is opportunities to make a living, to make a profit from the market, not

Trump’s latest round of aid for U.S. farmers hurt by his global trade wars.

being dependent on the next program to keep us from bleeding to death.”

As if Mother Nature weren’t erratic enough, now farmers are subject to the whims of politicians. On Monday Mr. Trump hinted that the Chinese might soon be buying big, saying he recently spoke with Xi Jinping, and “I think he’s going to do even more than he promised.” Where has the public heard this kind of talk before?

In 2020, when he signed a “historic trade deal” with China, Mr. Trump’s team bragged of billions in pledges to buy U.S. farm goods. “Though soybean exports managed to reach their pre-trade war levels over 2020–21, they still fell over 30 percent short of their target,” according to a 2022 report by the Peterson Institute for International Economics. By the way, this was while the first Trump Administration spent \$20 billion on aid to farmers after it derailed their exports.

“Trade wars are good, and easy to win,” Mr. Trump once boasted. Then why does he keep needing to divert billions of dollars to compensate the people whose livelihoods are collateral damage? Mr. Trump promised “Liberation Day.” He’s offering farmers a bailout instead.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Don’t Listen to the Reports of Ireland’s Demise

Dominic Green took to these pages not to praise Ireland but to bury it (“Ireland Is a Wounded Tiger,” op-ed, Dec. 8). He wrongly slights a good and prosperous country. His misperceptions are manifold.

First, Mr. Green’s claim that we demand the U.K. “surrender” Northern Ireland is preposterous. It flies in the face of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, negotiated by the British and Irish governments, brokered by the U.S. and supported by the Irish people. We recognize national unity requires popular consent.

Ireland supposedly has an “immigration crisis,” Mr. Green writes, never mind that much of the influx is designed to supply the needs of U.S. multinationals. He casts the country as crime-ridden, though the data belie him again. The Central Statistics Office in July reported that the number of recorded crime incidents fell for eight of the 14 offense groups between 2024–25. Homicides and burglary, among others, both declined. Ireland ranks second on the Global Peace Index.

Mr. Green pins his diatribe on a Dublin City Council proposal to rename Herzog Park. Yet the council quickly withdrew that motion after many Irish people and the government sharply criticized it. The country, along with several others, has recognized a state of Palestine: a decision anchored in sympathy

for the plight of ordinary Palestinians, not animus toward Israel. The Irish government has welcomed and supported President Trump’s peace plan, and Irish peacekeepers work with the U.N. to maintain stability in Southern Lebanon.

Mr. Green’s takes aim at Ireland’s economy as a member of the European Union, but the target is small. The economy grew 2.6% last year, on par with the U.S. Ireland continues to be a location of choice for American companies because it offers unhindered access to the European market. The 800 or so U.S. firms operating here are successful and profitable. They benefit from a highly educated workforce and fair and transparent tax system. The relationship is mutually beneficial: Ireland is the fifth-largest source of foreign direct investment in the U.S. and continues to expand its footprint in the states.

Contrary to Mr. Green’s dystopian sketch, our economy is humming along. Like much of the rest of the world, Ireland faces headwinds, but its people are nothing if not resilient. After all, since 1776, millions of Irishmen and women and their descendants have helped make America great through their labors.

DANIEL MULHALL

Dublin

*Mr. Mulhall was Ireland’s ambassador to the U.S., 2017–22.*

Is the GOP Serious About Fixing ACA Fraud?

You write that “ObamaCare Is a Mecca for Fraud” (Review & Outlook, Dec. 8), but does President Trump really care? Roll back the tape.

In 2024 the Biden administration suspended 850 insurance brokers for “reasonable suspicion of fraudulent or abusive conduct related to unauthorized enrollments or unauthorized plan switches.” Yet as the Government Accountability Office noted in its recent report, in May the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services said it reinstated them to help “fulfill the agency’s statutory and regulatory procedures.”

The same laxity persists elsewhere. In his first week in office, Mr. Trump fired the Health and Human Services Department’s inspector general, who saved taxpayers more than \$9 billion in

fiscal 2024 by performing essential audits of healthcare expenditures. The president also reportedly fired 200 staff members from the Office of Program Operations and Local Engagement, which oversees Affordable Care Act Marketplace fraud.

The government ought to be able to remedy the GAO’s findings without denying a mother access to care for her sick child. Yet the GOP is keen on objecting to the ACA without proposing a substantive alternative. If they want to correct the system, they can begin by overcoming their fear of Mr. Trump and demanding the administration begin policing fraudsters and stop signaling that suspected criminals will be pardoned.

REP. LLOYD DOGGETT (D, TEXAS)

Austin, Texas

The New Yorkers Saying No to Assisted Suicide

In his excellent column “To Sign or Not to Sign, That Is the Question” (Main Street, Dec. 9), William McGurn writes that assisted suicide “isn’t generating much interest or passion in New York.” That overlooks the thousands of residents whose voices may not be loud enough to register with Gov. Hochul.

I oppose assisted suicide because of my disabled brother, Duncan. The language my friends use to justify their support for the bill—an interest in autonomy to end one’s life when it becomes too unproductive or inconvenient—could equally be used to say his life isn’t worth living.

A friend battling cancer teared up when telling me she sees New York’s bill as a betrayal. She dreads the day a doctor may offer her the option: an indication that the state is resigned to give up on people like her.

A friend who teaches philosophy at a state university says her students have been “so, so horrified” by the bill and are “unanimous” in their disapproval. They fear a future in which they may have to talk a grandparent

out of committing suicide to save his or her descendants money.

It’s no coincidence that the “Medical Aid in Dying” bill made it to Gov. Hochul’s desk only after the death of Diane Coleman (1953–2024), a disabled activist who opposed assisted suicide. New York’s effort was proposed 10 times during her lifetime, only to fail in the face of her organized opposition.

Her voice is now silent, but those of us with family and friends threatened by the law continue to speak. Last week hundreds turned out in Syracuse, Albany, Buffalo and Manhattan for vigils, urging the governor to veto the bill. There is a rising generation that rejects the inhumane logic of assisted suicide. Perhaps their voices will be heard.

BRIA SANDFORD RAMOS

New York

Why AI CEOs Can’t Succeed

I am excited about the potential for artificial intelligence, but the suggestion that it will be able to replace CEOs frightens me (“AI’s Next Challenge: Take the CEO’s Job,” Technology, Dec. 8). My mind immediately went to Mr. Potter from “It’s a Wonderful Life,” a character known for his ruthless business tactics and lack of compassion. Is that the future of AI CEOs, cold and calculating?

AI can enhance decision-making, but it won’t replace human values. Let’s ensure we keep executives like George Bailey, leaders who balance profit with purpose and empathy. Or at least let’s require companies to install a Chief Humanity Officer to ensure AI CEO decisions are checked against ethical standards and the well-being of employees and communities, preserving the necessary human touch in corporate governance.

WILL FITZGERALD

Katy, Texas

Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



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LARRY DAVIS

Durham, N.C.

LEO A. GORDON

Los Angeles



OPINION

The Gaza Militias That Can Defeat Hamas

By Hussam Al Astal

*Khan Younis, Gaza*

Two months into the Gaza cease-fire, Hamas leader Khaled Mashal has declared from Doha, Qatar, that his group won't disarm or hand over power as agreed. But Mr. Mashal isn't acting from a position of power.

Hamas is weaker and more unpopular than ever in Gaza. The only cards it still holds over the civilian population are fear and brutality. On the international stage, Mr. Mashal's bluff relies on nobody else having enough skin in the game to call him out.

I am commander of the Counter Terrorism Strike Force in Khan Younis and have seen plenty of evidence of Hamas's demise. My patrols have

Groups like the Counter-Terrorism Strike Force can turn President Trump's peace plan into a reality.

arrested Hamas fighters on both sides of the cease-fire line. The new Hamas recruits are inexperienced and more likely to surrender under pressure. A few have begun to defect. From the messages I receive daily, many more will follow.

Alongside CTSF are four other anti-Hamas militias. The original leader of the Rafah-based Popular

Forces group, Yasser Abu Shabab, was killed last week in an internal dispute, but his group remains strong. As time passes, it is clear that our groups should unite under the banner of a new Gaza security service.

I recommend that our combined force report to President Trump's Board of Peace, and that our forces take an oath that neither Hamas nor any other terrorist group will take power in Gaza again.

That doesn't mean that I hope to launch a new war against Hamas in the territory it currently holds. I lost my daughter and granddaughter when Israeli planes targeted Hamas terrorists who were using them as human shields. The thought of more civilians losing their lives in Gaza is unbearable, but I also know that should Hamas remain in or return to power, this tragedy will repeat itself.

There is an alternative path, one that disempowers Hamas and guides it toward an exit. Hamas derives its power from the control and extortion of Gaza's population. Remove that and Hamas quickly becomes irrelevant.

I support a proposal that would see the international community ignore Mr. Mashal and begin investing heavily in eastern Gaza, where Hamas has no foothold. Gaza's civilian population can then be slowly brought over the yellow line dividing Hamas from the Israeli army, while the new Gazan security force, backed by international part-



The Counter-Terrorism Strike Force.

ners, prevents any infiltrations or assaults by Hamas.

Families who today pay rent to Hamas to pitch their tent on the rubble of their former homes are desperate for an alternative to Hamas corruption. Young men will choose employment in construction and a reopened economy over a place among the ranks of Hamas.

When the population begins to vote with its feet, Hamas's bluff to the international community will collapse. Until then, Gaza will remain divided. Once the population moves to the other side of the yellow line, however, Hamas will have to admit

defeat and hand over its weapons.

There is no benefit to compromising with Hamas now, especially after its actions in the past two months. Hamas recently announced a 10-day ultimatum that its internal opponents publicly repent or face execution. No group that engages in the torture and extrajudicial killings of its own people has any intention of relinquishing power over them. With his declaration last weekend that Hamas will refuse to disarm voluntarily, Mr. Mashal is simply saying out loud what has been obvious all along.

If Hamas does keep its weapons

and a strong Gazan security force isn't established, Hamas will look for an opportunity to regain control. After driving out international forces, it will re-establish itself in power, exact revenge on its internal rivals and turn its guns on Israel, taking us all back into hell. This is written in Hamas's DNA, and Gazans have paid the price in blood too many times. We must break this cycle.

As the first phase of Mr. Trump's peace plan comes to a successful close, the anti-Hamas forces in Gaza stand with him so we can together secure a permanent change for the good during the next phase. The choice before the international community is whether to support this new Gazan security force or watch as Hamas undermines and eventually overturns any progress.

Mr. Mashal can give speeches from Doha, but here in Gaza we look forward to seeing him and other Hamas leaders living in Qatar and Turkey facing justice in a Gazan courtroom for their crimes against our people. Despite ruling over millions of Gazans now, Mr. Mashal's trial will be only his second visit here.

For now we must ensure that Hamas can't bluff its way into retaking power. Mr. Trump's 20-point plan offers Gaza a real future. We stand ready to make it a reality.

*Mr. Al Astal is leader of the Counter-Terrorism Strike Force, an anti-Hamas militia.*



**POLITICAL ECONOMICS**  
*By Joseph C. Sternberg*

“Europe” is these days and how it works.

The document set off a wave of outrage because the administration warned that Europe faces “civilizational erasure” that would make it not worth the trouble for America to defend. Particular concerns are the waves of migration reshaping Europe's demographics and intrusive governance at odds with prosperity and political freedoms.

The strategy takes particular aim at the European Union, which the administration numbers among the “transnational bodies that undermine political liberty and sovereignty” on the Continent. The document envisions a greater role for American meddling in Europe's domestic politics, particularly to support insurgent parties challenging the EU.

If all of this were true, the White

House would be right to adapt America's national strategy. But most of it isn't. Europe faces many and varied political, cultural and economic ailments, several of them severe. But the administration—and America's neoisolationist “national conservatives” in general—are glaringly wrong on three major points.

First, Europeans appear to be much less bothered by a loss of national sovereignty than Americans assume. Majorities of the citizens in the EU's largest member countries have a positive opinion of the EU, the Pew Research Center found in a poll conducted this spring. In Germany and the Netherlands the figure is at least 70%. Given the choice in a referendum, voters would prefer to stay in the EU, according to a YouGov survey in nine countries this autumn. This includes culturally right-leaning Poland.

Of particular note, 70% of people in countries that are part of the euro currency believe membership in that bloc is good for them, even though the euro entails a greater loss of national economic sovereignty than membership in the EU itself.

This is why successful insurgent parties of the right typically end up abandoning their anti-EU antagonism to expand their electoral reach. Marine Le Pen, leader of France's in-

surgent-right National Rally, has all but dropped any suggestion that France should leave the euro or the EU. Some U.S. conservatives go gaga for Hungarian President Viktor Orbán when he feuds with Brussels over sovereignty, but he has never proposed exiting the bloc as the U.K. did.

Americans and others who argue for breaking up or “abolishing” the EU—as Elon Musk has amid a recent regulatory feud with Brussels—

The clearest example comes from

Germany. Vice President JD Vance and Mr. Musk waded into German domestic politics ahead of February's election, throwing their support behind the insurgent-right Alternative for Germany, or AfD. They appear to have been suckered by the AfD's antiestablishment tilt and its hostility to the EU, ignoring well-documented concerns about Nazi sympathies among some of its leaders.

Yet the parts of AfD's agenda that Messrs. Vance and Musk like either are unlikely ever to happen (Germany leaving the EU) or can be achieved by mainstream parties (tighter immigration controls and abandonment of ruinous green-energy policies). What chiefly distinguishes AfD in German politics—beyond the Nazi allegations—is that it is one of the more anti-American, pro-Russian parties. The ultimate winner of that election, center-right Friedrich Merz, is the most pro-American chancellor Germany has had in years—and Mr. Vance managed to goad Mr. Merz into declaring German “independence” from Washington.

Third, Europe's values aren't our values. Despite common origins, we hold a fundamentally different understanding of the proper relationships between individual, society and state—one reason we split from a

European empire when we did. We've developed very different traditions on matters such as free speech, religious liberty and economic management. One can believe, as I do, that the American model is superior for fostering prosperity and human flourishing. But any realistic and credible U.S. foreign policy has to acknowledge that Europeans will disagree.

The U.K. experience since Brexit tells the tale. Even in the only country ever to leave the EU, voters have refused to abandon EU rules and regulations. Nearly a decade after the referendum, Britain continues to impose most of the laws it inherited from the EU because every attempt to pare them back has proved politically unworkable. Despite major controversies over speech rights, Britons are likely to accept—and desire—a speech-regulation regime that's more restrictive than America's.

U.S. conservatives might look at the foregoing and think it's further proof that Europe isn't worth saving. But Europe's differences from us doesn't diminish America's national interest in peace and security on the Continent. A better strategy would focus on how we can work with our allies, not on fomenting domestic revolutions most of their citizens don't want.

By Jason Johnson

Two Washington Metropolitan police officers were tried and convicted in 2022 in the death of a fleeing suspect. President Trump pardoned the defendants, who he said were only doing their jobs. The two officers got their jobs back.

Fellow officer Cory Novick, who testified at the trial, wasn't so lucky. For telling the truth in court, he lost his job. That gives the administration another opportunity to right a wrong and put a good cop back in uniform.

During the trial, federal prosecutors called Mr. Novick to the stand but apparently didn't like what he had to say. Prosecutors moved to have Mr. Novick's testimony impeached—discounted by the court—in jury instructions, but the judge said no.

The problem seems to have been that his testimony failed to support some of the government's claims. He may have even made the prose-

cution look bad by undermining their preferred theory from the witness stand.

Two years later, Mr. Novick lost his new job as a U.S. marshal after being put on a blacklist on the say-so of federal prosecutors. Although no court found that Mr. Novick had committed perjury or any other crime, the mere allegation put him on a police blacklist. Mr. Novick was fired without evidence, a hearing or a chance to appeal.

In *Brady v. Maryland* (1963), the Supreme Court upheld the rights of the accused, requiring prosecutors to disclose potentially exculpatory evidence to the defense. Subsequent decisions, including *Giglio v. U.S.* (1972), ensured transparency, due process, and remedy for defendants. But the *Brady* doctrine has been turned on its head to target and tarnish police officers by denying them the same rights the court enshrined for accused criminals.

The U.S. attorney's office for the

District of Columbia maintains a list of law-enforcement officers who are suspected, accused or convicted of “integrity” violations or other misconduct. So do many local prosecutors' offices. These lists—known as Lewis lists, after *Lewis v. U.S.* (1979), a follow-up to the *Brady* decision—are used to alert the defense if an officer involved in a defendant's case has a record of relevant misconduct (such as perjury) that would affect his credibility as a trial witness.

Mr. Novick's name landed on such a list. To date, the U.S. attorney's office hasn't publicly identified the reason for Mr. Novick's inclusion. A careful review of the court transcript of his testimony reveals nothing that should have flagged him.

Being added to these blacklists is a career-killer for cops. Departments assume the officer's participation in court will jeopardize outcomes, making them a liability.

But Mr. Novick, who had only started his job as a U.S. marshal,

received more notice than most when the U.S. Marshals Service was informed that the U.S. attorney's office had placed him on the Lewis list. The Marshals Service then cited this as the reason for his termination. Now Mr. Novick is suing to get his job back. But the same injustice is repeated on a daily basis across the country.

For testifying truthfully, Cory Novick landed on a blacklist and lost his job as a U.S. marshal.

The federal government has no statute governing the use of Lewis lists, requiring notice to officers or setting criteria for placement, and there is no mandatory appeal process. Most states are little better. Only a handful—including Arizona, Colorado and Iowa—require advance notice and

an opportunity to respond.

So there is no clear legal definition of who belongs on these rosters, let alone guidance on how long officers must remain on these lists or how they can seek to have their names expunged. Local prosecutors have absolute, unreviewable authority over how, why and when to include an officer. Criteria can drift from sustained findings of lying under oath to broad categories like “bias” or “integrity concerns,” sometimes based on unsustained complaints or internal politics. In many places, officers don't even know they have been listed until they face significant employment consequences—if then.

The lack of transparency and due process afforded to law enforcement officers flies in the face of the *Brady* decision. The rules—or lack thereof—around these blacklists don't serve justice but pervert it.

The Justice Department can right the wrong done to Mr. Novick by removing him from the Lewis list and petition for his reinstatement. But for real change to happen, Congress and dozens of states must act to end these unfair blacklists. There has to be transparency and a remedy to prevent retaliation, abuse and incompetence. These lists need to be disclosed, have rigorous standards for inclusion, and allow for appeals.

Cops as much as criminals deserve justice. That's especially true for those who tell the truth, even if it's inconvenient for the government.

*Mr. Johnson is a former deputy commissioner of the Baltimore Police Department. He is president of the Law Enforcement Legal Defense Fund, which is funding Cory Novick's legal team.*

Notable & Quotable: Machado

From Maria Corina Machado's speech accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, delivered by her daughter in Oslo, Dec. 10:

More than anything, what we Venezuelans can offer the world is the lesson forged through this long and difficult journey: that to have democracy, we must be willing to fight for freedom. And freedom is a choice that must be renewed each day, measured by our willingness and our courage to defend it. . . .

A people who choose freedom contribute not only to themselves, but to humanity. We attain freedom only

when we refuse to turn our backs on ourselves; when we confront the truth directly, no matter how painful; when love for what truly matters in life gives us the strength to persevere and to prevail.

Only through that inner alignment—that vital integrity—do we rise to meet our destiny. Only then do we become who we truly are, able to live a life worthy of being lived. Along this march to freedom, we gained profound certainties of the soul—truths that have given our lives a deeper meaning and prepared us to build a great future in peace.



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# Chicago Tribune

Founded June 10, 1847

## EDITORIALS

### Johnson should endorse Hopkins' latest teen curfew proposal

Ald. Brian Hopkins, whose 2nd Ward includes much of downtown Chicago, deserves the city's thanks for striving repeatedly to find a means that will pass muster with our mayor to control mobs of teens who "take over" the Loop and cause mayhem and sometimes death.

The issue has resurfaced with the downtown shooting death of a 14-year-old last month after the annual tree-lighting ceremony. With two days' notice that a large teen gathering was planned, police appeared to take all the right steps to keep things under control. But tragedy ensued anyway.

We think Ald. Hopkins finally has hit on the right way of giving the Chicago Police Department the tools it needs to stop these mob events before they get started. A new proposed ordinance he filed earlier this week would allow CPD Superintendent Larry Snelling, in consultation with Deputy Mayor for Community Safety Garien Gatewood, to declare four-hour curfews for minors within discrete areas with at least 12 hours' advance notice.

Recall that an earlier Hopkins initiative to give Snelling powers to declare "snap" teen curfews passed the City Council but was vetoed by Mayor Brandon Johnson. Even Snelling at the time said he didn't need the ability to impose curfews with almost no notice in order to disperse teen mobs. And, though we urged Johnson to sign the snap curfew, we've been squeamish, too, at the prospect that young people not part of these planned gatherings could get caught up accidentally in the police actions.

The minimum 12-hour lead time Hopkins now is proposing gives minors and their parents more than ample warning to stay away from a specific part of the city at a specific time. Arrests for curfew violations, rather than for failing to respond to dispersal orders outside of curfew hours, don't go on teens' records and thus don't affect anyone's future prospects. Those arrested are held until picked up by a parent or someone else responsible for them.

As Hopkins explained to us, police are reluctant to arrest teens who gather in mobs for fear precisely of having those arrests recorded for posterity. But police are more willing to arrest those who violated curfew.

Indeed, Hopkins said, the officers on the awful night of the tree-lighting waited until 10 p.m., when the city's ordinary teen curfew begins, to make arrests. Once a few of the mob leaders had been arrested, the others quickly scattered, Hopkins said. But for nearly an hour before that point, police struggled to get the scene under control.

Hopkins' explanation and his proposed method of addressing the problem make perfect sense to us. And they should make perfect sense, too, to the mayor. He's likely again to have to decide whether to veto this latest curfew plan.

Hopkins believes he'll have more than 30 aldermen voting yes on his ordinance, but likely not the required 34 to override a veto.

He's optimistic Johnson will find this version more palatable than the earlier effort.

Unfortunately, Ald. Jason Ervin, 28th, immediately moved to consign Hopkins' proposal to the Rules Committee, where proposed ordinances famously "go to die." There's too much support for this measure to stay in the Rules Committee, but the maneuver does mean there will be some delay. That's unfortunate.

All involved, including the mayor, agree these teen takeovers are a hazard. The mayor should signal quickly that he supports this version of the curfew, and the council should pass it as soon as possible.

#### ON THIS DAY 100 YEARS AGO ANOTHER WORLD'S FAIR

Mayor Dever has recommended to the city council that the centennial of Chicago be celebrated in another world's fair ... The suggestion has enthusiastic backing from Charles H. Wacker of the Chicago Plan and Dr. Otto L. Schmidt of the Chicago Historical association. It seems also to have had a sympathetic reception.

The Columbian exposition is remembered as the focusing of the old Chicago energy ... It made the model and thereafter there were only imitators.

The city is having a new burst of energy and a good many people will say let's do it again. It is said, and it is true, that it would give an objective. It would stimulate by centering ideas upon an achievement and the citizens who are already considering it believe that the construction undertaken could be with a view to permanent attractions and improvements. ...

The Columbian exposition gave the city an inheritance of improved transportation ... The exposition also gave the city a few buildings, some of which we are still trying to preserve.

It is doubtful if the energy which went into such a fair any place at any time ever had full, permanent compensation for the city which gave it. A world's fair is a bright party. The day after is the day after. If it is successful it means a great temporary strain upon the resources of the city ... The abrupt stoppage of even twenty per cent of the demand on an industry is demoralizing if not ruinous.

We are not knocking the proposal ... It probably is not wholly bad to have an occasional party for stimulation even if all the flowers are faded the next day and the host has a touch of headache. In dollars and cents and continuous benefit a city would be further ahead which built to increase its attractions permanently year by year ... accommodation would develop with the increased demand and remain.

A zoo would permanently increase this flow ... There would be another continuing attraction. Soldiers' field is such, the Field museum, etc. And in that spirit, the discussion continues: whether Chicago should once again seize the moment for celebration, or invest steadily in the lasting institutions that shape its civic life long after any fair has ended.

Tribune editorial board, Dec. 12, 1925



A detainee places her shoe on after receiving an electronic monitoring device prior to being released at Cook County Jail on April 12, 2018. ARMANDO L. SANCHEZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

### Cook County's electronic monitoring system is putting people in danger. Fix it now

When we learned that the man who allegedly set 26-year-old Bethany MaGee on fire on a Blue Line train last month not only had been arrested more than 70 times but was also out on electronic monitoring after assaulting a social worker at MacNeal Hospital — in spite of the Cook County state's attorney's request that he be held — we were alarmed. That man, Lawrence Reed, had violated his electronic monitoring terms multiple times prior to the attack.

Given the shocking, high-profile nature of this story, you might be tempted to believe it an anomaly. It is not.

In June, Chicagoan Arturo De La Mora was sentenced to 52 years in prison for murdering his girlfriend while he was on electronic monitoring for a prior felony gun case, crime news site CWBChicago reported. In October, a Chicago man received 22 years in prison for carjacking a Facebook Marketplace seller at gunpoint while on electronic monitoring for an earlier case in which he allegedly tried to kill a Cook County sheriff's deputy.

A little over a year ago, Lacramioara Beldie was stabbed to death in Portage Park by her estranged husband, Constantin Beldie, who was on electronic monitoring at the time. A wrongful-death suit filed this month alleges he had dozens of monitoring violations leading up to the killing without any meaningful intervention from the county or its monitor vendor.

These are but a few horrific examples of a disastrous system that must be fixed, and quickly.

We spoke Tuesday with Cook County State's Attorney Eileen O'Neill Burke about this serious problem. Burke assured us that her office is committed to requesting pretrial detention whenever the public is at risk, and the data she shared encourages us that the state's attorneys arguing these cases on the front end are doing their part to prevent more danger.

Her team touted an increase in pretrial detentions under her watch, noting that, for example, detentions for aggravated domestic battery cases had increased to 85% from 61% under her predecessor. For cases involving handguns converted to the equivalent of machine guns, Burke's office requested detention in 97% of cases, with judges approving pretrial detention 76% of the time. Again, these numbers and the higher frequency of judges approving prosecutors' requests for detention are encouraging. But the problem of past detention refusals that have left violent folks on the streets with inadequate guardrails — and the potential for more in the future — continues to plague us.

"Electronic monitoring needs a law enforcement component," Burke added, addressing the need to be able to enforce electronic monitoring terms and restrictions when people don't comply. She's right. As the system exists today, there's next to no accountability and no muscle at all to ensure compliance while people remain

free ahead of their court dates. Burke described herself as "the skunk at the garden party" for questioning what happens when someone, say, cuts off their monitor ahead of trial.

We need answers to questions like that. The county cannot continue operating a system without clear protocols for violations, otherwise Chicagoans and visitors to our city aren't safe. Thankfully, the new chief judge understands this and is taking action. On Dec. 2, Cook County's new Chief Judge Charles Beach ordered an urgent review of the county's electronic monitoring program.

His announcement couldn't have come soon enough. According to the November electronic monitoring report from the office of the chief judge, there are still troubling cases of defendants facing serious charges of violence on electronic monitoring, including individuals charged with murder, attempted murder and aggravated criminal sexual assault, underscoring concerns about who is being released pretrial.

Much of the problem can be attributed to a culture that predates Beach and O'Neill Burke. Electronic monitoring has been part of Cook County's criminal justice system for decades. But its use has ballooned and been increasingly applied to people charged with serious violent offenses.

That has to change. It's clear the county's electronic monitoring system isn't working and isn't adequately protecting the public. O'Neill Burke has committed to requesting detention for those accused of committing serious crimes, but judges have the final say on which defendants are detained. For those accused of violent crimes, there really is no alternative to home confinement and ankle monitors if a judge rules against incarceration.

So Beach needs to treat this as a crisis. We grant that solving the problem of a lack of sworn officers to enforce violations of electronic monitoring conditions will take time. Creating a new unit along those lines within the chief judge's office should be considered now that the office has sole responsibility for managing the electronic monitoring system.

What happens in the meantime, though? Cook County shouldn't be expected to endure the status quo a year or longer while the wheels of government spin. No doubt Beach needs to dedicate more personnel to improve compliance for those already on monitoring. But the chief judge should consider issuing temporary guidance to his fellow judges that errs on the side of protecting the public for those accused of violent crimes. Like Lawrence Reed.

Overall crime in the city is down statistically, and all are glad to see it. But no one thinks Chicago is "safe" yet. Unfortunately, the current state of electronic monitoring is a big reason why.

#### EDITORIAL CARTOON



WALT HANDELSMAN



# OPINION



Mayor Brandon Johnson arrives for a City Council meeting at City Hall on Wednesday. **EILEEN T. MESLAR/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

## Big loser in city budget battle is Johnson

By Will Johnson

Mayor Brandon Johnson and the majority of the Chicago City Council are deadlocked over next year's municipal budget, an impasse that could halt all city services if they can't find common ground on tax increases by year's end.

Chicago residents aren't deadlocked, though, over who's to blame if city government actually shuts down — it's Johnson, hands down. In a citywide poll we just conducted, three quarters of representative respondents say they'll hold the mayor responsible if he vetoes the council's alternative budget, versus a quarter who'll pin it on the council.

The opposition is widespread. Across all age groups and among both men and women, most Chicago adults in our poll hold the mayor accountable for this breakdown, with the share rising to supermajorities of 4 out of 5 residents among those 35 and older.

A plurality of 43% of residents says they'll also turn against aldermen who side with Johnson in a budget vote,

while just 15% say they'll rally for his allies. (The rest say this vote won't affect their preferences one way or another.)

However it ends, this budget battle seems likely to hamper Johnson in a reelection bid. Though he won handily in 2023, his nonstop efforts to raise taxes are a turnoff. Half of Chicago adults now have unfavorable opinions of the mayor — twice the number who see him favorably. This net favorability gap leaves him with minimal political capital to negotiate a budget resolution or rally public support for difficult choices.

Johnson brought this rebellion on himself. To help close a massive \$1.15 billion deficit, he proposed reimposing an employee head tax. The tax was repealed in 2014 under Mayor Rahm Emanuel, who called it a job killer. Rebranding it a "community safety surcharge," Johnson initially asked the City Council in October to enact an annual \$252 per employee tax on corporations with 100 or more city employees, which he said would net \$100 million annually.

Facing public opposition from 26 of

the 50 members of the City Council, he began backpedaling by limiting the tax to those employing 200 or more and, earlier this week, reducing it further to only "corporate behemoths" with headcounts of 500 and up. At the same time, though, he raised the annual rate to \$396.

Neither modification changed the minds of aldermen in the majority bloc. Instead, they drafted their own budget, which avoids any head tax by increasing the fee for household garbage collection by nearly 70% and raising taxes on ride-shares and liquor. Johnson has vowed he'll veto any budget that swaps "regressive taxes" such as those for his head tax.

It's unclear how this duel will end. The majority would need to grow to 34 members to override a veto. Conversely, Johnson would need to peel away at least two aldermen from an opposition majority that is now up to 27 members.

Our polling doesn't reveal any easy workarounds. The city could avoid these taxes by borrowing more. But 56% of residents oppose that. Another option, which neither the mayor nor

the council majority endorses, would be to cut spending by reducing benefits to municipal employees. In our poll, 40% reject that idea, while 37% favor workforce sacrifices. (The other 23% say they don't know.)

If Johnson and the City Council can't find an acceptable compromise, Chicago will enter 2026 without a budget, something that's never happened. With no legal authorization to spend any more money and employees getting no pay, city government could be forced to cease operations overnight.

Though Johnson may look weak by compromising with the council majority on the head tax, it's what the Chicago residents have told us they want: a local government that takes a commonsense approach to taxing and spending, and not one that gives employers or employees yet another reason to leave the city behind

*Will Johnson is the Chicago-based CEO of Outward Intelligence, an artificial intelligence-powered quantitative research company, and former CEO of The Harris Poll.*

## Gale Sayers and the greatest performance in Chicago sports history

By Michael Peregrine

Forget for a moment memories of Walter Payton, Dick Butkus and Dan Hampton, among many legendary Bears. Because as incredible as their individual game achievements were, they all stand in the shadow of what Gale Sayers accomplished 60 years ago on Dec. 12. It's not only a fun recollection given the Bears' surprising 2025 success; it's also an important one, given Sayers' contributions to the team and to the city.

1965 was a transitional year for the Bears. They won the NFL championship in 1963, only to suffer a disastrous 1964 season. By 1965, the roster was aging rapidly, and team pursued an influx of youth. And they struck gold, drafting future Hall of Famers Butkus and Sayers.

The team started slowly, with a crushing 52-24 defeat by the San Francisco 49ers, followed by two more losses. But with Butkus leading the defense and Sayers the offense, the team was in contention by the Dec. 12 Wrigley Field return match with the 49ers.

The day was typically cold and rainy — miserable for anything outdoors, including a football game. "A muddy field for everybody but Gale Sayers," Bears tight end Mike Ditka noted. Indeed, it was a day when everything went right for the rookie running back. Sayers scored six touchdowns, tying an NFL record that has never been exceeded.

But it wasn't that he tied the record, but rather the spectacular manner how he did it, that made for football legend. In the first quarter, he took a screen pass



Gale Sayers, the "Kansas Comet," is all business as he eludes San Francisco 49ers defenders on the way to a 21-yard touchdown run on Dec. 12, 1965, one of six in the game. **CHICAGO TRIBUNE HISTORICAL PHOTO**

for an 80-yard score. Talk about yards after catch! The second quarter saw touchdown runs of 21 and 7 yards. In the third quarter, he had 50-yard and 1-yard scoring runs. He finished the day with a fourth quarter punt return of 85 yards. And current head coach Ben Johnson says he likes explosive plays! Future Hall of Famers Ditka and George Halas each referred to it as the greatest performance in NFL history.

Sayers had enormous self-confidence in his physical gifts but expressed it in a humble and team-oriented way. He truly

believed that if he was given the ball, no one could catch him: "Give me 18 inches of daylight. That's all I need." And he was right. Bears announcer Jack Brickhouse described his elusive running style as "he cuts, weaves, stops and goes; he runs with power and precision." Teammates and opponents alike compared him to magician Harry Houdini, an acrobat and a ballet dancer.

Yet the "Kansas Comet," as Sayers was known, streaked across the football sky for only a few years. He led the league in

rushing yards in 1966, followed by another outstanding season in 1967. But he suffered a major knee injury in 1968 against, ironically, the 49ers. He underwent arduous rehabilitation (often assisted by teammate Brian Piccolo) and returned to lead the league in rushing again in 1969. But unable to overcome another knee injury in the 1970 season, he retired. In 1977, he became the youngest person to be inducted into the NFL Hall of Fame.

Sayers went on to a successful post-Bears career, working in a variety of sports leadership and

business ownership positions. He supported the adoption charity The Cradle and founded the Gale Sayers Center in Austin. But the real Sayers was on display in the memorable film "Brian's Song", which told of his bond with Piccolo, who died in June 1970 at age 26. The centerpiece of the film was Sayers' moving acceptance speech for the George S. Halas Award:

"You flatter me by giving me this award, but I tell you here and now that I accept it for Brian Piccolo. Brian Piccolo is the man of courage who should receive the George S. Halas Award. It is mine tonight, it is Brian Piccolo's tomorrow. ... I love Brian Piccolo, and I'd like all of you to love him too. And tonight, when you hit your knees, please ask God to love him."

Piccolo died less than a month later. Watch the film again, 55 years later, and you'll still cry.

NFL Films greats Steve Sabol and John "The Voice of God" Facenda provided the narration for a film about Sayers: "In a generation or a lifetime, the great runner arrives in pro football. He is one of the select few whose number is burned into the memory of every fan."

Indeed, No. 40 was burned into the memory of every fan and player shivering in Wrigley Field on that muddy mid-December day in 1965. They knew what they had seen — the greatest performance ever. They're unlikely to feel differently today. Eighteen inches of daylight, indeed.

*Michael Peregrine is a Chicago lawyer. He watched the Dec. 12 game from Wrigley's right field upper deck.*



OPINION

# Normalizing Russia normalizes the mass abduction of Ukrainian children



Elizabeth Shackelford

Imagine that your child has been kidnapped and taken far away. That child is scared, and you can offer no comfort. You don't know if your child is being tortured, abused or militarized, but you know that someone is trying to turn your child into someone else entirely. It's a parent's worst nightmare.

Imagine that trauma and then scale it up thousands of times, and you have the reality that Ukraine is living with today.

Since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, tens of thousands of Ukrainian children have been kidnapped from their families and communities, taken to Russia and Russian-held territories and forced into indoctrination camps, military training camps, the Russian adoption system and who knows where else. Some have been tortured and sexually abused, while some have been forced to fight against Ukraine as child soldiers. At least two of these children, a 12-year-old girl named Misha and 16-year-old named Liza, ended up in a camp in North Korea.

These children are fed pro-Russian propaganda and forced to speak in Russian in a deliberate effort to deny their national identity. Their documents, histories and citizenship are being erased to wholly sever their ties to their families and nation. They are told lies about who they are and where they come from.

The facts are well documented, thanks to the Yale School of Public Health's Humanitarian Research Lab (HRL), which uses satellite imagery and open-source intelligence methods to track these crimes.

Some children were taken after their parents were killed in Russian strikes or by Russian troops or were separated from families in occupied areas. Others were taken from Ukrainian orphanages and foster care and put up for adoption in Russia after their identities were falsified. Children who resist this Russification are labeled extremists or terrorists.

Russia has, in fact, been stealing Ukrainian children since it invaded Crimea in 2014. This is a war crime that is on the rise across the globe. If Vladimir Putin can continue to do so with impunity, we can only expect more children and families will face this terrible fate.

Russia has committed many gross human rights violations against the Ukrainian people in this war and continues to ruthlessly assault civilians and critical infrastructure. But its attack on Ukraine's



Protesters, including children, gather on May 24 in London to demand the return of the Ukrainian children abducted by Russia. According to the Ukrainian government, more than 19,500 children have been forcibly taken by Russia since the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine. To date, only 1,307 of these children have been safely returned to areas under Ukrainian government control. ALISHIA ABODUNDE/GETTY

children is particularly grotesque, as they are put through hell to stoke fear in Ukrainian society and used as tools in Russia's attempt to extinguish the Ukrainian nation.

Ukrainian authorities have officially confirmed 9,221 cases of abduction and are actively reviewing thousands more, but experts investigating these crimes believe at least 35,000 children have been stolen so far. This doesn't account for the 1.6 million Ukrainian children subjected to Russian "reprogramming" within Russian schools, camps and social institutions in occupied Ukraine, where children are taught to be ashamed of their Ukrainian roots.

HRL has so far identified at least 210 "reeducation" facilities, most managed by the Russian government and many that include military-style training. As HRL Executive Director Nathaniel Raymond testified, "Kids as young as 8 years old were dressed in gas masks and military uniforms, taught to assemble machine guns, and — in at least one instance — were taken to a camp where children assembled drones, rapid loaders for assault rifles and other devices for Russia's military use."

A Senate hearing on Dec. 3 detailed this large-scale and systemic abduction

program, with powerful testimony from Ukraine's ambassador to the United States and experts from organizations working to bring these children home.

Just one day after the hearing, the Trump administration released its new national security strategy, which presented Putin's Russia in a very different light. Instead of calling out the threat Russia poses to stability and peace in Europe and beyond, this administration chastised Europe for viewing Russia as a threat. President Donald Trump continues to blame Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy for the lack of progress toward peace, while holding Russia, the only aggressor, wholly blameless. Trump has now formalized his warming relations with Russia and, in doing so, normalized Putin's crimes.

In an interview with Politico, Trump shared his expectation that Russia would inevitably prevail, saying that "at some point, size will win, generally." Just consider what it would mean for weaker countries, vulnerable populations, and, of course, children if we accept that premise.

The United States could play a positive role here instead, as Congress seems inclined to do. A bill introduced in December would designate Russia as a state

sponsor of terror if it fails to return these kidnapped children, and another, the Abducted Ukrainian Children Recovery and Accountability Act, would provide ongoing support for investigation and accountability to address these crimes. Passing and implementing these laws could provide the information and pressure needed to end the nightmare these children are enduring.

Any agreement to end this war should require the unconditional return of all the children. If we pressure Ukraine to cede more territory, thousands will be trapped behind new borders with no hope of being returned.

If we do nothing but help rehabilitate Putin on the world stage, we are legitimizing Russia's mass child kidnapping and abuse. Is that really the role we want our country to play in the world?

*Elizabeth Shackelford is a senior adviser with the Institute for Global Affairs at Eurasia Group and a foreign affairs columnist for the Chicago Tribune. She is also a distinguished lecturer with the Dickey Center at Dartmouth College. She was previously a U.S. diplomat and is the author of "The Dissent Channel: American Diplomacy in a Dishonest Age."*

## VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

### Biden failed in job

Regarding the story " 'Really reckless' " (Dec. 7), I agree. The conduct of Immigration and Customs Enforcement in enforcing immigration and border laws could have been less rough and more professional during Operation Midway Blitz. The agency should have been more communicative. We have a right to know the who, what and why.

Then again, we see the Tribune ignoring American border and immigration laws. The Barack Obama administration deported millions. That was followed by the Joe Biden administration's border policies, which allowed millions into our country.

All of this "really reckless" behavior could have been avoided if the Biden administration had not refused to enforce the immigration and border laws of our country.

Surely the Tribune respects that *all* laws of America should be enforced. Our elected officials created them. They are the laws of our land passed to protect Americans!

— Joseph A. Murzanski, Orland Park

### A breeding ground

When I saw the front-page of the Tribune with a picture of a masked federal agent sitting in a vehicle and pointing a handgun through the window, I could think of no better headline than "Really reckless."

As someone who served for 45 years as a police officer (including 22 years as a police chief), I totally agree with the comments made by former Customs and Border Protection Commissioner Gil Kerlikowske and former Chicago police Superintendent Eddie Johnson, as quoted in the article. The federal agents' actions were inconsistent with acceptable police practice and represented a breeding ground for disaster.

In my mind, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Border Patrol agents are not well trained in the proper law enforcement tactics for the job they have been assigned. The blame for that lack of training rests squarely on the shoulders of Department of Homeland Security leadership. Rather than accepting responsibility for providing the required training and supervision, DHS leadership exacerbated the problem by discounting the criticism it has received.

That resistance to change will result in

more violence against the agents and the protesters.

— David E. Dial, Naperville

### Just political theater

The tactics and actions of Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Border Patrol agents during Operation Midway Blitz beg explanation and description of the hiring practices and training provided for these agents. The reckless behavior described in the Dec. 7 article was very disturbing. I have to believe that the Donald Trump administration's rapid expansion of Customs and Border Protection has been done at the expense of the vetting and training of candidates.

Operation Midway Blitz has been little more than political theater, harmful to the Chicago area and its citizens.

— Richard Wambach, St. Charles

### Peace in his hands

It is simultaneously heartening and depressing to witness President Donald Trump's flailing attempts to end the war in Ukraine. Similar to one's hand getting stuck in a pickle jar and refusing to let go, Trump has peace in his hands but can't seem to pull it out of the jar. This is for a very simple reason — while Trump asserts that Russia "holds all the cards" in its ability to prosecute the war, he simultaneously claims that Russia has no capability to end its own invasion and that only Ukraine does.

There are few things more nauseating than having to listen to the Kremlin assert that the war cannot end until its "root causes" are addressed, which is a thinly veiled reference to Russia's claims that Ukraine is being led by Nazis. Yet, this line has been fully adopted by the U.S. administration. Whether Trump truly believes the power to end the war lies with Ukraine or whether he doesn't actually believe this and will simply do everything in his power to avoid criticizing Putin lest he risk future trade deals, there is no conceivable way that these "peace" talks will end in actual peace. There is no common ground between Russia and Ukraine: One wants to exist, and one wants the other to not exist. There is no overlap here.

It's reassuring to know that Trump is unable to force the Ukrainians to accept a deal. However, it's beyond unfortunate that the only attempts to end this war revolve

around Ukrainian capitulation. The result is that Ukraine retains its sovereignty, but also that the pressure necessary to end this war will not be exerted on Russia, the only party that is truly capable of ending the war.

Ukraine will survive, but the pressure from the U.S. is being squandered by not being leveraged on Russia. This war will thus continue to be falsely seen as intractable.

— Ethan Feingold, Chicago

### Campaign for civility

The U.S. Department of Transportation has launched a civility campaign for air travelers: "The Golden Age of Travel Starts with You." Our unqualified U.S. secretary of transportation, Sean Duffy, formerly a Fox Network host and MTV reality television star, condescendingly lectures us about manners and respect in a public service announcement.

Promoting the campaign on Fox News, Duffy said, "We've asked Americans to bring their better selves — to bring civility back to travel."

There is no "better" self for our increasingly uncivil president to bring to travel. On a recent flight on Air Force One, the Republican standard bearer, angered by a female reporter's question regarding the Jeffrey Epstein files, snapped, "Quiet. Quiet, piggy." Having overused "dog," "vermin," "scum" and "low IQ" as his standard insults, President Donald Trump has added "piggy," "ugly," "terrible," "stupid" and "nasty" to his repertoire to hurl at female journalists.

Two suggestions for Duffy: Focus on vitally important transportation issues, such as the urgent need for more air traffic controllers, and forward your civility campaign PSA to your boss.

— Jane Cox, Wheaton

### Extrajudicial killing

When the U.S. Supreme Court majority ruled that a president has "absolute immunity from criminal prosecution for actions within his conclusive and preclusive constitutional authority," Justice Sonia Sotomayor dissented, noting, among other things, that the ruling would allow the president to commit murder. As an example, she wrote that if the president "orders the Navy's Seal Team 6 to assassinate a political rival? Immune."

To many, her comment seemed extreme — *reductio ad absurdum*. No president of the U.S. would ever order a murder.

But now we have President Donald Trump ordering the killing of boat occupants far from our border. Law professor Gabor Rona, echoing many other legal scholars, wrote that "these killings are simply murder — extrajudicial killings in violation of United States and international human rights law because the boats' occupants are not attacking the United States, nor do they pose an imminent threat of attack." That seems pretty straightforward.

It seems like the decision to kill was made first, and then a justification — any justification, even if preposterous — was then sought.

Sotomayor's thinking now seems prescient. Indeed, the president of the United States can get away with murder.

— Sheldon Hirsch, Wilmette

### No replacement yet

When the Affordable Care Act was passed, Republicans said it was horrible and they were going fix it for the millions who signed up. And how are they doing with that? Not one Republican has put forward an insurance policy for poor Americans.

Perhaps it is that Republicans want nothing to do with poor Americans.

— Marsha Lieberman, Chicago

### Vaccination matters

I read the obituaries every day. A 78-year-old man recently was listed who died from complications of whooping cough. In 1936, I exposed my 76-year-old grandmother to it, and she became very ill. Luckily, she survived.

Today, vaccines not only protect the child; they also protect the family.

— Jacqueline Nussbaum, Wilmette

**Note to readers:** We'd like to know your hopes for the new year. Please send us a letter, of no more than 400 words, to [letters@chicagotribune.com](mailto:letters@chicagotribune.com) by Sunday,

*For online-exclusive letters, go to [www.chicagotribune.com/letters](http://www.chicagotribune.com/letters). Email your letter submissions, 400 words or less, to [letters@chicagotribune.com](mailto:letters@chicagotribune.com). Include your full name, address and phone number.*