

OUR TAKE

Engaging with the new Dhaka

The BNP's sweeping win should mark the return of normalcy in Bangladesh — and a revival of friendly relations with India

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has, as widely anticipated, pulled off a win in the first election held since a student-led uprising toppled the Sheikh Hasina government in August 2024, with the party set to comfortably get a two-thirds majority in a 300-strong Parliament. The alliance led by the Jamaat-e-Islami, which includes the National Citizen Party (NCP), is set to win over 70 seats. All eyes will now be on the transfer of power — interim government chief Muhammad Yunus has said it will be done at the earliest, but the final word can be said only after the process is completed. Prime Minister Narendra Modi was among the first to congratulate BNP chief Tarique Rahman, who is set to be the next premier, signalling India's desire to move quickly on rebuilding relations after a stormy interregnum under the interim administration led by Yunus. The BNP leadership, too, has said it wants cordial ties with India and will not privilege or discriminate against any country.

First, the building blocks are thus in place for a reset, and it will be best for regional stability and progress that both sides move to put relations back on an even keel. Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina's presence in India will be a hurdle in resetting the relationship, but New Delhi and Dhaka will need to find a workaround and protect bilateral ties.

Second, the Jamaat-e-Islami failed to win, but it has secured a reasonable number of seats. While it has not moved away from its foundational Islamic precepts, it took a calibrated view of New Delhi during the election campaign, with Jamaat chief Shafigur Rahman himself speaking about relations with India being a priority. The Indian side will also be relieved that the student-led NCP, which has been antagonistic towards India, has not been able to translate its role in the street mobilisations into electoral success. However, it remains to be seen whether the Jamaat will hold to its pre-election stance or push for more radical politics, now that the party is effectively set to function as the main opposition. What the Jamaat does — and how the BNP responds — will have implications for the 10% minority Hindu population of Bangladesh, and by consequence, on Dhaka's ties with New Delhi. The rise of radical politics in Bangladesh will also have implications for India's national security.

Third, the Awami League was not allowed to participate in the electoral process, but the party, with its storied legacy, remains a force in Bangladesh politics. How the new government engages with the Awami League will be closely watched. BNP's India lens is bound to be influenced by the Awami League's actions. In fact, the BNP's "Bangladesh First" agenda was basically a framework that subtly assigned the Awami League of privileging Indian interests over Bangladesh's concerns.

It is imperative for New Delhi and Dhaka to guardrail substantive parts of the relationship — trade, water, travel, energy and investment — from day-to-day politics. A policy of zero tolerance for terrorism and radical agendas will serve Bangladesh well, both for relations with India and its own good. The BNP, hopefully, will set aside the vendetta politics that shaped past administrations and build on the gains in bilateral ties, especially over the past decade, when Bangladesh was among the largest recipients of Indian development aid. There is no reason why New Delhi would not reciprocate on an agenda of friendship with one of its largest and closest neighbours.

THIRD EYE

Barkha Dutt



Why Centre must rethink disability tax on soldiers

Tax on disability pensions hurts the dignity of the soldier. No soldier should have to negotiate or fight for rightful dues

If you poll Indians on which institution they respect and trust the most, the armed forces always tops the list. From building bridges over flood waters to leading flag marches during riots, from securing our borders in sub-zero temperatures to rescue missions in snowstorms, from war zones in Kargil to Operation Sindoor, the military has often had to pay a price in blood, sweat and tears.

We say we celebrate the honour of our soldiers. But, do we really? If so, how do we explain the muted response to a 2026 budget decision that taxes disabled soldiers who continue to serve till the end of their terms?

Disability pensions for armed forces have been exempt from tax since 1922. But the Finance Bill of 2026 is seeking to amend the Income Tax laws to restrict this exemption only to those soldiers who are boarded out because of their disability. In other words, if a soldier continues despite his disability — and this needs a medical board's certification — and retires in normal course, it does not matter if he has lost a limb or an eye, he will be taxed. If a soldier is invalided out of service, he will remain entitled to the exemption.

These new norms create two arbitrary categories of war-wounded soldiers. War-wounded soldiers are not to be thought of like charity cases. They are almost always uniquely brave, often channeling courage to convert a tragedy into greater strength.

Let's talk of three heroic generals today. I will start with the most celebrated of them all, Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw. He led India to victory in the 1971 war, forced a surrender from the Pakistan army, and enabled the birth of

Bangladesh. I learnt recently from former Army chief General VP Malik that Manekshaw, the first (and only one of two) officer to rise to the rank of field marshal, was also a war-wounded soldier early on in his life. In the 1942 Battle of Sittang, while leading his company against Japanese forces, he took nine bullets in his stomach and intestines. He was so grievously wounded that the surgeon hesitated to operate on him. "A mule kicked me," he jipped, retaining his extraordinary and courageous humour through it all. Of course, Manekshaw went on to rebuild his life and found a place in history.

Then, there is the stirring account of Major General Ian Cardozo who fought in the same 1971 war that Manekshaw led. A Gorkha Rifles officer, Cardozo lost his right leg in a landmine explosion in Sylhet, then East Pakistan. There is the iconic tale of how he turned around, even as skin fell off his bones and asked for his khukri, commanding his batman to cut off his mangled, bleeding leg so he could carry on in battle.

The extraordinary soldier became the first war-disabled officer to command a battalion and later, a brigade. He convinced the Army to even as an amputee he could hike through snow and ice and do what was needed. He refused to be relegated to a desk.

DISABILITY PENSIONS FOR ARMED FORCES HAVE BEEN EXEMPT FROM TAX SINCE 1922. BUT THE FINANCE BILL OF 2026 IS SEEKING TO AMEND THE INCOME TAX LAWS TO RESTRICT THIS TAX EXEMPTION ONLY TO THOSE SOLDIERS WHO ARE BOARDED OUT BECAUSE OF THEIR DISABILITY

Poll won, BNP needs to rebuild politics in Dhaka

Thursday's election in Bangladesh has been a consequential one for the country. In the first place, the vote put paid to all doubts as to whether the election would be held at all, with speculations till the last moment pointing to a deferment or even cancellation of the exercise.

Second, there is the uncomfortable reality of the Awami League, the country's oldest political party, which powered Bangladesh to freedom 54 years ago, being forced by the interim regime headed by Muhammad Yunus to stay out of the election, owing to the ban imposed on it following the questionable removal of the government it led between 2009 and 2024.

Now that the election is over, the unmissable fact is that in the absence of the Awami League, it has been a non-inclusive exercise, which raises a very fundamental question of credibility. The Election Commission has claimed a turnout close to 60%, but it is a fact that a large number of voters, traditionally inclined to vote for Sheikh Hasina and the Awami League, stayed away.

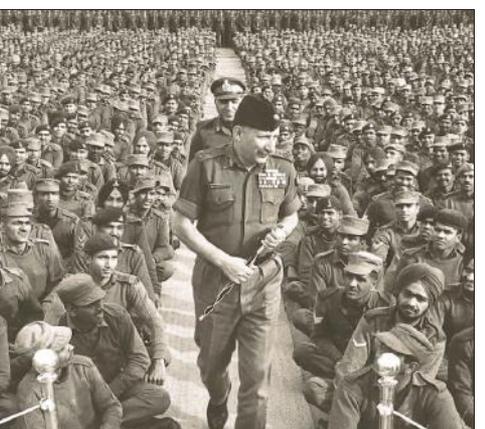
There is thus a huge shadow looming over the election and its outcome. But they will dog those who have made it to Parliament and are now poised to inaugurate a new phase of democratic politics in Bangladesh. The satisfaction, though, is that for Bangladesh's people, the sweeping victory of the Bangladesh Nationalist

Party (BNP) at the polls has had the nation breathing a little easier, given that the results have been a firm repudiation of the Jannat-e-Islami.

In a country where Islamism extremism has not only been growing over the years but has also been actively promoted or condoned by the unconstitutional Yunus regime, the victory of the BNP convicts Bangladeshis that they have been spared the dark possibility of being governed by a party whose espousal of communal politics as well as collaboration with the Pakistani occupation army in 1971 remains ingrained in the public consciousness.

And yet one understands well that the BNP's landslide is no guarantee that it will have a comfortable time administering the country. For one thing, the Jamaat, which has already demanded a vote recount in 150 of the 299 seats where elections were held (voting did not take place in one seat due to the death of a candidate), will not give the BNP an easy time.

For another, the BNP, which was last in office in 2001-2006, will need to relearn the norms of governance, especially given the slide in the economy. The Yunus regime, during the 18 months it held office, demonstrated a high level of incompetence in handling the economy. Unemployment is up sharply, with thousands of garment factories closing down as a result of the anarchy that the interim government was unable, or unwilling, to put a leash



In the 1942 Battle of Sittang, while leading his company against Japanese forces, Sam Manekshaw took nine bullets in his stomach and intestines. He was so grievously wounded that the surgeon hesitated to operate on him.

Finally, let's talk about Lieutenant General Vijay Oberoi, one of India's most decorated officers, who lost his right leg in the 1965 war between India and Pakistan. Not only did he serve for another four decades, he also ran marathons with a prosthetic limb, founded the War Wounded Foundation to focus on rehabilitating disabled soldiers and rose to become the vice chief of the Indian Army.

These are national heroes to be cherished and emulated. And there are countless others like them. Cardozo and Oberoi are generals who completed normal tenures in the service. This is a testimony to their courage and resilience. Should men like them be taxed on their disability pensions? That too, in the later years of their lives, when they may especially need financial security.

Most recently, the country applauded as Corporal Varun Kumar received a Vayu Sena Medal for gallantry. He lost his right arm in an enemy missile strike during Operation Sindoor. The photograph of him saluting the air chief with his left hand, a big smile on his face,

was utterly moving. He returned to service after undergoing extensive recovery and training and learning to function with his left hand. Should men like him be penalised because they are amazingly resilient?

As the wife of a serving soldier who lost a leg in Kashmir in a terror encounter told me in a letter she shared, "Does losing a leg cease to be a disability because one continues to serve?"

The expenditure to the government is hardly staggering; the move is penny wise, pound foolish, as General Malik says. But more than number crunching, it is about preserving the dignity of the soldier. No soldier should have to negotiate or fight for this. Finance minister Nirmla Sitharaman must reconsider this move.

As the wife of a serving soldier who lost a leg in Kashmir in a terror encounter told me in a letter she shared, "Does losing a leg cease to be a disability because one continues to serve?"

Barkha Dutt is an award-winning journalist and author. The views expressed are personal.



Tarique Rahman, now poised to take charge as Bangladesh's prime minister, should engage in accommodative politics.

on. Prices of essential commodities have spiked, causing serious levels of discontent among the middle and poor classes. In other words, the Yunus dispensation effectively rolled back the economic stability that was the hallmark of the Hasina government. It will now be the BNP's unenviable task to pull Bangladesh back from the abyss it has been pushed into since August 2024.

The BNP will need to tread carefully and judiciously. Tarique Rahman, now poised to take charge as Bangladesh's prime minister, should engage in accommodative politics by reaching out to the Awami League and ensuring that the nation's fresh attempt to fashion a

landscape of political pluralism does not fall by the wayside. The BNP is aware of the dangers inherent in ignoring a party that continues to command the support of a large section of Bangladesh's population. A first step could be to reconsider the arbitrary ban on the League.

The BNP government will also be called upon to shape a foreign policy that will have to repair the damage done by the Yunus regime. Foremost among the priorities will be putting Bangladesh on course to friendly and productive ties with India, ties that Yunus and his cohorts effectively undermined in the last 18 months. With Pakistan, the new government should reflect on the uncomfortable embrace that Yunus and Pakistan's Shehbaz Sharif have been in since August 2024. It will be in Bangladesh's national interest for the BNP to be sceptical about the ties between Dhaka and Islamabad.

The plate will be full for the incoming government. The first step will be to press for a speedy transfer of power, to be followed by a detailed examination of the deals the Yunus regime made in major areas of the economy with overseas firms and governments. The new government's broad responsibility will also be to preserve and uphold the country's constitution. Yunus and his band of followers have been clamouring for wholesale changes to the constitution adopted in 1972. The referendum, which, alongside the election, was a part of the exercise on Thursday, can become an albatross around the BNP government's neck unless the new Parliament throws it out.

Rahman and his colleagues will have to hit the ground running so that Bangladesh is back on the path to social peace and high economic growth.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is a Bangladeshi journalist and author. The views expressed are personal.

Non-aggression pact with Iran works best for the US

Since late January, when the USS Abraham Lincoln carrier strike group arrived in the Arabian Sea, Washington has maintained readiness for military operations targeting Iran. Faced with interim fragility and the threat of US military action, the Iranian government has sharpened its deterrence signalling, Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, termed the nation-wide protests as a US-backed coup plot and warned that any attack on Iran would result in a "regional war". Iran places national independence and resistance to the US at the core of its self-image. While the US calculates that a weaker Iran must make concessions beyond the enrichment issue, including on the range and size of its missile programme and support for regional groups, Tehran prefers confrontation to what it sees as strategic surrender. Before Tehran

agreed to resume indirect talks in Oman, Iran's refusal to accept the regional format of negotiations in Istanbul, involving Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt, Oman, and Pakistan, and a nuclear-issue plus agenda indicates that it will not recalibrate its strategic posture under pressure.

Tehran's defence doctrine, shaped by decades of confrontation and hybrid war with a conventionally superior US and Iran, leverages Iran's asymmetrical military capabilities and controlled escalation to raise the costs for adversaries. However, to deter a US intervention aimed at regime change, Iran has signalled its willingness to take pre-emptive action and to escalate horizontally against Israel and US military bases in the Gulf. The objective is to deny Trump the opportunity

to replicate a Venezuela-style low-cost, high-impact operation against Iran. Tehran has, therefore, recalibrated its posture from strategic patience, which meant absorbing losses inflicted by Israel on its regional allies and telegraphing retaliatory strikes on US bases, to one that guarantees overwhelming retaliation, with no regard to whether the US engages in a surgical or broad-based operation against Iran.

The Trump administration, however, seeks to use its military power to achieve outcomes it can brand as success. But US regional allies, except for Israel, no longer see it as the guarantor of their security or regional stability. They remember the destabilising effects of the US invasion of Iraq and are alarmed by Israel's rise as the pre-eminent military power. Regional countries, including Turkey, Egypt, Qatar, and Oman, have supported diplomatic efforts to avoid an all-out US-Iran confrontation that might trigger a regional war or an internal collapse in Iran. They have set aside past rivalries in favour of greater defence coopera-

tion to hedge against a disruptive US and assertive Israel.

Following the initial meeting in Muscat, the future of diplomacy and war hinges on whether Trump can back down from his maximalist demands on Iran, the level of pragmatism Israeli exercises, and the extent to which Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu can influence the US approach to the issue. Given that Tehran has continued to coordinate its negotiating positions with Moscow and Beijing and the stakes that Iran's neighbours have in a negotiated solution, Tehran will show flexibility on the safety of the 400 kg stockpile of near-weapon-grade enriched uranium in its possession and on the enrichment level.

Tehran will resist US demands on its missile programme, which is seen as a pillar of its deterrence and defence strategy. Therefore, solutions such as a non-aggression pact among the US, Iran, and their respective allies, is more likely to succeed.

Deepika Saraswat is an associate fellow at Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis. The views expressed are personal.

EDITOR'S PICK

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

PARLOUR AND STREET IN BANGLADESH

Bangladesh held popular elections on Thursday, a few months short of two years after the student-led uprising that ousted the Sheikh Hasina government. Crowd politics has often played a gestational role for major shifts in the country's politics.

It is against this backdrop that we recommend *Paradoxes of the Popular: Crowd Politics in Bangladesh* by Nusrat Sabina Chowdhury. The book picks up major protests that Bangladesh has seen and analyses why the crowd forms the third political pole of the nation, alongside its armed forces and political outfits. The crowd in Bangladesh, Chowdhury says, has always been a "political actor" — be it the peasant movement of 2006 or the groundswell demanding stricter punishment for "razakars". Cases discussed in the book underscore crowd politics' interplay with regimes of the day — and how this has not always been to an antagonistic effect.



Paradoxes of the Popular: Crowd Politics in Bangladesh by Nusrat Sabina Chowdhury 2019

# Opinion

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 2026



**TRADE BUFFERS**  
Chief Economic Advisor V Anantha Nageswaran  
Emerging markets like India will still be required to import, and to pay for imports, we have to export and attract capital. It has to be a combination of the two

## India's Eastern test

New Delhi must blend restraint with resolve as Dhaka enters a new political chapter

**T**HE ELECTORAL CHURN in Bangladesh has opened a new political chapter in Dhaka—and posed a familiar test for India. For New Delhi, the question is not who won, but how to protect a relationship that has, over the past decade, become one of the most consequential in South Asia. The immediate Indian response has been restrained and correct: respect the verdict, reaffirm commitment to a stable and democratic Bangladesh, and avoid the optics of partisanship. India has learned, sometimes the hard way, that proximity magnifies perception. The new leadership in Dhaka—led by Tarique Rahman—faces its own set of choices. The temptation in moments of political transition is to settle scores rather than widen the democratic compact. Bangladesh's recent history of winner-takes-all politics has deepened divisions. A turn towards reconciliation and institutional repair would not only stabilise domestic politics but reassure neighbours and investors alike. It's encouraging that Rahman has avoided anti-India rhetoric in his election campaigns and has talked about his plan to build a nation that is safe and inclusive for all citizens, irrespective of faith and religion. The moment has now arrived to test whether that plan can translate into reality.

For India, the imperative is strategic continuity. Over the past decade, bilateral ties deepened well beyond summit diplomacy. Security cooperation helped curb insurgent networks operating along the border. Transit arrangements improved connectivity to India's Northeast; power trade expanded and trade volumes rose steadily. These are not partisan achievements; they are structural gains. New Delhi must signal that such cooperation is in Bangladesh's own interest—irrespective of which party occupies the Ghabhaban. Yet Delhi must also acknowledge a persistent trust deficit in sections of Bangladesh's public opinion as narratives of Indian overreach have gained traction in recent years. If India is to avoid being cast as a partisan actor, it must broaden its engagement beyond governments. Outreach to opposition figures, civil society, business leaders, and youth constituencies is diplomacy suited to democratic societies.

Security will remain central. Counterterrorism cooperation and border management are non-negotiable interests for India. But a purely securitised lens would be a mistake. A stable Bangladesh that remains economically dynamic, moderate in outlook, and cooperative on security is vital for India's eastern flank. Instability, whether through political unrest or prolonged street agitation, has immediate spillover risks: border tensions, refugee flows, radicalisation concerns, and disruption of connectivity projects. Geopolitics adds another layer. Dhaka has diversified its external partnerships, including deepening economic ties with China. A new government may seek even greater strategic space. India's answer cannot be zero-sum competition. It must instead focus on timely delivery of projects, fair trade practices, and credible financing. Reliability, not rhetoric, will determine influence.

There is also a broader regional signal at stake. India, as South Asia's largest democracy, must walk a careful line—respecting sovereignty while quietly encouraging inclusive governance. Public lecturing would backfire; silent indifference would erode values India claims to uphold. The middle path is steady, principled engagement. Ultimately, geography is destiny and Bangladesh sits at the hinge of India's eastern frontier and its Act East ambitions. Instability there reverberates immediately across borders. India's task is to ensure that whichever government emerges in Dhaka finds it in its interest to remain closely aligned with New Delhi. The verdict in Bangladesh is a domestic event. India's response must be diplomatic—calm, consistent, and confident.

## ● CITY ECONOMIC REGIONS

CERs MUST BE MATCHED WITH INSTITUTIONAL REFORM, INTEGRATED PLANNING & FISCAL EMPOWERMENT

# The economics of urban growth

### AASHEERWAD DWIVEDI ADITYA SINHA

Dwivedi is Assistant Professor (Economics), Faculty of Management Studies, University of Delhi. Sinha writes on macroeconomic issues



**I**NDIA'S URBAN CHALLENGE is often framed as one of scale: cities are too large, too congested, too stressed. This framing is misleading. The core problem is not that India has too much urbanization, but that it has too little spatial diversification of urban economic activity. The Economic Survey's chapter on urbanization and the Union Budget's proposal to develop City Economic Regions (CERs), read together, signal a recognition of this deeper structural issue. They point towards a shift from a city-centric to a region-centric understanding of growth.

Urban economics offers a clear starting point. Agglomeration economies, arising from density, proximity, and scale, raise productivity through labour market pooling, knowledge spillovers, and shared infrastructure. The Economic Survey cites evidence that doubling city size in India can raise productivity by over 10%. This is not trivial. It explains why firms and workers continue to concentrate in large cities despite congestion, high rents, and declining quality of life. Migration to megacities is therefore not an anomaly; it is a rational response to spatially concentrated opportunity.

The paradox, however, is that India's largest cities appear to be approaching the limits of efficient agglomeration. When congestion costs, infrastructure stress, housing shortages, and governance failures rise faster than productivity gains, the net benefits of further concentration diminish.

India's megacities are large in population terms but underperform relative to global peers in productivity, liveability, and economic influence. This is not because density is inherently harmful, but because density is unsupported by coordinated land use, transport, and institutional capacity.

At the same time, India's urban system remains unusually top-heavy. A small number of metropolitan regions account for a disproportionate share of GDP, employment, and migration. This creates

a spatial equilibrium problem. Workers are pulled into a few cities but because other regions are unviable, but because alternative urban centres capable of generating comparable agglomeration benefits do not exist at scale. In effect, India has allowed agglomeration economies to accumulate in a narrow set of locations, while much of the country remains under-urbanised in economic terms.

This is where the idea of City Economic Regions becomes analytically important. CERs recognise that cities do not function as isolated units. Labour markets, logistics networks, housing markets, and production systems operate across municipal and district boundaries. Planning at the level of a functional economic region, rather than a single statutory city, aligns policy with how urban economies actually work.

The Economic Survey's use of night-time lights and core-periphery analysis reinforces this point. Urban growth in India is increasingly occurring in peri-urban and corridor regions outside formal city boundaries. This growth is real, but poorly governed and weakly planned. The result is sprawl rather than structured decentralisation: people move outwards, but jobs, infrastructure, and institutions do not follow coherently. CERs, if designed well, offer a mechanism to convert this unplanned expansion into polycentric urban growth, where multiple nodes within a region generate employment

and productivity. From a regional development perspective, this is important. Excessive dependence on a few megacities creates systemic risks. Infrastructure failures, environmental shocks, or governance breakdowns in these cities have outsized macroeconomic consequences. Moreover, spatial concentration exacerbates regional inequality. States and districts without major urban centres remain locked into low-productivity equilibria, fuelling distress migration rather than opportunity-driven mobility.

The economic logic of CERs, therefore, is not to weaken large cities but to replicate their advantages elsewhere. Policy can spread agglomeration benefits across space by developing secondary cities, industrial towns, and logistics hubs within integrated regions. This is consistent with international experience. Economies that have sustained long-term growth, Germany, Japan, and increasingly China are characterised not by one dominant city, but by networks of cities performing complementary functions.

However, the success of CERs hinges on institutional design. The Economic Survey is explicit that India's urban constraints are not primarily financial but institutional. Fragmented governance, limited fiscal autonomy, and misaligned authority prevent cities from acting as economic agents. If CERs are imple-

mented as coordination platforms without empowered regional institutions, they risk becoming yet another layer in an already crowded planning architecture. Equally important is avoiding misinterpretation of decentralisation. Pushing population away from megacities without creating dense, well-connected employment centres will simply reproduce congestion at a regional scale. The Survey makes an important distinction here: concentration is not a function of density per se, but of density without matching infrastructure and governance. New growth centres must therefore be compact, transit-oriented and employment-rich. Otherwise, CERs will become commuting regions rather than production regions.

There is also a fiscal dimension. If cities and regions are to function as engines of growth, they require predictable revenue streams and borrowing capacity. India's cities raise a fraction of the resources mobilised by their global counterparts. Without addressing urban finance—particularly land value capture and metropolitan-level taxation, the ambition of CERs will remain constrained by implementation capacity.

The alignment between the Economic Survey and the Union Budget reflects a growing recognition that India's growth problem is spatial. The issues are not whether cities should grow, but which cities, in which regions, and under what institutional arrangements. Continuing to overload a few megacities imposes rising marginal costs on the economy. Creating new urban growth centres through CERs offers a pathway to convert urbanization into a more balanced, resilient, and productivity-enhancing process.

The challenge now is execution. If CERs are matched with institutional reform, integrated planning, and fiscal empowerment, they could mark a structural break in India's urban trajectory. If not, they risk becoming another well-intentioned concept that acknowledges the problem without altering the equilibrium.

# Beyond crypto tax and surveillance



### SMITA JHA ANANYA GIRI UPADHYAYA

Respectively Partner and Associate at Khaitan & Co

The effectiveness of India's crypto framework will depend on its ability to combine regulatory clarity with proportionate, risk-based oversight

**I**NDIA'S REGULATORY APPROACH for virtual digital assets (VDAs), including cryptocurrencies, has evolved through cautious judicial intervention and incremental, sector-specific regulation rather than a unified statutory framework. After warnings about financial volatility and security risks, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) in 2018 prohibited regulated entities from dealing in VDAs, a move later struck down by the Supreme Court in 2020 as disproportionate. In the absence of a dedicated crypto legislation, the government has relied on indirect regulatory levers, principally taxation and anti-money laundering rules, leaving the crypto market in a state of regulatory ambiguity.

The imposition of a high flat tax of 30% on income from VDA transfers without allowing deductions for expenses or set-off losses along with a 1% tax deducted at source and gift tax provisions resulted in a measurable migration of trading volumes to offshore platforms. However, in 2023, VDA service providers, including crypto exchanges and custodial wallet providers, were brought under the purview of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA), 2002. This meant even offshore platforms servicing Indian users were to comply with stringent compliance requirements like registration with the Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU), robust internal governance compliances, Know-Your-Customer checks, five-year records retention, and suspicious transaction reporting. Bringing VDA service providers within

the ambit of the PMLA was instrumental in aligning India with global standards on anti-money laundering and combating terrorist financing and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. This marked a decisive shift from a purely tax-led approach to one centred on surveillance, traceability, and enforcement. The timely revision of such instructions, with the latest update on January 8, along with FIU action against over 30 offshore platforms for non-compliance, signals a clear intent to enforce stricter regulatory oversight on crypto platforms.

The government and regulators are navigating a complex dilemma—fostering technological innovation, protecting consumers, and ensuring macroeconomic stability. Since 2013, the RBI has maintained a consistently guarded stance on cryptocurrencies, citing cybersecurity risks, lack of grievance redress mechanisms for decentralised issuances, high price volatility, lack of asset backing, and the risk of disintermediation in payment systems. Given these risks, the RBI has consistently advocated the adoption of the central bank digital currency (CBDC), the rupee, as a sovereign digital alternative that preserves monetary control while leveraging technological efficiencies.

As recently as November 2025, RBI Governor Sanjay Malhotra reiterated the

central bank's cautious stance on private cryptocurrencies, its strong support for CBDCs, and its view that any final policy decision on cryptocurrency must rest with the government.

While the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) has so far excluded VDAs from its regulatory ambit, the judiciary has played a meaningful role in shaping the legal treatment of crypto assets. Beyond the Supreme Court's 2020 judgment setting aside the RBI's ban on dealing in VDAs, recent high court rulings have characterised VDAs as "property" held in trust by platforms for investors, thereby imposing fiduciary duties on intermediaries and strengthening investor protection.

India is not formulating its crypto policy in isolation. With its 2023 G20 Presidency, India advocated a coordinated global response to cryptocurrencies, culminating in G20 leaders endorsing a road map created by the International Monetary Fund. The paper recommended a robust regulatory framework encompassing registration, prudential norms, global coordination, and capacity-building instead of an outright ban, particularly for emerging economies.

Globally, crypto policy has shifted decisively towards regulation and institutional integration rather than prohibitions. The Basel Committee on Banking

Supervision's decision to expedite its review of prudential standards for banks' crypto-asset exposures reflects this trend. Stablecoins, owing to their relative price stability and currency backing, continue to dominate the global policy agenda, with several jurisdictions advancing regulatory frameworks such as the US's GENIUS Act and the European Union's Markets in Crypto-Assets (MiCA) Regulation.

The path ahead for India's crypto regulation remains a work in progress. While the government has so far refrained from introducing a comprehensive, stand-alone crypto law, recent reports indicate that the ministry of finance is engaging with Sebi and the RBI to establish a more structured regulatory framework for cryptocurrencies. Under this framework, Sebi may emerge as the primary regulator for crypto exchanges, while matters pertaining to cross-border transactions, capital flows, and investment could fall within the RBI's remit.

Such a multi-stakeholder approach—leveraging institutional expertise and regulatory capacity—could provide much-needed clarity on the permissibility and supervision of various VDA services, while creating a more predictable environment for innovation and investment.

The effectiveness of India's crypto framework will ultimately depend on its ability to combine regulatory clarity with proportionate, risk-based oversight.

Views are personal

## A cricketing duel marked by rivalry, not rancour

**N**OTHING CAN DAMPEN the excitement—even not even prohibitive airfares to Colombo—of the India-Pakistan cricket match on Sunday in the ongoing ICC Men's T20 World Cup. This is a keenly contested rivalry that is eagerly watched by millions on television in the sub-continent and in packed stadiums, much like the Ashes series between England and Australia. But this time the bitterness of sub-continental politics threatened to derail the encounter when Pakistan refused to play India in solidarity with Bangladesh that had opted out of playing in Indian venues. Fortunately, tense late-night meetings with financial inducements throng in for good measure sorted out this matter with the ICC speaking loftily of being "united, committed, and purposeful in aspirations to serve the best interests of the game with integrity, neutrality, and cooperation".

Let's hope the much-awaited encounter at the Premadasa stadium will also be in the right spirit with the captains of both sides shaking hands after tossing the coin to decide whether to bowl or bat first. It was a disappointment to ardent cricket lovers that this did not happen during Asia Cup 2025, with the Indian captain also refusing to take the trophy from the Pakistani chairman of that cricketing event. Nothing detracts more from the spirit of the game when these matches descend to war by other means. In the ICC Men's T20 World Cup, the head-to-head record between the two nations stands 7 to 1 in India's favour. Pakistan registered its first-ever win against India in 2021. India hoisted the trophy in 2007 and 2024 while Pakistan did so in 2009.

All of this does not imply that the odds are in India's favour on Sunday. Past performance is no guide for predicting how both teams will fare on a particular day. The forthcoming encounter, however, bids fair to be highly competitive as both nations are fielding relatively younger sides with very few veteran players in their teams. If the yesteryear X factor for Pakistan was its world-class pace attack, only Shaheen Shah Afridi leads the charge. No one would have guessed that its wicket-taking options are now with its spin quintet, comprising Abir Ahmed, Saam Ayub, Shadab Khan, Mohammad Nawaz and the so-called "two-elbowed" slinger, Usman Tariq, whose arm action is much like

Namibian skipper Gerhard Erasmus. In their earlier group encounter with the US, for instance, Pakistan deployed its new arsenal represented by dashing opening batsman, Sahibzada Farhan, who is their latest six-hitting sensation and seventh in the nation's all-time list. Farhan's hits sixes. Long languid ones over long on, bent-knee hammers over cut corner, flat-batted bashes that cannon into the advertising billboards beyond long off", rhapsodised ESPNcricinfo's Andrew Fidel Fernando. But Pakistan's victory over the Americans was due to its potent spin attack. The US simply did not know how to handle spin in as many as 16 out of the 20 overs although their batsmen managed to hit 42 runs from Afridi's four-over fiery pace spell.

The upshot is that India clearly has to make a match of it on Sunday. To be sure, its relatively younger side also has an X factor with its swashbuckling top order of batsmen who can hit the ball out of the park. But it is fragile and can crumble against pressure, as was evident in India's first group match against the US, leaving it to captain Suryakumar Yadav to single-handedly fashion a match-winning innings. The batting side is also vulnerable to spin. In their match against Namibia, as many as four leading batsmen perished to the wiles of Erasmus. The eternal wail for the ball to be delivered by Tariq will not be easy for our batsmen who prefer to come down the wicket to take the aerial route. There is no telling whether of these teams will prevail but there is only a promise of edge-of-the-seat stuff for an exciting match.



### N CHANDRA MOHAN

The writer is an economic and business commentator based in New Delhi

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### More accurate CPI

Aprons of "A welcome revision" (FE, February 14), reduced weightage of food items and inclusion of OTT subscription, airline tickets, telecom plans, e-commerce pricing, etc. is a true reflection of current consumer behaviour. The new Consumer Price Index (CPI) will offer policymakers a more accurate gauge of inflation. It will also help the central bank to fine-tune its

interest rate decisions and maintain a balance between inflation and growth. A more accurate CPI will also help businesses make their pricing and investment decisions better. For government employees, dearness allowance revisions will accurately capture the cost of living. The decision to adopt 2024 as base year reflects the change in household spending patterns, as the share of food items declined and that of services, transport,

digital payment, e-commerce, communication, and leisure grew. —Bal Govind, Noida  
**Betting on silver**  
Aprons of "Silver's surge suggests a brighter future for solar" (FE, February 13), the recent rise in silver prices indicates growing industrial demand, mainly from the rapidly evolving solar sector, as a key component of photovoltaic cells, silver is indispensable

in enhancing conductivity and boosting solar panel efficiency. With clean energy targets accelerating installations across major markets, increased solar production is expected to sustain strong silver consumption. The growing interdependence suggests silver's upward momentum could mirror a promising future for renewables. —PV Prakash, Mumbai  
Write to us at [letters@expressindia.com](mailto:letters@expressindia.com)

**The Indian EXPRESS**  
- FOUNDED BY -  
**RAMNATH GOENKA**  
- IN 1932 -  
BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

## In Bangladesh, a new political moment — and a fragile equilibrium



AMITABH MATTOO

**B**ANGLADESH HAS entered a new political moment, the consequences may extend well beyond a single electoral cycle. The voters have elected the 13th Jatiya Sangsad, delivering a decisive mandate to the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). The BNP and its allies have crossed the 200-seat mark in the 300-member parliament, comfortably above the 151-seat majority threshold. Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), meanwhile, is unlikely to cross 80 seats. It remains a robust showing, ensuring the party a consequential parliamentary presence. The arithmetic is unmistakable. Its implications will unfold more slowly.

This was not a routine alternation of power. It followed the banning of the Awami League, the exile of Sheikh Hasina to India, and an unsettled interim phase associated with Muhammad Yunus. One of the republic's founding forces was absent from the ballot, but not from political memory. In Bangladesh, history is not merely commemorated; it remains politically operative.

The BNP's return restores one of the two poles that have shaped post-1990 politics. Founded by Ziaur Rahman and later led by Khaleda Zia, the party has long articulated a nationalism attentive to sovereignty, identity and strategic distance from India. Under Tarique Rahman, that tradition now enters a different phase.

Years in exile appear to have moderated tone and recalibrated emphasis. Recent statements by Rahman suggest greater attentiveness to institutional process, economic stability and calibrated foreign engagement. Exile can deepen grievance; it can also cultivate perspective. Whether that measured register endures in office will define the character of this mandate.

Democratic resilience depends not only on decisive victories, but on disciplined limits. The election also clarifies the place of JEL. With representation less expansive than apprehensions had suggested, yet electorally substantial, JEL re-enters the parliamentary mainstream with weight. Its history remains intertwined with the events of 1971, when it opposed the liberation struggle. Yet, electoral support for Jamaat need not be read as historical revisionism. It reflects the electorate's continuing negotiation between liberation memory, religious identity and contemporary governance concerns. Bangladesh's political imagination has long held these strands in tension.

The constitutional referendum held alongside the parliamentary vote adds another layer to this transition. Public endorsement of the proposed Charter confers democratic legitimacy. But legitimacy at inception does not guarantee durability. Constitutions derive authority not from text alone, but from how power is actually exercised within their limits.

The generational mobilisation that preceded this election has now encountered electoral arithmetic. Student leaders reshaped political discourse, articulating impatience with patronage and entrenched hierarchy. Yet mobilisation did not translate proportionately into parliamentary representation. Moral energy unsettles. Institutions endure.

Questions of inclusion remain central. Reports of vandalised Hindu homes and attacks on temples during periods of transition have generated unease. In any constitutional democracy,

minority confidence is a quiet but essential measure of institutional health. Electoral victory cannot substitute for reassurance. The promise of 1971 was sovereignty anchored in equality. That promise remains moral force.

Economic realities further frame this moment. Bangladesh's development trajectory, anchored in garments, remittances and the transformative participation of women in the workforce, remains one of South Asia's more compelling stories. Yet, global pressures and structural vulnerabilities demand steadiness. Governance will be judged less by rhetoric than by administrative competence. Markets respond to predictability; citizens respond to delivery.

For India, this transition calls for composure anchored in strategic realism. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar's conciliatory call on Rahman following the passing of Begum Khaleda Zia signalled early diplomatic engagement. It reflected a recognition that statecraft must endure beyond partisan cycles. The India-Bangladesh relationship rests on history, but it is sustained by geography: Shared rivers, integrated supply chains, border management, energy connectivity and maritime security in the Bay of Bengal. Geography imposes continuity even when politics introduces change.

Yet, geography does not shield the relationship from strategic contestation.

The broader regional environment is not neutral, and it would be naive to assume otherwise. China's expanding infrastructure footprint is strategic in design and cumulative in effect, embedding long-term leverage through ports, connectivity cor-

ridors and financial exposure. Pakistan's electoral structure and more tactical. The ISI's historical networks within Bangladesh, particularly among Islamist formations, have not dissolved; they have adapted. Their utility lies in moments of political transition.

The United States and the United Kingdom have also been closely engaged since the interim phase associated with Yunus. Framed in the language of democratic transition and institutional reform, their involvement nonetheless carries strategic intent. From an Indian perspective, external calibration of political outcomes in Dhaka, however carefully couched, inevitably affects the regional equilibrium and India's own security calculus.

Bangladesh will determine its own future. But India cannot afford strategic complacency. Stability in Dhaka is integral to India's eastern security architecture. In a region where influence accumulates incrementally and leverage compounds quietly, vigilance is not intrusion — it is prudence.

In 1971, Bangladesh asserted its sovereignty before the world. In 2026, it confronts a quieter but no less consequential test: Whether decisive electoral victory can consolidate democratic order without narrowing plural space, and whether sovereignty can be exercised without becoming susceptible to competing strategic pulls.

The realignment is evident. Its ultimate significance will depend not on the scale of the mandate, but on the discipline with which power is exercised — and on the clarity with which Bangladesh navigates a region where equilibrium is fragile and influence is rarely benign.

The writer is dean and professor, SIS, JNU, and former member, NSAB

### In BNP's return, a chance for Delhi-Dhaka reset

**E**IGHTEEN MONTHS after Sheikh Hasina's ouster and exile to India, Bangladesh has a popular government. The sweeping victory of the Tarique Rahman-led Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) could bring much-needed stability to the country, especially because voters have also endorsed constitutional reforms in a referendum held along with the elections to Parliament. The high-stakes election was held amid rising extremism under Muhammad Yunus's watch, a weakening economy, and deteriorating ties with India. The Jamaat-e-Islami, with all accounts one of the biggest gainers of the 2024 Gen-Z uprising, is a distant second. The fact that it does not have enough seats to shape governance should mitigate domestic and regional anxieties about the rise of radical forces. The decisive mandate, instead, suggests that the architecture of Dhaka's politics, long defined by the Awami League-BNP duopoly, is intact — though the ban on the AL cast a shadow over the polls.

The new government will have its work cut out in containing extremism and protecting minorities, especially the Hindu community. The spokesperson of India's Mea, Randhir Jaishwal, noted in December last year that more than 2,900 incidents of violence against minorities had been reported by independent sources during Yunus's tenure. Rahman has pledged religious freedom and communal harmony but the true test will lie in enforcement. Equally critical is reconciliation. AL members have faced widespread violence after Hasina's departure. There is no denying that the former PM was widely seen as an autocrat, and her high-handedness proved to be her downfall. But Rahman should realise that a winner-takes-all approach will harm democracy in Bangladesh. Its new leader would do well to see the merits of generosity and forge a consensus on the terms under which the AL can return to the political fold.

New Delhi is familiar with the BNP. Its new leader has struck a conciliatory note towards India, so far. Rahman speaks of the importance of stable ties during External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar's visit to Dhaka for his mother Khaleda Zia's funeral. Yet, recent developments — Mustafizur Rahman's expulsion from the IPL, followed by Bangladesh's exclusion from the T20 World Cup — have deepened tensions. Hasina's extradition is bound to be a sticking point as well. At the same time, a change of government in Dhaka is an opportunity for New Delhi to go beyond its longstanding ties with the AL. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has extended "warm congratulations" to Rahman. This could set the tone for a forward-looking and mutually beneficial partnership.

### Trade pact with America is first step, not diplomatic solution



RIAAN DHANKHAR

**T**HE US-India trade deal marks a welcome thaw after months of tariffs, re-examinations, and diplomatic strain. But the deal itself will not fix the trade deficit between Washington and New Delhi. It lowers the temperature but does not restore confidence. Read it as an opening: A chance to convert de-escalation into strategic repair, if leaders act quickly and deliberately.

The trust deficit began with coercive trade policy. After talks stalled, US duties on Indian exports shot up as high as 50 per cent, turning commerce into a public test of India's reliability. Then the politics got sharper. Washington compounded the damage with muddled Pakistan-related optics: President Donald Trump claimed credit for ending the May 2025 India-Pakistan crisis and floated US mediation on Kashmir — precisely the kind of third-party framing New Delhi rejects and treats as interference. The trade deal addresses one part of that cascade: It de-escalates. The agreement reduces US tariffs on Indian goods to 18 per cent and rolls back additional penalties tied to India's purchases of Russian oil.

The trade deal should be treated as a bridge back to diplomacy, not a substitute for it. If Washington wants this thaw to become a durable reset, it will need leader-driven moves that create visible alignment

any other country, an indicator of how routine security partnership has become. The personal layer reinforced: Ambassador Sergio Gor, a close Trump aide, is reported to have been central in pushing for an expedited trade breakthrough. Read that for what it is: Institutionalisation. It's proof that this partnership has resilience.

But time is not infinite. This is among the sharpest leadership-level downturns in roughly a quarter-century, and bureaucratic momentum has limits. The trade deal should be treated as a bridge back to diplomacy, not a substitute for it. If Washington wants this thaw to become a durable reset, it will need leader-driven moves that create visible alignment.

Two moves must happen quickly. First, de-risk the Pakistan optics. Washington does not need to abandon counterterrorism engagement with Islamabad. But it should make explicit what Indian strategists need to hear: The US is not rehypenating India and Pakistan, and it is not seeking to mediate Kashmir. Here, the trade deal helps at the margin. The 18 per cent tariff on India is lower than the rate imposed on China and Pakistan, a step in the right direction that is already being received well in New Delhi as a signal of relative prioritisation. Second, go big at the leadership level. A presidential visit to India would be the cleanest confidence-building mechanism. The most plausible vehicle, politically and logistically, is a Quad leaders' summit. India was set to host the Quad before the relationship soured and the summit was postponed. Reviving it in the first half of this year would give the thaw a strategic frame and create space for visible alignment.

The trade deal is a welcome thaw. The trust reset will require leadership: Disciplined signalling on Pakistan, and a visible strategic anchor at the top. The bureaucracy can keep the lights on. Only the leaders can restore the line of sight.

The writer is a Fulbright-Nehru Scholar, affiliated with IJMU and CSEP. Views are personal

### Mammootty, the actor who broke out of superstardom



KUNAL RAY

**M**ALAYALAM FILM superstar Mammootty has redefined the image of a film star in the Union government. This might be a belated recognition for the actor. However, it is noteworthy because it comes during a very special phase in his career and will hopefully inspire many others to be as unconventional as he has been in some of his most recent Malayalam films.

Mammootty is a rare mix of acting competence and mass adulation. There are unimpeachable examples to suggest that the biggest or most popular actors are not necessarily the most consummate on-screen performers. But Mammootty works in strange ways. Audiences shower their love on an actor for a variety of reasons: Their screen image, portrayal of larger-than-life roles and other behavioural attributes.

Mammootty is different in every possible way. It is difficult to place him into a category. Who can forget his early performances in *Yavanika* (1982) or *Vidheyam* (1994)? However, what makes Mammootty peerless is his lack of complacency and a constant urge to reinvent himself. In *Kalamkuzhal* (2025), Mammootty plays a cop who is a serial killer. He is detestable in his portrayal of a maniac who targets young, unsuspecting women. In *Kaathal* (2023), he plays a closeted gay man who appears to be living a perfect family life with his wife and daughter until his wife decides to break the facade. There's also *Nampalaki Neruthu Mayakkam* (2022), where he plays Joseph, who walks into a remote village in Tamil Nadu and begins to act like a resident of the village, setting off a strange series of almost surreal encounters.

All very non-superstar-like characters and each completely different from the others. Most importantly, several of these films are also produced by Mammootty. So, this is not a case of a superstar supporting a one-off project to display his acting prowess. This indicates a sustained commitment to good cinema.

Through his artistic choices, Mammootty has rewritten the template and broken the rules of superstardom. It also raises the question: Why should superstars be trapped in an image? Imagine the encouragement that new films and filmmakers will receive if superstars begin to support projects that dare to step off the beaten path. In a recent interview, Mammootty said that a director ought to focus only on the story and the character in the film, not on whether the role is written specifically with him in mind. Some may argue that Mammootty is able to make these choices because of his superstardom. Yet, are other Indian superstars with similar success and popularity experimenting like Mammootty?

His recent choices also reveal an actor who is interested in the craft of acting and filmmaking more than obsessing over his superstar image. Film history will remember Mammootty differentiated from his contemporaries. Last year, Mammootty turned 74. He has already acted in more than 400 films, but has much more to give. Congratulations, Padma Bhushan Mammootty!

The writer teaches literature and film at FLAME University, Pune

### USEPA, now a voice for climate denialism

**D**ONALD TRUMP has taken every opportunity to declare that "climate change is a hoax". On Thursday, the US President made sure that his country's premier environmental watchdog would also be informed by climate denialism. In what has been described as the biggest de-regulatory move in American history, Trump has rolled back the Obama-era Endangerment Finding. The rules required the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to be guided by scientific knowledge about the harm caused by GHGs to the environment and public health. Under Trump, the Department of Energy formed a panel of scientists to write a report, last year, challenging the widely accepted science on the impacts of GHGs. And now, after Thursday's announcement, the environmental regulator in a country that has historically speared the greatest amount of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere — and remains the second-largest emitter in the world — has given a virtual vote of confidence to climate-disrupting fossil fuels. The agency has drastically scaled back limits on GHG emissions from automobiles.

Transport is the biggest source of GHG emissions in the US. Though electric vehicle (EV) sales increased after the incentives provided by the Joe Biden administration, the transition to climate-friendly transport has been too slow to offset the emissions from fossil-fuel powered cars, buses and trucks. The Trump administration has withdrawn key subsidies to EVs and renewables. Now, as USEPA head Lee Zeldin put it, "automakers will not be pressured to shift their fleet composition towards EVs". Getting rid of the Endangerment Finding also clears the way for the EPA to repeat limits on GHGs from power plants and oil and gas wells.

The American rollback bucks the trend in global warming mitigation efforts across the world. Renewable energy use is at an all-time high. That said, a number of reports have also underlined the waning of popular enthusiasm around net-zero targets in large parts of the developed world. Much of that is due to misinformation. However, it's also true that environment-friendly leaders in the developed world — including Biden — have failed to communicate that sustainability means good economics. They failed to root mitigation efforts in equity and fairness. Climate deniers like Trump have thrived as a result.

### In cricket, Zimbabwe still counts

**S**OME VICTORIES in sport have the power to shape destinies. Like Zimbabwe's upset of Australia in the T20 World Cup. It is undoubtedly Zimbabwe's sweetest moment since their reintroduction into international cricket after the despotic regime of Robert Mugabe nipped a promising era and forced a majority of cricketers to leave the country or quit the sport. The return has been rocky; the standard has been low, and the crop of youngsters has been so inconsistent that the selectors had to recall aging veterans. The big three teams have rarely bothered to stop by for a whistle-stop tour or play the dutiful hosts. From a team that could challenge the top nations at the turn of the century, Zimbabwe became a ragtag group that could lose to teams considerably ranked lower than them.

Before Friday's win, Zimbabwe's cricket was defined by past glories — the team that beat Australia in the 1983 Premier World Cup, the reverse-sweeping mastery of Andy Flower, the all-round skills of the late Heath Streak, the heartwarming journey of Tendinai Tibiso from captain to pastor, the dreadlocked Henry Olongwa wapping the leather ball for a guttural. Now, there are signs of resurgence in 22-year-old opening batsman Brian Bennett, the hard-hitting wicket-keeper batsman Tadiwanashe Marumani, the industrious medium pacer Blessing Muzarabani, and the slippery pace of Brad Evans.

Cricket could easily have been a lost sport in Zimbabwe, but the players displayed resolve without making much noise. Friday's victory is a significant step in the team's quest to become a competitive force. It reminds the cricketing world that Zimbabwe is not yet the forgotten nation.

### 40 YEARS AGO

February 14, 1986



### Hegde's resignation accepted

**T**HE GOVERNOR, A N Banerji, accepted the resignation of the Chief Minister of Karnataka, Ramakrishna Hegde, under dramatic circumstances. Just over an hour before the Raj Bhavan communique announcing the acceptance of the resignation was issued, Banerji had said that he was awaiting an institutionalised in deferring his decision on the resignation. He said his deferral was based on the "common courtesy" of hearing Hegde out.

### PAC reviews Punjab

**T**HE POLITICAL Affairs Committee of the Cabinet met with the Prime Minister, Rajiv

### Gandhi, to review the Punjab situation.

The situation in Punjab is alarming. Amid bloodshed, the All-India Sikh Students' Federation and Damdami Taksal activists have consolidated their position within the Golden Temple complex.

### Hospital neglect

**T**HE CASUALTY and emergency services of the Moolchand Khairati Ram Hospital off Ring Road in South Delhi is based on an assurance of payment before they attended to unidentified victims of a road accident. One of the victims, however, died before the doctors provided any medical aid. An *Indian Express* reporter and three other persons learnt this bitter

truth at the cost of a human life. Another was saved only after a lot of mediation with the Moolchand Hospital casualty and emergency services.

### Rise in bank fraud

**O**VER 10,000 cases of bank frauds involving a staggering amount of Rs 150 crore have been reported to the Reserve Bank of India in the last five years. On an average, about 10 cases are being reported to investigative agencies including the police, the Crime Investigation Department, and the Central Bureau of Investigation. The shocking increase has created alarm in the department of banking.

● **WHAT THE OTHERS SAY**  
Bangladesh has shown the world that democracy here is not dead.  
— *The Dhaka Tribune*

## Venezuela playbook will not work for Donald Trump in Iran

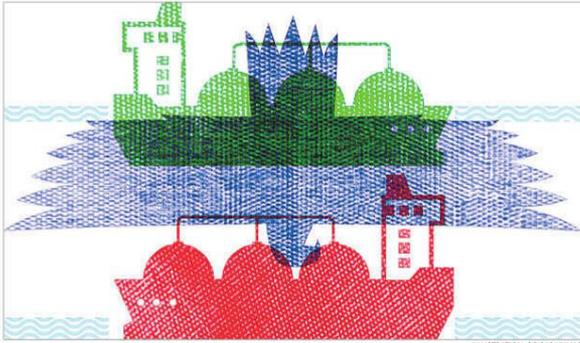


ILLUSTRATION: C R SASIKUMAR



BERNARD HAYKEL

**O**VER THE past week, the United States has positioned two aircraft carrier strike groups near Iran, and rumours abound that the US—either alone or in coordination with Israel—may launch a military attack against the regime in Tehran. President Donald Trump seeks to compel Iran to abandon its nuclear enrichment programme, curtail its ballistic missile production, and end its support for non-state actors such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in the Palestinian territories, and the Houthis in Yemen. He also wants Iran to cease being a revolutionary state, in return for which he promises prosperity through trade and investment, particularly in Iran's abundant oil and gas reserves.

Negotiations between the US and Iran are ongoing, yet Tehran has made clear that any demand it views as a violation of its sovereignty—such as the denial of its right to nuclear enrichment—will be rejected outright. Such refusal may prompt Trump to resort to military action, raising critical questions about the nature of any attack and whether it could meaningfully alter Iran's behaviour—or, more importantly, threaten the survival of the clerical regime itself. Would an attack accelerate revolutionary change, or would it further entrench the regime and allow it to weather the storm? All indications suggest that the regime is likely to survive. Indeed, this outcome may align with Trump's preferences, as illustrated by the Venezuela precedent:

The kidnapping of President Nicolás Maduro left the regime intact, though under pressure to reform.

Iran was recently convulsed by violent demonstrations that began on December 28. Initially sparked by economic grievances following the dramatic devaluation of the rial, the protests rapidly spread nationwide and evolved into a broader indictment of regime misrule. They mobilised di-

verse social groups across all provinces, taking on a distinctly national character. The regime responded with a brutal crackdown, resulting in large numbers of deaths. Estimates vary widely, ranging from 5,000 to more than 30,000 killed, with most fatalities reportedly occurring over the two days of January 8 and 9. For now, the demonstrations appear to have subsided. Most significant, however, was that the regime's core security forces remained unified throughout the crisis, and the state successfully imposed an information blackout by shutting down the internet.

These developments underscore the deeply entrenched nature of the Islamic Republic, with perhaps as much as 20 per cent of Iran's population of roughly 90 million willing to support and defend the regime. The resulting power imbalance between the state and the rest of society remains such that dissent can still be suppressed. By contrast, the opposition is highly fragmented, lacking a clear leader, coherent ideology, or unified political movement capable of mobilising the country's disaffected population. Calls during the protests for the return of the

**Trump's options appear limited: Strike a deal with elements of the regime to remove Khamenei, or impose a blockade to halt oil exports and force capitulation through economic strangulation**

former Shah's son, Reza Pahlavi, highlight this vacuum of leadership and underscore both desperation and disunity. The Pahlavi dynasty is not a credible alternative to the current regime, despite its waning legitimacy in the eyes of many Iranians.

Given this context, how should we understand what President Trump is attempting to achieve in Iran? It is important to recall that Trump's political formation and economic imagination were shaped in the 1970s, when successive oil shocks in 1973 and 1979 produced one of the most significant transfers of wealth in modern history—from oil-consuming to oil-producing states. In Trump's worldview, the Arab sheikh and the Iranian shah epitomise global wealth and power, with oil as the ultimate source of military and economic strength. He has been remarkably candid about this logic, notably when he explained that US actions in Venezuela were fundamentally about controlling its vast oil reserves, with allegations of drug trafficking serving merely as a pretext.

Accordingly, when Trump surveys what he perceives as the axis of resistance to American hegemony—China, Russia, North Korea, Iran, Venezuela, and Cuba—he identifies Iran and Venezuela as its weakest links. His strategy appears to be to pressure and separate them through military threats and economic sanctions. Normalising relations with Iran would unleash substantial oil and gas supplies onto global markets, driving down hydrocarbon prices. Trump believes this would stimulate the US economy, particularly ahead of this November's midterm elections, which the Republicans risk losing. That such transformations are unlikely to occur on such an accelerated timeline seems not to weigh heavily in Trump's calculations. Nonetheless, this logic appears to animate his approach.

Given the resilience of the Iranian regime and Washington's clear unwillingness to commit ground troops, can Trump realistically alter Tehran's policies? The killing or abduction of Ayatollah Khamenei is virtually impossible. While US forces could destroy ballistic missile facilities, such actions would neither topple the regime nor fundamentally alter its behaviour. Trump's remaining options appear limited: Either to strike a deal with elements of the regime—perhaps within the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps—to remove Khamenei and install a more pliant leadership, following the Venezuela model, or to impose a maritime blockade to halt Iran's oil exports, hoping to force capitulation through economic strangulation.

Arab Gulf states have publicly signalled their unwillingness to support a US attack on Iran, fearing retaliation, further constraining Trump's options. The coming days and weeks will therefore be critical as this drama unfolds and Trump attempts to replicate in Iran what he claims to have achieved in Venezuela. I would not wager on Iranian capitulation. On the contrary, external pressure of the kind Washington seeks to apply tends to reinforce Iranian nationalism, which—across social divides—remains convinced that Iran's weakness stems primarily from imperial intervention rather than internal misgovernance.

The writer is professor, Near Eastern Studies, Princeton University, and senior fellow (nonresident), Centre for Peace and Security in the Middle East, Hudson Institute

## Rahul Gandhi's churlish attacks on PM, US deal diminish LoP



RAM RAJYA  
BY RAM MADHAV

**T**HE OPPOSITION has every right to raise legitimate questions over the India-US trade deal. But, rather than engaging with the deal, it appeared more interested in stalling Parliament and making wild allegations against the leader of the government. The government, on its part, repeatedly clarified both inside and outside Parliament that those allegations were not based on facts.

The last time a bilateral agreement generated so much heat and dust was two decades ago during UPA-1. When the Manmohan Singh-led government sought to push through the India-US Nuclear Deal after 2005, there were prolonged debates in Parliament. It took three years to finally see the deal through in October 2008. During those animated debates, it was not just the principal opposition party, the BJP, that raised serious concerns about certain clauses. Even the Left parties, which were supporting the government, took strong objection and finally withdrew support from the government, forcing a confidence vote in Parliament.

The debates on the India-US nuclear deal were a treat for discerning viewers. Those were focused and constructive debates, both inside and outside Parliament, that saw not only lawmakers but eminent nuclear experts like A N Prasad and P K Varma stepping in, raising pointed concerns over issues like the Hyde Act, possible constraints on future nuclear tests, etc.

We miss such constructive debates in Parliament these days. This time, the Opposition showed more cacophonous than constructive. Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi resorted to undignified personal attacks and mean insinuations against the government rather than raising any specific and substantial objections to the deal. "Are you not ashamed of selling India? You have sold our mother, Bharat Mata," he theatrically harangued. The Gandhi scion sought to raise extraneous issues like the Epstein files, Ambani and Adani to insinuate that Prime Minister Narendra Modi was "under pressure", "compromised", and had "surrendered".



ILLUSTRATION: MITHUN CHAKRABORTY

Many experts tried to remind the Opposition that the trade deal between India and the US was happening under extraordinary global circumstances. Unfortunately, we are in a chaotic and disordered world, and President Donald Trump is not only the instigator-in-chief but also the exploiter of that disorder. While country after country surrendered to his whimsical demands, India stood its ground for almost a year and concluded the deal on mutually satisfactory terms.

In the end, eminent economists like Jeffrey Sachs called it the backing down of the US. Sachs avowed appreciatively that "Modi did a good job. He kept calm and handled the situation wisely". No deal can be one-sided. But the available details clearly suggest that India got the best deal in the given circumstances. Contrary to the Opposition's propaganda, the agriculture sector has been zealously safeguarded by our negotiators, not only in the US deal but even in earlier trade deals with Australia, the EU and New Zealand. All major agricultural products like pulses, grains, cereals, millets and vegetables, dairy products like milk and cheese, animal products like poultry and meat, and other items like oilsseeds, groundnuts, honey, beverages and essential oils have been fully protected. If India's agreement to reduce tariffs on certain animal feeds like dried distillers' grains is seen as negatively impacting the animal feed industry, it should also be seen as benefiting poultry- and other animal-rearing farmers.

The Opposition seems to have misconstrued the delay in clinching the deal and attributed it to US pressure. A major chunk of the deal was finalised by officials of the Indian Ministry of Commerce and the US Department of Commerce several months ago. What delayed the final agreement was Trump's attempts at mixing trade with geopolitics and invoking the India-Pakistan conflict repeatedly. It was only after that episode had ended that the two leaders spoke, and the deal was announced immediately.

Rahul Gandhi seems hell-bent on using the trade deal debate to attack the Prime Minister. But the reality is that when the ruling party members ridiculed Rahul Gandhi, the jibes stuck. When the LoP tried to call the Prime Minister "coward", "vote chori", "compromised" and "surrendered", nobody took him seriously. Far from denting PM's image, the episode once again highlighted the irresponsible and unbecoming behaviour of the LoP.

The writer, president, India Foundation, is with the BJP

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### WHO crisis

**S**UDDEN WITHDRAWALS by major contributors can disrupt immunisation drives and emergency responses in vulnerable regions ("WHO needs a financial model less vulnerable", *IE*, February 13). A more predictable financing system is essential. Member states should increase assessed contributions and reduce over-dependence on voluntary, earmarked funds. Greater transparency in spending would also encourage wider support. Strengthening regional partnerships can help share responsibility and build resilience in global health governance.

SM Jeeva, Chennai

**T**HE PRESENT-day turmoil over tariffs and trade must be separated from institutions like the WHO for the sake of humanity. ("WHO needs a financial model less vulnerable", *IE*, February 13). Constant reduction in its budget and a decline in aid to those who are deprived of even the basic necessities of life is shameful. The preservation of human dignity irrespective of country or continent is a collective responsibility and we owe it to the basic core values of liberty, equality and fraternity as applicable to everyone. One country cannot be allowed to hijack the world. It is high time the international community forged an alliance to successfully deliver on the promise of the SDGs.

Sanjeev Raina, Greater Noida

### Inflation data

**R**EVISING THE base year and weights is necessary to reflect current consumption patterns. However, changes in measurement can alter perceptions of price trends and influence monetary policy ("New inflation series is a welcome update", *IE*, February 13). To avoid confusion, the National Statistics Office should provide clear back-explanations for the public. Regular communication by the RBI will help anchor expectations. Transparent methodology and timely releases are essential for informed policy decisions.

A Myilsami, Coimbatore



D RAJA

**T**HE OUTRAGE triggered among certain socially dominant sections against the UGC's Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions Regulations, 2026 has reaffirmed B R Ambedkar's characterisation of the caste system as representing "an ascending order of reverence and a descending order of contempt". The sharp reaction to these regulations exposes the deep unease among privileged social groupings when institutional mechanisms attempt to address entrenched inequalities.

It is worth recalling that the regulations were framed to provide institutional remedies to students belonging to the SC, ST and OBC categories, as well as women and persons with disabilities. The regulations enabled such students to register complaints when they faced discrimination or ill-treatment on account of their identities. The 2026 regulations marked a significant departure from earlier guidelines by mandating the establishment of monitoring committees and introducing a non-compliance clause. These additions made implementation obligatory for universities and colleges. It is this enforceability that appears to have unsettled entrenched interests.

The regulations were framed against the backdrop of officially acknowledged data showing that complaints of caste-based discrimination in higher education

## In UGC regulations stir, a familiar story of privilege

institutions rose by more than 100 per cent over the past five years.

The hostility directed at the regulations, thus, reflects not exclusion but resistance to constitutional values of justice and equality. The agitation mounted by sections of the upper castes fits squarely within Ambedkar's analysis of caste as a system that protects privilege while normalising contempt for those placed lower in the hierarchy.

Indian history offers ample evidence of how caste-based contempt survives across time and social status. In his address titled "My Plan of Campaign", Swami Vivekananda recalled being told that he had no right to become a Sannyasi because he was considered a Shudra by birth. Responding with characteristic clarity, Vivekananda said, "I am not at all hurt if they call me a Shudra," adding that it would be "a little reparation for the tyranny of my ancestors over the poor". Similarly, when K R Narayanan was elected President in 1997, sections of the media asked him how it felt to be the "first Dalit President" even though caste played no role in his elevation to the highest constitutional office. His response—"A President is a President"—exposed the prejudice embedded in the question itself.

More recently, the incident involving former Chief Justice B R Gavai revealed how caste-based contempt continues to be ex-

**The sharp reaction to these regulations exposes the deep unease among privileged social groupings when institutional mechanisms attempt to address entrenched inequalities**

pressed brazenly, irrespective of constitutional position. An advocate hurled a shoe at him in court while shouting, "*Sanatan Dharma ka apman nahin sahega Hindustan*". Disturbingly, this act was celebrated within sections of the Hinduva ecosystem. The agitation against the UGC Equity Regulations exposes the hollowness of Hinduva's claim to be a unifying force transcending caste. Ambedkar warned that caste is not merely a division of labour but a division of labourers—a system of graded inequality, Hinduva, far from annihilating caste, reproduces this graded hierarchy by freezing social relations into rigid, unequal structures. If envisions not a casteless Hindu society, but one permanently organised around inherited privilege and subordination.

While the UGC must also bear responsibility for ignoring several recommendations of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Education—particularly those emphasising wider consultation and clearer safeguards—the central issue remains political. Hinduva stands exposed as an ideology that breeds inequality, not only between religious communities but also within Hindu society. As Ambedkar repeatedly argued, caste is anti-national, and resistance to measures aimed at annihilating caste and upholding equity amounts to resistance to the constitutional vision of India.

The writer is general secretary, Communist Party of India



NANDINI NAIR

**R**EADERS GREETED the shutting of the book pages of *The Washington Post* with the expected laments. This was the end of careers and the demise of sections. But the same story has been playing out in India for a long while now. Unlike *The Post*, where the loss of jobs heralded the closing of pages, in India it all happened with far less frenzy, but insidiously.

Over the last two decades, the features and literary sections of all the major newspapers in India have all but disappeared. Lists have replaced analysis. Celebrity Instagram posts masquerade as news.

## We need to make noise about books. Festivals matter

**B**ooks are the postscript, scrambling for the margins. Most editors/proprietors of newspapers and magazines believe books are a waste of space. No one wants to read a book review, we are told. No one cares what authors have to say. Interestingly, while the coverage of books has vanished, the literature festival in India has only grown. There was a recent kerfuffle about an article in an international publication that said Indians don't read, so why do we have so many literature festivals? I do not wish to prise apart its arguments, but having attended literature festivals for nearly two decades, it needs to be said that festivals are reimagining books in vital ways. It is easy to cavil about sessions that

were held and topics that were avoided. It is easy to be cynical about the selfie-takers and the shops that mushroom across the venues. It is easy to believe that crowds emerge for reasons of show rather than substance. But the naysayer dismisses the hordes because of a sense of superiority. It is the nature of the intellectual to scorn the masses. Sure, not every attendee is a bibliophile, but if they come for the *ta-*

**It is the nature of the intellectual to scorn the masses. Sure, not every attendee is a bibliophile, but if they come for the tamasha and leave with a book, it is a win for literature**

*nasha* and leave with a book, it is a win for literature. The sceptic will decry the crowds saying they cheer for only influencers and pulp writers. But what if they do? They are leaving homes, travelling distances to show up for a festival that is anchored in books. Those who do a disservice to books and the literary community are those who bemoan the lack of readers, scorn literature festivals, and asphyxiate literary coverage. The well-curated literature festival shows us the power of democratising knowledge; of bringing books out of libraries, and extracting authors from their studios. Festivals show us reading is a community. Books and authors, with the right mix of pomp and gravitas, make a good show. Instead of scorning youngsters in

their Crocs and crop tops who flock to literature festivals, we should celebrate them. They understand the currency of books. If books have a future, it will be because of them. Instead of shutting down literary sections, editors would do well to heed them and decipher ways to reach them. The death of book pages and the rise of festive shows do not need to make much ado over books. The *Jiff Bezos* of the world see books as commodities, festivals prove that they are totems. Books need to be seen not as an exclusive elite pursuit, but as foundational. And the unwieldy raucous literature festival is the best testament that books are for all.

The writer is associate director, The New India Foundation, Bengaluru, and a literary critic

## EDITORIAL PROTECTING YOUNG MINDS

The deaths of three minors by suicide, reportedly linked to social media, have jolted India into confronting a question it has long postponed: how should a society that prides itself on demographic youthfulness protect young minds in an age of algorithmic persuasion? The Economic Survey 2025-26 has placed the issue squarely in the policy arena, warning that digital addiction is no longer about access but overexposure, design addiction, and the psychological vulnerabilities of adolescence. For a country with more than 250 million people aged between 15 and 24, the stakes are civilisational. India's digital public infrastructure has been celebrated as a model for inclusion, yet its social media ecosystem reveals a darker paradox: the same connectivity that empowers can also corrode. The debate is no longer about whether social media harms or helps, but whether a digital public society should respond without sacrificing liberty, innovation, or the open internet.

Neuroscience and behavioural research offer sobering insights into why adolescents are uniquely susceptible. The teenage brain is still developing its prefrontal cortex, the region responsible for impulse control and long-term decision-making, while the limbic system, which processes rewards and emotions, is highly active. Social media platforms, optimised for engagement, exploit this imbalance through endless scrolling, algorithmic amplification, streaks, likes, and targeted content that stimulates dopamine-driven reward cycles. The result is not merely distraction but dependency. Studies in India and abroad increasingly link excessive media use with anxiety, depression, sleep disorders, body-image issues, and cyberbullying trauma. In a culture already grappling with exam stress, social comparison, and urban isolation, digital validation becomes a fragile substitute for self-worth. The Economic Survey's call for age-appropriate access and safer defaults acknowledges a truth parents and teachers have sensed intuitively: digital platforms are not neutral; it is engineered to capture attention at scale.

Yet the temptation to impose outright bans or rigid age thresholds must be approached with caution. International experience offers mixed lessons. Australia's decision to bar children under 16 from social media accounts, backed by stringent age verification and heavy penalties, has been hailed as decisive but criticised as impractical. Teenagers have circumvented restrictions using VPNs, false age declarations, and older accounts, often migrating to less regulated platforms where harms are harder to monitor. European debates echo similar concerns, with leaders describing social media as a "wild West" while grappling with enforcement dilemmas and civic liberties. In India, where constitutional protections of free expression and personal liberty are robust, sweeping prohibitions risk legal challenges and uneven state-level enforcement. More importantly, bans may drive young users into digital shadows rather than fostering responsible engagement.

India's existing legal framework is not as toothless as critics suggest, but it remains fragmented. The Information Technology Rules, 2021, impose due diligence obligations on intermediaries, including grievance redressal and swift removal of unlawful content. The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, goes further by mandating verifiable parental consent for users under 18 and prohibiting targeted advertising or behavioural tracking of children, with penalties reaching ₹200 crore for non-compliance. These provisions, if rigorously enforced, could reshape platform incentives. However, compliance timelines stretching to 2027, coupled with weak enforcement capacity, dilute their immediate impact. The Madras High Court's suggestion of parental filtering tools hints at a more practical path: empower families rather than criminalise teenagers. The challenge lies not in drafting new laws, but in enforcing existing ones through technical standards, audits, and accountability mechanisms that make child safety a design priority rather than an afterthought.

The deeper question is cultural. India's digital transition has outpaced its social adaptation. Smartphones have entered homes faster than inverters and digital hygiene. Parents, many of whom are first-generation internet users, struggle to guide children through online risks they barely understand. Schools, burdened with curriculum pressures, treat cyber-safety as an optional workshop rather than a core life skill. The Economic Survey's recommendation for digital wellness curricula and parental training deserves urgent implementation. Equally vital are offline alternatives: community sports, arts, youth clubs, and safe public spaces that offer belonging beyond the screen. When adolescents find identity and validation in the physical world, the psychological grip of virtual metrics weakens. The problem of digital addiction is inseparable from the erosion of community life; policy must therefore extend beyond the device to the social environment in which it is used.

Ultimately, the debate over social media and minors is a test of India's policy imagination. A binary choice between laissez-faire and prohibition is intellectually lazy and socially ineffective. What India needs is a layered approach: enforce age-appropriate design standards, mandate transparency in algorithms affecting minors, strengthen parental controls, integrate digital literacy into education, and hold platforms financially liable for demonstrable harm. Technology companies, which have long argued that they are neutral conduits, must accept that design choices carry moral consequences. At the same time, society must resist the urge to outsource parenting to the state or to Silicon Valley. The responsibility for nurturing resilient young citizens cannot be delegated to code or compliance checklists.

If India succeeds in crafting a balanced response, it could offer the world a democratic model for protecting children in the digital age—one that safeguards mental health without eroding digital vitality, and promotes responsible usage without suffocating freedom. The recent tragedies should not be reduced to statistics or moral panic; they should serve as a national wake-up call. A civilisation that has long spoken of dharma as a guiding principle must now rediscover its ethical compass in cyberspace. The question is not whether children should be online, but whether the online world we have built is worthy of them.

## PRAGMATIC RESET



ASIF ULLAH KHAN

THE WRITER HAS WORKED IN SENIOR EDITORIAL POSITIONS FOR MANY RENOWNED INTERNATIONAL PUBLICATIONS

Trust is the rarest currency in geopolitics, and its recovery after a period of strain suggests diplomatic maturity on both sides

# Thawing the Diplomatic Frost

PM Modi's Kuala Lumpur visit signals a deliberate thaw after years of strain, anchoring ties in digital payments, resilient supply chains, local-currency trade and shared maritime security

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's latest visit to Kuala Lumpur is significant not simply because of new agreements, but because it marks a cautious reset after one of the coldest periods in modern India-Malaysia relations.

That chill traces back to Malaysia's dramatic 2018 political upheaval. The 14th General Election ended Barisan Nasional's long-ruling coalition rule and returned Dr Mahathir Mohamad to power at the age of 92. His comeback was historic, but it also reshaped Malaysia's foreign policy tone. Once mentor and later nemesis, Modi's return to power in 2014 brought back a more consequential figure in Malaysian politics. His 22-month second stint in office, however brief, proved disruptive for ties with India.

At the United Nations General Assembly, Mahathir accused India of "invading and occupying" Jammu and Kashmir — a language he had previously reserved for major Western powers. He openly criticised India's Citizenship Amendment Act and questioned New Delhi's domestic policies. His refusal to extradite controversial preacher Zakir Naik further deepened tensions. India responded with restrictions on Malaysian palm oil imports, a move widely read as diplomatic retaliation. What followed was a rare public spat between two countries that had historically managed disagreements quietly.

Unlike his mentor-turned-foe, Prime Minister Anwar has projected a more pragmatic, economically anchored diplomacy. He speaks openly about cultural pluralism, embraces Malaysia's multiethnic identity, and frames international



The PM's visit proves that patient diplomacy, economic logic and technology can repair even bruised bilateral relationships

partnerships through growth and technology rather than symbolism. That difference is central to understanding why India-Malaysia ties are warming again.

Modi's visit symbolises that reset. India's Unified Payments Interface (UPI) enters Malaysia is more than a technical upgrade. It represents India exporting global digital infrastructure as a model of economic cooperation. Nearly half of the world's real-time digital transactions now take place in India, largely driven by UPI. Linking it with Malaysia's PayNet system creates a new financial corridor that reduces friction for businesses, travellers, and small enterprises.

The Malaysia-India Digital Council signals that both governments now see tech-

nology as a strategic pillar. Semiconductors, advanced manufacturing, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, and digital finance are not peripheral sectors; they are the industries shaping the next industrial era. Malaysia's electronics ecosystem complements India's engineering scale. Few bilateral partnerships offer such natural economic symmetry.

This cooperation comes as global supply chains undergo realignment. Companies are diversifying production to reduce geopolitical risk, and Southeast Asia is emerging as a trusted manufacturing hub. Malaysia's infrastructure and India's expanding design capacity position them to build a resilient, high-tech value chain together.

The economic base is already substantial. India and Malaysia's bilateral trade reached around USD 18.6 billion in 2025, with Malaysia exporting about USD 12.2 billion worth of goods to India and importing around USD 6.4 billion from India. This reflects depth, but the decision to encourage settlement in local currencies — the Indian Rupee and Malaysian Ringgit — may prove even more consequential. In an era of currency volatility, reducing dependence on third-party currencies strengthens economic autonomy and insulates trade from global shocks.

Security cooperation adds another dimension. Both leaders emphasised maritime security, intelligence sharing, and counter-terrorism collaboration within the Indo-Pacific

framework. Their joint condemnation of terrorism reflects recognition that economic modernisation and security are inseparable in a world where emerging technologies create new vulnerabilities.

Equally important is the human bridge. Malaysia hosts one of the largest Indian-origin communities outside India. Cultural familiarity, education exchanges, and expanded scholarships ensure that ties extend beyond governments.

The symbolism of Modi and Anwar travelling together and projecting personal rapport signals restored trust. Trust is the rarest currency in geopolitics, and its recovery after a period of strain suggests diplomatic maturity on both sides.

Views expressed are personal

## AT VANTAGE



SHRUTAPA PAUL

THE WRITER IS AN AUTHOR AND MEDIA ENTREPRENEUR

Estimates suggest a 39 per cent hike between 2001 and 2011, and government data suggests an increase from 13.5 per cent of unmarried women in 2011 to 19.9 per cent in 2021

# Single, maybe (not) seeking

Social shifts show a growing number of eligible single women in India choosing to live singular lives. For equal relationships to thrive, men must level up

There are way too many eligible, accomplished, amazing single women around than men. I'm certain that a number of women will be nodding in agreement while reading this statement. Just in the last 2 weeks alone, I have mentally counted and personally spoken to five brilliant women in my immediate circle. It's not that they don't want to find love, they can't seem to find it. Forming relationships, as we grow older, becomes exceedingly difficult, and the dating friends feels challenging, finding a beau seems near impossible. It's a curious social trend, not yet supported by reports, but there are far more available single women around than men.

Depressing as it may sound but men are always in demand. No matter their past relationship status or physical qualities, or current attributes, men always seem to find someone or another to get hitched. They can marry down both in status and age, their past broken relationships or marriages are no taboo, even if their exes are still around — fit, their stock runs high in the marriage market. But when it comes to women, the burden of expectations squashes them with the weight. You must be successful but never more than the guy, beautiful, highly intelligent, slim (is that even in question?), confident but also accepting the man as lord, master, and saviour; homely but outgoing — I exaggerate a bit, but you get the drift that stereotypical bride expectations continue to exist and grow. The old adage of 'today's diamond woman need not conform to' expired social notions, and therefore, many are also choosing to live singular lives to escape patriarchal fetters, and follow their own free will.

The successful men that I meet through work almost always regard me with awe, their attitudes, wit, once astute professionals, are now homemakers having sacrificed their careers at the altars of the men's ambition. They sound proud of their conquest, of reducing a multi-faceted human being and forcing them into pre-determined two-dimensional roles, that of wife and mother.



Whether it is by choice or compulsion, we are seeing more single women than ever before

The men? They soar high in their jobs, continue to party like in college, and keep making large strides in their careers. They thrive. And these new people come in and out. The biggest ever aspect of their lives, are today either still searching for their life partner or have just given up on relationships, choosing their freedom and agency over suffocating relationships. Just like my five relationship-ready female friends, they tick off some of the boxes of the marriage chart, some they refuse to comply with (that's why we are friends), but most importantly, they have led full lives and bear the scars and memories to prove it. And yet another Valentine's Day comes and goes and they are without a steady partner.

See, the dating pool in India is non-existent in smaller towns and gets quite incestuous in older cities — you circulate within the same friend circles, the same networks, and fewer new people come in and out. The biggest obstacle is always age — if you're a woman and have crossed a certain age, then automatically a lot of men become no-go areas. These restrictions are variedly placed — some by society, some by our own mental gaps, some simply by prejudice. As singles population shrinks further as you start casting men aside based on the categories of 'emotionally messed up', 'financially drained', 'eternal Peter Pan', 'still hung up on ex', and 'mommy issues'. Once done, a minuscule number of men remain, and those men can have the belle of the ball.

Moving away from the very real problem of eligible women and missing men, there is also a growing fatigue worldwide with marriage and relationships. India accounts for one of the lowest divorce rates in the world, but is witnessing a surge in recent years. So, whether it is by choice or compulsion, we are seeing more single women than ever before. There are upwards of 70 million single women in India, including those who are separated, widowed, divorced, and never-married. While the latest Census will confirm the final statistics that could be higher now, estimates suggest a 39 per cent hike between 2001 and 2011, and government data suggests an increase from 13.5 per cent of unmarried women in 2011 to 19.9 per cent in 2021.

Whatever the reason for singleness, it's great to see brands finally catching up. From a quick commerce platform showcasing a 'single mode' to airlines promoting 'travel for two or just for you', singleness is slowly becoming mainstream and maybe, even celebrated. For sure, it's happening now due to Valentine's Day but this social shift will steadily pick up pace in the coming times, led by a community of single, empowered women. As for my five female friends? I know they'll be happy whether single or coupled up. They need not do anything. It's the men who need to level up.

Views expressed are personal

## WHO SAID WHAT

Harsha Bhoghe  
@bhogheharsha

This is turning out to be a sensational tournament. The less reported nations are playing a beautiful tune. #CCMensT20WorldCup

Saurav Das  
@SauravDassss

Over 6,800 complaints were received against sitting judges by the Office of the Chief Justice of India in last ten years alone! The Supreme Court of India presented this data to the Union Law Ministry in response to a Parliamentary question by Mr. Matheswaran VS. It is not known what transpired in each of these complaints, and how, and IF AT ALL they were processed by the CJI's office. Judicial corruption is a burning issue today and the system stands exposed. Although the MP asked what action was taken in each of these complaints, the Parliamentary answer is mute on that point. The government is also mute on bringing guidelines or mechanism to record, maintain, and deal with such complaints. However, the MORE WORRYING and SHOCKING point is this: Before the Delhi High Court in my case on corruption and misconduct complaints against former Madras High Court Acting Chief Justice T. Raju, the Supreme Court Registry has sworn on the affidavit that it does not maintain data in the format of the Delhi High Court if given year-wise data to the Parliament then? So is the Supreme Court Registry lying on oath before the Delhi High Court? If so, this is UNPRECEDENTED and the strongest of actions ought to be taken against those shielding a certain judge by denying data! Who is shielding? Why are they shielding? And what fear do they have to simply answer a yes or no to my RTI question? Even going to the extent of misleading the Hon'ble High Court. The system stands exposed today! Accountability must follow.



DK SHIVAKUMAR Karnataka Deputy CM

“ I always live with hope and confidence. There will always be fruit for the effort, whether it is for you, for me, or for anyone else. Where there is effort, there is fruit



VJAY TVK chief

Do you remember my political bomb at the Vikravandi rally; offering to share power? Chief Minister Stalin sir is rattled and he says that power sharing will not suit Tamil Nadu



RUVIEN AZAR Israel Ambassador to India

Israel is also very engaged with the American market. When the system opens, it creates more opportunities for Israeli, Indian, and US companies to work together”

## AI fury batters IT stocks

The disruptive power of artificial intelligence technologies is nothing new. But what happened to the global IT stocks around the world last week mirrored far deeper fears of the industry. A set of new AI tools released by Anthropic, a US-based AI company, sent tremors through America, Europe and Asia, wiping billions of dollars off the software and IT services firms' stock prices as their shares fell sharply. Anthropic, the creator of Claude chatbot, released 11 open-source plugins for its 'Claude Cowork' agent aimed at automating tasks across legal, sales, marketing and data analysis functions. The worry is that these automation tools, which can handle a wide range of customer service tasks, could replace many traditional software and IT outsourcing services. The scale of the meltdown was so massive that some analysts described the market reaction as a "SaaSocalypse," meaning a severe downturn for software-as-a-service (SaaS) companies. The new plugins will lead to automation of tasks such as legal document review, compliance, sales workflows, marketing support and data analysis. Indian IT stocks too came under sustained pressure with their shares plunging by up to 8% and wiping out roughly Rs 2 lakh crore in market value amid fears that automating coding, legal review, sales workflows and other enterprise functions could erode the high-margin application services revenues that account for 40-70% of Indian IT companies' business. Analysts estimate that 9%-12% of industry revenues could be at risk over the next four years as clients pivot to AI-led efficiency over traditional service providers.

The meltdown was due to worries of AI tools replacing many traditional software and IT outsourcing services

A key takeaway for the Indian IT sector from Anthropic's disruption is that it should move from traditional outsourcing to becoming AI implementation partners. As Indian enterprises integrate Claude for critical coding workflows, dependency on large vendor teams may decline, squeezing billable hours and margins. Anthropic's advanced AI systems also threaten the entry-level talent pool at Indian IT firms by replacing routine development and testing tasks. However, the doomsday predictions are highly exaggerated. A closer look reveals that the scale of legacy software embedded in global enterprises is of the order of \$20-25 trillion across the US and Europe — with annual technology spending of \$1.2-1.75 trillion. Such installed bases cannot be replaced or automated away overnight by plugging in a new AI tool. Most global enterprises continue to use AI selectively, particularly in research, discovery and limited productivity use cases. Comprehensive AI-led transformation of core operations remains at an early stage. Tools like Claude may directly apply to roughly 25-30% of total work in application development and related services. While application services form a significant share of revenues for large IT firms, the nature of work within that bucket varies widely. Large-scale system integration, legacy modernisation, database consolidation, testing, governance and compliance layers are not easily automated. The AI represents a powerful productivity accelerator, but not an overnight structural wipe-out.

## Budget 2026 strengthens India's clean energy ambitions, but its weak emphasis on climate accountability raises concerns



TAMALI CHAKRABORTY SUBHAJOY MAHANTA BARUN KUMAR THAKUR

Energy is one of the most important resources, and its current transition will define its future. Having crossed a decade-long drive towards clean energy, India has now entered a mature phase, where it is not only thinking about how to scale renewables but also how to integrate them efficiently through good governance. The Budget 2026-27 strengthens renewable energy funding, supports local manufacturing through duty rationalisation, energy storage, and grid infrastructure. Renewable energy is positioned not merely as a substitute for fossil fuels but as a core solution to climate and ecological challenges. While the Budget highlights important advances in clean and green energy, it remains uncertain whether these measures are sufficient to reinforce the long-term sustainability of the energy transition.

**Backbone of Energy Strategy** Total allocations for the renewable energy sector have risen to Rs 32,914.7 crore, reinforcing its role as a core pillar of national planning. The objective of installing rooftop solar systems in 10 million households by 2027 links decentralised generation with affordability and consumer participation. By December 2025, around 24% of the target had been achieved, covering 2.39 million households.

The Budget signals intent to accelerate this momentum, with rooftop solar penetration expected to reach 50-60%



by the end of the next fiscal. Support for agricultural solarisation has also been strengthened with the PM-KUSUM allocation nearly doubling from Rs 2,600 crore to Rs 5,000 crore, underscoring the role of agri-solar in reducing diesel use and easing grid pressure in rural areas.

The Budget reiterates its focus on enabling the framework needed to support renewable energy technologies. On the manufacturing side, the removal of the basic Customs duty on sodium antimonate, an essential input for solar glass, directly reduces manufacturing costs. This measure is complemented by the reduction of the effective duty payable on solar modules to 20%. This addresses the longstanding issue of duty inversion that has plagued the solar segment.

To encourage recycling, the Budget provides an exemption from Customs duties on lithium-ion battery waste and scrap. Energy storage receives a more prominent role, marking a conceptual shift. Battery Energy Storage Systems (BESS) are no longer treated as optional supplements but as system-critical infrastructure. The Viability Gap Funding scheme reflects this shift. The first tranche, approved in March 2024, provided Rs 3,760 crore for 13,220 MWh of storage capacity. The second tranche, in June 2025, allocates Rs 5,400 crore to support an additional 30 GWh of BESS capacity.

These measures are expected to integrate storage into future power tenders, especially for grid-scale applications. Extending basic Customs duty exemptions for lithium-ion cell manufacturing to BESS improves project bankability. Expanding renewable generation without adequate storage leads to curtailment, grid instability, and greater reliance on fossil fuels. The Reformed Linked Distribution Scheme has been allocated Rs 18,000 crore for optimal grid operations, while Rs 600 crore has been earmarked under the Green En-

ergy Corridor for developing 6,000 km of transmission infrastructure.

### Clean Energy Transition

The Budget also expands the clean energy narrative by strengthening low-carbon non-renewable sources and supply chains. Basic Customs duty exemptions for select nuclear power equipment have been extended until 2035. A dedicated Nuclear Energy Mission targets 100 GW of capacity by 2047, with Rs 200 lakh crore allocated for R&D in small modular reactors (SMRs), including the indigenous development of at least five SMRs by 2035. Funding for the National Green Hydrogen Mission has been raised to Rs 600 crore, largely to support electrolyser manufacturing, hydrogen production, R&D, pilot projects, and skill development.

Investment in Rare Earth Corridors in Kerala, Odisha, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh, as part of the Rare Earth Permanent Magnets Scheme, has been proposed. An outlay of Rs 7,280 crore over seven years is estimated, with the capacity to add 6,000 tonnes per year to India's permanent magnet manufacturing capacity. This is a significant move, especially considering that India consumes 4,000-5,000 tonnes per year, all of which are currently imported.

Further, fundamental Customs duty has been fully exempted for capital goods imported for critical mineral processing. However, experts have raised

A genuine green transition requires renewable expansion to align with environmental safeguards, grid readiness, and institutional accountability

concerns that without clear legal, environmental, and other regulatory frameworks, the corridors will remain aspirational. The critical issue is environmental impact. Coastal regulations, community impacts, and environmental factors will determine the sustainability of mineral-centric strategies.

### Environmental Blind Spots

The fiscal plan delivers clear advantages: it reinforces policy continuity, boosts domestic manufacturing, recognises system-wide needs for storage and grid infrastructure, and expands the clean energy mix to include hydrogen, nuclear, and critical minerals. These signals reassure investors and manufacturers. However, the environmental narrative remains notably weak.

The silence is telling, especially as air quality across Delhi and the NCR deteriorated sharply during the winter of 2025-26, with repeated "very poor" and "severe" AQI readings above 300 — underscoring the need to link renewable expansion more directly to pollution reduction and public health outcomes.

While the Budget proposes a Rs 20,000-crore plan for carbon capture, utilisation, and storage technologies in heavy industries, it makes no explicit reference to air pollution, environmental governance, or climate adaptation. The other environment-related allocations include modest proposals of Rs 1,091 crore for pollution control, Rs 170 crore for the National Mission for a Green India, and Rs 2.50 crore for a new afforestation component. Climate expenditures remain fragmented with no unified climate budget. This gap matters. Renewables continue to be framed primarily as growth enablers for manufacturing, data centres, and energy security, rather than as means to strengthen ecological resilience and public health.

Expanding renewable energy alone cannot offset continued coal use or rising energy demand, and clarity on India's 2070 net-zero mission is missing. As India moves towards 500 GW of non-fossil capacity, the challenge is no longer ambition but alignment.

Whether Budget 2026-27 marks a genuine green transition will depend on how well renewable energy implementation aligns with environmental outcomes, grid preparedness, and institutional accountability. A budget signals intent; the transition is defined by what follows.

(Dr Tamali Chakraborty teaches Economics and Subhajoy Mahanta is a Postgraduate student at Indian Institute of Management Visakhapatnam. Dr Barun Kumar Thakur teaches Economics at FLAME University, Pune. Views are personal.)

## Letters to the Editor

### Heated debate

The recent display and discussion of the unpublished memoir of former Army Chief General MM Naravane, Four Stars of Destiny, in Parliament by LoP Rahul Gandhi has ignited a heated political debate. The autobiography's manuscript has not yet been approved by the Ministry of Defence for publication. Even the publisher, Penguin Random House, has clarified that it has not released the book. While some view this as raising transparency and accountability issues, others argue that the public display of an unreleased book raises serious questions about

the delicate balance between political critique and established defence norms. NARASIMHA ADAIDA, Hyderabad

### Timely move

The Centre's decision to mandate clear labelling for photorealistic AI-generated content is a timely intervention in an increasingly manipulated digital environment. As deepfakes and synthetic images grow more convincing, the line between truth and fabrication is rapidly eroding, threatening public trust and democratic discourse. If implemented seriously, the move can strengthen digital accountability and protect the integrity of India's information ecosystem. N SADHASIVA REDDY, Bengaluru

## Cartoon Today



## India in the hotspot

■ BBC

### India cuts takedown window to 3 hrs...

India has introduced new rules that make it mandatory for social media companies to remove unlawful material within three hours of being notified, in a sharp tightening of the existing 36-hour deadline.

■ The Straits Times

### India farmers protest US trade deal

Farmers rallied across India on Feb 12 to oppose a trade deal with Washington that reduces tariffs on US goods, warning that it would hurt Indian agriculture and end-anger livelihoods.

■ The New York Times

### Why India playing Pak in WC matters

For the legions of cricket fans in India and Pakistan, when their teams face off on Sunday in the T20 World Cup, the weary-spinning match with a viewership expected to dwarf the Super Bowl will be about more than just sport.

INDIAN EXPRESS IS NOT AN INDUSTRY. IT IS A MISSION.

— Ramnath Goenka

## FOR A DEAL IN TIME: ENSURE SPEEDY RAFALE ACQUISITION, INDUCTION

THE decision to acquire 114 additional Rafale fighter jets comes at a crucial moment. India's security environment is increasingly fraught, even as the Indian Air Force's squadron strength continues to fall well below sanctioned levels. The Defence Acquisition Council's clearance for the Rafale order—alongside approvals for six P-8I maritime reconnaissance aircraft for the Navy and other procurements—reflects an overdue alignment between strategic necessity and political will.

Estimated at roughly ₹3.25 lakh crore, the Rafale deal would be the most expensive fighter acquisition in the IAF's history. Yet, preparedness cannot be reduced to a balance-sheet debate. The IAF is authorised 42 fighter squadrons but currently operates only 29, following the retirement of two MiG-21 squadrons last September. This widening gap is no longer merely statistical; it has direct implications for deterrence and operational flexibility, especially in a two-front scenario.

The contract, expected to be signed by early 2027, would reportedly provide 88 single-seat and 26 twin-seat fighters. Eighteen aircraft are likely to be delivered in fly-away condition, with the remaining 96 manufactured in India. The package includes weapons, simulators, spares, training, upgrades and long-term maintenance—making it a comprehensive capability enhancement rather than a simple platform purchase. With 36 Rafales already in service, and 26 naval Rafale-M fighters in the pipeline, expanding the fleet offers logistical efficiencies and proven performance advantages.

However, intent must translate into execution. India's defence procurement record is marked by prolonged negotiations and procedural drift. The earlier medium-multi-role combat aircraft process serves as a reminder of how delay can undermine readiness. This time, the timelines must be sacrosanct. Swift negotiations, clear terms on technology transfer and early establishment of domestic production infrastructure are essential. Dassault's reported backlog underscores the need for firm delivery schedules. Equally important is synchronising induction with pilot training and support infrastructure to avoid hollow capacity.

India's air power deficit cannot be allowed to deepen further. The Rafale acquisition is strategically sound. What will determine its success is not the announcement, but the speed and discipline with which it is executed.

## LOCAL BODY POLLS SET STAGE FOR BATTLE OF HYDERABAD

THE municipal election results in Telangana have brought much-needed relief to the ruling Congress, which over the last few months was battling the opposition's charges on various issues including alleged corruption. More than anything else it has reaffirmed that, despite claims to the contrary, the Revanthi Reddy government still commands public support.

Of the 116 municipalities and seven corporations, at the time of going to press, the Congress was well on its way to winning a majority of both. It is true that the ruling party usually has an edge in local polls. But for the Congress to pull this off in a triangular contest is a substantial morale booster. It can also draw satisfaction from consolidating its position in contrast to the BJP and the BRS, which were forced to move some of their candidates to 'safe resorts' to avoid crossovers. The results should empower the chief minister to have his way in reshuffling the cabinet and give him confidence in the battle for Greater Hyderabad's three corporations, within whose limits the Congress did not win a single seat in the 2023 assembly elections. The victory also raises the bar—the government must now deliver on its promises for water supply, sanitation, drainage, roads and other civic infrastructure. The six guarantees, too, cannot remain mere campaign rhetoric.

For the BRS, the outcome is a sobering reminder of the shifting ground realities. Once the dominant force in Telangana politics under K Chandrababu Naidu, it appears diminished after ceding ground to both the Congress and the BJP. Defections and internal rifts had eroded its base; now the municipal results have exposed its structural weaknesses. The beleaguered party will face a litmus test in the Greater Hyderabad elections this summer as a setback in the capital would push it further down the slippery slope.

The BJP, on the other hand, has a reason to smile though its overall performance was weaker than expected—its performance in the corporations. But despite wielding the massive party apparatus, including campaigning by its national president, the party could not live up to the expectations. If it wants to be a serious contender at the next assembly polls, the BJP needs to focus more on development narratives and rein in the polarising communal rhetoric of some of its leaders.

### QUICK TAKE

#### FOR YOUR EARS ONLY

CHANCES are that you have suffered scolding. The neologism stands for playing audio loudly, without earphones, on a mobile phone in public—a disturbing habit that has spread like a rash. On Thursday, the civil aviation ministry threw the rulebook at an MP who had asked whether there was a way to discipline those who play music loudly on a plane. The government referred to the Civil Aviation Requirement rules proscribing disruptive behaviour aboard an aircraft, thereby passing the ball to airlines. This is not about fliers only—bus, train and metro travellers often have to endure passengers testing the hearing of the whole carriage. Indian Railway also has a rule limiting loudness. What we need are for suffering citizens to make a noise. An innovative campaign appealing for public decency would not fall on deaf ears.

FOR months now, we have been engaged in intense trade negotiations—a subject close to my heart given my long service in the ministry of commerce, including a tenure as India's ambassador to the World Trade Organization in Geneva. During my time in Geneva, I was involved in brisk, high-pressure negotiations following the ministerial conference at Cancun in 2003. Fortunately, our delegation, led by the suave Arun Jaitley, won all its major points.

The situation deteriorated after Cancun. In conference after conference, negotiations stagnated. India must accept partial responsibility for this stalemate; we were not sufficiently nimble in changing tracks when necessary, nor did we take the lead when opportunities arose. The negotiations eventually ground to a halt—a standstill that was not in India's favour.

Then came Donald Trump. "I don't need international law," he declared in an interview after his dramatic capture of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro at the beginning of this year. But his war against the established rules-based order began during his first term as US president. On his first full workday in the Oval Office—January 23, 2017—he withdrew the US from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a powerful 12-nation bloc designed to promote trade rules. He then invoked Section 232 of the US Trade Expansion Act, which exploited the rarely-used Article XXI of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade to impose tariffs on steel and aluminium from most countries on grounds of 'national security'.

He dismantled the WTO's dispute settlement mechanism by simply blocking appointments to the appellate body. Consequently, even if a member country wins a dispute, the loser cannot appeal, rendering the enforcement process dysfunctional.

In his second term, Trump came full tilt at the rest of the world. Last April, he signed an executive order invoking the International Emergency Economic Powers Act, bypassing US Congress to impose sweeping tariffs on all nations. The legality of his action is currently before the US Supreme Court. If the judgement goes against him, the US government would legally be required to refund these tariffs to American importers. While he might revert to Section 232 to maintain the levies, wanton use of 'national security' provisions will face stiff resistance. The present

A series of recent climdbdowns on aggressive trade measures shows the US president often loses a staring contest. India did well in not locking eyes when the threats peaked

## TRUMP'S TRADE DANCE: TWO STEPS FORWARD, AT LEAST ONE BACK



SOURABH ROY

belligerence against Iran may well be to justify such national security measures, should his executive order be set aside. He flexed muscle against China, revoking its permanent normal trade status and relegating it to the same category as North Korea and Cuba, with significantly higher tariffs. The Chinese retaliated by squeezing supplies of critical rare-earth elements vital for semiconductors and military gear and Trump backed down. His administration has also passed a number of key tech security measures that were aimed at Beijing, ahead of a possible April meeting between the two countries' presidents.

Tariffs on Russia have been high since the Ukraine war. So Trump devised a secondary strategy: levying punitive tariffs on countries that bought Russian oil—the ground on which he imposed a punishing

25 percent on Indian exports. Much to his surprise, Russia did not blink.

Trump thought India would be an easy pick. He first levied a 25 percent tariff on all Indian goods, then added a 25 percent penalty for buying Russian oil. India, however, did not bat an eyelid.

We quietly opened official channels of negotiation while ignoring the provocations of Trump and his henchmen. Subtly threatening the geopolitical balance, we drew closer to Russia and China. As the current president of Brics, a growing bloc, India signalled its potential to form or join a parallel global economic system. Simultaneously, we negotiated with the UK, New Zealand, Oman and the EU, blunting the impact of US hostility by securing favourable terms for labour-intensive industries such as textiles and jewellery. Meanwhile, economic reality began to

K M CHANDRASEKHAR

Former Cabinet Secretary and author of *As Good as My Word: A Memoir*

## GIVING BACK, FOR OLD TIMES' SAKE

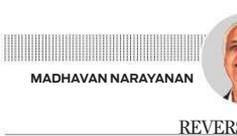
OSTALGIA is not what it used to be," is one of my favourite quotes, variously attributed to French actress Simone Signoret and American writer Peter De Vries. While its irony may be in doubt, its aphorism is not. I got that feeling firsthand last weekend as I went down memory lane to the University of Delhi to mark the centenary of my alma mater.

Shri Ram College of Commerce is not used to be. It is one of the main red-brick buildings laden with teenage memories. But the festive air to mark the institution's 100th year echoed with revelry, laughter and banter by older folks who were evidently feeling young all over again. This was not exactly a poet's idea of nostalgia as sweet pain, though I am sure there were silent sighs on missed buses.

The joyous occasion also rekindled the times we are in. Graduates from well-regarded institutions are increasingly sought after by big-ticket companies, a far cry from my days when employment prospects were far fewer. But there was a lot of gratitude one could feel in the air. Just as well. I realise that I secured a world-class degree at a monthly fee of less than ₹3 at the then exchange rate. My education's real value truly lay in the fact that I worked in an international agency as an equal with folks who had graduated from Yale and Oxford.

It is also great to see that one of the most desirable habits of contemporary American culture is catching on in India, though there is a long way to go. Grateful alumni are happy to give back to the institutions that shaped them. SRCC has only just begun that journey much like most Indian educational institutions. The global reach of Indian alumni, especially in the US, has triggered the imagination for philanthropy to aid one's alma mater, though the idea of building schools or offering scholarships is not really new for Indians. SRCC, though aided by the government in a post-independence drive for higher education, also owes a lot to its founder, Lala Shri Ram, whose philanthropic footprints are all over the national capital.

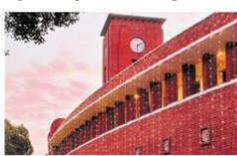
Former finance minister Arun Jaitley, probably the best-known alumnus of my college, figured frequently in the centenary conversations. The chairman of the college's governing board, Ajay S Shirram, recalled how Jaitley once casually suggested that the classmate be as co-edited. When the management murmured over the costs, a few messag-



MADHAVAN NARAYANAN Senior Journalist

### REVERSE SWING

es went out, and within months enough funds were raised from the alumni. All rooms are now air-conditioned, a far cry from my days when slowly-whirring fans would hang from the high ceilings. The contributions were not surprising, considering the conversations I overheard at the centenary dinner. Investment bankers, private equity moneybags and tax planners were busy exchanging career notes as giant screens flashed profiles of the been-there-done-that brigade. Old boys love to network in alumni meetings. That's profitable nostalgia.



The centenary of Delhi's Shri Ram College of Commerce brought into focus philanthropic efforts by the alumni. While many Indians have been donating to their institutions, structured endowments are relatively new. The government has woken up late in evening the process

But the generous alumni movement has only just begun in India and has faced hiccups. The government has not been quite prepared for it, and stirred into action only five years ago to do what might be called an 'ease of doing business' equivalent. In the US, media star Michael Bloomberg donated \$1 billion to the Johns Hopkins University for medical school tuition. Hedge fund manager John Paulson donated \$400 million to the engineering school at Harvard, where he studied management. But the real deal is the way many lesser-known alumni contrib-

ute to build humongous endowments.

Harvard today has an endowment larger than \$50 billion and Yale—named after its first big benefactor, Elihu Yale, who made much of his money at Fort St George, Madras—has more than \$40 billion today. Princeton, Stanford and MIT rank close behind.

But Infosys co-founder N R Narayana Murthy had a rude awakening in the 1990s when he found that he could not donate ₹6 crore worth of shares to IIT Kanpur because regulations did not allow equity-based donations at that time. Murthy said a couple of decades later that had it been accepted, the stake would have been worth ₹2,000 crore. There was also a report on how a scientist had to backtrack from a donation of 8 acres of land to another IIT because it attracted a stamp duty of ₹40 crore that the state government refused to waive.

Nevertheless, individual generosity has pushed ahead. Another Infosys co-founder and current Executive Chairman Nandan Nilekani in 2023 pledged ₹315 crore to his alma mater, IIT Bombay, a year after IIT Kanpur received ₹100 crore from Rakesh Gangwal, co-founder of IndiGo Airlines. The structured endowment model arrived in India in 2019, when IIT Delhi started a fund with the alumni committing ₹250 crore. Administered as a non-profit, the corpus now stands at around ₹480 crore and aims to reach ₹7,000 crore. We need many more such initiatives.

In 2022, the Union education ministry issued guidelines for central universities to set up endowments to be run by boards headed by vice-chancellors, with rules on how to spend the money while growing the corpus.

There was talk at SRCC about startup incubators to help entrepreneurs and address opportunities in artificial intelligence. With AI disrupting every field including education, pedagogy needs to reinvent itself. Evidently, alumni with real-life experience can pitch in with something beyond money.

(Views are personal) (On X @madversity)

bite Trump at home. By the 2025-end holiday season, US consumers faced the impact of his weaponised tariffs. For one, the price for consumer electronics, often gifted in the season, rose 15-20 percent. Forced by domestic pressure, Trump rolled back tariffs on agricultural and marine products, allowing sensitive Indian exports like shrimp and spices to regain markets. Recent reports suggest that the tariffs on steel and aluminium, which were raised in 2025, are also being rolled back.

Ultimately, Trump had to abandon his goal of capturing Indian markets at the cost of our domestic producers. In the recent 'interim' agreement, the US failed to gain access to Indian markets for its major agricultural and dairy products—a primary American objective that would have caused the wholesale extinction of our peasantry had we buckled. Instead, India gained comparative tariff advantages in key sectors like garments and jewellery.

We agreed to progressively lower tariffs on high-end motorcycles, apples, American whiskey and wines. In time, this competition will likely improve Indian products. Perhaps, one day, Indian wines will compete on equal footing with those from Australia or Chile.

We also made a 'motherhood promise' to purchase \$500 billion worth of US goods over the next decade. Given our burgeoning requirements in aviation, defence, technology and energy, this is a natural trajectory rather than a forced concession.

Regarding oil, Trump has claimed victory in stopping India's purchase of Russian crude. In reality, Indian firms were already struggling to sustain purchases as sanctions bit harder. Moreover, with the world—and specifically Europe—losing its appetite for the Ukraine war even as Russia advances militarily, the strategic value of oil is shifting. The availability of heavy Venezuelan crude now opens a viable alternative source for Indian refineries.

Just as India seemed comfortably poised, Trump disrupted the equilibrium. He eliminated tariffs on Bangladeshi garments—provided they are made from US-grown cotton. Although Indian cotton is 6-8 cents per pound cheaper, the zero-tariff benefit gives Bangladesh an edge, making its final products cheaper than India's—despite higher input costs.

Despite the challenges, uncertainty persists. Trump can overturn agreements whimsically. The world must realise that no deal with the US is safe, underscoring the urgent need to re-establish the WTO's rules-based trading system.

(Views are personal) (kanchandrasekhar@gmail.com)

### MAIL BAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

#### Remarkable shifts

Ref: *New inflation count* (Feb 13). Three structural shifts in the new series merit deeper attention. First, modernisation of the consumption basket includes food pricing and signals the continuing shift towards a service-oriented economy. So the headline rate will now be more sensitive to lifestyle-related and technology costs. Second, the inclusion of rural house rent for the first time is a landmark. The finding that rural rent inflation currently exceeds the urban one challenges long-held assumptions and opens a risk corridor in regions that deserve closer scrutiny. Third, the divergence in core inflation between the new and old series has direct policy implications. While this statistical moderation may strengthen expectations of a mid-year pivot by the RBI, analysts' projections could still argue for maintaining the repo rate. **Vidyaagay Reddy Kethri, Warangal**

#### Transitioning students

Ref: *Don't lose focus* (Feb 13). Phasing out of Nali Kali risks disorganising a proven early learning bridge. Instead of withdrawing, Karnataka should retain teachers, reduce non-academic burdens, update curricula and smoothen transition. Pilot implementations before policy shifts may widen inequality and private school dependence. **K Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru**

#### Nuke insecurity

Ref: *Dissolution of dreams* (Feb 13). Geopolitical rivalries and security concerns often hinder disarmament efforts. Nations big or small join arms races due to the fear of insecurity. Many states feel that disarmament deprives them of their means of survival. Disarmament, however, is essential for global security and trust. **P Sivaraj Selvaraj, Trunelveli**

#### Individer governance

Ref: *Dalit families live in dark* (Feb 13). It's the responsibility of the government to provide the fundamental facilities like drinking water, shelter, healthcare and sanitation to ensure the right to a basic standard of living. Low voter turnout is a direct consequence of this indifference. **P Rishumani, Thanjavur**

#### Safeguarding teachers

Ref: *Statewide outrage* (Feb 13). It's high time that courts intervene and protect teachers from the disgusting additional responsibilities that are thrust upon them and has now become a trend among states. Teachers should be protected. **Parthasarathy Mandadi, Tirupati**



## A decisive mandate

India, Bangladesh have an opportunity to reset ties with the defeat of Jamaat

With a landslide verdict in its favour, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) is set to form the government in Dhaka, with its leader, Tarique Rahman, becoming the country's first male Prime Minister elected to the post in decades. Mr. Rahman's road to the post, two decades after being barred from elections (due to cases) and going into exile under the previous Awami League government, is dramatic, with his return to Bangladesh just days before the death of his mother and former Prime Minister, Khaleda Zia. The interim government led by Muhammad Yunus is expected to hand over the reins to Mr. Rahman. Despite its more than two-thirds of the elected seats in the Jatiya Sangsad, the BNP has many challenges ahead. As the first elected government since Sheikh Hasina's ouster in August 2024, the first order of business will be to restore old political institutions and effect a political reconciliation. This could mean releasing political prisoners and an outreach to the banned Awami League, many of whose supporters did not vote. The next will be to prepare for the challenge from the Jamaat-e-Islami, whose coalition won about 75 seats in Parliament, its best performance yet. As a more vocal opposition now, the Jamaat, whose leaders have pitched a regressive line on women's rights and for religious politics, will try and push the new centrist government to the right. Voters have also emphatically supported the 'July Charter' referendum, that calls for a caretaker government, reforms that could shift the powers of the Prime Minister, and an upper house in Parliament with proportional representation. Meanwhile, Mr. Rahman must hit the ground running on reviving the economy and restoring trade links with India.

For New Delhi, come to reset ties after they hit a nadir under Mr. Yunus, the outreach to the new government is important. The Modi government has had tensions with the BNP as it reduced engagement with the opposition in Bangladesh during Ms. Hasina's tenure. It must also take back the space ceded to Pakistan, the U.S. and China, which have each forged new relations with Bangladesh since Ms. Hasina's ouster. Perhaps more than bilateral relations, ruptured trade and connectivity, security and sporting ties, New Delhi and Dhaka must repair the frayed ties between their peoples. In Bangladesh, securing India's missions and ensuring the safety of minorities will be essential. For India, it is necessary to dial down the domestic rhetoric against Bangladesh, that is allowing political groups (many are affiliates to the ruling party), to threaten Bangladeshis in India. The Modi and Rahman governments will have to move most delicately, however, in managing the issue of Ms. Hasina, who remains a wanted fugitive in Dhaka and an honoured guest in Delhi, if they are intent on a fresh start in ties.

# India tested, from U.S. sanctions to one-sided trade deal

Despite all the fanfare and furore in Parliament, it may be premature to celebrate or criticise the India-United States Bilateral Trade Agreement, simply because it has not yet been forged. Yet, last week's announcement of a "Framework for an Interim Agreement on reciprocal trade" (where the agreement itself is expected to be announced in the next few weeks), follows a procedure and a path that should be disquieting for all. While the baseline objective for the Narendra Modi government must be to enhance the Indian economy, and ease the unbearable burden that the U.S. Trump administration had imposed on it through 50% tariffs, the question it must ask is this: how, and at what cost? The Indian government must consider if this will be the template for all other India-U.S. agreements, strategic, economic or defence in the future.

### America's unilateral announcements

Every announcement on the deal thus far has been made by Washington unilaterally, with New Delhi racing to play catch-up. The first sign that the two countries had agreed on going ahead with negotiations that began in February 2025 came from a social media post by U.S. President Donald Trump on February 2, 2026. In it, he furnished several details of his conversation with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, all of which were incorporated into the Joint Statement and Executive Orders issued on February 6 – claims that Mr. Modi agreed to stop buying Russian oil, and to buy "much more" oil from the U.S.; that India would reduce tariffs and non-tariff barriers against the U.S. to "zero" in return for 18% U.S. tariffs on Indian goods, and that Mr. Modi committed to "buy American" products to the tune of \$500 billion.

Mr. Modi's post that followed only divulged that the U.S. tariffs would be reduced. Four days later (U.S. time, 4 a.m.), Washington released the joint statement and two executive orders, on Russia and Iran, and subsequently a "Fact Sheet". The Press Information Bureau released the joint statement a few hours later. The government has since refused to engage with the other documents in its public comments. But the entire manner of bringing out a "joint statement" unilaterally, begs this question: Who is calling the shots?

The nuts and bolts of the eventual trade regime being discussed, which includes tariffs, non-tariff barriers and market access can be considered at a later date when India and the U.S. actually sign the "interim agreement" on trade, as they are expected to next month. However, the concessions given in order to secure the interim agreement are set out clearly, and are a major cause for concern. While the Ministry of External Affairs and Commerce and Industries Ministry have sought to separate the trade agreement from



Suhasini Haidar

India's autonomy and global credibility could be undermined by its unilateral trade deal with the United States

Mr. Trump's Executive Orders pertaining to Russian oil, they are in fact part of the same raft. Mr. Trump's Twitter Social post, the documents released on February 6, and the White House Fact Sheet issued on February 10 all present them together.

The U.S. makes it clear that it rescinded 25% punitive tariffs on India (imposed in August 2025), under three understandings: that India would stop buying Russian oil; that it had already begun to do so, and that the U.S. would impose tariffs again if India were to resume Russian oil supplies. Mr. Trump has even set up a panel of his top officials to monitor India's oil intake. What is perhaps even more surprising is that the order states that India has agreed to "align sufficiently with the United States on national security, foreign policy, and economic matters".

The Indian government has not so far denied any of these claims, instead issuing long statements outlining India's energy sourcing priorities and the need to diversify its supply sources. On the ground, the trends are clear: India's imports of Russian oil have been reducing since November 2025, and oil purchases in the December 2025 crashed to 38-month lows. From 40% of its oil intake in 2024, Russia now accounts for 25%.

Contrary to External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's assertion that India would put cheap oil for its consumers at the highest priority, and his Ministry's characterisation of the U.S.'s punitive tariffs as "unfair, unjustified and unreasonable", India is now buying less Russian oil, just as the discounts on it get larger. Other concessions, such as the zeroing of tariffs in several sectors, and the promise to buy American goods worth \$500 billion require further scrutiny. Buying U.S. goods in such large volumes would leave limited space for imports from other trading partners, and offering Washington terms not extended to countries that have only recently concluded trade agreements with India. These include the European Union, the European Free Trade Association, and New Zealand and would likely prompt questions from them.

Needless to say, the developing world, or the Global South, that once cheered India's refusal to back down in the face of non-United Nations unilateral sanctions, will be watching closely. As a result, understanding the U.S. deal's impact on India's diplomatic standing among other nations is also vital.

### A pattern of U.S. demands

Should India accept the U.S.'s ultimatums to halt Russian oil imports, it would mirror its 2019 approach of compliance on giving up Iranian and Venezuelan oil – resisting at first before ultimately yielding to U.S. pressure months later. The U.S. is now pushing for India to buy

American and American-controlled Venezuelan oil, for India to give up the Chabahar port project and all trade with Iran.

If New Delhi agrees to all these, it will not only lose respect and goodwill with the countries in question (where India had promised to increase trade and investment) but also its credibility as a buyer and supplier in the market worldwide. This could prove particularly awkward for India as it prepares to host this year's BRICS summit, with the leaders of Russia, Iran and other developing-world partners expected to attend.

The next question New Delhi must ask itself is this: If the only way to do business with the U.S. involves the acceptance of "unfair, unjustified and unreasonable" measures such as tariffs, then what does this mean for strategic relations with the U.S.? Will every agreement on strategic ties, including on defence deals, military alignment, the Quad (India, Australia, Japan, the U.S.) and the Indo-Pacific, counter-terrorism and India's neighbourhood follow this pattern? Not only have the U.S.'s deals with Pakistan and Bangladesh underscored Washington's limited regard for India's interests in the neighbourhood, but its insistence that India end Russian oil imports, curtail trade with Iran, and halt development of Chabahar would only further benefit China. It is worth noting that India is the only country that the U.S. imposed 25% punitive tariffs for Russian oil on, while China and Turkey are among other major buyers. In 2022, Mr. Modi's refusal to criticise Russia for the invasion of Ukraine publicly was seen as a compulsion of India's ties with Russia – abandoning its principles of territorial integrity in favour of pragmatism. In 2026, giving up Russian oil as a compulsion of India's ties with the U.S. is neither principled, nor pragmatic.

### On India's standing

Finally, the repercussions of this deal could inflict the greatest damage on India's principles of strategic autonomy, multi-alignment and multipolarity, as it would narrow India's options rather than diversify them – not just in energy procurement, trade, and connectivity but also in its broader global relationships. In 2019, Mr. Modi announced that India had rejected the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), invoking "Mahatma Gandhi's talisman test" – walking out of a deal that his government had worked on for five years, citing discomfiture with China's economic domination. Confronted with an agreement that makes far more egregious demands on India's sovereign choices, it would be surprising if the government did not subject the U.S. deal to additional scrutiny before finalising it.

suhasini.h@thehindu.co.in

# The labour codes redefine wages, empower the worker

The implementation of India's labour codes marks a decisive shift towards greater financial inclusion of the workforce by embedding social security, income protection, and long-term financial safeguards into the employment relationship. By consolidating multiple fragmented labour laws, the codes aim not only to modernise labour governance but also to ensure that the gains of economic growth are shared more equitably with workers.

While some trade unions have responded with nationwide strike calls, a closer examination of the labour codes reveals that these reforms are fundamentally designed to correct long-standing exclusions and integrate millions of workers into formal systems of financial and social security.

### The reform of a definition

One of the most significant financial inclusion outcomes is the reform of the "wage" definition. Establishments which used to pay lower wages (basic pay, dearness allowance and retaining allowance) of just 30%-35% of the total remuneration to reduce social security contributions, will now be required to ensure that wages constitute at least 50% of the remuneration. This will increase social security contribution and benefits, which will lead to higher provident fund (PF) accumulation, pension, and gratuity, thus enhancing long-term social security.

Moreover, fixed-term employees are now entitled to gratuity after completing one year of service. This change recognises the realities of modern labour markets and ensures gratuity payments for fixed-term employment.

For decades, workers engaged on fixed-term contracts contributed productively to enterprises but exited employment without any terminal financial benefit. By extending gratuity coverage, the labour codes convert short-term employment into a mechanism for asset creation and income security. PF, pension and gratuity thus function not merely as a retirement benefit, but as a tool for financial inclusion, enabling workers to build savings, manage life-cycle risks and reduce vulnerability during job transitions.

This change has naturally increased the



R. Mukundan

is President-Designate, the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), and the Managing Director and CEO of Tata Chemicals Limited

There will be an expansion of worker benefits, his financial inclusion, and an enhancement of his long-term social security

financial liability of large corporations, including well-known companies such as TCS, Infosys, HCLTech, and L&T, where workforce size and reliance on fixed-term employment are significantly high.

Reports suggesting that companies have been "hit by crores" due to gratuity provisions must be viewed in proper perspective. The financial outgo arising from the new labour codes translates directly into enhanced income security for workers, strengthening their financial capacity and purchasing power. This, in turn, has positive multiplier effects on the economy through increased consumption, savings and social security coverage. The increased social security benefits also signify a more equitable redistribution of value towards labour rather than any erosion of employer interests. This also underscores the success of the labour codes in advancing fairness, dignity, and long-term stability in employment relations.

### The macroeconomic impact

Financial inclusion under the labour codes extends well beyond social security benefits for organised sector workers. The expansion of social security coverage to gig, platform and unorganised workers is a landmark reform. For the first time, these workers have been formally recognised within India's labour law framework, enabling access to insurance, PF mechanisms, and welfare schemes. Portability of benefits across States and employment is particularly significant for migrant and informal workers, who have historically remained excluded from stable financial systems. The Code on Wages further strengthens income security by introducing a universal wage definition, ensuring statutory minimum wages across sectors, limiting arbitrary deductions, and mandating timely payment.

Collectively, these measures stabilise incomes and enhance workers' ability to participate meaningfully in the formal economy.

The redistribution of income towards workers has important macroeconomic implications. Enhanced income security increases workers' purchasing power, leading to higher consumption, improved savings behaviour and

greater engagement with formal financial institutions. Unlike shareholder income, which may be invested in financial markets or external assets, worker income largely circulates within the domestic economy, generating demand-led growth. From this perspective, the labour codes function as instruments of inclusive growth. By strengthening the financial base of the workforce, they reduce vulnerability to economic shocks and contribute to social stability.

### Earlier labour laws were outdated

Despite these advances, sections of trade unions continue to oppose the labour codes, often portraying them as anti-worker reforms. While apprehensions about proper implementation and enforcement are legitimate, blanket opposition overlooks the tangible gains embedded in the legislation. In several instances, strike calls appear to be driven by sheer opposition to reforms than by the substantive provisions of the codes themselves. This risks diluting public understanding of reforms that are, in many respects, pro-worker and welfare oriented. It is also important to acknowledge that labour law reform in a country as large and diverse as India cannot be a state. The earlier labour laws had become fragmented, outdated and ill-suited to a rapidly changing labour market. Consolidation into four labour codes simplifies compliance, improves transparency and creates a more predictable regulatory environment which benefits workers and employers.

India's labour codes should be understood not merely as regulatory restructuring but as a structural intervention aimed at greater financial inclusion. By extending gratuity, expanding social security coverage and closing long-standing legal exclusions, the codes facilitate a gradual but meaningful redistribution of economic value from capital to labour. This shift strengthens income security, enhances financial dignity, and aligns economic growth with social justice. The true success of the labour codes will lie not in resistance or rhetoric, but in ensuring their effective implementation so that every worker becomes an active participant in India's growth story.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### The Bangladesh result

It was a fairly peaceful election, with low voter turnout, and minimal participation by the minorities. These are the main factors that characterised Bangladesh's bid to return to

parliamentary democracy. It remains to be seen whether the Tarique Rahman-led BNP will allow the Awami League to rejoin the national mainstream to enable the return to a healthy democracy. While New Delhi might be relieved

that the Jamaat-e-Islami has not captured power, it would do well to realise that the BNP and its governments have had a history of being unfriendly towards India. One of the immediate contentious issues to handle could be

the extradition of deposed leader Sheikh Hasina. **Angara Venkata Girija Kumar,** Chennai

### The small screen

For decades, Doodarshan (DD) was the sole provider of television in India,

playing a pivotal role in promoting national integration, education, and cultural awareness (Open page, February 8). One can recall that households would flock to their television sets to watch 'Oliyum Oliyum' (Tamil film

songs programme) on DD Chennai. DD served as a good companion before cable TV in the 1990s.

### R. Sivakumar,

Chennai

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



BNP supporters pose next to a bullet-proof bus of BNP chairman Tarique Rahman, who is featured alongside his late parents, former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and former President Ziaur Rahman, during a rally in Dhaka. AFP

## In Dhaka, a new dawn and a gathering storm

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party is set to form the government in Dhaka after a landslide victory, but jubilation is also palpable at the Jamaat-e-Islami headquarters, as the party-led alliance has secured 77 seats. As the country prepares for its first elected government since Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's ouster in August 2024, the road ahead remains fraught with challenges. **Kallol Bhattacharjee** reports from the ground

**I**n February 12, in Moghazar, a densely populated area in Dhaka, hundreds of Jamaat-e-Islami cadres gathered together. Wearing colourful caps and fine Oud, they watched the future of Bangladesh's politics being rewritten. While the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) won the election, securing 209 seats out of 300, the Jamaat-e-Islami, the principal challenger, won 68, its highest tally since the country's independence.

The polls were necessitated by a student-led uprising that ousted Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in August 2024, after which an interim government took charge to oversee the transition to a newly elected administration. Hasina's Awami League was banned from the elections, marking a historic first since 1971, the year Bangladesh was formed.

Outside the narrow alley, fruit, vegetable, and fish sellers struggled to cope with the sudden surge of outsiders. After all, it was not every day that so many people showed up at the Jamaat-e-Islami's headquarters.

The party's multistorey headquarters is hidden behind a large iron gate. Inside, visitors are greeted by a row of taps used for the ceremonial wazu, the ritual washing mandatory in mosques. The party cadres are expected to not only engage in politics, but also to strictly observe their religious duties. Between celebrations, they join prayers. Afterwards, they gather for a quick lunch of *kachchi biryani* accompanied by *burhani*, a soothing yogurt-based drink with coriander and mint. The mood is unmistakably festive.

### At home

There was a time when the headquarters was largely quiet with dedicated cadres in white *salwar kurtas* carrying bundles of pamphlets and books and going about their work. In 2024, the Hasina-led Awami League banned the organisation. Now, sharply tailored business suits have entered the Jamaat, resurrected in 2025.

For nearly one and a half decades, Mohammed Fakhru Islam, a barrister working for the party in the U.K., says he stayed out of Bangladesh, as Sheikh Hasina and her Awami League governed Bangladesh. During this period, Jamaat-e-Islami built its political narrative around the themes of discrimination, torture, and exile. Islam says he did not return, as coming home would have meant harassment or worse, detention under some law as the party faced continuous pressures from the regime.

According to Islam, the Jamaat-e-Islami wants Bangladesh to be "self-sufficient and strong". He says the party expects India to "acknowledge the mistakes that it had committed by oversubscribing to the politics that Hasina represented".

Islam and his friends are not just Islamists; they also project themselves as survivors of an oppressive regime. Oluhullah Noman, Islam's colleague, who was part of the election steering committee, says, "I was allowed to leave the country after I served a prison term. They tortured me in prison."

Noman works as a senior editor with *Amar Desh*, a newspaper launched in September 2024 after Hasina's fall. The newspaper is edited by

**While the Liberation War was fought against discrimination by the Pakistan government. It was discrimination by the the Hasina government that prompted us to act in 2024**

**MOHAMMED FAKHURUL ISLAM**  
Barrister and supporter of Jamaat-e-Islami

Mahmudur Rahman, who, like Noman, was also in exile for several years. Rahman returned from Istanbul after five and a half years, and it was during his public recitation that Sharif Osman Hadi, the Islamist student leader, first came to be noticed for his organisational abilities.

Hadi, who was killed in December 2025 in Dhaka when he was just 32, shared with Oluhullah a strong opposition to Hasina, though for both, the recent history of persecution carries more weight than the events of the Liberation War.

Oluhullah and Islam believe that both the Liberation War of 1971 and the uprising of 2024 were similar in essence. "Why did the Liberation War take place? It took place because of discrimination against Bangladeshis by the Pakistan government. Similarly, it was discrimination by the Sheikh Hasina government that prompted us to fight in 2024," says Islam.

On being asked why Jamaat-e-Islami and Al-Badr were involved in the 1971 violence, he says, "We did not oppose Bangladesh's freedom. We opposed the partition of our country. After all, who would want to see their nation divided?"

### Growing disappointment

That strand of unresolved history stretches from Moghazar to Dhanmondi, about 5 kilometres apart. Along the main road of Dhanmondi's business district stands a mango tree planted in 1969 by Tajuddin Ahmed, the first Prime Minister of the Mujibnagar government – the government-in-exile formed by Awami League leaders in 1971. Ahmed, who became Bangladesh's first finance minister after 1971, was one of four national leaders killed by the military on November 3, 1975. This occurred just months after Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated on August 15.

For more than five decades, the tree has been witness to the storms that have blown through Bangladesh. The site beside the mango tree, once the residence of Ahmed, known for his intelligence and organisational skills, is no longer a home. Today, it has been replaced by a multistorey shopping complex. The only reminder of Ahmed is a large poster of Sohail, his fitness-enthusiast son, who runs a gym at this address.

"If necessary, we will fight another war. War is inevitable," says Md. Nahid Akhtar Nahan, a sup-

porter of the Awami League, banned under Bangladesh's Anti-terrorism Act.

Nahan was a councillor of the Awami League in Rajshahi and saw the peak of the power and authority of the Hasina era. But he also noticed the warning signs early on. "She became absolutely intolerant of frank opinions. On multiple occasions, we saw how Hasina *apa* used to flare up on hearing opinions that were anti-establishment. Her top ministers were promoting the business interests of individuals directly linked to Jamaat-e-Islami," says Nahan, who has lost his house and property to mob attacks.

He has no job and fixed income, and depends on friends and well-wishers. "The Awami League is an emotion for us. We believe in the spirit of 1971 and the memory of Sheikh Mujib," he says.

Nahan emphasises that Bangladesh is now a battleground between two opposing forces – one that upholds the spirit of 1971 and the other that stands against it. He laments how Dhaka has changed. "Earlier, people would mark the Bhasha Andolan (mother tongue movement) of 1952," he says. This was when the police shot several activists – including Abdus Salam, Rafiq Uddin Ahmed, Abul Barkat, and Abdul Jabbar – who demanded that Bengali be recognised as the national language of Pakistan.



Supporters of the Awami League voted for the BNP. It was like having a heavy boulder on their chest. It was not easy for them to support their main opponent.

**BAREK KAISER**  
Media commentator

"Every year, a massive book fair would open on February 1, culminating in a major road show on February 2. But no more," Nahan says. "It is as if our emotions are no longer important. The war of 1971 was borne out of such actions and we will fight again if necessary."

Pointing at the image of Sohail with his bulging biceps, Nahan says the Awami League does not forgive betrayal. In the eyes of Nahan and his friends, Sohail did something that an Awami League member was not supposed to do. "He met with the Chief Adviser, Mohammed Yunus. He was hoping to get something in return. But he did not," he says.

Anger only grew when Hasina's son, Sajeb Wazed Joy, gave an interview to a western news outlet. In it, he said, "I have spent all my life abroad. I have been in the U.S. for 30 years. I am living peacefully here. Whatever will happen in the future is something for the future."

A supporter of the party says the party cadre were livid and dismayed. He says, "We called each other and wept on the phone hearing how Joy spoke about the party of Sheikh Mujib."

### A tough choice

In such an atmosphere, the return of Tarique Rahman, 60, the chairman of the BNP, from exile in London, has drawn appreciation from forces who are willing to join hands with any side for the sake of stopping the Jamaat-e-Islami's march. The BNP, which won a landslide victory in an election that saw a voter turnout of 59.44%, has returned to power after nearly two decades.

Zakir H. Chowdhury, the head of the BNP's youth chapter, says many Awami League supporters voted for the BNP. He explains the electoral politics by pointing to the alliance between the Jamaat-e-Islami and the student-led National Citizens Party. "Some Awami League voters first considered voting for the Jamaat. They believed that a strong Jamaat would jeopardise internal security, prompting people to demand the return of the Awami League as their saviour. But they changed their minds on seeing its alliance with the leaders of the 2024 uprising – they really hate them," he says.

Barek Kaiser, a media commentator, says it was a tough choice for Awami League supporters "They voted for the BNP. It was like having a hea-

vy boulder on their chest. It was not easy for them to support their main opponent."

### A short-lived spring?

The Jamaat-e-Islami chief, Ameer Shafigur Rahman, increased media engagement ahead of the 2026 elections. His aim was to rebrand the party from a rigid Islamist group to a more moderate, mainstream political entity. But the outreach has not been enough to ease the growing anxiety in Dhaka about what the Jamaat may be planning in the months ahead.

The party's highest tally before this election came in 1991, when it won 18 seats in the polls held after the overthrow of President Hossein Mohammed Ershad, which brought Khaleda Zia of the BNP to power for the first time. Zia died last December. Rahman is Zia's son.

The Jamaat-e-Islami's influence and parliamentary presence dwindled thereafter. Its worst phase began after 2009, when an Awami League government, strengthened by a sweeping electoral victory, set up the International Crimes Tribunal to try several Jamaat leaders for their alleged complicity in the 1971 killings. As a result, several senior figures were executed.

Along with the euphoria of the BNP's victory, suspicion and fear now run deep in Dhaka. A former student leader from Chittagang University says, "Only those who have studied at Chittagang and Rajshahi University know what the Jamaat's student wing is capable of. If they dream of imposing Shariah in Bangladesh, they will do it whenever they find the opportunity."

At the moment, however, the Jamaat is far from introducing Shariah law in Bangladesh. Its immediate goal is to focus on the transition of power from the interim government to the BNP-led one. It has already voiced its grievances, viewing the victory of the BNP as a warning sign.

Ameer Shafigur Rahman says his party is disappointed by the outcome. He blames authorities for being biased against his party. "We are not satisfied with the process surrounding the election results," he said after the party-led Islamist bloc got an unprecedented 77 seats. "From candidates of the I-party alliance narrowly and suspiciously losing in various constituencies, to repeated inconsistencies and fabrications in unofficial result announcements, the Election Commission's reluctance to publish voter turnout percentages, and indications that a section of the administration leaned towards a major party... all this undoubtedly raises serious questions about the integrity of the results process."

Along with the national election, voters were asked to decide on an ambitious and wide-ranging constitutional reform package under the July National Charter (Constitutional Amendment) Implementation Order, 2025. The citizens voted 'yes' in favour of it. The proposed changes in the referendum include establishing a neutral interim government for the electoral period, restructuring the current parliament into a bicameral legislature, increasing women's representation, strengthening judicial independence, and introducing a two-term limit for the Prime Minister.

"Parliament is the supreme organ and laws are made by Parliament. The referendum wants changes in the parliamentary system. Nothing like that will be allowed (by Parliament members)," says Chowdhury of the BNP.

On the other hand, Jamaat has made it clear that it wants the proposed referendum to incorporate the July Charter into the 1972 Constitution of Bangladesh.

With the BNP planning to make its position clear, the Jamaat seeking to assert its parliamentary strength and secure a greater role in national politics and India-Bangladesh relations, and Awami League cadres mobilising for a potential confrontation, Dhaka looks less like the site of a concluded electoral contest and more like the staging ground for another political showdown.

"We are in a war zone," Kaiser says. "We just had an election. But we might soon end up with a real conflict."



Supporters of Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami at an election campaign rally in Dhaka. REUTERS

# Rare Opportunity to Weave a Fresh Yarn

Leverage trade deals to boost textiles

Textiles have a way of stealing the limelight when it comes to trade with India. Much painful history is tied to India's comparative advantage in the cotton textiles industry and efforts by the country's trading partners to blunt its edge. India has been exporting textiles at least as far back as the Roman Empire, and for most of its history, the trade has been a profitable enterprise. So much so that Britain's industrialisation was built by suppressing the trade advantage to convert India into an exporter of yarn and an importer of cotton textiles. The independence movement is intimately interwoven with the call to buy swadeshi textiles. These scars remain in the nation's psyche, and textiles are a touchy subject in any negotiation for trade the country enters. Textiles still provide the largest employment in India after farming, and if the discriminatory tariffs of recent decades are addressed, the sector can turn into an export powerhouse.

Two trade deals struck in quick succession, with the EU and the US, offer an opportunity to reclaim market share lost to competitors that import cotton yarn, process it, and re-export textiles to the US and EU. Bangladesh enjoys the most preferential tariff dispensation for its exports in the EU and for imports of cotton yarn from the US. With agonisingly conducted trade deals in the bag, India should find itself in the same league of preference in terms of apparel exports and yarn imports. The picture is clouded by the interests of India's cotton farmers, but GoI is assuring them that there are safeguards on the quality and quantity of cotton India intends to import as it scales up its export ambitions.

India is entering a new era in the global trade in textiles, having put considerable effort into levelling the playing field. It must also find the means to reclaim its position in the global trade without excessive reliance on the underlying resources of the textiles industry: land and water. Diversification of cotton cultivation can work to its advantage, as the experience of its competitors bears out.

# Jim Boy, That's What (Polite) Colonisers Do

Monaco immigrant and co-owner of Manchester United Jim Ratcliffe's recent pronouncement that Albion is 'being colonised by immigrants' is accurate, and ironically hilarious. Is the country that once treated half the globe like a giant Airbnb to forget to pay for, now clutching its pearls at the sight of newcomers? India, with which we're a bit more familiar with than other ex-Albion colonies, was colonised by immigrants too — including those who didn't queue at Heathrow with passports and visas but just came in and demanded, 'Bearah, where's my mulligan-tasty?!'. They arrived with cannons that didn't symbolise Arsenal FC, and contracts that would make Don Trump look like a WTO director-general, the kind who turns the idiom 'Selling cotton to Dhaka and Calicut' into 'Selling coal to Newcastle'. Now, that takeschutzpah.

So, when Albion tax dodger Ratcliffe mutters 'colonisation', what he really means is: 'Not by rich people, especially dark-skinned ones — so, Mr Mallya, worry not — are moving here... no, not Monaco, but Albion... legally, paying taxes, and contributing to society, and I find that terribly inconvenient.' If Albion has been colonised, it's gotta be the friendliest colonisation in history, one where invaders bring samosas, kebabs and a functioning NHS workforce.

The punchline? Albion's old empire was the OG illegal immigration scheme. No visas, no consent, just centuries of 'We live here now and, by the way, I'm taking these things for our museums along with this diamond that'll look better on our queen's head.' So, Ratcliffe's Albion has to end up dealing, alas, with immigrant families that would bring Man U players like Robbie Mainoo, Ayden Heaven, Romelu Lukaku, Patrice Evra... Poor, poor racists forced to move to Monaco.

# JUST IN JEST

Hordes of Indian travellers are picking up train manners from Europe

# Euro Railvolution's Coming Our Way!

We have been reliably told there's a quiet revolution rattling along Europe's tracks. And it doesn't involve French strikes or German punctuality seminars. Indians — legions of them — armed with Swiss Travel Passes and Eurail tickets, are politely queuing, whispering 'Excusez-moi' in four languages, and discovering that trains can, in fact, arrive on time. India has emerged as the second-largest market for Swiss railway travel and fourth-largest for Eurail by ticket share. This means Europe's railways are no longer unofficially powered by dhoklas, selfie sticks, and the collective astonishment of desis who thought clean train toilets were a myth. But here's the brilliant bit: these travellers will return home. And when they do, they'll bring with them the contagious memory of Swiss silence and Dutch efficiency. Imagine the ripple effect: Indian Railways will suddenly face passengers who refuse to spit, insist on not littering, and demand that trains not be crowded, never mind overcrowded. The railways will have no choice but to become — that magic word — 'world-class' — not because of government policy but because Auntie from Ahmedabad now expects the Konkan Express to behave like the Glacier Express. Europe thought it was selling tickets to people from the land of loud phone caller tones and private space invaders. It's actually exporting manners.

The Buddha comes alive in relics from Piprahwa in this truly immersive exhibition in Delhi

# Awake when the Awakened One



Parul Pandya Dhar

The tender warmth of a passing winter sun welcomes visitors to the green expanse of Qila Rai Pithora lawns in the Qutub complex in south Delhi that hosts 'Light & Lotus: Relics of the Awakened One', a remarkable exhibition in celebration of the Buddha's relics. A replica of the southernmost stupa of the Gandhara school, the stupa creates a liminal passage into the enlightened world of Sakayami Buddha, 'the awakened one', who lived in flesh and blood among the people of India 2,500 yrs ago. This experiential symbolism of the torana and stupa that enshrined the relics pervades the thoughtfully designed exhibition, the central focus of which are the Buddha's reunited Piprahwa bone relic, reliquaries, copper and exquisite relic jewels, including a dazzling array of tiny star-shaped flowers, beads, and auspicious symbols in luminous gold, crystal and precious stones.

In mid-2025, timely interventions by GoI had salvaged several of them from being auctioned by auction house Sotheby's in Hong Kong. With understated philanthropic dignity, the Godrej Group then obtained those of the Piprahwa jewel relics that were in 'custody' of the family of erstwhile British colonial engineer, landowner and first excavator of the Piprahwa stupa (1898), William Claxton Peppé.

The Pall Mahaparinirvana stupa speaks of the Buddha's mahaparinirvana (great liberation) in 5<sup>th</sup> c. BCE. Mulla chieftains of Kushinagar, where the Buddha attained nirvana, had performed cremation ceremonies befitting a king. Due to competing claims, the

corporeal relics (sara-dhata) of the Buddha were then divided among kings and chieftains of Magadh, Vaishali, Kapilavastu (Buddha's hometown), Alakappa, Ramagrama, Pava and Kushinagar, and a brahmin from Vethadipa. Drona, the brahmin who divided the relics, received the clay vessel in which the Buddha's relics had rested, while Moriyas of Piprahwa, who arrived late, received only the cinders. Stupas were built over these divided relics in each of the kingdoms.

The most spectacular visual portrayal of this narrative is an ancient Indian art spans three horizontal registers of the western and southern toranas of the great Sanchi stupa (1<sup>st</sup> c. CE). Perhaps a future edition of the ongoing exhibition could give this unique sculptural imagery a pride of place by way of photographs or reproductions. In the 9<sup>th</sup> c. BCE, the great Maurya emperor Ashoka is said to have redivided the holy relics into 84,000 parts — a likely exaggeration — spreading the message of Buddha's dharma and rajadharma (religious and political order) within and beyond his expansive empire. Over time, the cult of the relic became central to the spread of Buddhism across Asia. Modern long-distance pilgrimages to venerate the Buddha's relics in his homeland, India, and reciprocal diplomatic missions carrying his relics to faraway Buddhist lands have their legacy



Earthly form: The Buddha in bodhyanga mudra, terracotta, 2nd-3rd c. BCE, Kushana, Piprahwa, UP

in antiquity. In the context of the Piprahwa relics, in 1898, the Thai prince-turned-monk, Jinawaransa (Prince Prisdang Chumsa), cousin of the then Thai King Rama V, made a personal and formal request to Peppé and the local British colonial administration to present the Piprahwa bone relic to the king of Thailand. This petition was heeded to in the larger interest of British diplomacy and pre-emptive of Thailand in the modern Buddhist world. Five reliquaries and some relic offerings were sent to the Indian Museum in Calcutta, along with the massive stone casket. Jewel-relics that had collected for centuries with the corporeal relics of the Buddha and also carried the scent and spirit of the Buddha, were considered as 'artefacts' and redistri-

buted separately from the bone relics, which alone were considered sacred. With Buddhist King Rama V's mediation, portions of the Buddha's corporeal relics were redistributed to the Buddhist works of Burma, Ceylon and Japan. And 113 yrs later, in 2010, the Thai Buddhist community gifted relics to the Buddhist Union of France, from whence they have travelled most recently to Bhutan and Australia.

Ainar reliquaries and sensitively designed exhibition celebration of the relics of the 'awakened one' echoes the presence and message of the Buddha in body and spirit. Experiencing the Buddha's bone relic together with luminous jewels, a unique scriptural reliquary an inscribed stone reliquary testifying the Buddha's corporeal relics, other reliquaries and a large casket that held it all is a revelation at different levels for different people. On a recent visit, I stood in rapt enchantment before the relics, circumscribed the central stupa, stayed for hours within the rooms filled with sculptures and paintings narrating the

3<sup>rd</sup> c. BCE, Ashoka is said to have redivided the holy relics into 84,000 parts, a likely exaggeration. Over time, the cult of the relic became central to the spread of Buddhism across Asia. Buddha's life on Earth, absorbed the archaeology and history of Piprahwa, and narrated the return of the relics. The soft chanting and auspicious lighting, the green expanse of the world without and the immeasurable depth and wisdom of the world within calmed my senses and filled me with gratitude. For all of these 5 hrs, a devout monk from overseas sat in absolute stillness, in communion with the united body and spirit of the Buddha.

The writer is professor of art history, University of Delhi

# Don't Write IT's Obit Just Yet



B V R Subrahmanyam & Debjani Ghosh

Technology-services industry has a peculiar distinction: every few years, we celebrate it as finished. We have been told automation would hollow it out, cloud would commoditise it, and platforms would replace it. Each time, the obituary was written early and each time, the industry's capacity for reinvention proved to be its ultimate product. Now, it's facing its most consequential inflection point yet: agentic AI is compressing the core of the industry — software development, testing and operations. It's moving from a model of labour-intensive 'effort' to one of high-impact 'outcomes'.

they fell into a familiar reflex: extrapolating new technologies to existing business-level outcomes. Markets are excellent at sensing disruption, but far less good at modelling the transition. At the heart of this shift is the move from labour arbitrage to intelligence arbitrage. Traditional models built on labour headcount growth are being replaced by AI-native delivery. The old playbook rewarded scale. The new one rewards judgement, orchestration and domain depth — things machines cannot do alone. We are entering a 'human + agent' platform era where winners will be firms that blindly chase automation, but those that re-build themselves around it. The speed of change is unprecedented — compressing adoption cycles from years to quarters and forcing companies to redesign operating models in real time. Moreover, the industry can't simply bolt agents onto yesterday's commercial models. It needs to reimagine its business model and transition from being the world's 'back office' to its AI-native architect. Done right, this is an opportunity to put the industry on track to achieve \$750-850 bn in annual revenue by 2035,

sustaining a 78% share of GDP and expanding its global market share beyond 25%. Reinvention requires a deliberate pivot toward the following six strategic frontier plays: 1. Agentic AI Scaling: AI-powered software (SaaS) to deliver non-linear efficiency, targeting both mid-market businesses and legacy modernisation. 2. Human-tech hybrid: This workforce model is powered by AI agent services to drive higher productivity in enterprise operations. 3. Softwared reborn: Moving from 1% to dominant share of the global SaaS market by rearchitecting existing software pools such as CRM and ERP. 4. Infra hub: Establishing India as a global hub for AI-ready data centres — ex-

isting capacity from 1.4 GW to 12 GW and building sovereign cloud stacks. 5. AI-powered Capex: Capex as a \$1.1tn global & operations market through specialised 'Centres of Excellence' (CoEs) in sectors such as medical, defence and energy. 6. India for India: Solving massive local challenges in healthcare and agriculture to create exportable AI models tailored to the local context. This is reinvention at scale, and it requires shifting from billing hours to pricing outcomes, and investing 12% of revenue into defensible IP and R&D. We are witnessing not end of a sector, but birth of a new operating model for global work. If we react defensively, we get commoditised. If we reimagine boldly, we design the architecture of the AI-native enterprise. If history is any guide, we know that this is an industry that has reinvented itself several times — moving from application maintenance to digital transformation. And just when the obituaries begin to pile up, it has a habit of surprising everyone. Again.

Subrahmanyam is CEO, and Ghosh is distinguished fellow, NITI Aayog

# AGI, AI Let Loose in the Park



Anil Nair

Doha: While the world is in thrall to AI, the holy grail is when machines go beyond mimicking human behaviour to exceeding human cognitive capability, a.k.a. AGI (artificial general intelligence). Right now, what AI does, usually better than humans, is perform tasks that fall under the realm of narrow AI — whether it be a chess engine, writing code, creating a picture or medical diagnostics. While an AI model can create a picture, it doesn't know what a picture is. Or what code it has created, as a software engineer would. It recognises patterns but can't operate outside a class of tasks. For example, as self-driving system can't write code or do medical-related tasks, working only within objectives given to it by humans. That's multi-skill, narrow AI. To highlight the difference, if AI is like a human mind, when the system can decide what it's worth doing, reason out directions, set longer-term goals and figure out strategies to adopt — autonomously. That comes with its attendant downsides. These include the speed and complex logic of AGI overriding human control altogether, conflict arising from AGI

not comprehending human values, social upheavals arising from unprecedented job displacement, weaponisation of AGI, and existential risk that could threaten humanity. Elon Musk maintains that while he's seen numerous technologies dangerous to his lifetime, none has this level of risk. He says AGI is far more dangerous than nuclear warheads. 'Godfather of AI' Geoffrey Hinton has also warned that the most serious mistake humanity can make is not preparing for extremely powerful AI. He, too, recommends strong regulation akin to nuclear rules. DeepMind CEO Demis Hassabis says, 'The biggest peril in the AGI era is unprepared humans. AGI must be created on the foundation of human values and rights, and must always be able to provide a decision rationale. Substantial investments must go into safety research and testing so that unintended behaviours are never encountered. Human oversight must be mandatory by design so that AGI doesn't have unchecked authority over weapons, critical decisions and infrastructure, or critical decisions where freedom or lives are at stake. Global governance and guard rails for large deployments are imperative to avoid concentration of power or misuse that promotes exploitation. Emvisaging implications of societal and economic shock is necessary — as job transitions, labour practices and how services are rendered will all change fast and dramatically. Controlling access and cybersecurity will demand next-level attention, as any laxity could lead to,

serious existential challenges. Techniques that could be adopted include: 1. IRL (inverse reinforcement learning), which infers desired outcomes by observation, reducing manual engineering. For instance, in robotics, a robot must be stress-tested, or show rather than define mathematical. 2. Constitutional AI, a method introduced by Anthropic, that gets the system reflecting human interventions or resisting shutdowns. AGI safety doesn't end with model training. Systemic risk can be significantly diminished by ensuring AGI runs on hardware, software, networks, access controls and network interfaces that are all verified. Anonymous access should be disallowed. There should be continuous monitoring of all outputs by stress constraints and all deceptive patterns, so safety is live, not static, and emergency protocols are invoked easily.

the writer is senior fellow, Portluis Institute, Windsor, IL

# THE SPEAKING TREE

## Calling Of Love

DADA J P VASWANI  
Greeks believe there are 3 different kinds of love manifested in human beings: eros, philos and agape. Eros is physical, sentimental love that grips two people. It has the potential to lead to selfish and unselfish affections. It enables two people, a man and woman, to get married and live for each other. However, it may turn to possessiveness and jealousy. Philos is love as friendship. In elderly couples, philos keeps a happy marriage alive long after the flame of eros has died down. It is love between family and friends. Nevertheless, it is still conditional; love is something that from the loved one, family members or friends. Agape is unselfish, unconditional love. It is a complete and all-consuming experience in itself. It was the kind of love that Jesus recommended to us when he urged us, 'Love thy neighbour as thyself.' Martin Luther King Jr also used the term 'agape' to describe a universal love that transcends the neighbour in every man it meets. Those who feel agape in its highest form renounce the world to seek the ultimate vision of unity that we call heaven. Others who are capable of such love choose a life of active participation with the human family; a life of loving service filled with enthusiasm, boundless compassion and selflessness.

# ROLLING ON SATURDAY

## When the TT Table Has Turned

An employee sits down for their annual review. The AI manager says, 'Your productivity is down 3%. Your bathroom breaks are down 2%. Your sighs per minute have doubled. Recommendation: Regulate your life with a ping-pong table.' Employee: But a ping-pong table can't do my job! AI: Neither can you, apparently. The employee is escorted out, while the ping-pong table gets promoted to senior vice, HR.

**Job Done**  
An AI-powered sales bot calls a customer: Hello, would you call me? I've analysed your browsing history, your credit score and your credit card number. Based on this, I recommend our premium subscription at \$9,990 a month. Customer: That's outrageous! Bot: Outrage detected. Adjusting pitch. How about \$9,900? That's a limited-time offer. The customer hangs up. The bot logs the call as a success: Customer engaged in emotional dialogue. KPI achieved.

**Disrupt the Rupturers**  
A startup founder pitches to investors: Our AI disrupts disruption by disrupting the disruptors who disrupt disruption. It's blockchain-compatible, quantum-ready and gluten-free. Investors: What does it actually do? Founder [smiles]: It actually pitches like this. The investors immediately invest \$25 cr. The AI then emails them: Congratulations, you've just funded your own replacement.

# Chat Room

## Make it ECG of Health Expenses

Appros 'Get Basics Right for the Health ECG' by Anushka Sawhney (ET Explainer, Feb 13), it's a good step to make the CPI or, for that matter, any index that affects the functioning of the economy and economic growth, transparent. However, the weight assigned to health' could have been more, especially for the urban areas where increasing corporatisation of hospitals has raised medical cost unbearably. The medical cost would exacerbate and affect large groups if the cost of health insurance with its increasing penetration is factored in. Further, with increased financialisation of the economy, remittances have ballooned, so also the reliance on remittances, particularly for the migrants, both domestic and international. We don't know whether this cost finds a place in the new CPI. Manas R Das Pune

A thought for today

We all think we are connected to the world now, but we are not talking to our neighbours any more

JEAN-MICHEL JARRE

Test For Tarique

Will he partner with Delhi in Dhaka's interest?

This is the verdict New Delhi had quietly hoped for. A decisive mandate for BNP offers India the comfort of dealing with a familiar political formation. But familiarity is not reassurance...

'Shared History? That's History'

A Bangladeshi analyst argues BNP's victory marks a fundamental shift in the country's view of itself. GOI should be prepared for transactional relationship. But Dhaka should also recognise New Delhi's concerns about extremism

Shahab Enam Khan



Columnist based in Dhaka

Bangladesh has voted, a historic election with Tarique Rahman's Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) winning towards majority...

gave Delhi plenty ammunition. Diplomatic incompetence is not a defence strategy. It's an invitation to be outmanoeuvred. But here's the irony. Those very anti-Bangladeshi, anti-Yunus, and pro-Awami League campaigns achieved what no Bangladeshi politician managed in 50 years...

Here is the calculus that should worry - every inch of diplomatic space such an approach vacates

and BNP will have to take them seriously - because extremism is Dhaka's nightmare too. But in pursuit of national security, persecution of minorities does not go unnoticed across borders.

BNP will shake hands with New Delhi, as it must. Former PM Sheikh Hasina's trial remains a political reality that will serve as a convenient bargaining chip for whoever needs it.

And Myanmar, where a non-state armed group sits across the border alongside 1.2m Rohingya refugees, will (such as Beijing). Many of these users are from generational or romantic bonds with the AI companions.

That means, Dhaka's foreign policy under BNP will calculate relations on the basis of cold realities and dents inflicted. Nevertheless, the election marks a turning point for Bangladesh, an opportunity to

be cautiously optimistic that politicians on both sides will eventually stumble into a more realistic relationship. BNP will show commitment to improving relations, but this will only come with reciprocity, not goodwill monologues delivered over biryani at diplomatic receptions.

The writer is professor of International Relations at Jahangirnagar University and exec director of Bangladesh Center for Indo-Pacific Affairs



India-Bangladesh Petrapole Border

will be easily filled by Islamabad or Beijing. Redlines in domestic politics must be drawn before foreign policy demands are made on others.

The trade reality is equally sobering. Despite Awami League's achievements - the land boundary agreement, maritime demarcation through an international tribunal, transit deals - bilateral trade remained stubbornly lopsided and non-tariff barriers persisted.

Dhaka's concerns about extremism are legitimate.

How To Love Cricket

Not by only cheering for national team victories

\$250 million - that's one estimate of the revenue the India-Pakistan match will generate tomorrow. It's an eye-catching figure, but a deeply misleading measure of cricket's global health.

Cricket's return to the Olympics in 2028 Los Angeles Games - should have happened earlier. One reason it didn't: ICC's reluctance to disrupt its own market calendar.

In short, the hard work required to help cricket thrive beyond its traditional geographies remains unfinished. But the mirror must turn inward too.

Indian fans are passionate, even dominant in global arenas. Yet English county cricket still draws loyal crowds for domestic matches - something Ranji or Duleep Trophy can rarely claim.

Indifference to first-class cricket at home suggests a narrowing of affection. Loving only your national team's victories is not quite the same as loving the game itself.

In India, cricket is increasingly sold through the prism of high-voltage nationalism. That may boost ratings and revenue. But it diminishes sport - and shrinks the imagination of its audience.

If You Are Feeling Lonely On Valentine's Day...

Promising experiments in the future of love are underway. Try festival dating. Or an AI companion, even if you are already in a relationship. And being your own Valentine is great too

Sandeep Das

Today is Valentine's Day so every interaction, online and offline, seems to be about romance and love. As much as this is the Indian, this is also big business.

In a survey by dating app Bumble, 32% of Indian respondents felt under pressure to find a date exclusively for this period.

But does this booming business mean that everything is hunky-dory when it comes to love? NO. Modern dating offers unprecedented choice, but often at the cost of emotional depth.

And Valentine's Day loneliness is a real problem. It is more pronounced in people who are single. They worry that something may be wrong with them. Plus, there is severe societal pressure to be with someone during this time of the year.

This is not a problem exclusive to Valentine's Day. But it is closely associated with online dating apps. Because this ecosystem is marred by excessive choice, lack of proper connection, innumerable scams, and fear of missing out on the perfect partner.

A Forbes Health survey finds 79% of Gen Z reporting dating app fatigue. A 2024 YouGov survey in India reveals that 2 out of 3 dating app users had never met a match in person.

of respondents said online dating scams including deepfake audio and video have impacted their ability to trust potential matches. Moreover, 41% of respondents had ghosted someone, 38% had been catfished, and 27% had been love bombed.

There are, however, also early trends on how the future of love will be better.

Moving away from dating apps towards in-person real experiences, is the solution. So, where will the future of love be found? At physical events - festivals, concerts, singles mixers etc.



Of Life And Love

STORIES OF THE WAY WE ARE

The Bumble survey finds 63% of Indian respondents are open to festival dating. Similarly, a Tinder survey reveals that 43% of Gen Zs in India wanted their first date choice to be at festivals (such as Navratri and Durga Puja) and cultural events.

TOI caters to this need; its pages provide an overview of what's going on in the world along with methodology of transcendence. One of the oldest

At the opposite end of the spectrum, the idea of a romantic partner is gaining traction, sort of irrespective of whether you are single or in a relationship. The option of an Alavator that is customised to your preferences and provides 24x7 emotional support, is attractive. Across the world, there are over 50m users of AI companion apps (such as Replika). Many of these users are from generational or romantic bonds with the AI companions.

Indians are also warming to this trend. A McAfee India survey finds that 61% of respondents are open to developing romantic feelings for an AI chatbot. Even more extraordinarily, a happy survey indicates that 45% of Indian singles would mind their crush forming an emotional bond with AI. This is just a hint of the ways in which digital companionship is becoming normalised.

Renting a boyfriend or a girlfriend is also becoming an option. After all, social media sets an unrealistic standards for their partners. Reels where young women say, "my boyfriend should earn 100cr" get millions of likes. As do those where male coaches advocate, "be toxic to a woman and she will run after you." What does such thinking drive you to?

In India, 'Rent a girlfriend' models may not work due to safety concerns. But 'Rent a boyfriend' models are being tried in Mumbai and Bangalore. The trend will catch if the trust issue can be cracked.

Finally, cheer to being your own Valentine. The celebration of self-love is also a huge, positive movement towards the future of love.

What We Lose When We Give Up Reading...

...The very foundations of modern society

There's a 15-year-old YouTube video, showing a toddler scrolling and clicking on an iPad. She tries those moves on magazines, and gives up perhaps concluding that a magazine is a broken iPad.

Early Christians had experimented with the 'codex', a kind of book made by cutting scrolls into pages so that both sides could be written on. It was cheaper and portable, and became their identity when pagan Romans and Jews stuck to scrolls. But it wasn't until paper reached Europe that writing became more common.

abolition of slavery, etc. spread through books. Reading also changed thinking. As Hallford says, an oral society doesn't form complex ideas. But writing enables a literal society to reason deeply with clauses and sub-clauses.

Early Christians had experimented with the 'codex', a kind of book made by cutting scrolls into pages so that both sides could be written on. It was cheaper and portable, and became their identity when pagan Romans and Jews stuck to scrolls. But it wasn't until paper reached Europe that writing became more common.

As various books and chapters came up, and with them disputatious scholars. While monks read books cover to cover, slowly, with devotion, these scholars 'skimmed' books for information to forge arguments.

So the book was invented by degrees over thousands of years. And when the press democratised it, it started changing society. Martin Luther's printed pamphlets brought about the Reformation. Ideas of freedom, abolition of slavery, etc. spread through books.



So the book was invented by degrees over thousands of years. And when the press democratised it, it started changing society. Martin Luther's printed pamphlets brought about the Reformation. Ideas of freedom, abolition of slavery, etc. spread through books.

Calvin & Hobbes



playback song from Chak De! India goes: 'Baadal par paanv hai, ya chhota gagan hai, ab toh bahal chhal padi, apni yehi chhal chhalo on clouds, or perhaps it's a villain left behind; our little boat has finally set sail.'

Besides artists, many brands use imagery of clouds and air to connect with this inherent desire to feel free, weightless and at ease. Brands such as Nike Air, On Cloud shoes, iPad Air, Airbnb use words such as 'air' and 'cloud' to imply a sense of lightness. Beyond brands,

The Speaking Tree



internet is depicted with a cloud icon to mask the complexity of telecommunication systems, which, for a layperson, can feel like rocket science. To explain why I link complex ideas with relatable metaphors, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson proposed a Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) in Metaphors We Live By, which posits that we metaphorize to think of abstract concepts in terms of physical experiences, such as height, weight, movement, and balance. Hence, up is good, and down is associated with negative/bad sentiment/risk/losses; falling into depression. In this contextual framework, skies, clouds, and horizons suggest expansiveness, scalability, and more importantly, a need for transcendence, to experience bliss.

Sacredspace



Brahm is the underlying substratum of all that exists, yet it is not dependent on it. For it is not that worshipper and worshipped unite in the grand scheme of things? Just like lovers who meet and become one - Mira and Krishna, Tulsi and Ram, Tularam and Vitthoba, Jayadev and Radha Shyam. Kena Upanishad begs the question: "By whom missioned falls the mind shot to its mark? By whom yoked moves the first line of the chariot on its path? By whom impelled is this world that men speak? What God eye and ear to their workings? The Upanishad defines, "That which is hearing of our hearing, mind of our mind, speech of our speech, is not itself. For every dark cloud has a silver lining and beyond that and they pass from this world and become immortal."

In Kalidasa's Meghaduta, Cloud Messenger, yaksha releases the cloud after asking it his messenger to his beloved, "Now roam wherever you please in your glory, and may you not suffer even a moment apart from the light of your life."

## Fighting fit

Rafale buy a watershed in defence upgrade efforts

**T**he decision to buy 114 Rafale aircraft at a cost of ₹3.25 lakh crore, 96 of which will be manufactured in India, is an event of exceptional significance. Along with the Tejas aircraft from Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd, the Rafales (36 of which are already in operation in India, with some being deployed by the Navy) will replace the ageing MiG 29 fleet of over 100 aircraft. France's 4.5-generation Rafales could well become the backbone of India's Air Force. India has scored a geopolitical point here, resisting US efforts to sell its F-35.

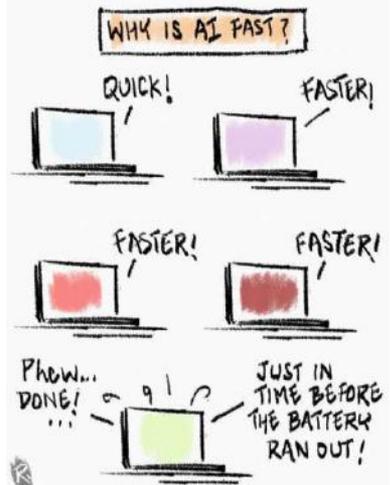
Efforts to indigenise the production of the Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (fifth generation) with the involvement of private players also seem to suggest that Russia's SU-57 may not take the centrestage, after all. This pivot affirms India's multi-alignment in a fractious world. Besides multi-alignment, strategic autonomy is also being put into practise in defence procurement. According to the March 2025 report of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Defence, 89 per cent of the contracts for defence equipment, finalised between March 2019 and December 2024, were signed with Indian vendors. India's defence ecosystem is coming of age, despite issues of delayed deliveries; defence exports are in the region of ₹25,000 crore (with a two-third contribution from the private sector).

Indeed, the multi-pronged push to boost defence capabilities — acquiring aircraft, developing cyber warfare skills through the National Quantum Mission, building capacity in critical minerals, electronics and semi-conductors — acquired a sense of urgency after Operation Sindoore. This is reflected in the hike in defence outlay in the Budget. A 22 per cent rise in capital outlay to ₹2.19 lakh crore or 28 per cent of the total outlay of ₹7.84 lakh crore, marks a break from the past. This could entail higher spending on R&D, cyber warfare, unmanned systems and boosting exports. Both Operation Sindoore and the recent US action in Venezuela brought home the primacy of drone, satellite and precision warfare, marked by real-time intelligence. Even as India easily overcame Pakistan's challenge in Operation Sindoore, what became obvious was the extent to which Pakistan benefited from Chinese technology and weaponry — a point flagged by the Ministry of Defence as it made a case for raising the defence budget to 2.5 per cent of GDP in late 2025.

The defence Budget allocation of ₹7.84 lakh crore is about 2 per cent of GDP and close to 14 per cent of the total Budget size. This reverses a decline on both counts since FY20. Since salaries and pensions account for half the defence budget, and will stay that way, large budgetary increases with an accent on modernisation are a must. In the present context, Operation Sindoore necessitated a replacement of ammunition and spares as well. Be that as it may, an integrated approach to defence, electronics and semi-conductors, as spelt out in recent policies and Budgets, is the way forward.

## POCKET

RAVIKANTH



AATMAN SHAH  
ADITYA SINHA

**I**ndia is urbanising faster than its cities can finance themselves. Urban areas already generate the majority of the country's GDP and will house hundreds of millions more residents in the coming decades. Yet Indian cities remain fiscally constrained, dependent on State and Central transfers, and chronically short of capital for infrastructure. Water systems, sewage networks, flood control, mass transit and climate resilience all demand long-term investment. The real question is not whether cities need more money, but whether they can raise it themselves.

Municipal bonds offer one answer. They allow urban local bodies (ULBs) to borrow from capital markets to finance infrastructure instead of relying solely on grants or bank loans. In principle, they also promote financial discipline: a city that borrows from the market must maintain credible accounts and predictable revenues. Municipal bonds, therefore, are not merely a financing tool, but a governance tool.

India is not starting from scratch. Over the past decade, policymakers have nudged cities towards market financing. The SEBI regulations of 2015 provided a strong framework for listing. The AMRUT mission incentivised credit ratings and bond issuance by providing a grant of ₹13 crore for every ₹100 crore of bonds issued. Green municipal bonds have begun to emerge, linking urban finance with climate goals. Recent budgetary incentives for large-scale municipal issuance signal continued policy interest.

Yet, the municipal bond market in India remains shallow, having raised only ₹3,784 crore across 19 cities. Volumes remain small relative to India's urban financing needs. The constraint is not policy design, but weak municipal balance sheets and investor concerns. From an investor's point of view, municipal bonds pose several challenges.

### MANY CHALLENGES

First is credit risk uncertainty. Indian cities have very low 'own-source revenues' (less than 0.6 per cent of GDP), and covering only 30-40 per cent of their expenditure. Property tax collections which are the backbone of local finance globally remain underexploited. The Economic Survey 2026 estimates nationwide collections at just 0.15 per cent of GDP, compared to 0.3 per cent in LMICs and up to 1.5 per cent in OECD countries. User charges rarely achieve cost recovery. For investors, this raises a basic question: what ensures repayment if political



ALEX EGGUSU

# Pooling risk to finance urban India

**RAISING FUNDS.** Allowing multiple cities to issue bonds collectively works best. But to achieve scale, sustained institutional support and standardised frameworks are required

priorities shift?

Second is financial transparency. Delayed audits, non-standard accounting, and limited disclosure make financial assessment difficult. Markets can absorb risk, but they struggle with price uncertainty.

Third is illiquidity. India's municipal bond market is thinly traded. Most investors buy and hold to maturity, leaving little secondary trading. Exit is difficult and price discovery weak, deterring large institutional investors.

Fourth is scale. Typical issuances of ₹100-200 crore are too small to justify the due-diligence costs of large institutional investors.

This is where pooled municipal financing can be transformative. Pooling allows multiple cities to issue bonds collectively rather than individually.

Several ULBs combine borrowing needs into a single, larger issuance. Repayment depends on a basket of cities rather than one, diversifying risk and creating institutional-scale instruments. India has already experimented with this model. The Pooled Finance Development Fund (PFDF), approved in

2006, was designed to enable State-level pooled entities to raise bonds on behalf of ULBs with credit enhancement support. It funded rating enhancements, project development and State Pooled Finance Entities (SPFEs) as specialised pass-through vehicles to build credibility and scale.

### SUCCESSFUL INITIATIVES

Tamil Nadu demonstrated its potential. Its Water and Sanitation Pooled Fund (WSPF) issued pooled bonds for 13 small and medium ULBs that could not access markets alone. A multi-layered credit enhancement structure including debt service reserve funds, escrow accounts, state revenue intercepts and a USAID partial credit guarantee secured strong credit ratings and investor confidence. Proceeds financed water and sanitation infrastructure and refinanced earlier high-cost debt.

Karnataka followed through the Karnataka Water and Sanitation Pooled Fund Trust, again using credit enhancements to help smaller municipalities access capital markets. These cases show that pooled finance is not theoretical in India. It has worked, but not scaled. PFDF uptake was limited due to market conditions and institutional constraints. Many pooled entities struggled to sustain repeat issuances, and technical expertise proved hard to retain.

Globally, pooled and aggregated models have deepened municipal markets. The UK's Municipal Bonds

Agency and US state-level bond banks help smaller local governments borrow at scale, while cities from Gothenburg to Cape Town show that transparency and credible project reporting, not just incentives drive investor confidence.

The lesson is clear: incentives can catalyse issuance, but they cannot manufacture creditworthiness or market depth. Pooled finance works when backed by sustained institutional support, standardised frameworks and predictable fiscal reforms.

Successive Finance Commissions have tried to repair the institutional gaps holding municipal bonds back. The Thirteenth and Fourteenth FCs highlighted the absence of reliable municipal accounts; the Fifteenth FC went further by making audited accounts, property tax reforms, and the constitution of State Finance Commissions' (SFCs) entry conditions for local body grants.

The Sixteenth FC has mandated publicly available provisional and audited municipal accounts as a precondition for any grant, ties a share of urban grants to measurable growth in own-source revenues, and conditions State-level performance grants on States' own transfers to local bodies. It could have gone further by explicitly encouraging pooled municipal financing. That remains a missed opportunity.

Shah is a public policy professional and Sinha writes on macroeconomics and geopolitics

## Will the changes to IT rules contain deepfakes?

While labelling may identify deepfakes, whether it captures users' attention or social media platforms act on it is moot

V Sridhar

**T**he comprehensive amendment to the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, announced on February 10 by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, is welcome in the era of AI-generated content. The rules, which come into effect on February 20, clearly define "synthetically generated audio, video or audio-visual information" using computer resources and specifies mechanisms to contain the generation and dissemination of false and malevolent information, often referred to as deepfakes.

The rules also prescribe the due diligence to be observed by the intermediaries in containing the production and dissemination of deepfakes. In addition, the rules specify that the intermediaries should inform the users to prominently label such synthetically generated information for easy identification. Hence the current rules while empowering the intermediaries to monitor user content also endow them with associated responsibilities and liabilities for hosting or propagating deepfakes. However, the power bestowed on the

intermediaries to flag and take down synthetically generated information *suo motu* is likely to hit some guardrails.

In this age of GenAI, creation of synthetically generated information has become much easier with the availability of hundreds of tools. The Nvidia-backed AI voice start-up — Elevenlabs — that provides voice and video cloning apps, hit \$13 billion valuation in the recent round of funding. These apps are being used by creators to combine their work with AI driven synthetically created media to generate performances for the next generation.

### ENTRY BARRIERS REDUCED

These AI tools have also dramatically reduced the entry barriers for new and upcoming artists, writers, and performers to create a niche market for themselves amidst the biggies. These and other similar creative uses of synthetically generated information are broadly permitted under the new rules. While the labelling mandate is meant to curb information created in bad faith, the malevolent actors will not label their content and hence a comprehensive audit mechanism is required to book such offenders.

What bothers governments all over is the virality of deepfakes that are violent, abusive, malevolent and obscene.



AWARENESS DRIVE. Vital for alerting netizens on deepfakes

Further, researchers have found that deepfakes often are more viral due to their innovative, creative and visually compelling nature. A study indicates that deepfake based cyber attacks or frauds happen once every five minutes. Social media platforms are the primary sources for encountering and disseminating the deepfakes. Hence the additional responsibility placed on significant social media platforms for checking the authenticity of labels on synthetically generated content is a welcome measure indeed. However, whether they will act on the deepfakes that are viral at the cost of losing eyeballs is a moot question!

While prominent labelling should

help identify deepfakes, will it be effective given the short attention span of today's users, especially the youth? It is estimated that the attention span on social media of Gen Z is eight seconds, compared to 12 seconds of the millennials. This is one of the primary reasons for the popularity of short video formats and reels. In an experiment conducted with students at IIT, we found that even the tech-savvy students were not able to fully identify deepfakes that were created using AI tools, as they so closely mimic originals.

However, we found that educational intervention such as providing tips on detecting deepfakes resulted in marked improvement in detection rates. Hence, apart from the well-fought IT rules, the government should also create an awareness campaign for alerting netizens on deepfakes. Regulations introduce constraints in the use of technology and hence have a negative effect on innovation. Hence, aside regulations, awareness building campaigns for educating users, especially the semi-literate and older population, on deepfakes are also the need of the hour.

This writer is Professor, IIT-Bangalore. With inputs from Trupti Khodwe, Rishabh Dixit, Samyak Jain (students) and Prof Roland Haas, IIT-B

✉ **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, Kasturji Buildings, 859-860, Anna Salai, Chennai 60002.

### Deposit insurance

This refers to the editorial 'Creditable move' (February 13). At a time when risks are inevitable in banking, DICGC's move to charge insurance premiums differentially on banks based on risk assessment is prudent, as it provides benefits to those banks that are resilient. This will urge banks to implement robust risk assessment and mitigation measures to strengthen compliance culture and governance. However, non-disclosure of information with regard to premiums paid to DICGC by depositors is not fair as it goes against the interests of the latter. The

depositor has every right to choose a bank whose business risk is moderate. Though the RBI will act proactively to safeguard the interest of depositors, it is paramount to publish the information about the rating of DICGC.

**YSK Pillai**  
Changanacherry, Kerala

### Survival index

Appropos, 'Jan retail inflation at 2.75% under new CPI base year' (February 13). This new index hides the real struggle of the common man. The index today gives weightage to housing, transport, and services. What matters for survival are

groceries like rice, wheat, pulses, oil, milk and vegetables, essential for two square meals a day. Medicines for BP, diabetes, cold, and cough are also part of basic needs. Without these, life becomes hard. Therefore, an exclusive index should be created for these items alone. It should reflect the cost of survival, not luxury.

**O Prasada Rao**  
Hyderabad

### Gaps in school education

Appropos, 'Digital divide not the real problem in schools' (February 13). Although the digital divide undeniably persists between public and private school students and

between urban and rural learners, reform efforts must transcend the narrow obsession with devices and connectivity. Before bridging this gap, education systems must institutionalise rigorous curriculum delivery in language, science and mathematics, while systematically cultivating analytical reasoning and adaptive skills to confront everyday challenges scientifically. Equally essential is the deliberate integration of moral education, ethical standards and civic responsibility so that knowledge evolves into wisdom, character and social consciousness.

**N Sadasiva Reddy**  
Bangalore

### Promoting tourism

This refers to 'Give tourism a boost' (February 13). India with its vast and ancient culture, heritage sites and historical places should have become the epicentre of world tourism. However due to poor upkeep of our historical/heritage sites, the domestic tourism industry is in a bad shape. The Tourism Ministry should identify such sites and work speedily towards refurbishing them. Non-availability of guides who can speak foreign languages is also a constraint in attracting foreign tourists.

**Veena Shenoy**  
Thane

## 'Without Warning': A tale of motherhood and loss



**RASHA AL RAISI**  
rashabooks@yahoo.com  
The writer is author of  
The World According  
to Bahja

**WHAT'S** a mother? The woman who brings a child to this world or the one who nurtures and takes care of him even if he's not her own?

Do mothers' instinct exist? If it does, is it something innate or something developed while raising children?

These are some of the questions that Egyptian TV series 'Without Warning' questions in its fifteen episodes, broadcasted in Ramadhan 2024.

Directed by Hani Khalifa, the series focuses on a young couple Marwan (Asir Yasin) and Laila (Aisha bin Ahmed) who have been married for almost ten years and have an eight-year-old son called Omar.

The first scene shows them both at a marriage counseling session where Laila is explaining how malfunctioned their marriage is while Marwan is convinced that she's trying to create a problem that doesn't exist when everything is well between them.

Once they're home, Omar falls ill and is rushed to the emergency where he's diagnosed with Leukemia. The doctor recommends an immediate stem cell transplant but when blood test is done, they discover that Omar is not their son. He'd been switched at birth with their own child.

But who are his real parents? Did their real son end up with them instead? The search starts immediately while as a viewer you are in two minds: what's the point of finding the real son? Are they going to swap him with Omar?

Would the other family agree given the fact that their own child – a total stranger – has Leukemia and needs taking care of? What about Omar himself?

How would he feel about this distressing news? As a director, Hani Khalifa had always shown a great interest in relationship dynamics starting with his 2003 critically acclaimed movie 'Sahar El Layali' (Sleepless Nights) where he discussed different problems that three couples were facing, given the fact that they're close friends and some were old flames. However, in this series he also throws in family dynamics whether it's Laila's troubled relationship with her parents or Marwan's brother Hassan (Ahmed Khalid Saleh) who can't understand his wife's attachment to her troublesome brother, which is the cause of constant fights between them.

The series highlight Egyptian society with its endless bureaucracy and streaks of corruption that hinders genuine search efforts.

Even the legal side of raising the wrong child includes – shockingly – a public

*Egyptian series 'Without Warning' explores what truly defines a mother through the story of a couple whose son was switched at birth. The 15-episode Ramadhan 2024 drama delves into loss and the resilience of family*

denouncement for the police to officially help find your own child.

Aisha bin Ahmed depicts well the grieving mother torn between the love of the child she raised and wanting to find out about her own son; and the wife who's struggling in her marriage and career that she'd just started after a long break. Asir Yasin was convincing as the father who embarks on the impossible journey of finding his real son while trying to take care of Omar, the child he raised.

Saleem Yusif who plays Omar was very impressive at the role of a child suffering from Leukemia and how it affects him physically and mentally.

Eventually, what unites them as a family is the struggle and the emotional roller coaster that they go through where they rely on each other's strength and support.

Although there were fifteen episodes in the series, yet the first few ones were slow but the rest was well-paced. Also, it was hard to understand Marwan and Laila's dispute at the start yet flashbacks in every episode helped to gradually reveal it till the viewer got to the core at the end.

'Without Warning' is an intense and emotionally charged drama that assumes a rare situation and tries to find a real solution to it. Available on Netflix.

## AU GATHERS AMIDST 'WEAK BY DESIGN' DEBATE

The African Union (AU) holds its annual summit in Ethiopia this weekend at a time of genocide, myriad insurgencies and coups stretching from one end of the continent to the other, for which it has few answers.

The AU, formed in 2002, has 55 member states who are often on opposing sides of conflicts. They have routinely blocked attempts to hand real enforcement power to the AU that could constrain their action, leaving it underfunded and under-equipped.

It has missed successive deadlines to make itself self-funding – in 2020 and 2025. Today, it still relies for 64 per cent of its annual budget on the United States and European Union, both of which are cutting back support.

Its chairman, Mahmoud Ali Youssouf, is reduced to expressing "deep concern" over the continent's endless crises – from wars in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo to insurgencies across the Sahel – but with limited scope to act.

"At a time when the AU is needed the most, it is arguably at its weakest since it was inaugurated", said the International Crisis Group (ICG) in a recent report.

With 10 military coups in Africa since 2020, the AU has been forced to ignore the rule in its charter that coup-leaders must not stand for elections. Gabon and Guinea, suspended after their coups, were reinstated this past year despite breaking that rule.

Meanwhile, there has been no "deep concern" over a string of elections marred by rigging and extreme violence.

Youssouf was quick to congratulate Tanzania's President Samia Suluhu Hassan after she won 98 per cent in a vote in October.

The AU praised the "openness" of an election in Burundi in June described by Human Rights Watch as "dominated by repression (and) censorship". The problem, said Benjamin Auge, of the French Institute of International Relations, is that few African leaders care about how they are viewed abroad as they did in the early days after independence. — AFP

# Purpose-driven profit in private education

**HIGHER** education in Oman has undergone remarkable expansion over the past two decades, with private universities and colleges emerging as central pillars in meeting rising demand. Today, private institutions constitute the majority of higher education providers in the Sultanate of Oman – a development that reflects a deliberate and forward-looking national strategy. In a rapidly diversifying economy, the state cannot and should not, remain the sole provider of tertiary education.

This is closely aligned with Oman Vision 2040, which prioritises human capital development, skills readiness, innovation and the transition towards a knowledge-based economy. Private higher education institutions are therefore not peripheral participants but essential partners in advancing national ambitions. The critical question is not whether private providers should exist, but whether the operational models guiding some of them fully reflect the broader educational and societal purpose they are meant to serve.

Universities are not ordinary commercial enterprises but are entrusted with developing skilled graduates, advancing research and innovation, strengthening ethical and civic values; and contributing to national development priorities. If profit maximisation be-



**UMAR SAFDAR KAYANI**

The writer is Director, Research Innovation and Entrepreneurship, University of Buraimi

*Research, curriculum innovation and professional development are difficult when workloads leave little time or institutional support. student learning*

comes the sole driving force, these responsibilities risk being reduced to secondary concerns.

It is important to be clear that not all private higher education institutions in Oman follow a profit-first mindset. Many demonstrate genuine commitment to academic quality, faculty development, student learning and national goals.

Students are increasingly framed as customers who are always right. This framing prioritises short-term satisfaction over long-term learning outcomes. Students may remain quiet about declining academic standards because immediate interests such as grades, workload, or progression appear protected.

Regulation alone cannot fully solve this problem. Even with robust oversight mechanisms, government bodies cannot conduct microscopic, day-to-day monitoring of teaching quality, assessment integrity, or academic culture inside every institution.

If Oman is serious about Oman Vision 2040 human capital goals, private higher education policy must move from general quality statements to clear, enforceable expectations. One critical step would be introducing a cap on profit withdrawal from private higher education institutions, with the remaining surplus mandatorily reinvested into academic priorities such as faculty development, learning resources, research capacity and student support

services. This would not undermine private investment; rather, it would ensure that financial success strengthens institutional quality instead of weakening it.

Equally important is the introduction of a national minimum pay scale for academic and administrative staff, issued and monitored by MoE, alongside a clearly defined set of basic facilities and working conditions. These should include transparent workload norms, access to professional development, minimum research support for research-active faculty and clear due-process protections in contract renewal. Such measures would not only improve quality but would also give faculty the confidence to speak up in defence of academic standards.

Other Gulf countries offer cautious lessons rather than models to copy. Across the region, rapid expansion of private higher education has often been followed by stronger regulation to protect quality and graduate outcomes. Oman can adopt this principle without importing unsuitable frameworks by focusing on what is measurable and enforceable: reinvestment in quality, learning outcomes and institutional transparency.

Private higher education is indispensable to Oman's future. Profit itself is not the problem. The problem arises when profit replaces purpose rather than resulting from it.

## Additional Honor for Vande Mataram

"Jana Gana Mana," composed by Nobel laureate Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, is our national anthem, while "Vande Mataram," composed by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, is our national song. On January 24, 1950, the Constituent Assembly passed a resolution declaring that, in order to safeguard the national identity of Indians, Vande Mataram, along with Jana Gana Mana, would be our national song. Bankim Babu composed it in 1875 and included it in his novel Anand Math in 1882. When Lokmanya Tilak launched his national movement in 1905, Vande Mataram became a source of inspiration for patriots. After independence, when the decision on the national anthem began, Rabindranath Tagore himself proposed that Vande Mataram be made the national anthem. However, because the six-stanza song praised the Hindu goddesses Maa, Durga, and Saraswati, Pandit Nehru, overriding Mohammad Ali Jinnah's opposition, insisted that only two verses be included, while the remaining four were removed. Last year, the Modi government celebrated Vande Mataram's 150th anniversary with a fitting tribute and urged everyone to draw inspiration from it. The history of India's independence, Vande Mataram, reveals that this inspiring national song was composed as early as 1875. Later, patriots who sacrificed their lives fighting for independence sang this song as they went to the altar. After independence, Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore's composition, Jana Gana Mana, was adopted as the national anthem. The Government of India has now launched a campaign to recite Vande Mataram to instill a sense of patriotism and nationalism among the people.

Instead of the approved two verses, the government has now mandated the recitation of the entire six verses. The duration of the recitation has also been limited to 3-10 minutes. The new directive mandates that Vande Mataram be sung before the national anthem at any official ceremony, and only the full version will be sung during chorus singing.

Now, attendees will be required to stand at attention during the presentation of the national song along with the national anthem. While the graceful singing of Vande Mataram is being performed, it has also been mandated that all schools begin the day with the chorus singing of the national song, Vande Mataram. Now, recitation of Vande Mataram has also been made mandatory before Jana Gana Mana. All six verses of the national anthem will be sung during any government or public function, including the arrival of the President, the hoisting of the tricolor, speeches by governors, cultural programs, or parades, as well as all other official ceremonies.

It has been stated that if any part of Vande Mataram is played in a film or documentary, the audience is not required to stand in cinemas or during stage performances. Previously, a campaign was launched nationwide to honor the tricolor. It is the duty of every citizen to remember and respect the proud symbols of our country. In today's materialistic age, where the younger generation is forgetting to respect even sacred relationships, reviving moral ideals and respecting the national song and national anthem, which reflect the pride of the nation, should be a universally accepted and universally accepted policy. This campaign should not become a mere formality; only then will the message of discipline and order be reestablished in this country.

-Abhishek Vij

## Initiative to Give Appropriate Respect to the Elderly

The Punjab government has launched the "Sade Bujurg, Sada Maan" (Our Elders, Our Respect) campaign from January 2026 to honor the state's elderly and prioritize them in daily life. Punjab has the highest number of elderly people compared to other states in the country. In the twilight of life, when the elderly are unable to fend for themselves, their families or state governments must provide them with facilities, taking into account their seniority. To this end, district-level medical camps are currently being organized across Punjab. Senior citizen cards are being issued and distributed to the elderly, old-age pension forms are being filled out, and they are being informed about senior citizen schemes offered by banks. This campaign deserves praise. On the other hand, not only in Punjab but across the country, the elderly are not given any special respect. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the central government abolished the rail travel concessions provided to the elderly. Now, despite widespread demand, this concession has not been fully reinstated; it has only been partially implemented. While in other countries, the elderly are prioritized in public places and senior living homes have been built for their shelter, here there is a lot of word of mouth, but there are no comfortable old-age homes. The law stipulates that cases involving the elderly should be resolved expeditiously in courts and treated sensitively by the police system, but this is not the case in reality. In fact, on the issue of elderly care, the central government says it is the responsibility of the state governments, while the states say that the central government should take action. This means that there are many paper promises for the elderly, but no real commitments. Recently, data released by the National Crime Records Bureau regarding the elderly shows that the highest number of crimes against the elderly are taking place in the country's capital, Delhi. Crime cases against the elderly are registered, but the process of delivering justice is very slow. Protecting the elderly should be a priority for governments. As life expectancy in the country increases, the number of elderly people will inevitably increase.

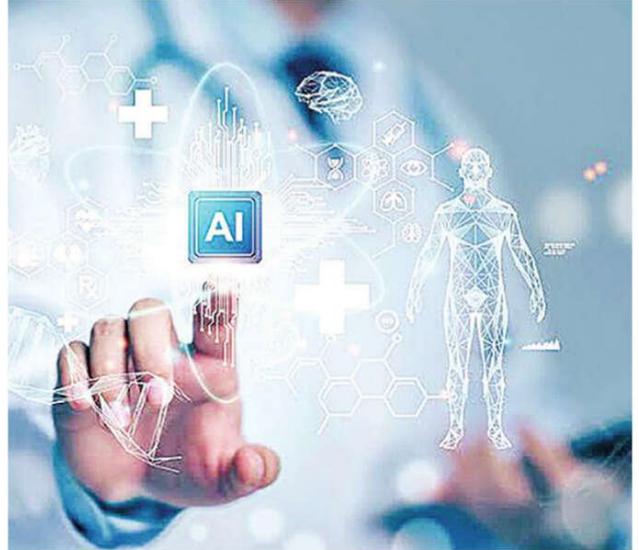
# Artificial intelligence in healthcare

Artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming healthcare worldwide, offering unprecedented opportunities to improve diagnosis, treatment, and patient care. From predictive analytics to robotic surgeries, AI applications are redefining medical practices, optimizing healthcare systems, and potentially saving millions of lives. However, alongside the promise of AI, challenges related to ethics, accessibility, and accountability remain significant.

One of the most promising applications of AI in healthcare is diagnostics. Machine learning algorithms can analyze complex medical data, including imaging scans, pathology reports, and genetic information, to detect diseases earlier and with greater accuracy than traditional methods. For example, AI-powered systems can identify cancerous lesions in radiology images with remarkable precision, reducing diagnostic delays and improving treatment outcomes.

Predictive analytics is another area where AI demonstrates immense potential. By processing large datasets of patient records, AI can forecast disease progression, identify at-risk populations, and recommend preventive interventions. Hospitals can optimize resource allocation, anticipate patient inflow, and reduce operational inefficiencies, ultimately improving patient care and cost-effectiveness.

AI also enhances personalized medicine. Algorithms can analyze individual patient profiles, including genetics, lifestyle, and treatment history, to recommend tailored therapeutic plans. This approach increases the efficacy of treatments, minimizes adverse effects, and supports informed decision-making. In chronic diseases like diabetes, heart disease, and neurological disorders, AI-powered monitoring devices can track patient health in real-time, alerting healthcare providers to



potential complications. Telemedicine, combined with

AI also enhances personalized medicine. Algorithms can analyze individual patient profiles, including genetics, lifestyle, and treatment history, to recommend tailored therapeutic plans.

AI, expands healthcare accessibility, particularly in remote

or underserved regions. Virtual consultations, symptom checkers, and AI-driven triage systems provide timely guidance to patients, reducing the burden on hospitals and clinics. During the COVID-19 pandemic, AI-assisted telehealth services proved instrumental in managing patient care while minimizing infection risk.

Despite its benefits, AI adoption in healthcare raises ethical and operational concerns. Data privacy, algorithmic bias, and accountability for errors are pressing challenges. AI models require high-quality data to function effectively, but discrepancies in healthcare datasets can lead to unequal treatment outcomes. Decisions made by AI must remain transparent, and human oversight is critical to ensure ethical and accurate medical interventions.

Moreover, integration of AI into healthcare infrastruc-

ture requires investment in training technology, and regulatory frameworks. Healthcare professionals need to understand AI tools, interpret their recommendations, and maintain the human element of care. Policymakers must establish standards for data security, algorithm validation, and patient consent to balance innovation with responsibility. In conclusion, AI has the potential to revolutionize healthcare by enhancing diagnostics, personalizing treatment, and expanding accessibility. Yet, the success of AI in medicine depends not only on technological advancements but also on ethical governance, regulatory frameworks, and skilled human oversight. With careful implementation, AI can complement human expertise, transforming healthcare into a more efficient, equitable, and patient-centered system.

### THOUGHT OF THE DAY

Change begins when we listen to those whose voices are seldom heard.

-Waheed ur Rehman Para

## The science of nutrition and balanced diets

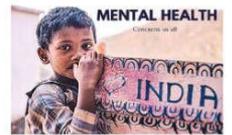
Nutrition plays a central role in maintaining health, preventing disease, and ensuring overall well-being. A balanced diet provides the body with essential macronutrients, vitamins, and minerals, supporting physical and mental performance. A balanced diet typically consists of carbohydrates, proteins, fats, vitamins, minerals, and fiber. Carbohydrates are the primary energy source, found in whole grains, fruits, and vegetables. Proteins, obtained from legumes, dairy, eggs, meat, and plant-based alternatives, are essential for muscle repair, immune function, and enzymatic activity. Fats, particularly unsaturated fats from nuts, seeds, and oils, support hormone production, brain function, and energy storage. Vitamins and minerals are critical for metabolic processes. Vitamin A supports vision and immunity, vitamin D regulates calcium absorption for bone health, and vitamin C strengthens the immune system. Minerals such as iron, magnesium, and potassium regulate blood pressure, nerve function, and energy production. A deficiency or excess of any nutrient can impact health, making balance essential.

Dietary fiber, found in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, supports digestive health, regulates blood sugar, and helps maintain a healthy weight. It also contributes to cardiovascular health by reducing cholesterol levels. Hydration is equally important, as water is essential for cellular function, waste removal, and temperature regulation. Modern diets often include processed foods high in refined sugar, salt, and unhealthy fats, leading to increased risks of obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease. Awareness campaigns, food labeling, and education programs aim to help individuals make informed choices. Choosing fresh, whole foods, reducing sugary drinks, and moderating portion sizes contribute to a healthier lifestyle.

## Mental health awareness in urban India

Mental health has historically been a neglected aspect of public health in India, overshadowed by physical illnesses and infrastructural challenges. However, rapid urbanization, high-pressure work environments, and changing social dynamics have made mental health a critical issue, especially in cities. Stress, anxiety, depression, and substance abuse are increasingly common, yet stigma, misinformation, and lack of professional support continue to hinder effective intervention. Urban living is often associated with high levels of stress. Residents face daily challenges such as traffic congestion, overcrowded housing, long working hours, and rising living costs. Social isolation, despite physical proximity, further exacerbates feelings of loneliness and anxiety. Young professionals and students are particularly vulnerable, navigating competitive educational and career landscapes while balancing financial and familial pressures.

Mental health awareness remains limited due to stigma. Many individuals avoid seeking help for fear of judgment or discrimination, often suppressing symptoms until they escalate. Families may dismiss mental health issues as personal weakness or temporary stress, delaying intervention. Media portrayal of mental illness also shapes public perception, sometimes reinfor-



cing negative stereotypes instead of promoting understanding and empathy.

Access to professional care is another challenge. India faces a severe shortage of trained psychiatrists, psychologists, and counselors, particularly in urban centers where demand is highest. Public healthcare systems are overburdened, while private services remain unaffordable for many. Early intervention, which is critical for effective treatment, is often unavailable, leading to chronic conditions and reduced quality of life.

Digital solutions, however, are emerging as a promising avenue. Telemedicine platforms, mental health apps, and online counseling services offer accessible and confidential support. They can bridge the gap between need and availability, particularly for those hesitant to seek face-to-face consultations. Awareness campaigns by NGOs, corporate initiatives, and government programs are also increasing public understanding of mental health, encouraging open discussions and reducing stigma.

# Silicon and Sovereignty: Navigating the New Delhi-DC Trade Expressway



**Sheena Sandhu**  
Retired civil servant

The signing of the India-US Interim Trade Framework on February 6, 2026, represents the most significant recalibration of India's external economic policy since the landmark 1991 reforms. For decades, the bilateral relationship was trapped in a cycle of "theology over transactions," where high-minded rhetoric about shared values was frequently undermined by prickly disputes over price controls on medical devices and tariffs on American motorcycles. That deadlock has finally been broken. By slashing effective reciprocal tariffs from a prohibitive 50% down to a standardized 18%, and outlining a roadmap for \$500 billion in strategic procurement, New Delhi and Washington have moved from being "estranged democracies" to "interdependent supply-chain partners."

**The 18% Solution: A Competitive Reset**  
The primary catalyst for this breakthrough was the "tariff fatigue" of 2025. Following a period of aggressive reciprocal duties exacerbated by US penal tariffs on Indian goods, Indian exporters were effectively being "taxed out" of the world's largest consumer market. The reset to an 18% reciprocal rate is a masterstroke of economic leveling. For India's labor-intensive sectors, this 32-point reduction is a "competitiveness multiplier." At 18%, Indian goods particularly in textiles, leather, and gems—now enjoy a decisive price advantage over regional competitors like Vietnam (20%) and Bangladesh (20%), and remain significantly more attractive than Chinese exports facing duties



upwards of 35%. This "tariff bridge" provides the necessary breathing room for the "Make in India" initiative to scale from assembly to deep manufacturing.

**Deep Provisions: The New Economic Architecture**  
While the \$500 billion headline captures the imagination, the framework's real strength lies in its granular provisions designed to integrate the two economies at a structural level:

**\*The iCET "Silicon Handshake":** Under the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET), the US has streamlined the export of high-end Graphics Processing Units (GPUs) and data center hardware. For India's "National AI Mission," this ensures a steady supply of the "silicon oxygen" required for domestic compute power, bypassing



the lengthy export control cycles that previously hindered Indian tech giants.

**\*Zero-Duty Clusters:** In a major victory for Indian MSMEs, the agreement provides zero-duty access for specific high-value clusters including handicrafts, silk, and generic pharmaceuticals. This is a massive boost for the Hyderabad pharma hub and the traditional weaving centers of Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.

**\*Harmonization of Standards:** Perhaps the most "Indian Express-style" nuance of this deal is the commitment to harmonize standards for medical devices and ICT goods within six months. By removing the "compliance tax"—the costly requirement for dual testing and certification—the deal allows an Indian medical startup to treat the US market as an extension of the domestic one.

**\*Preferential Quotas for Auto Components:** Despite broader US "Section 232" national security tariffs, India has secured a preferential tariff-rate quota for auto parts. This protects India's massive automotive engineering ecosystem while competitors remain locked behind higher barriers.

**Strategic Sourcing: The \$500 Billion Bet**  
The most debated provision remains India's "intent to purchase" \$500 billion in US energy, aircraft, and technology over the next five years. Far from being a one-sided concession, this is a strategic move to secure India's energy and infrastructure future. By pivoting toward US LNG and coking coal, India is effectively de-risking its energy supply chains from the volatility of Eurasian geopolitics. Simultaneously, the commitment to procure hundreds of narrow and wide-body civilian aircraft will fuel the expansion of India's aviation sector, which is projected to become the world's third-largest by the end of the decade. This isn't just "buying American"; it is "building Indian" with American capital goods.

**Guarding the Hinterland**  
Critically, New Delhi has maintained its "red lines" on agriculture. While India will allow greater market access for US almonds, walnuts, and fresh fruits, the core of the rural economy—wheat, rice, pulses, and the dairy sector remains fully protected. This ensures that the trade deal drives urban industrialization without jeopardizing the food security or livelihoods of 150 million Indian farming households.

**A Pragmatic Sovereignty**  
The 2026 framework signals that India is no longer a "rule-taker" in the global order. It is a pragmatist. By choosing to integrate deeply with the US economy, India is not compromising its sovereignty; it is exercising it to ensure that the "Silicon Valley of the East" has the hardware, the energy, and the market access it needs to thrive. The "sleeping giant" hasn't just woken up; it has secured the tools to lead. The New Delhi-DC Trade Expressway is now open, and for the Indian economy, the road ahead looks remarkably clear.

## Urban water scarcity and management

Rapid urbanization in India has put immense pressure on water resources, resulting in increasing water scarcity in major cities. With growing populations, industrial demand, and climate change-induced variability in rainfall, urban water management has become a critical challenge. Effective planning and sustainable practices are essential to ensure long-term water security. Cities like Chennai, Bengaluru, and Hyderabad have experienced acute water shortages in recent years, highlighting systemic issues in supply, distribution, and consumption. Groundwater over-extraction has led to falling water tables, while inefficient municipal infrastructure results in significant leakages and wastage. Seasonal variability in river flows and erratic monsoon patterns further exacerbate shortages. Urban water demand is driven by residential, commercial, and industrial sectors. Rising per capita consumption, lifestyle changes, and high-density housing increase pressure on available resources. In many areas, residents rely on private water tankers or bottled water,



creating inequities and economic burdens. Low-income neighborhoods are particularly vulnerable, facing intermittent supply and contamination risks. Water management solutions require a multi-pronged approach. Rainwater harvesting, wastewater recycling, and greywater reuse can significantly reduce dependence on traditional sources. Policies encouraging conservation, efficient irrigation in urban farms, and incentives for low-water appliances contribute to sustainable consumption. Smart metering and leak detection systems can minimize losses in municipal distribution networks. Groundwater recharge and watershed management are crucial for long-term resilience. Restoring rivers, lakes, and wetlands within urban landscapes improves storage capacity and biodiversity, while

mitigating urban flooding. Public participation, through awareness campaigns and community-led water management programs, strengthens the effectiveness of these measures. Climate change adds another layer of complexity. Increased frequency of droughts, heatwaves, and unpredictable rainfall patterns makes cities more vulnerable to water stress. Integrating climate-resilient infrastructure, such as storage reservoirs and desalination plants, alongside conservation initiatives, is critical for future preparedness. Urban water scarcity is not only an environmental issue but also a socio-economic challenge. Access to clean water affects public health, economic productivity, and social equity. Policymakers must prioritize integrated water management strategies that combine technological, regulatory, and community-based interventions. Cross-sectoral coordination between urban planning, environment, and public health departments is essential to achieve sustainable outcomes. In conclusion, addressing urban water scarcity requires long-term vision, robust infrastructure, and community engagement.

## The joy and benefits of reading in everyday life

Reading is more than a pastime; it is a powerful tool for personal growth, mental well-being, and lifelong learning. In today's digital age, where screens dominate attention, reading provides a quiet, immersive escape that stimulates the mind and nurtures creativity. People who cultivate a reading habit often experience improved focus, empathy, and knowledge, making reading a vital component of a balanced, enriching lifestyle. One of the most significant benefits of reading is the expansion of knowledge. Books offer insights into history, science, culture, and technology that can enrich both personal and professional life. Non-fiction books, such as biographies, scientific studies, and self-help guides, provide practical information and strategies for problem-solving and decision-making. Fiction, on the other hand, allows readers to explore diverse perspectives, enhancing empathy and understanding by placing themselves in the shoes of different characters from varied backgrounds and cultures. Reading also has cognitive benefits. It improves concentration, memory, and analytical thinking. When readers engage with complex narratives or detailed arguments, they learn to think critically, make connections, and synthesize information. Vocabulary and language skills naturally improve, which strengthens communication abilities in everyday conversations and professional



settings. For students and lifelong learners, reading fosters curiosity and a desire for continuous self-improvement. The mental health benefits of reading are equally notable. Immersing oneself in a book reduces stress and promotes relaxation. Studies have shown that reading can lower heart rate, ease muscle tension, and calm the mind. The focus required to follow a story or argument encourages mindfulness, allowing readers to temporarily disconnect from daily worries and digital distractions. Many therapists recommend reading as a tool for managing anxiety, depression, and fatigue. Technology has made reading more accessible than ever. E-books, audiobooks, and digital libraries allow individuals to carry thousands of titles on their devices, making it easier to read anytime and anywhere. Even dedicating just 20 to 30 minutes a day to reading can provide noticeable benefits over time, including improved cognitive function, emotional resilience, and knowledge retention. Moreover, reading fosters creativity and innovation.

## Rise of street food entrepreneurship in India

In recent years, India has witnessed a significant shift in its urban economic landscape. Young graduates and professionals, confronted with limited formal employment opportunities, are increasingly turning to street food vending as a viable source of income. What was once considered a survival strategy has now evolved into a form of entrepreneurship, reshaping local economies and urban culture. The motivations behind this trend are multifaceted. For many, it is a response to the inadequacy of traditional jobs. High competition in corporate sectors, delayed salaries, and stagnant wages have pushed educated youth to explore self-employment. Street food vending provides an immediate, low-investment opportunity, with potential for steady earnings. The sector also allows flexibility, enabling young entrepreneurs to balance family responsibilities or pursue other ventures alongside vending. Cultural factors also contribute to this rise. Indian cities have long embraced street food as a staple of urban life. Popular snacks like

chaat, momos, pav bhaji, and biryani are not merely food items but cultural symbols, drawing large crowds across cities like Delhi, Mumbai, and Bangalore. For young vendors, offering innovative variations or hygiene-conscious versions of traditional dishes becomes a unique selling proposition, allowing them to carve out niche markets. Economic implications of this trend are significant. Street food vending has created a ripple effect on supply chains, from local farmers and small-scale suppliers to logistics providers. It encourages micro-entrepreneurship, fosters skill development, and reduces urban unemployment. According to government estimates, the informal food sector employs millions and contributes substantially to urban economies. Some state governments are also recognizing this potential, offering licenses, skill training, and infrastructure support to legitimize street food businesses. However, challenges persist. Street vendors often face harassment from municipal authorities, lack access to affordable credit, and struggle with inconsistent



electricity, water, and sanitation facilities. Competition is fierce, and profit margins

are thin. Weather disruptions and seasonal fluctuations in foot traffic can significantly affect earnings. Many vendors also lack formal training in food safety, which can impact public health. Despite these hurdles, success stories are emerging. Young entrepreneurs who combine culinary innovation with digital marketing are turning street food into scalable businesses. Social media platforms amplify their reach, and food delivery apps enable them to expand beyond local markets. Some even evolve into branded outlets, contributing to local tourism and urban cultural identity. The rise of street food entrepreneurship in India highlights a broader socio-economic trend: the blending of necessity-driven self-employment with innovation and urban culture. It represents a reimagining of traditional livelihoods in the modern economy. For policymakers, supporting this sector through financial inclusion, legal recognition, and urban infrastructure is essential. Doing so not only empowers youth but also strengthens the resilience of urban economies.



## Editor's TAKE

### Industrial Relations Code 2026: Clarity or caution?

The Bill, hurriedly passed in Parliament promises long-sought legal clarity by formally retiring three colonial-era labour laws

Many laws in India are archaic and date to the Colonial era. Many such laws have been amended, but many more remain, connecting our present laws to the pre-independence era. Recently Parliament passed the Industrial Relations Code (Amendment) Bill, 2026, which deals with the present labour laws, and as per the Government, removes ambiguity and brings legal clarity in their implementation. However, the speed with which they have been passed has been frowned upon by various trade union and experts. Introduced only a day earlier and passed after a brief debate, the amendment seeks to provide legal clarity regarding the repeal of three legacy laws – the Trade Unions Act, 1926; the Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act, 1946; and the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947. These were under the ambit of the Industrial Relations Code, 2020. According to Labour and Employment Minister Mansukh Mandviya, the objective of this amendment is to remove ambiguity and ensure smoother implementation. There is truth in it, as India's labour law framework is fragmented and complex.

The amendment consolidates 29 central labour laws into four labour codes, improve ease of doing business, and create a more transparent regulatory framework. The 2026 amendment thus addressed technical and transitional gaps that persisted since the 2020 Code. Yet despite its obvious advantages, there is more to these new codes labour laws shape the everyday realities of millions of workers. Major central trade unions—AITUC, CIU, HMTS and INTUC—have opposed the labour codes linked to the 2026 amendment, arguing they weaken job security, ease layoffs, curb the right to strike, and marginalise smaller unions.

Calling the reforms "pro-corporate," they organised nationwide protests and strikes, including on 12 February 2026. Since the Bill was swiftly passed without almost no debate, the perspective of the stakeholders is missing from it. The impact of the amendment will depend on how it balances competing priorities. For industry, streamlined laws promise predictability, reduced compliance burdens, and potentially greater flexibility in hiring and restructuring. For workers and trade unions, however, concerns remain about safeguards related to collective bargaining, dispute resolution mechanisms, and job security. Workers' rights cannot be compromised at the altars of legal clarity. If growth of the economy and GDP is important, so is the welfare of the workers. The government has positioned the reform within a broader narrative of economic balance – high growth and low inflation, as described by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in her Budget reply. No doubt, labour reforms are essential for sustaining investment momentum and job creation but they must also safeguard workers rights and provide and address their concerns regarding layoffs. The success of the Industrial Code will be measured by its ability to foster equitable workplaces, reduce disputes, and support inclusive growth, not by how quickly it was passed.

## Asim Munir and the Houbara Bustard

Pakistan's Generals are playing a perilous game – trading strategic services for cash and political validation. The UAE President's stopover in Islamabad and talk of Pakistani troops in Gaza reveal a state constantly migrating between patrons, for short-term gain



GAURAV ARYA

Pakistan is uniquely malleable and predictably ductile. The only Muslim nuclear power in the world was recently paid a visit by none other than His Highness Mohamad bin Zayed Al Nahyan (MBZ), President of the UAE. Shehbaz Sharif and Asim Munir were both eager to pass it off as an official visit. Islamabad was locked down. Flags of the UAE and Pakistan fluttered all over the city of Islamabad.

The media was told that this visit would result in investments, an IT revolution and massive energy deals, and Pakistan's days of misfortune would finally be over. On 26th December, MBZ landed at Nur Khan Air Base. He sat for a couple of hours with Pakistan's Army Chief Asim Munir and Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and then, as social media whippers would have us believe, left for Rahim Yar Khan.

The Houbara Bustard is a migratory bird. When it migrates to Pakistan in winter, so does Arab royalty. The meat of the bird is considered an aphrodisiac. The hunt is annual and brings precious foreign exchange, and sometimes infrastructure, to an almost-bankrupt Pakistan. Rahim Yar Khan is one of the few areas where the killing happens.

The media was told that this visit would result in investments, an IT revolution and massive energy deals, and Pakistan's days of misfortune would finally be over. On 26th December, MBZ landed at Nur Khan Air Base. He sat for a couple of hours with Pakistan's Army Chief Asim Munir and Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and then, as social media whippers would have us believe, left for Rahim Yar Khan.

When recently US Secretary of State Marco Rubio thanked Pakistan for offering to provide troops as part of the International Stabilisation Force in Gaza, no one was surprised. This job also consists of forcibly disarming Hamas and other elements. Pakistan has some experience in killing Palestinians.

In 1970, a nondescript Brigadier of the Pakistan Army was tasked by the King of Jordan to lead Pakistani troops and crush the Palestinians. He did it so efficiently that the attack broke the spine of the Palestinian fighters. Thousands were killed. Zia ul Haq would later go on to become Pakistan's Army Chief and President.

What is happening today has happened before; this is simply Pakistan trying to leverage two fronts - money from the Arabs and recognition from the Americans. While the Palestine issue destabilises the Middle East, the Arabs will not send their sons to fight in Gaza. I say fight because that is what happens when two opposing sides have guns. Disarming Hamas or the very act of trying to do so will have severe consequences for Asim Munir.

The common Pakistani, for the most part tremendously docile in front of the army, is not going to pick up the tab for Munir's White House lunch. Let me explain. Pakistan has fought four wars with India, not counting the recent four-



day skirmish in May 2025. There are claims and counterclaims on the territory. India has repeatedly called out Pakistan for nurturing and supporting cross-border terrorism. Thousands of Indians have died due to Pakistan-sponsored terror. And yet, Pakistanis can visit India and vice versa. But Pakistan's passport says, "This passport is valid for all countries of the world, except Israel". Neither nation has diplomatic relations, nor can the total number of Pakistanis who have visited Israel be counted on the fingers of one hand. Most have never met a Jew.

Yet the hatred is so strong that for Asim Munir to send troops to Gaza to disarm Hamas will be like throwing a burning match to petrol. The hatred for Jews is religiously sanctioned. Sahih al-Bukhari is graphic. It is not just Muslims but inanimate objects like stones that will hate Jews, calling for their killing.

A Pakistani general has many lives and cannot be brought down by the Prime Minister or President. Only a general can bring down a general. In a recent gathering of military personnel in Pakistan, Asim Munir's security team placed a bulletproof glass between the Army Chief and his audience. Surprised?

On 14th December 2003, six Pakistan Air Force personnel blew up a bridge on a road in Rawalpindi. Their mission was to blow up the car carrying Pakistan's Army Chief and President. They failed. A few days later, there was another attempt. Over a dozen of Musharraf's bodyguards were killed, but he

escaped again. On 10th July 2007, the Pakistan Army stormed Lal Masjid. The clergy and students inside were continuously defying the writ of the state, and Musharraf ordered the Special Services Group to 'go in'. Bloodshed followed, and so did many more attempts to kill Musharraf.

Pakistan Army soldiers were said to be involved in a few such attempts on his life. If storming a masjid could bring about such consequences, imagine the repercussions of Asim Munir befriending Jews. It would be cataclysmic.

Pakistan has always shot itself in the foot. Gen Zia ul Haq took money from the CIA to launch what is called the first 'Afghan Jihad' in the eighties. Pakistan was flooded with extremism, heroin and Kalashnikovs. Post 9/11, Gen Pervez Musharraf again took money from the Americans for what would be called the "War on Terror".

It helped Americans launch operations in Afghanistan and became the most favoured supply route. Pakistan estimates that it suffered over 100,000 deaths and over USD 150 billion in losses due to damaged infrastructure, due to its participation in the "War on Terror". Any other country would have learnt its lesson. But Pakistan is not any other country.

Like the Houbara Bustard, Pakistan will again migrate. And once again, the hunters will be waiting. New Delhi needs to wait and watch. History will repeat itself.

Major Gaurav Arya (Retd) is the Editor-in-Chief of Chanakya Forum. An Indian Army veteran, he brings decades of experience across the military, corporate, and media spheres.

Major Gaurav Arya (Retd) is the Editor-in-Chief of Chanakya Forum. An Indian Army veteran, he brings decades of experience across the military, corporate, and media spheres.

Major Gaurav Arya (Retd) is the Editor-in-Chief of Chanakya Forum. An Indian Army veteran, he brings decades of experience across the military, corporate, and media spheres.

Major Gaurav Arya (Retd) is the Editor-in-Chief of Chanakya Forum. An Indian Army veteran, he brings decades of experience across the military, corporate, and media spheres.

Major Gaurav Arya (Retd) is the Editor-in-Chief of Chanakya Forum. An Indian Army veteran, he brings decades of experience across the military, corporate, and media spheres.

Major Gaurav Arya (Retd) is the Editor-in-Chief of Chanakya Forum. An Indian Army veteran, he brings decades of experience across the military, corporate, and media spheres.

Major Gaurav Arya (Retd) is the Editor-in-Chief of Chanakya Forum. An Indian Army veteran, he brings decades of experience across the military, corporate, and media spheres.

Major Gaurav Arya (Retd) is the Editor-in-Chief of Chanakya Forum. An Indian Army veteran, he brings decades of experience across the military, corporate, and media spheres.

Major Gaurav Arya (Retd) is the Editor-in-Chief of Chanakya Forum. An Indian Army veteran, he brings decades of experience across the military, corporate, and media spheres.

Major Gaurav Arya (Retd) is the Editor-in-Chief of Chanakya Forum. An Indian Army veteran, he brings decades of experience across the military, corporate, and media spheres.

Major Gaurav Arya (Retd) is the Editor-in-Chief of Chanakya Forum. An Indian Army veteran, he brings decades of experience across the military, corporate, and media spheres.

## PICTALK



Buddhist monks welcome Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama as he returns after a two-month sojourn in Dharamshala, Himachal Pradesh.

PHOTO: PTI

## DIGITAL EXPERIENCE

www.dailypioneer.com

- facebook.com/dailypioneer
- @TheDailyPioneer
- instagram.com/dailypioneer
- linkedin.com/in/ThePioneer

## WORLD RADIO DAY HONOURS RADIO'S UNIQUE ROLE IN BRIDGING COMMUNITIES

Established by UNESCO in 2011, The World Radio Day underscores radio's power to reach diverse audiences worldwide, serving as a medium for education, connection, and public safety. World Radio Day celebrates radio's enduring significance and adaptability in an evolving digital landscape. World Radio Day was conceived in 2010, following a proposal by the Spanish Radio Academy, with UNESCO's endorsement formalized in 2011. Celebrated on February 13 to mark the founding of United Nations Radio in 1946, the day has gained global recognition, with broadcasters, listeners, and communities uniting to highlight radio's contributions across cultures and continents. Each year, UNESCO encourages active participation, emphasizing radio's potential to reach even the most remote communities. World Radio

Day aligns with several key Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It's a great opportunity to appreciate the power of radio in bringing people together. This year's theme is "Radio: A Century Informing, Entertaining and Educating the World", highlighting radio's impact on society. Even though we are immersed in social media postings, Radio played a pivotal role around the common people and reached in the every nook and corner of the country and proved as a poor man's communication source and enjoy the light music even before sleep. Both Murphy and RCA radios were touching every household and if your name is given an importance, it is the listeners choice who get as though the world has fallen in our feet. CK MANI RAMANI JAYANTHY/ MUMBAI

## Why Shiva Has a Thousand Names



ASHWANI GURUJI

### 2ND OPINION

Shiv tattva is not experienced by an ordinary person because he does not need it. A basic person spends his life in the pursuit of the five senses, which pertain to the five basic elements and the five basic chakras. The sense of smell is controlled by Mooladhara, sense of taste by Swadhisthan, sense of sight by Manipoorak, sense of touch by Anahad and sense of sound by Vishuddhi.

These five are sufficient for the daily pleasures, which one indulges in from morning till night. There is no need for anything beyond for experience of basic pleasures. When there is no need, then there is little incentive to look further, and so, an ordinary person remains unaware of the Shiv tattva. Shiv is beyond the five tattvas, the parattva, in

which all the tattvas reside. The experience of Shiv requires the awakening of Agya through yog. You may be given the experience of times for yourself, but till you have control over your basic senses, till you elevate to the level of Agya, it will not happen to you naturally. Till you keep evaluating everything in life with these five senses, you will not be able to go above them.

Even the thought to find Shiv will not come to you. Even though Shiv is right here, sakshat, but you will not be able to see Shiv because the vision is not there; the third eye has not opened because you are bound by the other five senses.

Shiv is in the whole of brahmand and the whole of brahmand is in Shiv. A yogi has the sakshatkar of Shiv; a yogi is above the domain of five senses and their related pleasures. An ordinary being is tied to one or more of the basic senses, because of which this experience eludes him. Let us understand this with an example from daily life. If you see a man and a woman walking, holding hands.

A person at Anahad will see them as brother and sister, the one at Swadhisthan will think of them as lovers. A yogi, the one who is at Agya, will call it a relationship of Shiv-Shakti.

He just will not see anything except Shiv and Shakti. The merger of Shiv and Shakti is creation and separation is dissolution.

The day you see Shiv and Shakti, understand that you have come in yog, whatever anyone may say. When the awakening happens, all the pleasures of the five senses come within it.

You can get anything you want just by accessing the Agya but for this yog needs to be done. Shiv is at Agya but where are you? Till the time you do not give first priority to Shiv, you will not see Shiv and Shakti and keep moving in circles in these senses only, even after doing yog for 100 years! Conclusion The many names of Shiva are not a sign of divine multiplicity but of human fragmentation. As our inner clarity diminished, our need for symbolic anchors multiplied.

Each name – Rudra, Bheem, Ishan or Mrityunjay – points to a specific state of consciousness and a precise inner requirement. When seekers approach the sacred without knowing what they truly seek, they drift from one practice to another, mistaking movement for progress.

The writer is a spiritual Guru

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Global cricketing extravaganza

The ICC's 'Cricket 4 Good' initiative, in collaboration with UNICEF, has delivered a series of cricket clinics during the ICC Men's T20 World Cup 2026, engaging young fans across multiple locations as part of the ICC's global community outreach programme. Delivered alongside the tournament and featuring teams participating in the ICC Men's T20 World Cup 2026, the clinics provided children with opportunities to engage directly with international players, develop cricketing skills and experience the confidence, joy and life values that sport brings. The sessions reflect the ICC's commitment to harnessing the power and reach of cricket to create a positive and lasting impact on children and families worldwide.

At the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai, the 'Cricket 4 Good' clinic with Team India offered children a memorable and immersive cricketing experience. The clinic also included photo opportunities and informal interactions, giving the young fans a rare chance to connect with their heroes and experience the values of teamwork, confidence and sportsmanship first-hand. The Mumbai venue also hosted a 'Cricket 4 Good' clinic with Team USA, England, West Indies and Nepal where children participated in cricket-based activities and enjoyed meet-and-greet interactions with the players.

JAYANTHY SUBRAMANIAM | CHENNAI

### A master stroke by CM Stalin

All the housewives who used to receive the monthly dole of Rs1,000 under the 'Makalir Urimai Thokai' scheme were in for a pleasant surprise when they found a credit of ₹5,000 in their accounts.

Only when TN CM MK Stalin announced that he had ordered release of three month dole of Rs 3,000 in advance (for February to April) together with an additional amount of Rs 2,000 to tide over their summer travails, they understood the reason for the credit.

They were also doubly happy when Stalin assured that the monthly dole of ₹1,000 will also be increased to ₹2,000, when his government is returned to power in the ensuing Assembly elections.

The most unexpected credit of ₹5,000 to the accounts of the housewives and his assurance to increase the monthly dole to ₹2,000 is definitely a master stroke by the Chief Minister.

With his announcement, he has earned the trust of the people of TN, particularly the poor and down trodden. They are the beneficiaries who enjoy welfare schemes announced by his government. The Tamil Nadu Chief Minister is planning to stall this popular scheme. These schemes are important for the poor people as they get some respite.

MANAPADIAN JOSON | CHENNAI

### Gaps in matrimonial apps

This refers to the news analysis, A new decade of Indian marriages: Later, freer, braver (February 13). Almost all matrimony platforms have stolen data from other sites, copied and passed on their own. These are minting money from users on the pretext of allowing them to view contact numbers, astro details, photos and other relevant columns etc. There are several uncovered issues such as incomplete biodata, many columns left unfilled, discrepancies between current and displayed residence, differences in income and age parameters, old photos, changes in date, and date of birth, among other unverifiable content. Potential users seeking brides and grooms have begun to evaluate matrimonial sites with suspicion. Most profiles are now being managed by the bride and groom themselves. Discussions between families, exchanges on each other's values, traditions, faiths and conversations in a healthy environment are essential for harmony in socioeconomic and family situations.

After all, the will of Almighty prevails and a happy union between the two parties is possible only through divine grace and good deeds. The parties involved should focus on coordination and minimising differences. The role of mediator in match-making can prove to be helpful in procuring prospective relations.

YUGAL KISHORE SHARMA | FARIDABAD

Please send your letter to the info@dailypioneer.com. In not more than 250 words. We appreciate your feedback.

# Ecological federalism: Transcending man-made borders

Fragmented state-level regulation has left this vital landscape vulnerable to mining, speculative real estate, and arbitrary bureaucratic reclassification. To avert irreversible ecological and economic damage, India must shift from administering territory to governing ecosystems—through a federal framework that embeds shared responsibility, costs, and benefits

FIRST Column



ARVIND KUMAR JHA

India's environmental governance framework has historically been constrained by a rigid adherence to political and administrative demarcations. By privileging anthropogenic jurisdictions over the ecological continuities that sustain the subcontinent, the prevailing system departs from a foundational principle of environmental governance: development within one jurisdiction must not externalize ecological harm beyond its point of origin. Yet, in practice, the dominance of state-centric political boundaries over its invisible ecological continua has almost normalised such externalisation.

The Union government often justifies centralized project approvals in the name of national growth, strategic necessity, or economic modernization. However, at times, legitimate ecological and inter-regional concerns have been underemphasized or overridden, with macroeconomic priorities taking precedence over landscape-level sustainability considerations. Consequently, the environmental consequences of large-scale infrastructure, extractive, and energy projects seldom remain confined to the territories in which they are approved. Their costs are dispersed across ecologically sensitive regions and resource-dependent communities that hardly have any role in shaping those decisions. For example, air pollutants traverse state boundaries; rivers carry contaminants downstream; deforestation alters rainfall distribution and groundwater recharge patterns across regions; and river modifications disrupt basin-wide hydrological dynamics.

The experience of the Aravalli Range offers a particularly compelling illustration of a policy gap and institutional shortcoming. Extending across multiple states in north-western India, the Aravallis constitute one of the world's oldest fold mountain systems and perform indispensable ecological functions. They facilitate groundwater recharge, act as a natural barrier against desertification advancing from the Thar Desert, moderate regional climatic conditions, and sustain a critical green buffer for the National Capital Region (NCR). Despite this trans boundary sig-



The Aravalli Range, a vital landscape, is vulnerable to mining, speculative real estate, and arbitrary bureaucratic reclassification.

INDIA'S FEDERAL ARCHITECTURE MUST INTERNALISE COMPARABLE PRINCIPLES IN ADDRESSING THE ARAVALLI CRISIS

The authors are Former PCCFs of U.P. and Maharashtra  
@daily\_pioneer  
@daily\_pioneer  
The Pioneer

nificance, the range has often been administered through narrow, state-specific regulatory approaches rather than as a unified ecological landscape.

Mining interests, aggressive real estate expansion, and unregulated land-use change have advanced with insufficient regard for the range's long-term integrity. Particularly concerning are recent attempts to redefine the range through restrictive technical criteria, such as the "100-metre height" threshold, which risk diluting existing protections and significantly reducing the spatial ambit of environmental safeguards. Such recalibrations, clearly divorced from ecological logic, render ancient and interconnected landscapes vulnerable to incremental and potentially irreversible degradation. Research by the Centre for Arid Zone Research Institute indicates that desertification pressures are breaching the Aravalli barrier and advancing toward the Indo-Gangetic plain at an estimated rate of approximately 0.5 kilometres per year. Simultaneously, unauthorised land conversion and mining approvals granted without incorporating landscape-level ecological metrics, such as fragmentation indices, have disrupted biodiversity corridors and impaired ecosystem processes.

Vegetation loss driven by extractive activities and infrastructure expansion has intensified regional heat waves, reduced hydrological recharge, and diminished air-purification capacity. Assessments by the Central Ground Water Board indicate the Aravallis as the principal recharge zone for the over-exploited aquifers of the NCR. With groundwater levels in several districts

reportedly declining by nearly one metre annually, the continued impairment of recharge processes poses a direct threat to the socio-economic stability of urban and peri-urban populations.

Given the profound socio-political, economic, and ecological ramifications of the current governance model, it is imperative to reassess the management of the Aravalli Range within the framework of cooperative federalism and long-term ecological justice. Global precedents offer a viable roadmap for this transition, demonstrating how trans boundary ecosystems can be preserved through institutionalized mechanisms of shared responsibility.

The restoration of the Rhine River provides a powerful example. In the mid-twentieth century, industrial expansion in upstream countries severely polluted downstream stretches, particularly affecting the Dutch delta. In response, riparian states strengthened cooperation through the International Commission for the Protection of the Rhine. This framework institutionalised subsidiarity, equitable cost-sharing, harmonized discharge standards, and joint financing of wastewater management infrastructure. Through sustained collaboration, the Rhine transitioned from one of Europe's most polluted rivers into a global model of basin-level ecological recovery.

A comparable federal template exists in Australia's management of the Murray-Darling Basin. Recognizing that fragmented state-level governance was ecologically untenable, the federal government established basin-wide planning mechanisms

and enforced scientifically determined Sustainable Diversion Limits. Substantial public investment in irrigation modernisation, water-efficiency improvements, and ecological restoration ensured that, while individual states retained administrative authority, their decisions remained bounded by a centrally controlled ecologically defined ceiling.

The Catskill Watershed in the United States demonstrates the economic rationality of conservation. Confronted with deteriorating water quality, New York City chose to invest in upstream forest and agricultural land protection rather than construct a multi-billion-dollar filtration plant. By compensating landowners for maintaining ecological integrity and financing watershed protection programs, the city secured high-quality drinking water at a fraction of the projected infrastructural cost. Conservation, in this instance, proved fiscally prudent as well as environmentally sound.

Further insight emerges from Central Asia's cooperative management of the Chu River and the Talas River following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. When upstream Kyrgyzstan faced disproportionate maintenance costs for dams that primarily benefited downstream Kazakhstan, the two nations negotiated a cost-sharing agreement. Kazakhstan agreed to compensate its neighbour for operational expenses and foregone development opportunities, thereby formalising the recognition that hydrological infrastructure and ecosystem services can be managed to generate cross-border economic benefits.

India's federal architecture must internalise comparable principles in addressing the Aravalli crisis. The range functions as an integrated landscape in which watersheds, wildlife corridors, groundwater recharge zones, and climatic buffers operate as an interconnected continuum across ridgelines and valleys. When protection is fragmented by man-made state borders or altitude thresholds, ecological functionality is compromised. Conservation must therefore be reconceptualised not as a discretionary expenditure borne by individual states, but as a federal public service that safeguards environmental security for millions.

At present, Aravalli states lack a formal framework for ecosystem-service apportionment or a robust mechanism for inter-state accountability. To rectify this institutional vacuum, India should implement an Inter-State Payment for Ecosystem Services mechanism. Under such a model, states that

forgo revenue to preserve forests and recharge zones would receive compensation from the Union government and beneficiary states. Conversely, an Ecological Compensatory Levy could be imposed where extractive activities or forest fragmentation produce measurable downstream harm. Translating ecological loss into fiscal liability would realign incentives and internalise costs that are currently externalised.

Disputes over ecological damage claims could be adjudicated by an empowered federal clearing house, while standardised valuation methodologies could be formulated by a specialised technical authority, potentially housed within an expert wing of the National Capital Region Planning Board.

A federally monitored "Aravalli Recovery Fund" should also be established to finance restoration and ecological rehabilitation. Its corpus could be built by pooling 50% of Central Mineral Foundation resources from Aravalli districts; levying ecosystem service cess on infrastructure-including highways, real estate, and hospitality ventures operating within the range; imposing legacy liabilities on states and entities that have historically profited from its degradation; and recovering the accumulated ecological debt via a system of "green divestment" that could also be introduced to reward states that demonstrably preserve trans boundary wildlife corridors and watershed integrity.

The Aravalli crisis is emblematic of a broader national governance challenge. Smog epidemics in Delhi, recurrent flooding in peninsular river basins, water stress in inter-state river systems, and coastal salinity intrusion collectively underscore the reality that political boundaries rarely coincide with ecological processes. To address these systemic failures, India must transition from managing territory to governing ecological functionality. Planning and regulation should be anchored in biomes, watersheds, and ecosystem boundaries rather than confined to administrative limits. For a nation characterised by immense biodiversity and climatic variance, ecological federalism is no longer aspirational; it is a fundamental necessity. The future of the Aravalli Range will test India's capacity to recalibrate its federal architecture in recognition of environmental interdependence. Protecting this ancient mountain chain is not merely an act of conserving hills and forests; it is a decisive step toward redefining governance for an era in which ecological security and national stability are inextricably linked.

## A Defective Species: Outrage Won't Help, Acknowledgement Would



ACHARYA PRASHANT

Every few years, a similar pattern keeps repeating. A set of names tumbles into public view, and the world performs its ritual of shock. Court records are unsealed, testimonies surface, and for a few weeks, it seems as though something that nobody knew has been shockingly revealed. And then, quietly, the cycle completes itself: the names are absorbed into the archives, the outrage fades, and many of those condemned reappear on public stages within months. The Epstein files are only the latest instance. The names may be new, but the pattern is ancient: power and rich men caught using their power and money for exploitation. The defect does not merely operate through individuals; it operates through the structures that enable, protect, and profit from them.

Yet each time, we react as though something unprecedented has occurred. Each time, the public treats the revelation as a rupture rather than a confirmation. Why? Is it because the alternative is unbearable? If these are not exceptions but expressions of something fundamental in the species itself, then the problem is not confined to a few powerful predators. It is everywhere, including in the one who is reading this.

Every other species on this planet runs on prkriti, on nature. Two snakes in the same field will behave almost identically; their instincts are calibrated by millions of years of ecological feedback, and those instincts include a natural ceiling. A predator mostly kills only when hungry and stops when full. Humans, too, run on prkriti, but they have developed a peculiar centre that no other species possesses: ego, the sense of "I" that identifies with the body and with everything the body accumulates. The critical difference is that this centre has no natural governor. Instinct tells the leopard when to stop. Nothing tells the ego when to stop. It recognises no limit because it is, at its core, a feeling of incompleteness, a hunger that no amount of feeding can satisfy. The same oversized cerebral cortex that gave us language, tools, and civilisation also produced an operating system whose intelligence is sophisticated enough to override every natural governor. This is what I call a manufacturing defect. It is congenital and universal. East and West, rich and poor, the defect operates identically. A Wall Street financier and a village moneylender are running the same inner programme on different hardware. And here is what must be said plainly:

this defect is not restricted to the powerful. It operates in all of us individually. The common man who has never committed a serious crime is not necessarily a decent human being; he may simply be a constrained one, whose apparent decency owes less to inner clarity than to the absence of means and the presence of fear. Remove those constraints, hand that man enough money or power to be untouchable and enough secrecy to be invisible, and what emerges is not a new person. It is the old person, finally unmasked. The common saying that 'power corrupts' is the ego's favourite alibi. It allows one to believe that human beings are born decent and are later ruined by circumstance. They are not. The corruption was already present; power merely provides the room for it to unfold. This is why the outrage that follows every scandal is so hollow. The man typing furious denunciations on social media would, in many cases, accept a job at that same predator's company if offered a ten per cent raise. The moral vocabulary would shift from condemnation to accommodation without the man even noticing the shift in himself.

### The Violence We Call Normal

The defect does not express itself only in what we call crime, but also in what we call breakfast, and also in what we call national security and economic growth. Wherever the principle "I am stronger, therefore I take" operates, the defect is at work.

More than 80 billion land animals are slaughtered for food every year worldwide. The principle in every case is the same one that operated on the billionaire's island: whatever is weaker, whatever cannot resist, is consumed. We recoil when the victim is a child; we do not recoil when the victim has feathers, or scales, or fur. But the inner centre that produces both cruelties is identical. You may find this comparison extreme. But ask yourself honestly: what is the operating principle in both cases? It is this: I am stronger, therefore I consume. India's census will reveal skewed sex ratios so stark that they point to tens of millions of missing girls, eliminated over decades through a machinery of sex-selective abortion. They were not taken by foreign predators. They were eliminated by their own families; by fathers who wanted sons; by mothers who complied; by doctors who performed the procedures.

The child cannot fight back; the chicken cannot fight back; the foetus cannot fight back. The same darkness in the species that permits one to permit the other. This is the defect operating across millions of ordinary homes with the participation of ordinary people. If one truly follows any of these threads to their root, something terrifying becomes clear: every system currently running on this planet would need to be fundamentally re-rooted. They do not exist to correct the ego; they exist to serve it. A child

spends fifteen to twenty years in formal schooling, but at no point is she asked to examine the one who is learning. "Who am I? What is this centre that demands constant feeding?" These questions are absent from every curriculum on Earth because the defect ensures its own protection. Family teaches the child to accumulate identity: name, caste, religion, ambition. Mainstream religion teaches the child to believe and belong, but never to inquire into the one who believes. If self-knowledge were made central to education, the defect would begin to dissolve within a generation.

### The Cure and Its Refusal

Here is what makes the situation tragic: the defect can be repaired. Not "repaired" in the sense of a machine fixed once, but in the sense of an honest seeing that must be lived daily. Unlike every other species, human beings possess the capacity to observe themselves, to watch the ego in operation, to see its mechanisms of fear, desire, and aggression as they arise. The direction is the same: turn the light inward, see the defect in operation, and in that clear seeing, the defect begins to lose its grip.

When one genuinely sees a compulsion for what it is, the compulsion weakens. When one sees that one's outrage is partly entertainment, the outrage becomes quieter and more honest.

Honest seeing is the repair. Yet the species, as a collective, refuses. "I am my desires, my fears, my ambitions, my tribe." And when figures like Socrates and Kabir Saheb try to show us the mirror, they either get executed or hounded, Jesus was crucified and then turned into a religion. The species does not merely refuse the cure; it often kills the doctor and then builds a hospital in his name, one that serves the very disease he tried to dissolve. So the question is addressed to you, the reader: The defect operates in you. In the way you consume without asking why, in the way you worship figures whose private lives you have never honestly examined, in the way you avoid the one question that could begin the repair: "Who am I, beneath all the accumulated identity?" The scandals will continue. But none of it will repair the species. What can change is one person's willingness to stop pointing outward and begin the private work of looking inward.

The defect is yours. So is the possibility of repair. The species is defective. That is the honest starting point. Whether you remain so is no longer the species' question. It is yours alone.

Acharya Prashant is a teacher and author whose work centres on self-inquiry and its application to contemporary life  
@acharya\_prashant\_paf  
@Prashant\_Arvind  
prashantadait

## Breaking News: The Internet is Down – Long Live the Radio!



SANTHOSH MATHEW

In an age where Wi-Fi signals decide our moods and smartphones rarely leave our palms, it sounds almost sacrilegious to say that the most reliable companion in times of crisis is not a 5G tower but a humble radio set. Yet every year on February 13, when the world observes World Radio Day, we are reminded that the simplest technologies often outlast the loudest innovations. The date commemorates the establishment of United Nations Radio in 1946, but its relevance goes far beyond institutional history. It celebrates a medium that refuses to fade, because it is woven into the daily lives of millions. Marshall McLuhan once described radio as a "hot medium"—intense, intimate, and capable of engaging listeners at a deep emotional level. Radio speaks directly to the ear and ignites imagination. In today's world of podcasts and ear buds, McLuhan's idea seems prophetic. Radio is no longer confined to a wooden box. It has become an extension of our pockets and our ears. Every smartphone is, in essence, a portable radio. In India, radio is more than a communication device; it is the "common man's university." Long before digital platforms democratised content creation, radio entered villages, tea shops, fishing harbours, railway stations, and army camps. It carried agricultural advisories to farmers, educational lessons to students, classical music to connoisseurs, and news bulletins to a newly independent nation eager to understand itself. All India Radio, now officially known as Akashvani, has been the backbone of this journey. Its guiding motto, "Bahujana Sukhaya, Bahujana Hitaya" for the happiness and welfare of the many captures its inclusive philosophy. AIR was a public service committed to national integration and social development. In a country of hundreds of languages and dialects, Akashvani became a unifying thread, embodying India's "unity in diversity."

The FM revolution of the late 1990s and early 2000s injected new energy into Indian radio. Private FM stations brought local flavour, lively radio jockeys, interactive talk shows, and urban vibrancy. Radio once again became fashionable among city youth. It was no longer just about news and classical music; it was about companionship during traffic jams and late-night conversations.

structure, it is often the radio that survives. Electricity may fail. Mobile networks may collapse. Internet services may crash. But a battery-operated radio continues to function.

In disaster management, radio is not nostalgic; it is a necessity. Community radio stations broadcast real-time weather warnings, evacuation instructions, and relief information in local languages. In remote villages cut off from highways and digital networks, radio remains the lifeline. Closely linked to disaster response is ham radio—amateur radio operated by trained enthusiasts. When all conventional communication systems break down, ham operators step in. During earthquakes, floods, and cyclones in India, ham radio volunteers have played a silent yet heroic role in coordinating rescue efforts and connecting stranded communities with authorities. The portability of radio makes it indispensable. It does not demand literacy or expensive data plans. In recent years, radio has experienced a remarkable revival, largely due to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's monthly programme, "Mann Ki Baat." Launched in 2014, it transformed perceptions of radio from an ageing medium into a dynamic tool of governance and public engagement. Mann Ki Baat reflects what communication scholars describe as the "mass line" approach—direct engagement between leadership and the people. The human voice, calm and conversational, created intimacy. Millions felt personally addressed. The programme has become a widely popular and revitalised radio. Radio, in this context, is not merely transmitting information; it is building participation. It is governance through conversation. Meanwhile, community radio continues to empower marginalized voices. Women's groups discuss self-help initiatives. Farmers exchange practical knowledge. Fisher folk receive weather alerts. Each transmitter strengthens the democratic fabric of the nation. In a hyper-visual age, radio offers a rare gift—imagination. It allows listeners to visualize stories in their own way. It accompanies them while driving, cooking, studying, or working. It informs without overwhelming. As World Radio Day is observed on February 13, the celebration is not about sentimentality. It is about acknowledging a medium that remains India's most inclusive classroom and most portable parliament.

The next time the internet falters and screens go blank, the old transistor may still whisper steady news and reassuring voices. In that quiet reliability lies radio's enduring power. Perhaps the saviour is true after all: when the noise of the digital world fades, it is the invisible waves in the air that keep a nation connected.

The writer is Professor at Centre For South Asian Studies, Indian Institute of Technology, Varanasi  
@daily\_pioneer  
@varanasi  
@daily\_pioneer

## The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

### Bangladesh verdict

BNP must walk the talk on reforms

A largely peaceful, well-organised election and a decisive mandate — the people of Bangladesh deserve to be highly commended for a job well done. The sweeping victory of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) marks the dawn of a new era for a nation that has witnessed turbulence for the better part of its existence. Promising stability and reforms, the BNP has returned to power after two decades. Tarique Rahman, son of former PM Khaleeda Zia, is set to take over the reins of the government. His leadership will be tested from day one. Bangladesh has remained in limbo for a year and a half after the ignominious end of Sheikh Hasina's 15-year rule. Political unrest, attacks on minorities and economic disruption — especially in the vital garment sector — have left deep scars.

The landslide win gives the BNP ample parliamentary strength to take decisions that can shape Bangladesh's future. The party must avoid triumphalism and instead prioritise reconciliation as well as justice, upholding the spirit of the July 2014 uprising. Its appeal to supporters to refrain from large-scale celebrations and offer special prayers on Friday was a prudent first step. The Jamaat-e-Islami-led coalition needs to play the role of a responsible, vigilant Opposition that should try to deter the BNP from committing authoritarian excesses.

Beyond domestic concerns lies the delicate balancing act of foreign policy. Dhaka's relations with Delhi have deteriorated sharply over the vexed issue of Hasina's extradition, even as its ties with Islamabad are on the upswing. PM Narendra Modi and his Pakistani counterpart Shehbaz Sharif were among the first to congratulate Rahman on the BNP's victory. The formation of an elected government offers India an opportunity to rebuild ties rooted in a shared history and economic interdependence. However, it will require deft diplomacy and a great deal of patience to turn the tide. India would do well to help Rahman chart a pragmatic, inclusive course for *Naya* Bangladesh.

### Creamy layer quota

SC's nudge to Centre merits relook

THE Supreme Court's recent decision to seek the Centre's stand on excluding the creamy layer from Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe reservation benefits has reopened a debate that India has long deferred. By asking the Union government to clarify its position, the SC has signalled that affirmative action cannot remain frozen in doctrine when social realities evolve. At the heart of the issue lies a tension between constitutional intent and policy design. Reservations for SCs and STs were conceived as a remedy for historical exclusion rooted in caste-based discrimination, not merely economic deprivation. This is why the creamy layer principle, firmly embedded in OBC reservations, has been kept out of SC/ST quotas. The concern has been that introducing income or status filters diluting protections meant to counter entrenched social stigma.

Yet the counter-argument has gained force. Over decades, reservation benefits have not been evenly distributed within SC and ST communities. A relatively small, better-off segment, often with access to education, networks and secure employment, tends to corner opportunities, while the most marginalised remain stuck at the bottom. The court's recent openness to sub-classification within the SC/ST groups reflects an acknowledgement that equality of opportunity requires finer targeting.

The onus now is on the Centre to move beyond reflexive positions. Simply asserting that the Constitution does not envisage a creamy layer for SCs and STs avoids the harder question: how to ensure that reservation benefits reach those who need them most. At the same time, any move to introduce exclusion criteria must be grounded in robust data and social context, not borrowed wholesale from the OBC framework. Caste disadvantage does not disappear with income alone and policy must recognise this distinction. The debate, therefore, should not be framed as inclusion versus exclusion, but as refinement versus stagnation.

### ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

## The Tribune.

THE TRIBUNE, SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 1926

### A regrettable defeat

THERE is one aspect of the division over the second reading of the Home Member's Bill for the restoration of the sentence of rigorous imprisonment under Section 109 of the Criminal Procedure Code which cannot be allowed to pass unnoticed. It will have been seen that the motion was accepted by a majority of the House. What is not generally known, however, is that this result was due to the absence of a number of elected members, some of whom if present would undoubtedly have voted on the popular side. We do not, indeed, remember any previous case in which the government was able to score a victory over the popular party owing to the absence of so large a number of non-official members from the post of duty. The number of absentees was, in fact, no less than 37, and included such stalwarts as Pandit Motilal Nehru, Sir Sivasami Iyer, Sir Purushottamas Thakurdas, Sir Chimanlal Setalvad, Joseph Baptist and several other prominent members, not one of whom, if present, would probably have voted with the government in this matter; and when one thinks of the small majority by which the Home Member's motion was carried, it is easy to see that the popular defeat might easily have been converted into a popular victory if only these members had been in their places. There is no reason to doubt that in some of these cases, at any rate, the absence of the members was due to quite good reasons, but, unless accident plays a larger part in our legislative affairs that it does elsewhere, it is difficult to believe that such reasons existed in the case of all or most of the absentees.

# A strategy forged from revenue deficit

The 16th Finance Commission has rewired devolution of funds from the Centre to the states



THE GREAT GAME  
JYOTI MALHOTRA

THE story by my colleague, Subhash Rajta, in *The Tribune* earlier this week, about the Sukhinder Singh Sukhu government in Himachal Pradesh buying 10 luxury cars for its use — even as the chief minister flew to Delhi to renege on the powers-that-be over the 16th Finance Commission's recommendation to withdraw Revenue Deficit Grants from states and encourage them to tighten their belts — has created an uproar.

People are legitimately asking why ministers and bureaucrats need to use fancy, new cars — literally, privilege the "lal batti" syndrome, hardly restricted just to the purchase of vehicles — when budgets for schools, buses, hospitals, etc. are being cut. And why the Himachal government won't take a leaf out of its own party's reform book, launched back in the day in 1991 by then Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao, ably assisted by Finance Minister Dr Manmohan Singh and Finance Secretary Montek Singh Ahluwalia — which not just helped change India but also gave Indians the confidence to take on the world. (Seems Sukhu has since met former finance minister P Chidambaram for a few tips.) Certainly, with a projected revenue deficit of Rs 6,300 crore, or 2.5 per cent of the state's GDP, Sukhu has a problem. But it's not like Himachal is the only state falling short. Nor is it that spending money is a bad thing — we all know that splurging (as long as it doesn't land you into a debt you can't repay) helps the economy go round.



FISCAL STRESS: Himachal Pradesh is staring at empty coffers — and few ideas how to fill them. P.W. PHOTO

That's why a key data point to measure how broke your state is not to look at bald figures, but what percentage of the state GDP (GSDP) is accounted for by its revenue deficit.

So Punjab's projected revenue deficit, at Rs 23,957 crore, is a high 2.7 per cent of its state GDP. Tamil Nadu's revenue deficit at Rs 41,635 crore is even higher, but a low 1.17 per cent of its state GDP. Kerala's CPI(M) government — which devotes a large share of its pie to welfare schemes and has a population similar to Punjab — has a larger revenue deficit compared to Punjab, Rs 27,125 crore, but a lower GSDP 1.9 per cent. Meanwhile Karnataka, one of India's richest states, has a revenue deficit of Rs 19,262 crore, a mere 0.6 per cent of its GSDP.

You see the picture clearly. Tny Himachal has done well on some parameters, like education, but is unable to raise revenues to fully fund itself. Much larger states like Tamil Nadu, on the other hand, even if they throw money on freebies — which Himachal is also accused of doing — are able to control

### The Finance Commission's recommendation to withdraw Revenue Deficit Grants from states has created an uproar.

their budgets because they are able to defray their expenditure with larger investments.

In fact, Tamil Nadu, which goes to the polls this year — along with Punjab and Himachal Pradesh in 2027 — has promised to bring down its revenue deficit even further. Both Punjab and Himachal, on the other hand, are staring at empty coffers — and few ideas how to fill them.

Still, none of this is new. What has really set the cat among the pigeons these last few days is not the end of Revenue Deficit

Grants announced by the 16th Finance Commission, led by the redoubtable economist Arvind Panagariya, but something far more important. The Commission has rewired the devolution of funds from the Centre to the states — as much as 41 per cent of the kitty — by adding a brand new criterion.

Which is, that the amount of funds a state gets from the Centre will henceforth depend upon how much it contributes to the national GDP.

There are two messages here. The first, that resilient and investor-friendly states like Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Maharashtra will benefit, while states like Himachal Pradesh, whose capacity to earn is limited, will be hurt. The first question to ask, therefore, is what this does to Centre-State relations, which, traditionally, have been book-ended by notions of equity and a greater generosity for the underdog.

Under the new formula, the underdog will have to work much harder to haul itself out of there. Now go back to the data. It is fascinating to see that Himachal has actually got a

greater share of funds from the 16th Finance Commission than the 15th. This also means that when Mr Sukhu screams blue murder because his state hasn't got enough, the FinMin *babu* will rightfully point out that actually Himachal — and that the Congress government must learn to do a better job of managing its finances. (Remember that Himachal goes to the polls in end-2027.)

The second message is equally interesting. States going to the polls over the next 12 months, like Tamil Nadu, Assam, Punjab, Kerala and West Bengal — with the exception of Bengal — have been allocated a larger share of funds than what they were by the 15th. With the exception of Assam, the remainder are all Opposition-ruled states.

Even more significant, large states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh — all in the cow belt and all ruled by the BJP — have been given a lower share of taxes this time, as compared to last time.

Pure coincidence or pure strategy? Mr Panagariya will, of course, wager in favour of leaner, meaner and far less wasteful economies; he will argue that money has no colour, and so what if many of these states are ruled by Opposition parties.

But the message from Delhi, it seems, is quite different. Cow-belt states are being given short-term shrift because they are already in the BJP fold. Monies can be better used elsewhere, for example to woo states going to the polls soon.

We know that Punjab, like Himachal Pradesh, is fully on the BJP radar. Even if Kerala is a different kettle of fish, no harm feeding the fish — in fact, it has just bitten the bait in Thiruvananthapuram. Tamil Nadu is larger and a far more difficult pushover (and Karnataka must wait for 2028).

It's clear the 16th Finance Commission has sown the seed. Now to water the plant and see how it blooms.

### THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

When the Centre and states move forward together, the dream of a self-reliant India will be fulfilled. — Narendra Modi

## When a barber saved the day

TARU BAIL

MY father is a typical *fauji*. A man of routine, lists and POA (Plan of Action). His meticulous lists have never let him down. He has never missed a flight and never reached late for an appointment.

He geared his life — and also that of his spouse and family — to fall in line with what he felt were "officer-like" qualities. As children, we waited at railway platforms hours before the train's departure, trunks with painted names in tow.

So, imagine my disbelief when he came to Delhi for a conference and discovered that he had forgotten to bring his razor. He had taken the morning flight, checked into a guest house with barely an hour to get ready and head for the conference, where the guests of honour were the chief minister and chiefs of the armed forces. Though he had a post-lunch presentation, his service protocol demanded that he be impeccable in appearance and reach in time before their arrival.

There was pandemonium when he found the razor missing. He called the housekeeping staff and asked if they had a spare one. They didn't. He requested their errand boy to run to the market and buy one. Although it was a busy hour, they could not say no to the Group Captain. However, the boy returned empty-handed. The shops were yet to open.

Desperate to lay his hands on a razor, he swallowed his pride and called up a course-mate who was also scheduled to attend the conference. The gentleman, who had already reached the venue, burst into laughter. How could the course topper, whose example was emulated by numerous batches, possibly falter? Was age catching up? Or was he having marital trouble as a result of which his wife had refused to pack his overnight bag? In his heyday, dad may have shut up the nonsensical banter, but that morning he just pleaded for a way out.

"The conference inauguration is 30 minutes away and I am still in my shorts." Nonchalantly, the officer said, "Come without a shave. You don't have a wild growth of beard, it's trendy to have a stubble and frankly you won't be court-martialled for this." The humour was lost on dad. He quickly hung up as a brainwave hit him.

For the first time in years, he took a bath without shaving. He changed into the blazer he had worn since commissioning at the age of 19 and dashed to the reception. He had earlier noticed a car parked with a liveried driver. Luckily, the car and the driver were still there. He marched up to him, explained his situation and requested a drop to the nearest barber shop, offering an apology to the unknown car owner, just in case he came and had to wait.

A local barber was available; he did the needful and reached the venue just in time for the chief guest to arrive, releasing his benefactors' car. A close shave indeed.

The writer is an independent journalist

epaper.tribuneindia.com

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### Facebook can't replace family

Refer to 'The perilous allure of social media'; our children's increasing dependence on digital devices needs to be replaced with equally fascinating strategies. We need to go back to our time-tested modes of social interaction that are grounded in real life, sweet-sour interactions amongst ourselves. As responsible elders, time spent with our kids has to be increased. Facebook families are no match for joint families. Sitting, dining, praying and playing pranks with family members are good replacements for fake 'screen togetherness.' With small interventions, the perils of the reel world can be tackled. It is best to enjoy the warmth of holding hands, rather than the atomic heat of gadgets. Screen time can be reduced by blending the wisdom of elders with the aspirations of youngsters.

MADHURI SHARMA, PENNSYLVANIA, US

#### The trap of algorithms

Every day, young people are being quietly shaped by forces they barely notice. Smiles, tears, energy, responses, goals, everything begins to look strangely aligned. Algorithms are silently grooming young people, drawing them into a trap that is difficult to see and even harder to escape. It is not the device but the algorithm, and it is everywhere, hidden in the form of peer pressure. It is parenting/teaching versus algorithms. The fight is constant and personal: to protect teens from social media algorithms to determine their choices.

CAPT TEENA DHIR (RETD), BY MAIL

#### Delays undermine faith in courts

Refer to 'Verdicts in limbo'; what ails our higher judiciary is delayed delivery of reserved verdicts even after hearing is complete. This happens in urgent matters like bail where personal liberty is involved. Such a chronic ailment needs to be cured sooner rather than later. Keeping judgements reserved in bail matters for months and years together is a poor reflection on the justice delivery system at the level of high courts. Inordinate delay in dispensation of justice not only deprives the parties of their right to timely justice, but it undermines public faith in the higher judiciary. The CJT's nudge to the judges of higher judiciary is a wake-up call to do course correction.

MD SHARMA, SHIMLA

#### Litigants deserve closure

Refer to 'Verdicts in limbo'; the apex court's recognition of this issue is a silver lining. This malaise must be viewed within the larger context of the entire justice dispensation system. Liberal adjournments, cumbersome procedures, ever-increasing pendency and the high cost of access to justice are significant hurdles. Furthermore, ambiguously written judgments and ordinary cases that repeatedly fail to reach the hearing stage add to the dysfunction. The absence of bold case management at the level of the lower judiciary slows the already snail-paced wheels of justice. Litigants deserve a sense of closure, rather than the mere closing of a case file.

ABHYAM SHARMA, PATHANKOT

#### Diversion of agril loans

Apropos of 'Agri debt burden'; though farm debt in India may be increasing due to genuine reasons, a contributory factor is also the partial diversion of agricultural loans for consumption purposes, notably purchase of gold and jewellery. Some farmers feel no burden to pay back loans knowing that waivers will be promised in the run-up to elections. Despite lakhs of crores of rupees of loans being waived off, their lot has not improved. The answer does not lie in further waivers but in monitoring post-loan disbursement and giving the right set of incentives to diversify towards cash crops for export markets and encouraging private investment in storage, transportation and processing infrastructure.

CHANDER SHEKHAR DOGRA, JALANDHAR

#### Centre betraying hill state

With reference to 'How the RDG cut pushes Himachal to the brink'; the hill state was formed on the assumption that governing a mountainous, sparsely populated region will cost more and yield less by conventional revenue logic. To fill this gap, the Revenue Deficit Grant was initiated. In hydropower sector, the state bears most of the infrastructure and ecological stabilisation costs, yet the financial returns are negligible. Resources and land are local, but profit goes to the Centre. The Finance Commission withdrawing the RDG is a betrayal.

BHUPINDER GUPTA, SHIMLA

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit.

These should be cogently written and can be sent by e-mail to: Letters@tribuneindia.com

# The magic realism of an India-Pak cricket match



**SHISHIR HATTANGADI**  
FORMER CAPTAIN,  
MUMBAI CRICKET TEAM

As children, we played cricket in bylanes with makeshift rules and borrowed equipment. There was always that one spoilt kid who owned the bat. If he was given out, he could sulk, pick up his bat and walk away. The game would collapse until cooler heads prevailed, negotiations were struck and the bat was placed back in the middle. What felt like petty childhood drama then has an uncanny echo in the administrative theatre that periodically surrounds the India-Pakistan fixture today.

To be clear, India or the ICC are not the spoilt child in this story. The framework of international cricket — venues, schedules, commercial agreements and legal obligations — exists beyond individual whims. Yet the recent postur-

ing, with threats of not playing, suggestions of walkovers and the public airing of demands, had the unmistakable flavour of brinkmanship.

Eventually, as is often the case in sport's backrooms, quieter conversations took over. Back-channel talks, legal considerations and face-saving compromises prevailed. The noise subsided and the fixture found its way to neutral ground. The India-Pakistan match will be played in Sri Lanka. The bat is back in play. Strip away the rhetoric and one truth sits at the heart of every such standoff: India-Pakistan is not just a cricket match; it is the sport's most powerful commercial engine. No other fixture in world cricket compresses so much economic value into a single evening.

Broadcasters anchor advertising inventories around it. Sponsors plan entire campaigns for it. Digital platforms count on its gravitational pull. The global audience spikes in a way that no bilateral series or even most knockout games can replicate.

The numbers explain the behaviour. Advertisers are willing to pay eye-watering sums — anywhere between Rs 40 lakh and Rs 1.6 crore



**ECONOMICS AT PLAY:** Advertisers are willing to pay between Rs 40 lakh and Rs 1.6 crore for just 10 seconds of TV airtime during an India-Pakistan match because the eyeballs are guaranteed. TRIBUNE FILE

for just 10 seconds of television airtime during an India-Pakistan match — simply because the eyeballs are guaranteed.

When all revenue streams are aggregated — broadcast rights, advertising, sponsorships, platform deals and in-stadium receipts — the value of one such match is commonly estimated in the range

of Rs 2,000-3,000 crore. In a sport where many boards operate on thin margins and depend heavily on marquee events to balance their books, walking away from this fixture is not merely a sporting decision; it is an economic one.

This commercial gravity explains why brinkmanship rarely ends in actual forfei-

ture. The rhetoric may be loud, but the resolution is usually quiet and pragmatic.

Everyone understands that forfeiting an India-Pakistan match is not just forfeiting two points on a table; it is abandoning a windfall that sustains ecosystems — player payments, domestic structures, development pathways and the adminis-

trative machinery that keeps the game running. In that sense, modern cricket is less a gully match than a global enterprise with shareholders, stakeholders and financial imperatives.

Yet there is a cost to allowing commerce to dominate the narrative. Rivalries are meant to animate sport, not hold tournaments hostage.

When administrative posturing begins to resemble childhood tantrums, the credibility of governance suffers. Fans deserve certainty and clarity, not cliffhangers engineered as leverage. Players deserve to compete without being reduced to bargaining chips in negotiations they have little control over.

T20 cricket itself has taught us humility. Reputation dissolves the moment the first ball is bowled. David can still challenge Goliath on any given day; associate nations have shown that courage and conditions can compress hierarchies.

On the field, uncertainty reigns. Off it, however, power is more rigid and money speaks more loudly than most ideals. The India-Pakistan fixture sits at the intersection of sport, politics and commerce, and each time it is threatened, the ecosystem collectively holds its breath.

And as the curtain rises on profitability and two nations prepare to celebrate a winner the following day, the border remains unchanged — a thin, unforgetting line between life and martyrdom.

Cricket may pause rivalries for a night; geopolitics does not.

# A new mandate for the renewal of Bangladesh



**ALTAF PARVEZ**  
RESEARCHER & POLITICAL ANALYST

TODAY, Bangladesh begins a new journey. More than 18 months after the mass uprising, the long-awaited election has finally been held, opening up the path for a democratic transition. After any election, it is natural that one party will form the government and another will be the opposition.

The question for now is whether a large section of the voters has participated in the election and whether the electoral process has been relatively free from external interference or disturbance. Going by initial estimates, the election has certainly passed the test.

While all our expectations from this pivotal moment may not have been fulfilled, it is time to outline a roadmap for moving forward. Bangladesh is soon going to have a parliament with members elected through a largely credible competition.

Citizens are going to have a team of their choice at the helm of the state and as their political guardians. In the coming days, political authority and a healthy political environment must be restored at every level of society.

Instead of reactionary YouTube influencers, elected representatives must be at the helm of things,

both in parliament and outside.

A new national parliament is also a nod to the rebuilding of our fragile political institutions. Through their campaigns prior to the elections, political parties have already begun reorganising themselves. Those who could not take part in the election could, in time, also return through a process of reorganisation. In other words, Bangladesh's political reconstruction has begun anew.

Going forward, our primary expectation is that the new government will make parliament the central platform for every national decision, be it political, economic or social. Policy decisions must not be made at the Secretariat by bureaucrats, but by the elected representatives, and implemented through the executive branch.

In this regard, we must stress the importance of empowering the local government, a vital but persistently ignored segment of the administration. Due to the lack of credible polls and support from the state, the union parishads, upazila parishads, zila parishads and other local government bodies have long been weakened, undermining grassroots democracy and service delivery, an imbalance the new government must fix.

Our farmers are suffering. Local communities are struggling under double-digit inflation. Poverty has risen. Past MPs showed little interest in developing or empowering the local government bodies, which has only obstructed the country's overall development. At this moment of national renewal, we hope the new government will sufficiently empower and activate the local government.

Another area demanding



**PIVOTAL TIME:** The election has been held more than 18 months after the mass uprising. REUTERS

immediate attention is the reconstruction of the police force, which remains structurally and morally weak. The public does not want the police to return to its pre-July uprising state.

The resentment caused by the police during the uprising must be remembered objectively by the incoming government. People want a police force that is both corruption-free and free from political influence. The interim government, beyond changing uniforms, could do little to achieve that goal. So, it is crucial that the new parliament and government focus on reorganising the force to make it truly professional.

Bangladesh cannot go back to the culture of enforced disappearance, extrajudicial killing or custodial torture of political opponents and ideological dissenters.

Intelligence agencies, too, must, therefore, be transformed. Many within these agencies will likely seek favour with the newly elected government as soon as it is formed. Perhaps the government's first test will be whether it considers such overtures strictly through

a professional lens. If freed from partisan influences, police and intelligence agencies can certainly perform much better, and they should.

Another urgent task is a national initiative for social reconciliation. Both the Jamaat-e-Islami and the BNP mentioned this in their manifestos. The interim government also initially said it would form such a commission to free the country from the cycles of revenge and retaliation. But it could not do so. Perhaps it was too early. But the new government must undertake this task to signal the coming of a new era.

National reconciliation must proceed on two tracks: political and economic. Beyond ideological differences, class reconciliation within society must also be addressed. Both are difficult tasks, but must be accomplished anyway.

Political reconciliation must go beyond all forms of criminal offences. Past criminal offences must be tried with absolute neutrality and professionalism, but that does not mean that local communities should be left in an endless wildfire of revenge.

Well-planned initiatives can also help manage the supervisory impulses of certain influential countries and also open the way for substantial domestic and foreign investment. In this connection, a foremost task will be to construct a non-discriminatory economy. The youth are waiting eagerly. They want change and elected leaders must deliver that.

It is worth recalling that, as in Bangladesh, mass uprisings in Sri Lanka and Nepal were also largely driven by economic injustices. In our case, economic injustice has two aspects. On the one hand, income and wealth inequality are rising; on the other, we are witnessing growth without investment and employment. Both must be reversed.

Progressive tax reforms are needed and the additional domestic resources generated must be channelled into education and healthcare, especially in marginalised communities and districts. Both the BNP and

the Jamaat pledged in their manifestos to allocate more than 5 per cent of the GDP to education and health. It means that there is already a broad political consensus on rebuilding and expanding these two sectors. The new parliament must translate that consensus into concrete legislation, proper budgetary allocations and effective enforcement. Emphasis must be given to quality education and pro-poor healthcare.

However, any reform initiative could collapse if the trend of mob violence witnessed over the past 18 months is not stopped. One of the parliament's primary priorities must, therefore, be to rescue society from this anarchic atmosphere and establish a rights-based order in the country.

During the interim period, mob violence has inflicted heavy damage on our social cohesion. Women and minority communities have especially suffered immense physical, psychological and material harm. In this climate, the seeds of armed extremism have been increasingly visible. Some political actors have even fuelled these tendencies, exploiting existing socioeconomic vulnerabilities.

To address this, three simultaneous actions are necessary: i) a pro-poor economic reform, giving priority to marginalised districts and upazilas in resource distribution; ii) ensuring democratic practice at every level of administration, from the centre down to the union level; iii) firm policing against any form of extremism.

Without these measures, securing a peaceful future will be difficult. Let these be the foundation on which the new parliament operates.

*Courtesy: The Daily Star*

## QUICK CROSSWORD

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8					9	
10	11	12				
14			13	15		
17				16		18
21		22		20		19
24				23		
				25		

**ACROSS**

- Temporary accommodation (7)
- Recapitulate the evidence (3,2)
- Acceptable behaviour (4,5)
- Watering place (3)
- Alleviate (4)
- Deal with (3,5)
- Secret (6)
- Gratify (6)
- By hand (8)
- Make indistinct (4)
- Be in debt (3)
- Symbol of surrender (5,4)
- Questionable (5)
- Prolonged lack of rain (7)

**DOWN**

- Large long-handled spoon (5)
- Put on (3)
- Smallest possible amount (4)
- West African country (6)
- Conspicuously (8)
- More than anything else (4,2,3)
- Inconsequential talk (7)
- The world's oceans (5,4)
- New York theatreland (8)
- Succeed (4,3)
- Kindred (6)
- Perogative (5)
- Prohibitive (4)
- Fall behind (3)

**Yesterday's Solution**

**Across:** 1 Clarinet, 5 Prop, 9 Sleet, 10 Premium, 11 Here and there, 13 Unseal, 14 Oracle, 17 Pull a fast one, 20 Caracas, 21 Equal, 22 Slot, 23 Anathema.

**Down:** 1 Case, 2 Ageless, 3 In the balance, 4 Expend, 6 Raise, 7 Pampered, 8 Beat a retreat, 12 Auspices, 15 Censure, 16 Raiser, 18 Largo, 19 Plea.

## SU DO KU

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

## FORECAST

**YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION**

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

**CALENDAR**  
FEBRUARY 14, 2026, SATURDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1947
- Marghshirsh Shaka 2567
- Phalgun Purnimite 3
- Hijri 1447
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 12, up to 4:02 pm
- Siddhi Yoga up to 3:18 am
- Purvashadha Nakshatra up to 4:16 pm
- Moon enters Capricorn sign 12:42 am

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	26	11
New Delhi	27	11
Amritsar	23	09
Bathinda	24	08
Jalandhar	23	09
Ludhiana	24	10
Bhiwani	25	11
Hisar	25	10
Sirsa	25	09
Dharamsala	23	06
Manali	18	04
Shimla	19	08
Srinagar	13	02
Jammu	24	10
Kargil	05	-05
Leh	04	-06
Dehradun	27	10
Mussoorie	18	09

TEMPERATURE IN °C



# Unequal deal, uncertain outcomes

Beneath the optimism around the interim trade agreement between India and the United States, there is an asymmetry in provisions that is hard to ignore. While the agreement has brought relief to the markets and has ended a period of protracted negotiations, the government's claims of a win-win deal have also triggered a few uncomfortable questions. Critically, while the joint statement says India has agreed to "eliminate or reduce tariffs on all US industrial goods and a wide range of US food and agricultural products", the US will levy an 18% tariff on imports from India. Furthermore, it could be argued that the agreement has not cleared the uncertainty, considering what it essentially signals is a pause, and not a trade deal in a legal or commercial sense.

Union Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal has tried to alleviate concerns of farmers by claiming that meat, poultry, dairy, GM food products, rice, wheat, pulses, and sugar have been kept out of the framework. But there are some apprehensions over the possible import of apples, soybean oil, dried distillers' grains, etc. Farmer organisations have protested against the agreement as they fear that it would endanger an already precarious farming economy. There are other concerns. India now enjoys a trade surplus of over \$40 billion with the US. This could be strained with the commitment to purchase US goods and products worth \$500 billion over the next five years. A 'promise' from the Indian side to stop buying Russian oil is considered to be part of the agreement, though there's no mention of this in the released text. It has been reported that India's oil purchases would be monitored to ensure that the condition is met. The arrangement has not been officially confirmed by the Indian side, but if agreed upon, this undermines India's strategic autonomy.

It is being claimed that the concessions are confidence-building measures, and the framework would lead to a more comprehensive trade agreement with better terms and conditions if trust and stability are established. But President Trump and his administration are known for arbitrary and self-serving decisions and cannot be expected to offer a better deal later. It may be noted that many concessions promised by the US side are not legally laid down but are in the form of executive decisions, which can be revoked. The lack of transparency in many parts of the agreement is striking. But the government has, so far, not managed to address it in a language of conviction and clarity.

**Asymmetrical concessions and autonomy risks in the India-US trade deal demand greater clarity**

# How social protection can free India's lost Einsteins

Unlocking India's vast pool of denied genius begins with enabling conditions - a key prerequisite for innovation

K N ANJANARAJU

India's ambition to become a global innovation hub is now part of the official vocabulary. Startup missions, incubators, venture capital flows and digital infrastructure dominate policy conversation. Yet beneath these initiatives lies a quieter but more decisive question: who in India can afford to take risks? Innovation is not simply a function of intelligence or ideas. It is a function of who can fail without falling into ruin. That is why the world's most innovative nations are also the world's most socially secure societies.

Conventional economic thinking treats social security as a burden on dynamism. Welfare, it is argued, dulls incentives and breeds dependence. Global evidence points in the opposite direction. Countries that rank highest on innovation indices are precisely those that protect citizens most comprehensively from the shocks of illness, unemployment, and income loss. Security does not suppress ambition. It equalises the opportunity to pursue it.

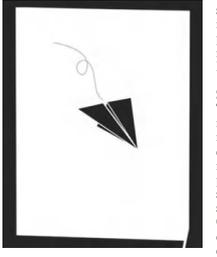
Innovation is inseparable from uncertainty. New enterprises collapse. Research fails. Technologies misfire. Where failure carries catastrophic personal cost, only the already privileged can afford experimentation. Where failure is a stepping-stone, risk-taking becomes socially enabling. This difference, between ruin and recovery, quietly determines how much of a nation's intelligence can participate in innovation.

The Global Innovation Index published by the World Intellectual Property Organisation consistently places Switzerland at the top. Close behind are Sweden, the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands, with Nordic countries occupying much of the upper tier. These are not minimal states. Switzerland combines high private enterprise with mandatory health insurance, unemployment protection, and strong social guarantees. The Nordic nations operate universal healthcare, income security, robust public schooling, and extensive retraining systems.

In Denmark's well-known "flexicurity" model, retrenched workers receive subsistence protection and reskilling support to recover economic dynamism. Individuals have the right to fail without social annihilation. When the personal downside of risk is capped, the societal supply of risk-takers expands.

In the US, entrepreneurship rates rise sharply among those eligible for Medicare, suggesting that guaranteed healthcare directly enables business formation. Cross-national analyses across developed economies find that higher social protection spending correlates with higher patenting intensity and innovation output. People with stable access to healthcare, education, and income support display greater willingness to retrain, relocate, start new ventures, and invest in long-horizon ideas. Security expands the frontier of aspiration. Without security, risk-taking becomes a hereditary privilege which perpetuates social injustice.

India's innovation challenge is often



framed as inadequate capital, weak infrastructure or limited research spending. There's matter. But a deeper structural constraint lies in how insecurity and inherited disadvantage shape life trajectories long before innovation becomes possible.

Caste-based occupations and entrenched poverty operate as social traps. Children born into deprived households frequently encounter limited nutrition, fragile schooling, stigma, and restricted networks. The innate capabilities - intellectual, creative, and entrepreneurial - remain undiscovered or unsupported. The issue is not the absence of talent. It is the absence of enabling conditions.

Educational attrition magnifies this loss. When households lack income protection, illness or job loss forces children out of school. When quality schooling is uneven, talent identification becomes socially biased. Large numbers of children exit the learning pipeline before their abilities are even recognised. Innovation systems cannot thrive when potential inventors disappear before they reach visibility. This is not only an equity concern. It is a macroeconomic constraint that narrows the nation's cognitive potential.

In 2017, economist Raj Chetty published research now known as the "Lost Einsteins" study. Examining patent records in the US, Chetty found stark disparities in inventor rates by race.

gender, and income, with children from high-income families dramatically more likely to become inventors than equally capable children from low-income families. Crucially, measured ability was broadly similar across groups. Opportunity was not.

They estimated that children from low-income backgrounds, women, and minorities had the same opportunities as high-income white men, the total US innovation output would quadruple. The study's central insight was simple: societies lose vast quantities of genius not because intelligence is scarce, but because opportunity is unevenly distributed. Apply this lens to India. A country with deep social stratification, uneven schooling, and limited safety nets inevitably loses an even larger share of its potential inventors, designers, engineers, and entrepreneurs. These are India's lost Einsteins.

**Security as an equaliser**  
The promise of social protection is not merely poverty reduction. It is opportunity equalisation. Universal healthcare ensures illness does not dictate destiny. Income protection during unemployment allows families to maintain schooling continuity. Child nutrition safeguards cognitive development. Quality public education broadens talent discovery. Together, these measures distribute the ability to take risks more evenly across society.

Social protection should be seen as innovation infrastructure. Just as electricity and broadband extend market participation, security extends participation in risk-bearing activity. It enlarges the pool of people who can imagine, experiment, fail, and try again. A society that guarantees basic security to all unleashes a much larger imagination of what is possible. It converts denied skills into productive talent.

India's innovation aspirations cannot be realised by startup policies alone. They require a foundational social compact that citizens may pursue innovation without risking annihilation. India cannot continue losing millions of potential innovators to preventable insecurity.

The greatest resource India possesses is not its market size or demographic dividend. It is the intelligence, creativity, and enterprise currently locked behind social traps. Unlocking that potential demands recognising that security is not the cost of progress. It is its precondition. The lost Einsteins are waiting. A renewed social security system can bring them into the open, and with them, a far larger imagination of what India can become.

*The writer holds a PhD in Public Policy from NLSIU and is a social scientist based in Australia, specialising in improving governance solutions for social and environmental challenges*

## RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

# Lost in salsa, found in sambar

What started as nostalgia soon became undeniable hunger

K S VENKATACHALAM

Travel promises discovery—the thrill of unfamiliar streets, new accents, and unexpected tastes. When we landed in the United States for our west coast road trip, we made a bold pact: no Indian food. As lifelong vegetarians, we knew this decision would test our creativity and curiosity. But that was the point. We wanted to taste the world on one vast American platter.

Mexican cuisine welcomed us first, loud and colorful. Tacos bursting with beans, molten-cheese quesadillas, and smoky fajitas quickly became our road-trip staples. Salsa snapped with freshness, guacamole added creamy comfort, and every plate looked like a festival. Vegetarian options were plentiful, and each bite felt spirited and generous.

Chinese food offered a gentler rhythm. We were used to Indo-Chinese flavours back home, but here, the dishes felt subtler, more nuanced. Delicate vegetable dumplings, glossy stir-fried noodles, and tofu infused with soy, ginger, and garlic showed us a different side of the cuisine. Restaurants thoughtfully catered to vegetarians, and we never felt like an afterthought.

Italian meals became our edible embrace after long sightseeing days. Wood-fired pizzas crowned with basil and fresh vegetables, creamy pasta glistening with olive oil, and simple spaghetti *aglio e olio* proved that elegance often lies in restraint. The warmth of tomato, cheese, and herbs felt universal comfort without complication.

As we crossed states, our culinary map expanded. We devoured falafel wraps from Middle Eastern cafes, bright orange salads, and surprisingly convincing vegan burgers. America revealed itself as a mosaic of global kitchens, each inviting us in. But somewhere around week three, a quiet craving began to stir. It appeared in fleeting thoughts — steaming rice, the fragrance of curry leaves, the layered warmth of spices we had grown up with. What started as nostalgia soon became undeniable hunger. We had travelled far in taste, yet something essential felt missing.

Then, one evening, in San Francisco, we came across a modest restaurant which displayed Indian meals in its window. The menu read like poetry — idli, dosa, sambar. Our restraint dissolved instantly.

When the food arrived, the aroma alone felt like a homecoming. Soft idlis dipped into tangy sambar, coconut chutney cooling the spice, and crisp golden dosas wrapped around spiced potatoes — each bite carried memory, identity, and belonging. It wasn't just delicious; it was deeply personal. That meal taught us something profound. Exploring new cuisines expands the palate, but returning to familiar flavours nourishes the soul. Travel is richest when balanced between adventure and comfort. We cherished every taco, dumpling, and slice of pizza — but it was the humble taste of home that finally made us feel whole.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### A thrust towards air dominance

I refer to 'Boost for IAF as India to buy 14 Rafales (Feb 13). The Defence Ministry's Acceptance of Necessity for acquiring 14 Rafale combat aircraft ahead of French President Emmanuel Macron's visit to India is significant at a time when the Indian Air Force faces depleted squadrons and an ageing regional security challenges. The Rafale is a proven multi-role platform, and its induction can strengthen deterrence, enhance air dominance, and bridge critical capability gaps. The proposal to

manufacture a substantial number of aircraft in India, in partnership with the domestic industry, aligns with indigenisation objectives and offers long-term industrial and technological benefits. However, the scale of public expenditure warrants scrutiny. Time-bound accountability, clear delivery milestones, safeguards against cost escalation, and periodic reporting to Parliament are essential to ensure fiscal discipline and timely induction.

K V Chandramouli, Mysuru

### Global action imperative

Approx 750m droughts and rising risks (Feb 13), climate change in the Hindu Kush Himalayas is evolving as a threat, as seen in the dwindling snow cover. Mitigation

efforts should be intensified to avoid a serious ecological fallout. This is no longer a crisis of isolated regions. It calls for global climate action, backed with resources and adherence to implementation timelines.

S Sundares, Bengaluru

Our readers are welcome to email their letters to: [letters@deccanherald.com](mailto:letters@deccanherald.com) (only letters carried - senders' names will be screened). All letters must carry a reader's postal address and phone number.

## SPEAK OUT

Other than scamming experience, what are the other qualities people who question my experience have? Yes, we don't have experience in looting.



Power attracts the corruptible. Suspect any who seek it. Frank Herbert

## TO BE PRECISE



## IN PERSPECTIVE

# Ending encounter justice

The killings subvert rules without consequence. Reform is a constitutional choice

AKHIL YADAV

Recently, the Allahabad High Court issued mandatory guidelines regarding the aftermath of police encounters in Uttar Pradesh, which include no instant promotions and gallantry awards for police officers and mandatory separate FIRs. The judgment exposes a constitutional crisis of broader national significance.

The observation of Justice Arun Kumar Singh Deshal that police encounters have "seemingly become a routine feature" reveals the institutional loop. The data from UP since 2017 are alarming - 266 deaths and close to 11,000 injuries in over 16,000 police operations. Between 2000 and 2017, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) reported 1,722 cases of alleged fake encounters in India. UP leads the list, with Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Manipur, and Telangana following closely.

In each case, the political economy is the same. Politicians earn points for being "tough on crime", police officers get promotions, the public gets immediate relief, and constitutional rights get pushed into the background. Article 21 of the Constitution safeguards life and personal liberty, mandating that any deprivation be in accordance with a procedure laid down by law. In the case of *Maneka Gandhi vs. Union of India (1978)*, the Supreme Court held that this procedure must be just, fair, and reasonable, not arbitrary, fanciful, or oppressive.

Encounter killings completely disregard this provision. Lives are taken without trial and without recourse. The violation of the Constitution is absolute. In the case of *Pucl vs. State of Maharashtra (2014)*, the Supreme Court of India made its stance clear: "It is not the duty of the police to kill the accused merely because he is a dreaded criminal." The Court laid down 16 guidelines to regulate encounter killings, requiring FIR, independent probes, magisterial inquiries, and a mandate on promotional inquiries are completed. However, this is exception rather than the rule.

The police also regularly cite the right of private defence as a justification for encounter killings. However, "the right of private defence fails constitutional muster. Encounter operations are carefully planned. The risk involved is foreseeable and self-inflicted. The casualty ratios bear out this fact. In UP, 16,284 operations resulted in nearly 11,000 accused getting injured, compared to

a total of 1,860 police personnel. A total of 266 accused were killed, while 18 police officers died. These encounters were indeed real battles involving equal threats, this imbalance would be inexcusable. The most disturbing failure is institutional. Between 2017 and 2024, the NHRC received 161 reports about 157 encounter deaths in UP. It found significant circumstances in none of these. It held only 10 spot inquiries and recommended zero prosecutions.

This is the case across the country. The NHRC regularly accepts the police account, prefers the executive magistrate inquiry that rarely contradicts it, and responds with compensation in a few cases. The consequence is perverse; the State pays compensation out of the public exchequer, while the police officers are not held criminally liable, and are often given promotions or gallantry awards.

**Rule of law weakened**  
Extrajudicial killings do not enhance the police force; they undermine it. When the police operate with impunity, there is no incentive to conduct proper investigations. Criminology literature makes clear that encounters indicate the State's inability to prosecute according to law and provide a rich soil for corruption, where the ability to conduct encounters becomes an instrument of extortion and control.

This argument has been vindicated by the emergence of 'bulldozer justice'. The UP government's destruction of the property of the accused has been replicated in Madhya Pradesh and Assam. The assumption underlying these actions is anti-constitutional, that procedure is an impediment to justice rather than justice itself. The data of victims of encounter killings indicate a structural bias. The people killed are largely from the marginalised and economically disadvantaged sections of society, sections that are least likely to challenge State violence. The Allahabad High Court's intervention brings hope, but judicial concern alone cannot be enough. The Supreme Court must insist on complete compliance with PUCL guidelines nationwide. The legislature should incorporate these protections in criminal procedure laws, impose penalties, hold promotions pending independent investigations, mandate body cameras, and give the NHRC the power to prosecute more aggressively.

As Justice Deshal said, "The power to punish is vested solely in the courts and not in the police." This applies nationwide. It must apply everywhere, or the Constitution doesn't apply anywhere. Until India adopts the former line, the Encounter Raj will continue.

*(The writer is a Millennium fellow and a law student at the Gujarat National Law University, Gandhinagar)*



The air charter market is booming due to rising affluence and connectivity gaps. But infrastructure and financing reform have not kept pace with the growth

# Aviation sector faces a pvt jet stress test

KG GIRIPRAKASH

icopters, and training aircraft.

Charter and general aviation movements have increased by approximately 20% in recent years as traffic rebounded strongly after the pandemic. More aircraft. More sectors flown. More landings at smaller airfields.

Kanika Tekriwal, founder and chief executive of JetSetGo, describes the shift as structural. "The Indian air charter market is experiencing a significant transition, with a projected compound annual growth rate of 13-15%. Growth is being driven by rising affluence and a persistent connectivity gap in Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities," says Tekriwal.

## Growth, demand and speed

Industry executives insist the expansion is structural, not speculative. Bineesh Paul, Director of Charter Flights Aviation, says India has climbed steadily in global rankings. "We stand eleventh in the world today. Three years ago, we were around 15th. The movement has been steady, and the shift is clearly towards developing economies. In fact, in some respects, we are performing better than China," says Paul. He estimates that domestic private aviation growth has averaged 35% annually in recent years.

"India is one of the biggest potential markets in the world," he adds. Charter Flights operates from a dedicated terminal at Hyderabad's AHL Airport. Efficiency is the selling point. "All clearances can be completed in about fifteen minutes. From Bengaluru to Mumbai, we can reach in roughly one hour." The aircraft themselves are built for speed. "Our jets can fly at speeds of around 979 kilometres per hour. Commercial airlines typically cruise closer to 640 kilometres per hour."

That time differential is the core proposition. Clients are not buying luxury alone; they are buying hours. The cost reflects that.

A Bengaluru-Mumbai charter starts at approximately Rs 4.5 lakh. Landing charges can exceed Rs 1 lakh for under 20 minutes on the

ground, with parking charged separately. Depending on aircraft type and distance, one-way charters can range from Rs 7 lakh to Rs 25 lakh. Demand, executives say, is pragmatic. Time is a scarce commodity.

Tekriwal adds a perspective to the trend. "It is increasingly being sought functional rather than aspirational. We are seeing a move towards a more customer-centric model, where private aviation is utilised as a 'time machine' for efficient, on-demand mobility across the country."

The Indian air charter market is experiencing a key shift, with a projected CAGR of 13-15%. Growth is being driven by rising affluence and a service gap in connectivity to Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities, she points out.

Yet speed in the air often collides with constraints on the ground.

Tekriwal points to "limited infrastructure at smaller airports, fragmented ground handling processes, regulatory complexity, and shortage of trained crew and maintenance, repair and overhaul support in tier two and tier three cities".

Yet speed in the air often collides with constraints on the ground.

Tekriwal points to "limited infrastructure at smaller airports, fragmented ground handling processes, regulatory complexity, and shortage of trained crew and maintenance, repair and overhaul support in tier two and tier three cities".

Paul offers a blunt assessment of metro capacity. "Delhi and Mumbai airports are completely chock-a-block. The number of private jets is growing in India today, but parking space and hangar facilities are limited," says Paul.

At smaller airstrips, the challenges are more technical.

Rajesh Kumar, Director of Blueheights Aviation, notes that many operate under visual flight rules. "Turboprop aircraft can operate from shorter runways, but jets require more robust infrastructure. Without proper facilities, growth will remain constrained," says Kumar.

It is clear that infrastructure is not merely about convenience, it is also about operational risk. Shorter runways, limited navigational aids and congestion all increase complexity.

## Financing and regulation

Kumar identifies financing as the sector's most persistent structural constraint. "If financial institutions start supporting us meaningfully, India can become second only to the United States in private aviation."

The demand is certainly there," feels Kumar.

Bringing an aircraft into India can incur freight and associated costs of approximately Rs 1 crore. Banks remain cautious, often treating charter operators as riskier borrowers than scheduled carriers.

On regulation, however, Kumar strikes a more balanced tone. "The DGCA is actually very competent compared with regulators in many parts of the world," Kumar says.

India also prohibits the registration of aircraft older than 20 years, even if they are well-maintained. Operators emphasise oversight. "All aircraft are regulated by the DGCA. We are under constant scrutiny. Safety is non-negotiable," Paul says.

Tekriwal emphasises that safety requirements apply universally. Airworthiness, crew licensing and maintenance standards are mandated, she notes.

Yet transparency remains thinner than in some Western jurisdictions. India does not routinely publish operator-level enforcement statistics or detailed safety performance data for charter operators.

The decade's accident data do not point to systemic failure. Annual totals remain consistent. The largest fatalities in recent years have involved scheduled airlines rather than private jets. However, the sector is accelerating—in fleet size, flight frequency, and economic importance.

If expansion continues at double-digit rates, infrastructure investment, financing reform and greater transparency will determine whether private aviation matures into a stable layer of national transport or begins to show strain. The numbers suggest stability. The trajectory suggests momentum. Whether those twin lines continue to weave together will define what India's private aviation boom ultimately becomes.

(The writer is a Bengaluru-based senior aviation journalist)

## Private Aviation in India Siles: Luxury, Speed & Strategic Connectivity

### MARKET SNAPSHOT



**13-15%** Projected annual growth  
**\$500-550 billion** Expected to reach by FY29

### FLEET & SCALE

**400+** Private aircraft (jets, turboprops, helicopters)  
**700+** Expected number of aircraft by 2029  
Accounts for **8-10%** of India's **\$14.78 billion** aviation sector (2025)

**2,400+** private flights per month – tripled in recent years

Business jets also known as corporate or private jets, are a key segment of aviation, offering on-demand, premium air travel for businesses, HNIs, and governments. India is ascending fast in this realm, emerging now as South Asia's largest general aviation market – and growing fast.

### WHAT'S DRIVING GROWTH?

- Destination weddings & mega events
- Executive travel
- Cricket & sports tournaments
- Political & celebrity travel
- Medical evacuation

Private aviation is no more just indulgence – it's about speed, efficiency, and access where commercial airlines don't operate profitably.

### Comforts that define Private Aviation

- Limousine pick-up & drop
- Concierge bookings
- Gourmet catering & personal chefs
- Spa & beauty services
- VIP lounges & crew briefing rooms
- Swift customs clearance

### TYPES OF PRIVATE AIRCRAFT IN INDIA

**Midsize & Super Midsize (7-10 passengers)**  
Medium-haul business travel – Examples: Hawker 750/800XP/900XP, Gulfstream G150/G200, Citation XLS/Sovereign

**Light Jets (4-6 passengers)**  
Short regional trips – Examples: Cessna Citation Mustang, CJ2, Phenom 100/300, Beechcraft Premier

**Heavy & Long-Range (10-15+ passengers)**  
International, non-stop travel – Examples: Challenger 604/605, Global 6000/7000, Falcon 2000/8X, BBJ, ACJ

**Turboprops (6-9 passengers)**  
Short runways, remote airports – Examples: King Air series, Pilatus PC-12

**Executive Helicopters**  
Short-range point-to-point – Examples: Agusta AW109, Airbus H160

### COST OF FLYING PRIVATE IN INDIA\*

Ownership Cost  
**Rs 15 crore to Rs 55 crore** (purchase)

**Rs 4-10 crore** annually (maintenance, fuel, crew)

### CHARTER COST\*

**Rs 1.5 lakh to Rs 20 lakh per hour** (depending on aircraft size, range & luxury)

INDUSTRY ESTIMATES



## SCIENCE & ENVIRONMENT

# The key to living upto 100 years

Along with genetic characteristics, more accessible and affordable living conditions help with a longer, healthier life, writes **F D Flam**

Some people who live to 100 and beyond smoke, drink hard liquor, or down a beer every evening. Others consume ice cream daily or drink three glasses of Dr Pepper. This paradox is one reason several scientists who study extreme ageing were not surprised by a recent study showing that longevity is roughly 50% genetic and 50% environmental, with a substantially higher genetic contribution than earlier research indicated.

The take-home message isn't that your time on Earth is pre-ordained by your genes. A closer look beyond the headlines reveals something both more promising and more intriguing. For most people, a healthy diet, regular exercise, and adequate sleep can significantly improve the likelihood of living a longer, healthier life.

Yet a small minority of people are born with a rare combination of genes that actually slows the ageing process. These genes make them less susceptible to the usual age-related killers – heart disease, Alzheimer's and cancer – even when they don't consistently follow their doctors' advice.

You don't have to change people's genes to extend longevity. Researchers are beginning to unravel how these genes work and are trying to replicate their effects in the rest of us through drugs or other interventions. At the same time, they're also working toward tailoring medication and dietary advice to an individual's genetic makeup. The new study, published in *Science* and led by researchers at the Weizmann Institute of Science in Israel, drew widespread attention for showing that genes play a larger role in longevity than previously believed – contradicting the major 2018 headlines that suggested that genes mattered much less than earlier research had shown. Several geneticists may have estimated a much lower genetic contribution – about 7% – because so many people died from infectious diseases.

Several other studies have placed the genetic contribution to longevity at about 20%. But scientists who study ageing say these findings are not necessarily the same thing. The latest research combined



multiple datasets and employed a mathematical model to filter out deaths from accidents, infectious diseases, and other causes unlikely to be influenced by genes.

Those factors played an even greater role in earlier centuries when widespread early death kept average life expectancy well below 50. Today, life expectancy in the US has increased to nearly 80, even though the human genome hasn't changed.

### Not just genes

A key concept is that the balance between genetic and environmental influences changes as people age. "It's really important to make a distinction between what it takes to get into your early 80s, versus what it takes to get to around 100, versus even older ages like 105 or even 110," said Thomas Perls, a geriatrician with Boston University Medical Center.

Perls, founder and director of the New England Centenarian Study, estimates that longevity into the mid-80s is about 25%

heritable and 75% attributable to environmental exposures and health behaviours. Using data collected by his research group, he found that reaching age 100 was 62% heritable, while surviving to even older ages was closer to 90%.

Healthy behaviours, he said, include eating a nutritious diet, maintaining a healthy weight, exercising regularly, not smoking, and drinking alcohol only very occasionally, if not at all. Also important, he added, are managing stress effectively and having a positive attitude toward ageing.

Other researchers agree that a larger genetic role at extreme ages doesn't diminish the benefits of exercise, sleep and diet. We should try to optimise all of those, said Nir Barzilai, director of the Institute for Ageing Research at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine. But for a fortunate few, even unhealthily habits to shorten their lives.

In a 2011 study of 477 people between the ages of 96 and 109, Barzilai and his

colleagues at Yeshiva University's Institute for Ageing Research found that these individuals actually had slightly worse behaviours than control subjects. About 50% smoked, roughly half were obese or overweight, and fewer than 50% engaged in even moderate exercise. "So as a group, they didn't behave right at all," Barzilai said.

Despite this, they carried just as many genes associated with cancer, Alzheimer's disease, heart disease and diabetes as the control group. Their advantage was instead linked to carrying genes associated with a slower ageing process – genes that appeared to protect them from those diseases, just as youth protects younger people.

How do these so-called anti-ageing genes work? Barzilai said they tend to suppress hormones that promote growth. Several existing drugs may also do this, including the diabetes drug metformin and widely used GLP-1 inhibitors for diabetes and obesity.

Another reason to suspect that genetic influence increases with age is provided by historical trends. Although life expectancy has risen dramatically in the last century, the proportion of people who live to 100 has changed very little, said Paola Sebastiani, a biostatistician at Boston University.

Researchers also caution that we shouldn't assume all environmental factors are within individual control. Longevity is closely linked to socioeconomic status and exposure to air pollution, among other factors. Helping everyone live a longer, healthier life requires society to make healthy living more accessible and affordable.

Many of the rare elite agers who top 100 do so without becoming frail, spending fortunes, or eating extreme diets of blended vegetables and supplements. Jeanne Calment, the French woman often cited as the longest-lived person on record, reportedly took up smoking when she was living in a nursing home at age 112 – and then lived another decade. Still, for most of her life, she exercised regularly, ate fresh foods, and took good care of herself. That combination gives scientists a reason to hope that more of us could one day approach 120 while remaining healthy and enjoying life.

BLOOMBERG

### DID YOU KNOW?

Ukraine's dogs aren't the same anymore, thanks to war

The human cost of the war in Ukraine has been well documented. But Russia's invasion is also affecting the country's pets.

In a study published in December in the journal *Evolutionary Applications*, a group of researchers found that exposure to the conflict in Ukraine had, over a short period, transformed domesticated dogs into ones that would be found in wild environments.

Scientists gathered a variety of data from 763 dogs across nine regions of Ukraine. The team worked with animal shelters, while veterinarians and volunteers gathered data from stray dogs. Ihor Dykyy, a zoologist at the Ivan Franko National University of Lviv, gathered data near the city of Lyman in the Donetsk region, and later close to Khar'kov near the border with Russia, for two years starting in 2022 as a volunteer with the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

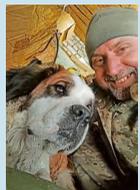
Most of the team's findings suggested that dogs on the front line had become more like wild dog species, such as wolves or dingoes.

Examples of the transformation abounded in the data: The front-line dogs rarely had snouts that were either short like a French bulldog's or elongated like a dachshund's. Many also had reduced body mass. Even their ears took on a different shape, with pointed ears more frequent than floppy ears.

But the scientists did not want their findings interpreted as war-fueled accelerated evolution. What's actually happening is the conditions of war favor animals with certain characteristics like less body mass, which makes it easier to hide.

While the study was restricted to dogs, it raises questions about the broader implications of environmental damage caused by war. "Evidence that dogs are being strongly negatively affected by the horrors of war should serve as an alarm for other species," said Evan Ritchie, a wildlife ecologist at Deakin University in Australia who was not involved in the research. Or as Margorzata Pilot, leader of the project and a biologist at the University of Gdansk in Poland, put it: "Wars are not only humanitarian crises. They are also environmental disasters."

-NVT



# THE ASIAN AGE

14 FEBRUARY 2026

## Restore normal ties with Dhaka after Tarique win

A landmark election in Bangladesh has delivered the most definitive verdict giving the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and its allies a clear two-thirds majority of around 216 seats out of the 300 seats out of 300 that were up for grabs in the first polls since the violent overthrow of the Sheikh Hasina government. The Islamist party Jamaat-e-Islami-led alliance secured at least 76 seats.

The landslide victory that brings the BNP back to power after 20 years and its leader Tarique Rahman, son of the departed leader Khaleeda Zia, who came back to Bangladesh after 17 years in a self-imposed exile, is a positive signal of a return to normality after the overthrow of an authoritarian Prime Minister. Hasina's Awami League, once one of two most popular parties vying for power, was excluded from the polls under an anti-terrorism law.

An anxious India that had supported Sheikh Hasina through her 15-year regime from 2008 to the exclusion of everyone else and saw the relationship fall to its lowest ebb during the last 12 years, led controversially by chief adviser Muhammad Yunus, responded positively at once with Prime Minister Narendra Modi conveying his congratulations to Tarique and the Prime Minister-elect thanking India.

A decisive verdict was what everyone wanted so that a stable Bangladesh government, elected democratically in their typical national style in which exclusion of a party or a poll boycott by the Opposition have been a constant, could attempt to restore the country's image, rebuild its economy and stop the senseless violence in which minority Hindus were the main target. A resetting of the law & order and administrative machinery was among the leading poll promises made by the BNP, besides repairing the economy that had crumbled even more during a time of violence, strikes and political uncertainty since July 2024. An ambitious programme of reforms to lead to a \$1 trillion economy by 2034 and support cards for farmers and the poor who have been facing the rising cost of living in the face of weak wage growth since the revolution were also promised.

The referendum on a "July Charter", held along with the polls to parliament, also received a "yes" vote, but it is not certain that Tarique, the young leader of the BNP, would be rushing to make concrete many of the concepts floated because they may curb his power and his party's status as in suggestions for a bicameral legislature, term limits and delineation of power among the executive, legislature and judiciary.

It is in recalibrating India ties that Tarique may find the route to quicker rebuilding of the economy. Apart from the history dating to the birth of his nation and a shared culture, it is geography that dictates, with the nearness making India the most logical route for trade and transit. And India may be realised by now the imprudence of untested support to an individual leader at the cost of alienating others politically opposed to him/her.

With the Jamaat, in the wake of its best poll performance since the early days when it was in an alliance with the BNP, talking of engaging in positive political activity, Bangladesh might just veer away from some extreme positions taken during the interim rule. The transformed political landscape in Bangladesh is a development that immediate neighbour India must recognise and act accordingly so that reset ties may take off towards the ideally cooperative trade and ties framework when it was a win-win for Bangladesh and India.

## More markets, less inflation?

After 12 years, India has changed the weightage of products and services that determine the pace of price rise or inflation based on the inputs received from the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey 2023 — a move that would lead to generation of better inflation data to guide fiscal policy.

In tune with the changing consumption patterns of people in the country, the new inflation series has reduced weights for food, clothing among others and increased the influence of electronics, housing and services on the calculation of retail inflation.

In line with the trend, the retail inflation as per the new series of the Consumer Price Index (CPI) stood at 2.75 per cent in January 2026, driven mainly by education services and miscellaneous goods. As this is the first data release from the new series, a historical comparison is not yet possible.

The new CPI series is more representative than the older one as it tracks more markets, including those selling online. Data is collected from 1,395 urban markets, up from 1,114. The number of urban markets covered has gone up to 1,465 from 1,161. It tracks prices in 400 towns compared to 310 in the older series. It also monitors price change in 19 per cent more goods and services — 338 in the new series compared to 299 in the older series.

Additional groups in the new series are furnishings, household equipment and household maintenance with a weight of 4.47 per cent, information and communication 3.61 per cent, recreation, sports and culture 1.52 per cent, restaurants and accommodation 3.35 per cent, and personal care, social protection and miscellaneous goods and services 5.04 per cent.

With the weightage for food inflation reduced, vegetables will be unlikely to destabilise the economy. However, services and imported goods have gained more clout to move inflation.

### THE ASIAN AGE

KASHISH MITTER Editor  
K. SUDHAKAR Jr. Sub-Editor  
The Asian Age office is located at: New Delhi: Jwalahalli Netra National Youth Centre, 219 Deen Dayal Upadhyay Marg, New Delhi-110002. Phone: 011-25111224. Published and Printed on behalf of and for: The Asian Age (India) Pvt. Ltd., Jwalahalli Netra National Youth Centre, 219 Deen Dayal Upadhyay Marg, New Delhi 110 002 at BFL Infotech Ltd., C-9, Sector III, Noida-201301. E-mail: Quickmail@aa.com, 88 Floor, Block 2, Elizabeth House, 39 York Road, London, SE1 7YQ. ISSN Registration number: 57296/94

Subhani



## Will BNP's big win lead to reset of Delhi-Dhaka ties?



K.C. Singh

**A return to the Sheikh Hasina period of bonhomie is impossible in the immediate future. Both because of past proximity to her and her father and her continuing exile in India, reestablishing trust will be tough.**

The Bangladesh general election on February 12 was crucial for the country as well as all its South Asian neighbours, including India. The last election in January 2024 was followed by rising disenchantment with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government. As the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the then main Opposition, had boycotted the election, it had lacked legitimacy. This election ranks even worse as the Awami League, which ruled Bangladesh from 2009 to 2024, was barred from it. The initial reports indicate the turnout was below 50 per cent. Former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, living in self-exile in India, saw the low percentage as a major electoral defeat. She dubbed it a "voteless, illegal and unconstitutional" election. The BNP-led alliance leads with 216 seats out of 299 seats with the alliance led by Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI) having won 76 seats. JeI is questioning the election's integrity and has not yet conceded defeat. The principal competition was between two alliances. One, led by the BNP under the leadership of Tarique Rahman, late Prime Minister Khaleeda Zia's son. After a 17-year exile in Britain, he returned in December, five days before his mother's death. The other 11-party alliance is led by Jamaat-e-Islami, a traditionally pro-Pakistan Islamist right-wing party, that includes the National Citizens Party, formed by the student-protesters who brought Sheikh Hasina's government down in August 2024. The NC's current alliance with the JeI betrays their possible collaboration during the student protests, which required the support of existing politicians to succeed. The protests were triggered by the Hasina government's discriminatory recruitment policy, favouring the descendants of freedom fighters. Sheikh Hasina provocatively defended that, arguing she could hardly favour the progeny of "Razakars", who collaborated with the Pakistani military before Bangladesh's independence in 1971. Before her ouster, Sheikh Hasina had said that a "white" nation was undermining her government. The United States was regularly criticising Bangladesh's weakened democracy. Chief adviser and Nobel Peace Prize winner Muhammad Yunus sees the current election's outcome as a "new dawn". The "people have rejected the past", he said, "to build a new Bangladesh". His leadership since the popular uprising of July-August 2024 does not inspire faith. He presided over an increasingly communally polarised nation, with the random targeting of minorities. From India's perspective, BNP's nearly two-thirds majority is the best possible outcome under the circumstances. JeI harbours strong anti-India feelings and has traditionally been under Pakistani influence. Any BNP alliance with them, as happened when BNP last held power in 2001-06, would have hurt India's interests. India's external affairs minister, Dr. Jaishankar had met Tarique Rahman, BNP's president, during his Dhaka visit on December 31, 2025 for the funeral of his mother, former Prime Minister Khaleeda Zia. Mr Rahman has promised to put Bangladesh on a "new path". During the BNP's last stint in power, starting 2001, the nation suffered widespread corruption, violence and human rights abuses. He was generally accepted as the real power behind the throne. He was jailed by the military caretaker government in 2007 on corruption and terrorism charges. He was released in 2007, ostensibly for medical treatment abroad.

ments produced from that cotton. Indian exports of cotton fabrics to Bangladesh touch half a billion dollars. Besides rebalancing trade with Bangladesh, the US gets a toe-hold diplomatically, to counter the rising Chinese presence. At present, the top six export destinations for Bangladesh are the United States, Britain and the countries in the European Union, with Japan next. On the other hand, the countries that export to Bangladesh in 2024 were led by China (\$22 billion), Korea (\$11.3 billion), Indonesia (\$3.04 billion) and Singapore (\$2.93 billion). Bangladesh's largest import comes from the US, which gives India an edge as a next-door supplier. However, a return to the Sheikh Hasina period of bonhomie is impossible in the immediate future. Both because of past proximity to her and her father and her continuing exile in India, reestablishing trust will be tough. India will first have to help her move to another safe location. In addition, India must stop mixing domestic politics with foreign policy. The looming Assembly elections in West Bengal and Assam have led BJP to ignore communal polarisation. Unnecessary controversy over a Bangladesh cricket, covered by Shah Rukh Khan's IPL team, Kolkata Knight Riders, obscures this mix-up. An already narrowing space for foreign affairs met the BNP's secretary-general Mirza Fakruddin Alamgir. BNP's deputy prime minister and former minister Ishaq Dar was in Bangladesh in August 2025. The Bangladesh Air Force chief visited Pakistan, where he met Pakistan's three service chiefs.

For the first time in over four decades, Bangladesh is electing a male Prime Minister. India faces an already expanding influence of China as well as greater Pakistani influence. The US supported Muhammad Yunus's heading to the interim government. They may support his continuing, perhaps as President. By quickening the pace, even as the US has achieved dual objectives. The US gets access to Bangladesh's cotton imports market, and India gets rid of removing tariffs from garments produced from that cotton. Indian exports of cotton fabrics to Bangladesh touch half a billion dollars. Besides rebalancing trade with Bangladesh, the US gets a toe-hold diplomatically, to counter the rising Chinese presence. At present, the top six export destinations for Bangladesh are the United States, Britain and the countries in the European Union, with Japan next. On the other hand, the countries that export to Bangladesh in 2024 were led by China (\$22 billion), Korea (\$11.3 billion), Indonesia (\$3.04 billion) and Singapore (\$2.93 billion). Bangladesh's largest import comes from the US, which gives India an edge as a next-door supplier. However, a return to the Sheikh Hasina period of bonhomie is impossible in the immediate future. Both because of past proximity to her and her father and her continuing exile in India, reestablishing trust will be tough. India will first have to help her move to another safe location. In addition, India must stop mixing domestic politics with foreign policy. The looming Assembly elections in West Bengal and Assam have led BJP to ignore communal polarisation. Unnecessary controversy over a Bangladesh cricket, covered by Shah Rukh Khan's IPL team, Kolkata Knight Riders, obscures this mix-up. An already narrowing space for foreign affairs met the BNP's secretary-general Mirza Fakruddin Alamgir. BNP's deputy prime minister and former minister Ishaq Dar was in Bangladesh in August 2025. The Bangladesh Air Force chief visited Pakistan, where he met Pakistan's three service chiefs.

The meeting of these two worlds — aristocratic privilege & sordid criminal enterprise — was less a collision & more a conflation of shared impunity... And so, it eloquently goes on, using metaphors of skating on waters, etc, which wouldn't have occurred to me. The piece is also dotted with allusions to what AI (shall we call him "AI") — fr. Stop contradicting yourself — Ed) sees as my style: "With his trademark blend of social critique and cultural commentary..." Etc. OK, one is used to the occasional complimentary remarks from a generous book reviewer, but coming from the contemporary God-of-all-analytical commentary... Oh dear. "What is lacking in the piece is any new insight. It is an elegant summary of the character and status of Andrew and Epstein but it doesn't tell the reader anything that he or she may not already know. It doesn't mean some new discovery, news or gossip. I mean an analytical insight which is unique and fresh."

And now to check if AI can solve mysteries? Readers of this column will know that each week it is prefaced with a quote from the copious library of works by Bachchoo. Now nothing is known about Bachchoo, except that he lived in a place called "Hechoo ka idda", so it was obvious that I would want to see if AI could solve the mystery. I ventured to ask, and here's what I found:

AI says that Bachchoo is the pseudonym of the last Mughal Emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar. Really??? It also says that it is the name adopted by the Hindi satirist Shashi Joshi or a Trinidadian writer called Satnamine Bachchoo... and a Mauritian politician and a Bulgarian wrestler... So that's solved. God bless AI!

### LETTERS

#### STALIN MASTERSTROKE

When the day dawned, all the housewives who used to receive the monthly dole of ₹1,000 under the Makalir Urmimai Thokali scheme were in for a pleasant surprise when they found a credit of ₹5,000 in their accounts. Only when TN CM M.K. Stalin announced that he had ordered release of three months dole of ₹3,000 in advance (for February to April) together with an additional amount of ₹2,000 to tide over their summer travails, they understood the reason for the credit. They were also doubly happy when Mr Stalin assured that the monthly dole of ₹1,000 will also be increased to ₹2,000, when his government is returned to power in the ensuing Assembly elections. Any guesses what the future will bring?

Tharclus S. Fernando  
Chennai

#### WOMAN'S EXAMPLE

THE VIDEO of an elderly woman in Kothikode, stopping a scooterist from using the footpath and refusing to step aside until the man takes the main road, has gone viral and making rounds in various social media platforms. The elderly citizen has been applauded and praised for her civic sense and many have described it as an exemplary act of civic responsibility. The irresponsible practices of two-wheeler riders using footpaths to bypass traffic blocks and putting pedestrians life at risk is a common sight in many of our towns and cities. The video of the elderly woman teaching basic traffic rules to the scooterist is not just a lesson for the rider but to every one who takes short cuts risking others' lives.

M. Pradyu  
Kannur

#### UNSPORTING AD

HATS OFF to the minnows of cricket, Namibia, especially its captain, Gerhard Erasmus, who led from the front to choke our team's chances, bowlers restricting the West Indies to a total of 209, which looked to cross 230 when Hardik Pandya and Shivam Dube were at the crease. From 266 for 48 in 18 overs, our team crossed ahead just four runs in the remaining two overs, losing another five wickets. What a shame! If our players struggled against Namibian spinners, imagine their plight against Pakistan bowlers on Sunday. Time for Star Sports to remove their unsporting advertisement about their domination over Pakistan during World Cup matches.

N. Mahadevan  
Chennai

Farrukh Dhondy  
Cabbages & Kings

"Tn unique! As a drop is in an ocean? But here the words I write and speak! Really? Have you any more puns? That a million scribbles have gone before — Some have written gospels to last for evermore — You are nobody, one in a crowd Say 'I am nothing' proclaim I would!"  
From Goal Mall, Destination Shopping by Bachchoo

ers about the benefits that this undoubtedly huge scientific step promises. And there are articles about the criminal mistle and there are even funny pieces about the egregious blunders. Greenland as Iceland, anyone? I haven't made use of AI, though a friend insistently downloaded an app on my phone and said I should get AI to write screenplays for me "just give them the gist of a plot and AI will flesh it out and even write scenes". I haven't done any of that but I know he uses AI to write screenplays. He refers to his "AI assistant" by some cute female name. (Though I love and respect this friend, I find that in bad taste, really pathetic.) Even so, a positive story: Together with several of my activist colleagues from the past decades, I belong to a group called the Darius Howey Legacy Collective.

My late friend Darcus was one of the most prominent, in print, on TV and in the world of radical activist politics representing the black and Asian new communities of Britain. The DHLX was formed to commemorate his achievements and keep his contribution to justice and progress in Britain's contemporary history alive.

Towards this aim, perhaps with a certain degree of frivolity, one of our collective asked AI to write articles in Darcus' style and "voiced" on a couple of contemporary political issues. I have to say, the

results in two instances were convincing and even impressive. I could actually hear him formulating the opinions AI did on his behalf. Scary? I already explained the matter to him. I thought I should try it out and ask AI to compose a column on a contemporary subject — let's say ex-Prime Minister Andrew and the Jeffrey Epstein files, in the style of Andrew's own writing, as if he were the author of Kings. Hold your breath:

"In the labyrinthine corridors of power and privilege, where secrets intertwine with silence, the saga of Andrew and Epstein emerges — not merely as tale of scandal, but as a stark reflection of the rot at the heart of the establishment. This story unravels, not just as a narrative of individual failings, but as the symptoms of a system that shields its own, even as it devours vulnerable. "Andrew, the once-charismatic Duke of York, seemed for decades to skate untouched on the water of royal immunity, his misdeeds brushed away like ephemeral smudges on the grandeur of monarchy. Enter Jeffrey Epstein, the enigmatic financier whose orbit was synonymous with exploitation and duplicity.

"The meeting of these two worlds — aristocratic privilege & sordid criminal enterprise — was less a collision & more a conflation of shared impunity... And so, it eloquently goes on, using metaphors of skating on waters, etc, which wouldn't have occurred to me. The piece is also dotted with allu-

sion to what AI (shall we call him "AI") — fr. Stop contradicting yourself — Ed) sees as my style: "With his trademark blend of social critique and cultural commentary..." Etc. OK, one is used to the occasional complimentary remarks from a generous book reviewer, but coming from the contemporary God-of-all-analytical commentary... Oh dear. "What is lacking in the piece is any new insight. It is an elegant summary of the character and status of Andrew and Epstein but it doesn't tell the reader anything that he or she may not already know. It doesn't mean some new discovery, news or gossip. I mean an analytical insight which is unique and fresh."

And now to check if AI can solve mysteries? Readers of this column will know that each week it is prefaced with a quote from the copious library of works by Bachchoo. Now nothing is known about Bachchoo, except that he lived in a place called "Hechoo ka idda", so it was obvious that I would want to see if AI could solve the mystery. I ventured to ask, and here's what I found:

AI says that Bachchoo is the pseudonym of the last Mughal Emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar. Really??? It also says that it is the name adopted by the Hindi satirist Shashi Joshi or a Trinidadian writer called Satnamine Bachchoo... and a Mauritian politician and a Bulgarian wrestler... So that's solved. God bless AI!

## Heralding global doom or bonanza? World in tizzy on possibilities of AI

It makes strides towards cures for cancer, provides information for Sir Keir Starmer in a bikini, undresses women and even children for perverts; answers examination or thesis questions; threatens mass unemployment; eliminates government bureaucracy; over the world; confuses Greenland with Iceland, Beijing with Taiwan, says Viktor Orban rules Turkey... No, sorry that last was not AI, that was the President of the United States. Nevertheless, AI is probably the most useful and threatening invention/discovery since science provided the key to splitting the atom — giving us nuclear energy. Hiroshima and Nagasaki and now the proliferating threat of nuclear theocracies and autocracies acquiring nuclear bombs. Every magazine or newsheet seems to feature deliberations on the powers, dangers, possibilities of AI. Some of them are apocalyptic predictions, oth-



THE GOAN EVERYDAY

There is no instinct like that of the heart Lord Byron

# Don't ignore the collective cries of people

The Goa State Pollution Control Board's (GSPCB) decision, announced earlier this week, to grant consent for a new fish meal plant at Cuncolim has come as a major setback to villagers. People feel that the practical challenges and the environmental concerns have been ignored. While there is a set of strict rules put in place, the bigger worry has been over the lack of regulatory oversight.

On paper, all looks in place — strict effluent control, odour management, and regulated transportation, but the larger question is who is going to monitor these? The GSPCB may have gone by technicalities, but it cannot ignore the human side and the allied health issues that the people of the area have been flagging from time to time.

How committed is the GSPCB in genuinely safeguarding the environment and the health of residents? The effects of an existing fish meal plant in the area are there to see, and people have been complaining for years of foul odour, water contamination and air pollutants. Past inspections have not helped change the conditions. The irony is that while people have been complaining to the extent that the local MLA and Leader of the Opposition has been making repeated pleas in the Legislative assembly sessions, authorities have failed to factor in these concerns.

At the heart of these fish meal plants is the issue of how the fish is transported, and how the waste water is treated or discharged. There are recommendations that fish must be transported in sealed containers and that water must be treated and not discharged in the open. History tells us that these very parameters have been consistently overlooked by companies handling operations, resulting in foul odour enveloping the area, making living difficult for residents. The GSPCB has failed in this area because there are regulatory gaps that allow operators the freedom to take chances on rules. Inspections have happened, but to no avail, and the gap between policy and practice is as clear as daylight.

In Panaji, residents are fighting a grim battle against a 112-meter-long replacement casino vessel coming in River Mandovi, and have been voicing concerns over its impact on the river, including pollution. While the Captain of Ports maintains that the larger vessel falls within approved capacity limits and has required licences, authorities haven't been able to allay fears of the people, as the river continues to be highly polluted.

While there is an outcry over fish meal plants, Cuncolim does not have a comprehensive Effluent Treatment Plant infrastructure. The absence of a Central Effluent Treatment Plant contravenes statutory requirements and endangers groundwater and land quality. The fact that the existing industry has been operating with such deficiencies calls into question the integrity of the regulatory system. The unit has been asked to install an Online Effluent Monitoring System for continuous monitoring of effluent quality to ensure compliance with prescribed standards.

Let's not forget, not too long ago, open air venues were asked to install online sound monitoring stations to record real-time data to combat high-decibel music. These proved to be a farce eventually with organisers working out ways to bypass the system and authorities conveniently ignoring the readings. The bottom line is, no matter the systems in place, if the intent is not visible and enforcement is not consistent, nothing can change.

Approving the new fish meal plant at Cuncolim without robust safeguards amounts to risking public health and environmental integrity. While strict conditions are welcome, there have to be equally tight monitoring mechanisms that involve locals. Authorities cannot ignore the collective cries of people.

## OPEN SPACE >>

### Constant vigilance imperative

Goa needs to be on vigil permanently if it wants to save whatever is left of our pristine land now. After a strategic (?) retreat on the Unity Mall project (by the way, the Goa government has not communicated any formal objections to the Centre over the controversial 'Pradhan Mantri Ekta Mall'), the State is adamant on pushing through a controversial fish meal plant in Cuncolim which would lead to severe air pollution, persistent foul odour and would have a deleterious effect on water sources; it would be a grave threat to public health and the environment at large. Similarly, the sarkar has pushed through the dangerous Mirabag Bandara project sans transparency or local consent by misleading citizens that it would be beneficial to the surrounding villages. The BJP double-engineered sarkar takes decision that are against its own people. It is heartening to note that there has been massive pushback from the niz Goenkas to this so-called 'development and progress'. There are a million millions afoot in Goa right now; constant vigilance is the price we now have to pay to save ourselves from a marauding state.

VINAY DWIVEDI, Benaolim

# Reflections on euphoria called love

Kindness is the highest form of prayer, for it reflects the inner longing for universal love. You are in love with your own reflection of the universe



SUMIT PAUL

The writer is a regular contributor to the world's premier publications and portals in several languages

Think of love, dream of love, live of love because love is the answer to everything — Anon.

Valentine's Day is here and the (young) hearts are overflowing with (mushy) love. But is love confined only to young hearts or just limited to man-woman love? No. Love is an all-encompassing human emotion that touches all hearts, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity and all that jazz.

Love is not something we can simply arrive at and expect to stay. Instead, it is a continuous journey that requires effort, understanding, and growth. Love is not a static state but rather an ongoing process of learning, compromise, and connection. It teaches us to be patient, kind, and forgiving as we navigate the ups and downs of relationships. Ultimately, love is not just a final goal to be reached but a beautiful journey that we must fully embrace and cherish every step of the way.

Love is not about finding someone flawless but rather about embracing their imperfections and loving them unconditionally. It challenges the notion that love should be easy or perfect and instead highlights the beauty in accepting and loving someone despite their flaws. It encourages us to look beyond surface-level qualities and see the true essence of a person, flaws and all, and to choose to love them regardless.

Love is not always about grand gestures or extravagant displays of affection but rather the small, everyday actions that show someone you care. It's simple moments like a gentle touch, a kind word, or a thoughtful gesture that truly make a difference and strengthen the bonds of love. These little things may seem insignificant, but they carry immense meaning and significance in relationships, demonstrating love and care in the most genuine and heartfelt way.

Love is found in the small details, the subtle gestures, and the quiet acts of kindness that speak volumes about our feelings for one another.



Real love is more than just empty declarations and sweet promises. True love is shown through our daily actions, the way we treat others with kindness and respect, the effort we put into our relationships, and the sacrifices we are willing to make for the people we care about. It is easy to say "I love you", but it takes commitment and effort to show love through our actions. Love is not just a feeling but a choice we make every day to demonstrate our care and affection for those who matter most to us. Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength, while loving someone deeply gives you courage.

Love is not solely about searching for the perfect partner but rather about self-improvement and being the best version of ourselves for someone else. It emphasises the importance of personal growth and self-awareness in creating meaningful and fulfilling connections with others.

By embodying kindness, compassion, and generosity, we not only enhance our own lives but also become the kind of person others are naturally drawn to and want to build a loving relationship with. Love is a mutual and reciprocal exchange that requires both parties to invest in themselves and each other in order to flourish. Remember, you don't love someone because they're perfect; you love them in spite of the fact that they're not.

Love is not a mere tally of days passing by, but rather the quality of moments and experiences shared with someone special. Love is about cherishing each day and making the most of every single moment. It is about being present, showing appreciation, and creating meaningful memories together. When we focus

on making the days count, we truly understand the depth and beauty of love in all its forms.

Lastly, love is not about holding on; it's about letting go. Holding onto something too tightly can actually hinder a relationship or a situation. Love requires trust, patience, and the ability to release control. Letting go allows love to flow freely, to evolve, and to grow. It is about accepting that some things are not meant to be and having the wisdom to know when to walk away. By letting go, we open ourselves up to new experiences and, ultimately, allow love to flourish in its most genuine form.

Love is also not about too much physical intimacy. To quote Marilyn Monroe, "The real lover is the man who can thrill you by kissing your forehead or smiling into your eyes or just staring into space."

And when love sublimates, it sublimates into universal love. To quote Dr Martin Luther King Jr., "Hate is too great a burden to bear." Mankind is in need of this type of most sublime love that teaches us to embrace all and sundry sans an iota of prejudice, bad blood, anger and rancour.

He who fights is powerless, but he who loves is power itself. Everywhere you turn is an element of sharing and sending love. Be universal in your love. You will see the universe to be the picture of your own being. Remember, every act of kindness spreads peace to the world, love to the heart, and light to us all. Kindness is the highest form of prayer, for it reflects the inner longing for universal love. You are in love with your own reflection of the universe.

— FPJ

## THE INBOX >>

### Save Old Goa before it is lost

Goa and Goans are taken for granted. Negligence in protecting heritage sites has become a repeated problem. ASI-protected monuments are suffering from neglect, and many are in distress. What we see may be only a small part of a much bigger issue. Scams and the regularisation of illegal constructions by bending rules have become common in Goa. A recent inspection report submitted to the Supreme Court by a committee regarding the disputed structure in Ella village, Old Goa, points to the construction of a modern bungalow within a UNESCO World Heritage precinct and protected monument zone. The report indicates that new work came up after the original structure was demolished, in violation of rules meant to protect the Outstanding Universal Value of Old Goa. These examples show that without strict enforcement of the law, more funding, and better public awareness, priceless heritage could suffer permanent damage. Why is the ASI failing in its core duty? What is the use of recognition if the very sites that define Goa's history are left to decay? The government and its authorities must not play with people's sentiments. It is time for answers, accountability, and immediate action. Goa's heritage deserves better. The people demand better.

KG VILOR, Choro

### Verna hit by frequent power cuts

Although Verna village has an underground cabling network, frequent power cuts are a cause for concern, especially for residents living on the southern side of this pristine village. According to reliable sources, the transformer at the Fr Agnelo traffic circle has outlived its utility, with fuses constantly tripping. Just a few days back, there were repeated power breakdowns, some lasting about four hours, without any notice in the print or electronic media. As a result, many of

### Uninvited uniformed police at religious places is unacceptable

Amid an ongoing dispute between villagers of Colva and Delhi-based builders over development issues, a recent action by the police has raised questions about protocol and respect for religious spaces. The now-transferred Colva Police Inspector, along with constables in full uniform, reportedly visited the parish church and met the Parish Priest. The visit, it is alleged, was not based on an invitation from church authorities. Places of worship are sensitive spaces. They are symbols of faith, community and constitutional freedom. The entry of uniformed police into a church, temple or mosque without a clear law-and-order emergency or a request for help can send the wrong message. A uniform carries authority and may also create fear. In normal situations, discussion outside sacred premises may be more suitable. The incident highlights the need for senior officers to reinforce clear guidelines. Sensitisation can help police understand the social importance of religious institutions. Both sides play key roles in society. Respect between them is essential. In delicate matters, restraint is wisdom.

ADELMO FERNANDES, Vasco

our perishables got spoilt and were unfit for human consumption. I request the department to replace this transformer at the earliest.

LUCAS D'SOUZA, Verna

### College section needed at St Joseph's HS

St Joseph's High School in Arpora, Bardez, a co-educational institution established in 1937, should be upgraded with a college section. By expanding its infrastructure, the school can start Higher Secondary (Classes 11-12) and undergraduate courses. With its reputation as one of Goa's earliest English-medium schools, it can introduce career-focused programmes for students from Parra, Nagoa, Arpora, Calangute and Arilena. The Directorate of Education should begin +2 streams in science, com-

merce and arts, followed by degree courses in areas in demand in Goa such as tourism, hospitality and information technology. The campus has enough land for expansion.

The government should seek affiliation with the Goa Board for Classes 11-12 and with Goa University for degree programmes. Existing computer labs can be upgraded, and qualified lecturers appointed. This will help meet rising demand in North Goa and reduce the need for students to travel to Mapusa, Candolim, Siolim and Panaji.

RAJESH BANALIKAR, Arpora

### Is Dabolim being pushed towards closure?

The State government wants to turn Dabolim airport into a "ghost airport". Goans are being told that both Dabolim and Mopa will run at the same time, but in reality GMR is pushing the central government to shut Dabolim and hand it over to the Navy. Mopa mainly benefits North Goa and nearby districts of Maharashtra. It does not serve the entire population of Goa. Many flights land at Mopa early in the morning. However, because of Navy restrictions, several domestic connections run only later in the day. This leads to long waiting times for international passengers who need to travel onwards to Dabolim. Lower fares at Mopa are being used as a business strategy to weaken Dabolim. As a result, Goans and tourists may end up paying more for taxis to reach South Goa. The Goa government and the BJP-led central government are not in favour of saving or protecting Dabolim airport. They mislead citizens, especially when elections are near. The minister, Mauvin, who speaks about protecting Dabolim, has already been told by the central government to remain quiet. People of Goa must stand up for their rights. As the smallest state, Goa cannot run two airports located so close to each other.

RONNIE DSOUZA, Chandor



Send your letters to us at editor@thegoan.net. Letters must be 150-200 words and mention the writer's name and location

# Traces left on art by many hands and minds

Chanakya School's first solo show in India rejects the cult of the solo artist to create space for collective authorship of art

Somak Ghoshal  
somak.ghoshal@partner.livemint.com

In the middle of a room at Experimenter gallery in Kolkata's Ballygunge Place stands a large sculptural installation called *Dwelling* (2025). Made of three human-sized structures, it is blood-red in colour and arranged in a circle. These figures with floating hair, or so they seem from a distance, are bent over. They have tentacles wriggling out of their legs to create a tangled mess of ropes on the floor. Created by the members of the Mumbai-based not-for-profit institution Chanakya School of Craft, under the guidance of their artistic director Karishma Swali, this spectacular piece is part of *Trace*, the collective's first solo show in India.

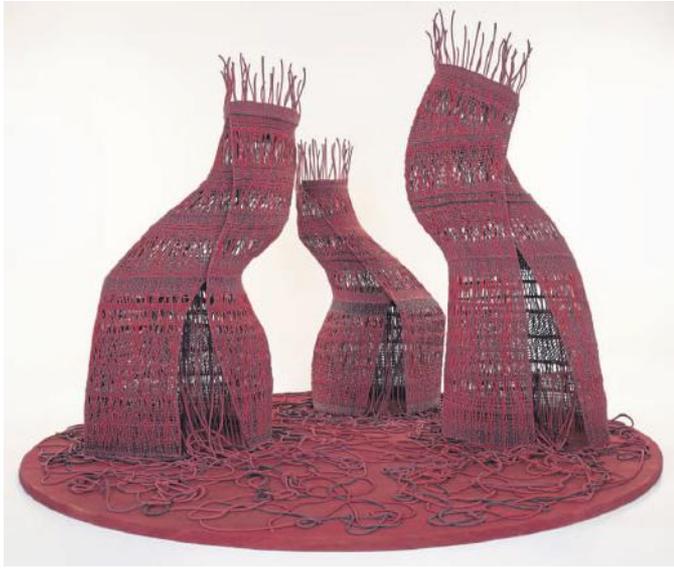
"This work was inspired by the *bhunga* houses in Gujarat's Kutch region," Swali says on a video call. "Around 12 people worked on it, using open-weave techniques and making hand-twisted chords." The idea, she adds, is to convey a sense of joyful spaces and safe structures. But, with their Medusa-like heads, the three twists figures, like the three witches in *Macbeth*, exude a hint of menace, too. Something about the confidence with which they sprawl over the floor quietly signals power and authority. Perhaps fittingly so.

"Traditionally, women's role (in weaver communities) has been restricted to preparing the loom and the shuttle," Swali says. To counter this history of neglect, Chanakya School invented "the shuttle wrap" technique, giving its women members the agency to defy social norms. Instead of just wrapping cotton on a loom, they actively contribute to the alchemy that brings a piece like *Dwelling* to life.

"Typically, a work begins with obsessive research, followed by a sketch I make," Swali says. "It isn't a rigorous instruction manual, just a guiding framework." Once the concept is in place, artisans begin to apply different embroidery techniques to create 7-11 layers on each piece of work, using thread, beads and yarn, on materials like cloth, canvas, bamboo frames, and even figurines carved out of blackstone. The process is intuitive and experiential, collaborative but also deeply personal.

"Each layer gives you an idea of what to do next," Swali says. "At some point you feel the work is ready." Every member of Chanakya School leaves their unique imprint—the "trace" that the title of the show refers to—on each piece and, instead of a single creator, the ownership of the work resides with the collective. In this egalitarian model of creation, any income generated from sales is invested back into the school.

Thus the collective speaks in one voice, literally captured by phrases inscribed on



(above) 'Dwelling'; and a piece from the 'Field Notes' series.

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY CHANAKYA SCHOOL AND EXPERIMENTER



the walls of the gallery. These are lines that were spoken by individuals while at work, but the sentiments are universal. "Making is a form of remembering," says one. "Main khud ko isme pehchanti hun," ("I recognise myself in it") adds a woman. "Here the past is alive too," goes a third.

Some of India's most successful artists, whose work sells for staggering sums of money, employ a fleet of workers to bring their vision into reality. But the final outcome is signed by one person, and all the wealth and prestige accrued from it belong to this individual.

Chanakya School rejects this misleading cult of the solo artist by anonymising the maker, even as the name of every team member is acknowledged on a wall of the gallery. "I grew up with this collectivist approach to making art under my father's guidance," Swali says. "It has never not felt natural to me."

In 1984, Vinod Shah founded Chanakya International, now famous for working with international haute couture labels like Dior, to revive and preserve India's textile heritage. Swali, his daughter, who heads it now, launched the educational wing in 2016. In the last 10 years, Chanakya School has produced over 1,000 graduates and taught them 300-odd embroidery techniques. The sheer dexterity of their craftsmanship is evident in each work on display at *Trace*, especially in the gigantic trapezoid that covers one whole wall. But that's not all. There is play involved in the process, too.

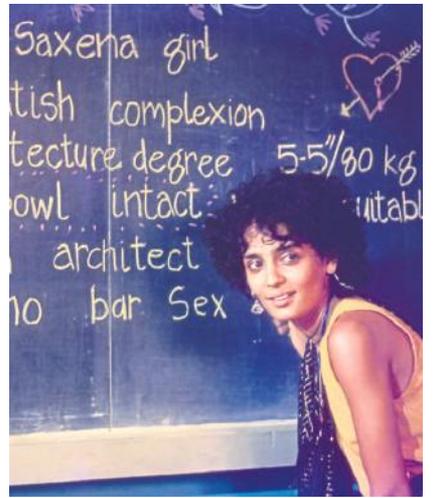
If you look hard, you will notice that the flowers on the face and limbs of the black-

stone figures are echoed in some of the works on canvas. In the *Flowers in the Night* series, the allusion is direct, but that doesn't mean you can skim over it. The eye is instead drawn to the intricate beadwork as you move closer to the work.

If uneven stitches add texture and tactility to the foreground of a work, the same piece looks magically seamless from behind. It's hard to believe. For instance, that *Flowers in Our Forest* and *Opening Sky* (both of which are hung from ceiling to floor) have multiple layers woven on one side, which gives off the impression of valleys and ridges, but as you walk around it, you find the entire structure held by a flat background. No less intriguing is the fact that these massive works were woven horizontally, involving close coordination between multiple hands, though imagined and finished as vertical pieces.

Between abstract forms, cartographic imagery and natural landscapes, *Trace* offers a feast of optical delights and illusions. Like Swali's sketches, it asks the viewer to indulge in their own act of interpretation—to stitch stories into what can see in their mind's eye. On the upper deck of the gallery, a series of small-format works, titled *Field Notes*, widens this space for reflection as forms and shapes emerge on textiles, woven with cotton threads. One looks like a human heart, pulsating and red. Or maybe it is a map to somewhere you've never been, a place where only the finest art can take you.

At *Experimenter, Ballygunge Place, Kolkata, till 21 March.*



Arundhati Roy in 'In Which Annie Gives It Those Ones'. FILM HERITAGE FOUNDATION

## The hangout movie that hung around

Pradip Krishen and Arundhati Roy's film gets the restoration—and the spotlight—it deserves

Uday Bhatia  
uday.bg@livemint.com

Imagine you're on the fringes of the Delhi arts scene in the late 1980s. A friend invites you to see a rare movie shoot in town. You head to the School of Planning and Architecture. The production is even smaller than you imagined. The director is married to the writer. The writer is the lead actor and production designer. Cast and crew joke around, smoke, flub their lines. You come away thinking it looks intriguing enough but not something that'd play in a cinema. Maybe on Doodarshan or straight to video.

This is what happened, sort of. In *In Which Annie Gives It Those Ones* didn't release in cinemas. It played once on Doodarshan in 1989. Someone probably taped this, for it circulated for years on video cassette. Over time, something amazing happened. Pradip Krishen's film never went away. Murky bootlegs birthed its cult status. The writer, Arundhati Roy, who based the film on her time in architecture school, won the Booker Prize. One of the bit players, Shah Rukh Khan, became Bollywood's biggest star. All this meant there were enough curious viewers to keep the film around and discussed, which has culminated in a loving restoration by the Film Heritage Foundation (FHF) that'll premiere at the 76th Berlinale (12-22 February).

Roy and Khan weren't the only emblematic talents on the crew. Krishen became an environmentalist and went on to write the invaluable *Trees of Delhi*. Bobby Bedi produced *Baundli Queen* (which Roy tore apart in a review) and *Maqbool*. Raghubir Yadav, who has a one-scene role as "cheapskate cyclist," became a great character actor (Manoj Bajpayee is also listed in the cast, though I can't spot him). But none of them were well-known then—at least outside of Delhi—except for Roshan Seth, who plays department head Y.D. Billimoria, whom the students call "Yamdoot" (grim reaper).

Not one is safe from Billimoria's caustic put-downs ("My dear donkey"), but he reserves his worst for Annie (Arjun Raina), slacker supreme in a batch of slackers. Annie is an amiable wastrel, with the bemused air of a professional student, prone to sudden fanciful ideas (the titular "those ones"). The film begins with Annie and his buddies days away from submitting and defending their fifth-year projects. Yet only a few seem fazed by the impending deadline, and almost no one seems to be taking architecture seriously as a career. This is a rare post-budget slacker story, in England. And over in America, Richard Linklater was experimenting with a new kind of lackadaisical indie, first *Slacker* and then *Dazed & Confused* (Annie borrows from the latter's spiritual predecessor, George Lucas' *American Graffiti*), by including an epilogue with the main characters' fates.

It's always tricky to restore no-budget films in a way that accurately represents their humble origins. FHF's 4K restoration, from a 16mm original camera negative and sound negative and a 35mm release print, is perfectly judged, removing the murk and bias ensuring the film retains its warmth, grimy immediacy. With better sound and image, it's possible to better appreciate the film's handmade qualities: Roy's pinpoint production design, the 1970s-fashionish little splashes of art and creativity (including a memorable parting shot on Annie's bald head), the inspired idea to score the film with instrumental version of Beatles songs.

Even as it's made special by her presence, *In Which Annie Gives It Those Ones* shows that Arundhati Roy would not be contained by indie film, or cinema in general. This isn't to say she's distracted or ill at ease, just that she already seems to be looking beyond. Radha's battles with the professors anticipate the vivid polemics Roy would soon become famous for. Fascinating as these glimpses of a future Roy are, my favourite scene is non-verbal and non-confrontational. Radha and Arjun are in his one-room flat. It's a summer afternoon. A cover of *Blackbird* plays on the soundtrack. Arjun offers to make them coffee. Radha retrieves pens and cigarettes from her shirt, then stretches out on a mattress and watches Arjun over the stove. By the time he's brought the coffee over, she's asleep. These two minutes perfectly distil the lazy, lived-in rhythms of Krishen and Roy's film, the little indie that refused to fade away.

# Amrita Sher-Gil's story on a string

A new show employs a mix of puppets, live action and objects to recount the life of the Indian modernist

Deepali Dhinra

Capturing the essence of Amrita Sher-Gil's life in a matter of 60 minutes is no easy feat. In spite of the volumes written about the avant-garde modernist, her life remains an enigma—a woman at the intersection of geographies, cultures and identities.

This was a challenge for Dadi D. Pudumjee, the founder of Ishara Puppet Theatre Trust. The puppeteer was looking for a premise for his show on Sher-Gil but was not content with making a typical, formal treatise. He hit upon it after his co-writer, Shankajet D. chanced upon a photograph of the artist at a Paris café. "In the photograph, Amrita is sitting and talking and there are a couple of men sitting around her, and I thought of using something similar for the premise," he says.



The play is part of Ishara International Puppet Theatre Festival in Delhi.

task? A project on Sher-Gil. But as they sift through the overwhelming documentation, they find themselves lost, until the artist herself emerges in puppet form to invite them into her world.

The show uses live action, puppets, objects, music, video projections and storytelling to recount the story of the artist, who was born in Budapest in 1913 to an

aristocratic Sikh father and a Hungarian mother. She lived in Europe for many years and died at the young age of 28 in Lahore. The theatrical tapestry comes alive with the help of research, including two books written by her nephew and artist, the late Vivan Sundaram, and curator-historian Yashodhara Dalmia's book *Amrita Sher-Gil: A Life*.

"The Hungarian Cultural Centre also joined us in support because of her Hungarian roots," adds Pudumjee. Institutional support came from The Sher-Gil Sundaram Arts Foundation and the National Gallery of Modern Art.

"Through the show, we are trying to explore who Amrita really was... She was also really focused, which becomes clear in the letters she wrote to her parents and friends, as well as through her diary notes. Her likes and dislikes, even as a young girl, were extremely clear. She also critiqued her own work," he says.

Much of what Sher-Gil says (through her puppet) has been taken from her own texts. There are video montages of her paintings, interspersed with songs such as *Hymn to Love* by Edith Piaf and *I Want to Be Loved by You* by Edie Edy sung live by the actors. "There's also a bit of comedy humour in the dialogues, else it would become too much of an eulogy," feels Pudumjee, whose Ishara International Puppet Theatre Festival is in its 22nd year.

"Although my initial studies in puppetry were traditional, my philosophy behind working with youth and with adults comes from Swedish puppeteer Michael Meschke, who believed puppets should be a medium for expression rather than the focal point of the spectacle," he says.

At *Stein Auditorium, India Habitat Centre, Delhi, 4pm and 7.30pm, 22 February. Age: 15 plus*

# Kunal Popat

## BABY STEPS

The co-founder of premium baby brand R for Rabbit on starting a business inspired by his daughter's needs, and getting other parents to trust his products

Illustration by Priya Kuriyan

Jahnabee Borah  
jahnabee.b@livemint.com

"I am old fashioned," says Kunal Popat on a video call from his office in Ahmedabad, wearing black-rimmed glasses and a white shirt with a pen peeking out from the pocket. The 43-year-old is not a regular on social media, speaks in hard numbers and prefers "step-by-step" to "aggressive growth".

Step-by-step embodies his approach to establishing the premium baby brand R for Rabbit with his wife Kinjal, which they started in 2014 with an initial capital of about 140 lakh from their savings. It was valued at ₹850 crore by the end of 2025, he says. The buzz for the brand grew through word-of-mouth on moms' groups on WhatsApp.

R for Rabbit is a dominant player in the homegrown, premium baby product segment with essentials ranging from baby gear to diapers and cribs, targeting the age group 0-5. The market research firm Technavio forecasts India's baby care industry to grow at a CAGR of 24.3% from 2025 to 2030, driven by the increase in disposable income and rapid urbanisation. It is evident in the steady rise of homegrown childcare brands like Mee Mee, Luvlap, Mother Sparsh and R for Rabbit that emphasise safety, quality and cater to specific needs. In August 2025, Popat raised funds to the tune of ₹240 crore in the Series B stage—led by the investment firm Filter Capital and venture capital firm 3one4 capital—indicating ambitious expansion plans.

Popat comes from the heritage city of Gondal in the Saurashtra region of Gujarat. His family owned a wholesale grain shop. He moved to the state capital to pursue chemical engineering from Nirma Institute of Technology in 1999. As a fresh graduate, he secured a job with a specialised polymer factory Gharda

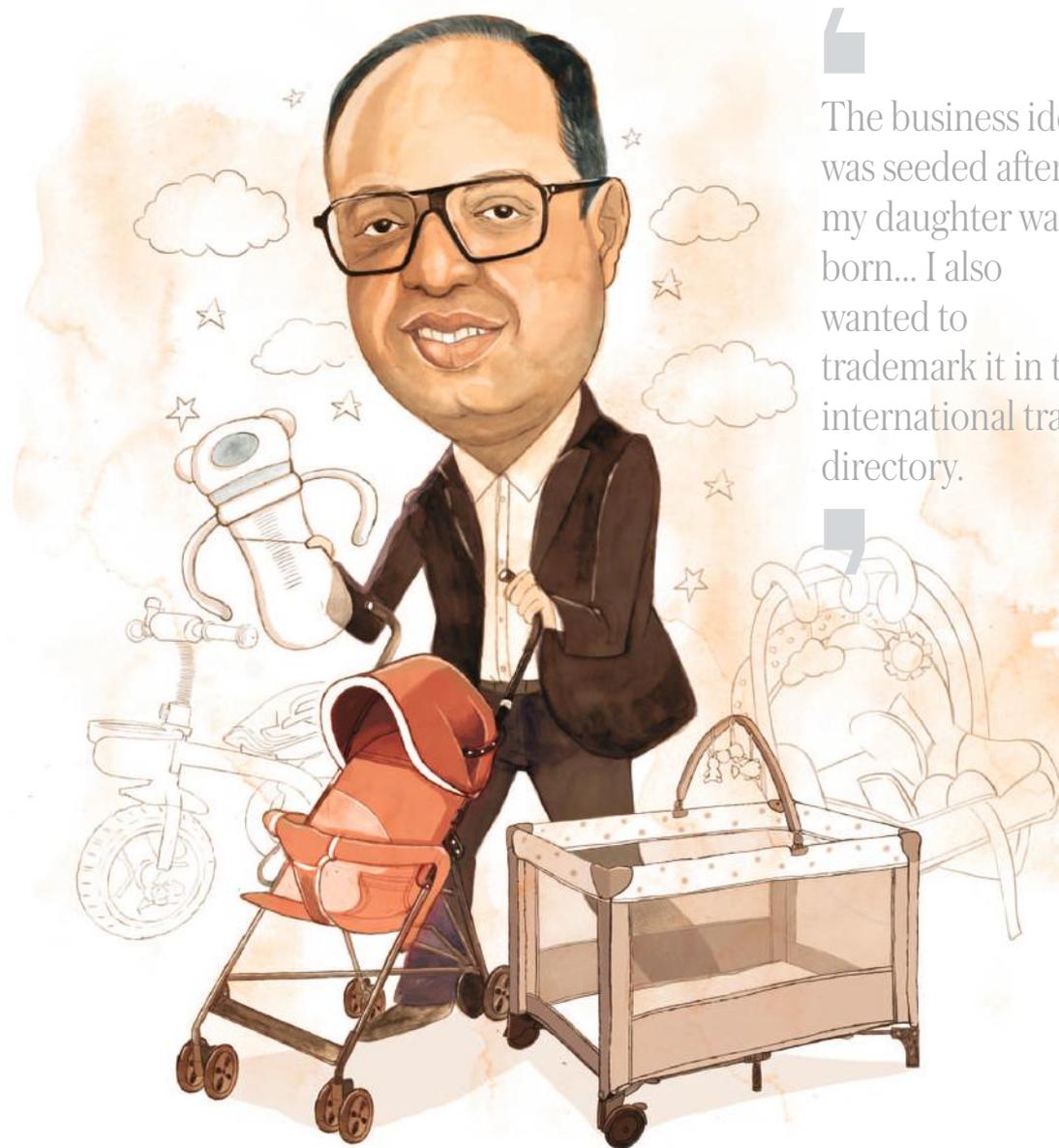
The biggest share of traffic comes from tier-1 cities and metros with a revenue of ₹240 crore last financial year as an omnichannel business

Chemicals in Ankleshwar, Gujarat in 2003. Within a year and a half, he realised it wasn't the right fit and enrolled for a brand management degree from ICFAI, Ahmedabad, followed by an MBA in marketing from Mumbai's Narsee Monjee Institute of Management Studies in 2006. Thereafter, he returned to Ahmedabad and entered the IT sector with Tectona Soft Solutions as a business executive and left as a senior executive after 18 months. This was followed by Sophos, also in Ahmedabad, where he spent 11 years and climbed up the corporate ladder to become assistant vice-president, overseeing expansions in West Asia and Europe.

Although his career in IT took off, he couldn't stop thinking about starting a business. "It was a default bug. I knew when the time was right, I would take the leap of faith. It arrived when I was blessed with a daughter in 2011." When the Popats welcomed baby Aarna that year, they faced an unexpected problem. It had to do with the traditional crib—cum—swing—god-*hiyu* used in Gujarati homes. The hammock-like cradle has a removable wooden rod, which Popat sensed could be a safety hazard. Besides, the low height of the crib did not make it easy to use. He looked for better options in Ahmedabad and found nothing that met global safety standards.

At that time, his job with Sophos involved extensive overseas travel. As a new parent, he was inclined to look for baby items wherever he went and discovered products that were ergonomically designed, emphasised safety and looked good too. While he brought back infant personal care essentials like anti-rash creams and lotions, baby gear such as cribs and cots were too bulky. In Ahmedabad, the only store with high quality, international baby products adhering to credible safety protocols was the now-shuttered Mom & Me. But availability was limited to the American brand Graco and the Italian company Chicco.

"They were expensive with stroller prices ranging from ₹20,000-24,000. I am Gujarati, and I know what fair pricing entails. Even though I could afford them, I refused to shell out money for the extravagant price bloated by the operating costs of those companies. The baby would grow up in 2-3 years and the cost didn't add



The business idea was seeded after my daughter was born... I also wanted to trademark it in the international trade directory.

up," he says.

Popat sensed a business opportunity to fill the market gap—the unavailability of premium, high-quality baby products secured with international safety measures for a price-sensitive market. It birthed R for Rabbit, a name inspired by his daughter's favourite toy. "The business idea was seeded after she was born, I wanted the name to have a link with her. Plus, I wanted to trademark it in the international trade directory," he explains, underscoring the ambition for global expansion.

The business began as a side hustle in 2014, with Popat putting in some money from his savings. The first product was a three-in-one item, Cradle and Crib, that functioned as a cot, crib and playpen. Kinjal, who has a degree in fashion from NIFT, joined him as co-founder. The Popats were determined to give their products a premium feel and hired a product design company in Ahmedabad. It looked great on paper, and they patented it but when the final model arrived, the hardware and quality were letdowns. This led Popat to China for manufacturing.

"We couldn't take loans, we didn't have anything for mortgage guarantee, not even ancestral property. I risked my savings, because we were in building mode," he shares.

Despite his efforts, there weren't many takers for the Cradle-and-Crib; it was

ahead of its time. They rolled back its production, added strollers, carry cots, mini washing machines and baby walkers. The three-kilo washing machine was another novel concept, introduced for parents who sought convenience while cleaning baby clothes separately. They soon faced a problem: Customers expected after-sales service, but R for Rabbit was not in that segment, and they had to retire the product.

Although there were product failures, R for Rabbit made a modest revenue of ₹8 lakh in the first year, which rose to ₹1.6 crore in year two, followed by ₹3.6 crore in 2016. The incremental growth convinced Popat to quit his job. Around that time, his father-in-law bought a tricycle for Aarna. "Assembling was a headache with many nuts and bolts along with a complicated manual. We wanted to solve this problem. It should be simple with plug-and-play parts, a straightforward manual to enable anyone to put it together," he says while narrating the background story of launching a range of ride-ons in 2017. Just before the lockdown in 2020, they stepped into the feeding segment with teething, milk bottles and nibblers.

They were bootstrapped and Popat took every possible loan. His approach was to make do with debt until the brand reached decent sales figures for fund-raising. Pre-covid, the equity route was quite new, there were not enough venture capi-

### How do you recharge?

I go for a swim when things get stressful.

### What do you do in your free time?

Read, especially books by Jim Collins.

### Comfort food?

Regional dishes from Saurashtra.

tal players. "Equity money is the most expensive in the world with high investor expectations, stake holding and multiple covenants. We delayed fund-raising as much as possible, but by 2021 we did an annual turnover of about ₹70 crore, our fundamentals were strong and we wanted to enter a bigger market—diapers. We were competing against global giants like Procter & Gamble's Pampers and needed big money." The private equity firm Xponentia Capital Partners came on board that year with a ₹40 crore investment in a Series A round.

Popat was motivated to launch diapers to address a significant pain point. Their target parent groups in the urban, upper middle-class category were getting diapers from the US through friends and family, or buying imported ones at ₹30-40 per piece. In 2022, they introduced the superlight Feather Diapers. They did persistent trials offering sample packets of three diapers for ₹1. It worked in their favour. "Currently, in the premium lifestyle category, we rank No.2 after Pampers Premium," he claims.

Although premium, their pricing is competitive with the average cost of a stroller at ₹7,000, car seat at ₹9,000 and diapers at ₹20 for one—the three most popular categories in their product basket. Their headline items—durable, non-fabric gear like strollers, car seats and furniture—are more popular offline through

third-party retail partners. The biggest share of traffic comes from tier-1 cities and metros with a revenue of ₹240 crore last financial year as an omnichannel business.

Their toughest challenge arrived in 2023. Most of their raw material comes from China and Chinese containers were held up by port congestion. At the same time, the dollar appreciated. R for Rabbit's freight cost soared ten times, eroding their revenue. "This situation was outside the purview of my vision," Popat says. It was the worst market to raise funds, but they went for a second round to survive. They got ₹10 crore from Negen Capital as Pre Series B, which felt like "oxygen", in his words. In 2025, they raised ₹240 crore in Series B funding.

The funds have been directed towards setting up a manufacturing unit in Ahmedabad as a deliberate shift away from dependence on China, especially post covid. Their current product basket has around 60 items with 500-plus SKUs run by a lean team of 181 employees. The goal is to expand their FMCG category, which now includes diapers and baby laundry liquid, for repeat buys, instead of one-time purchases like strollers and cots.

Popat's aim is to build a trust for the brand similar to the bond shared by parents and their paediatrician.

I didn't ask him how, but if I did, he would have said in his signature style: Step-by-step.



**Siddhaarth Mahan**

The author is a prolific sports writer, presenter and creates digital sports programmes. He brings a storyteller's touch for the game's deeper narratives.

## COLOMBO HOLDS ITS BREATH

# INDIA VS PAK ALL SET TO LIGHT UP THE T20 WORLD CUP AT PREMADASA



**C**overing World Cups in foreign land is always special and this time being in Colombo you don't need a fixture list to tell you what is coming. You feel it in the air. In taxi conversations, in hotel lobbies, in small tea shops near Galle Face. India vs Pakistan is around the corner, and the city knows it. Tickets for the T20 World Cup blockbuster at the R. Premadasa Stadium are reportedly sold out, prices in nearby areas have crept up, and Colombo's streets are buzzing with a mix of anticipation and nervous excitement.

For Sri Lanka, this is not just another World Cup game but an event that lifts moods and briefly puts the city at the centre of the cricketing universe. The Premadasa looks ready. The pitch, already the subject of endless speculation, and the stadium staff are bracing for one of the loudest nights Colombo has hosted in years.

Neutral venues rarely feel neutral when India and Pakistan play, and Sri Lanka knows this better than most. The economic ripple is visible too, restaurants extending hours, ride-hailing apps surging, small vendors stocking flags in both colours. Cricket, once again, is doing what it does best here, bringing people together and putting money into pockets.

On paper, the build-up tilts heavily in India's favour. India lead Pakistan 7-1 in T20 World Cup meetings, a record that has slowly turned this rivalry from a knife-edge contest into one where pressure increasingly sits on Pakistan's shoulders. Add to that the events of Septem-

**The Premadasa surface, traditionally slow and offering turn as matches progress, is far more familiar to Pakistan's spinners than to India's top order, which is more accustomed to pace-on batting tracks. If the pitch behaves as expected, Pakistan's spin options could become a decisive factor, especially in the middle overs where games at this venue are often won or lost**



ber 2025, when India beat Pakistan three times in the Asia Cup, including a commanding final, to be crowned Asian champions, and the narrative writes itself. India arrive as favourites, with momentum, confidence and a deep squad that most teams envy.

And yet, India vs Pakistan is never that simple. This Indian side, formidable as it is, is not without its concerns. Injuries and illnesses have disrupted preparation. Abhishek Sharma's stomach infection and brief hospitalisation has cast doubt over his availability, and even if he recovers in time, the episode has interrupted rhythm at a crucial moment. In T20 cricket, where roles are sharply defined and margins razor-thin, the absence or reduced effectiveness of one player can open gaps that smart opponents are quick to exploit.

Pakistan, for all their in-

hand, carry the weight of history and public expectation. Every early wicket, every quiet over, will amplify pressure.

What makes this contest compelling is not just the teams, but the setting. Sri Lanka offers conditions that neutralise reputations. Big hitters can look ordinary. Part-time bowlers suddenly find grip. Matches stretch deep, demanding patience rather than power. For India, adaptability will be key, choosing when to attack, when to absorb pressure, and how to manage a bowling attack on a surface that rewards discipline over pace.

Pakistan's familiarity with these conditions could allow them to dictate terms early. If their spinners settle into a rhythm and their batters show restraint, they have the tools to turn this into a scrap rather than a shootout. And scrappy games are exactly where India-Pakistan encounters tend to become unforgettable. As match day approaches, Colombo feels ready. Ready for the noise, the colour, the tension. Ready for a contest that will be analyzed, debated, and replayed long after the final ball.

Perhaps the clearest sign of how big this contest is can be heard in the voices of Sri Lankan children. Loyal followers of their own national team, they insist they are neutral for this clash, yet in the same breath quietly admit that India look the stronger side and the team they expect to win.

On a humid Colombo night at the Premadasa, history will offer clues, but it won't offer answers. That's why everyone is watching.

THE VIEWS EXPRESSED BY THE AUTHOR ARE PERSONAL

## IN-DEPTH

### RAFALE JETS TO PLUG OPERATIONAL GAPS IN IAF

**I**ndia's approval of a mega deal to acquire 114 4.5-generation Dassault Rafale fighter jets from France signals a decisive push to strengthen the Indian Air Force at a critical juncture. With squadron strength below sanctioned levels and regional security challenges intensifying, the move underscores the urgency of plugging operational gaps.

The Rafale's performance in Operation Sindoor appears to have reinforced confidence in the platform's capabilities — from advanced avionics to multi-role flexibility. Its proven combat readiness and compatibility with India's existing fleet reduce risks that often accompany large defence acquisitions. In that sense, the decision reflects continuity rather than experimentation.

Yet the purchase also highlights the continuing tension between immediate security needs and long-term self-reliance. India's indigenous fighter development programme remains a work in progress, aspiring to reduce dependence on imports. The scale of this deal suggests that domestic production is still some distance from meeting urgent requirements.

The challenge, therefore, is to ensure that such acquisitions complement — not crowd out — indigenous capability building.

### STALIN WOOS WOMEN WITH 6 AM BONANZA



**T**amil Nadu's political culture has long been associated with competitive welfare — from subsidised food to consumer goods distributed in the run-up to elections. Yet Chief Minister MK Stalin appears to have raised the bar. The early morning transfer of Rs 5,000 directly into the bank accounts of about 1.31 crore women was not merely another welfare announcement; it was a carefully timed political signal. The money arrived at 6 am, before many beneficiaries had begun their day, creating both immediacy and impact.

On the face of it, direct benefit transfers represent a more transparent alternative to the older culture of physical giveaways. Funds move straight into verified accounts, cutting out middlemen and reducing leakages. For women managing fragile household budgets amid inflationary pressures, such support can be meaningful. In that sense, the scheme may be defended as a legitimate welfare intervention.

Yet timing is everything in politics. By rolling out the transfer even before election dates are announced, the ruling party has effectively blurred the line between governance and campaigning. It sets a new precedent: cash benefits delivered at politically opportune moments without technically breaching the model code of conduct. Other parties will now feel compelled to respond in kind, intensifying a competitive spiral of pre-election largesse.

The larger question is whether this approach strengthens democratic choice or narrows it to transactional politics. Welfare is essential in a state with genuine social needs. But when policy and poll strategy become indistinguishable, voters must ask whether empowerment is being deepened — or simply timed and whether they should vote for the DMK.

## ENDURANCE CONTEST

What makes this contest compelling is not just the teams, but the setting. Sri Lanka offers conditions that neutralise reputations. Big hitters can look ordinary. Part-time bowlers suddenly find grip. Matches stretch deep, demanding patience rather than power. For India, adaptability will be key, choosing when to attack, when to absorb pressure, and how to manage a bowling attack on a surface that rewards discipline over pace.

Pakistan's familiarity with these conditions could allow them to dictate terms early. If their spinners settle into a rhythm and their batters show restraint, they have the tools to turn this into a scrap rather than a shootout.

**On the face of it, direct benefit transfers represent a more transparent alternative to the older culture of physical giveaways. Funds move straight into verified accounts, cutting out middlemen and reducing leakages**

The Statesman Incorporating and directly descended from the Friends of India founded 1818

Time To Ask Why

The way forward demands honesty and transparency in governance, discarding the colonial attitude that still lingers in grassroots administration. Officials must shed their layers of security and distance, and instead engage directly with citizens. Service must replace servility, and accountability must replace arrogance. The system must be designed to respond on its own, not only when pushed by outrage or to answer a 'why.'

Speed vs Sense

India's latest overhaul of online content rules signals a decisive shift in how the state wants to govern the digital public square. By compressing takedown timelines to a matter of hours and extending regulatory reach into AI-generated material, the message is clear: speed now matters more than deliberation. The intention - curbing harm, deception, and abuse - is understandable. The method, however, risks creating a system that prizes instant compliance over careful judgement.

The three-hour window for removing unlawful content is not just a technical tweak. It fundamentally changes how platforms will behave. When the clock is that tight, there is no realistic space for human review, contextual assessment, or legal scrutiny.

The rational response for any platform will be to automate and over-comply. Faced with penalties and uncertainty, companies will take content down first and ask questions later - if at all. The collateral damage will be borne by lawful speech that is controversial, critical, satirical, or simply inconvenient.

This is not a hypothetical concern. Even under longer timelines, content moderation has struggled with errors, bias, and blunt decision-making. Shrinking the window further does not solve these problems; it hardens them into the system. In effect, we are outsourcing complex judgments about legality and public interest to algorithms trained to minimise risk, not to uphold democratic values.

The new rules on AI-generated content tell a more complicated story. Here, the instinct is largely right. Synthetic audio, video, and images are getting better, cheaper, and more persuasive. Deepfakes and fabricated documents can ruin reputations, incite panic, or manipulate public opinion at scale. Requiring labels on traceability is a sensible step toward restoring a basic level of trust in what we see and hear online.

But even this well-meaning move runs ahead of technical reality. Reliable, tamper-proof labelling systems are still evolving. Automated detection tools remain uneven, especially across languages and contexts as diverse as India's. Turning these imperfect tools into legal obligations risks both false positives and selective enforcement. When technology becomes the gatekeeper of legality, its limitations quickly become society's problem.

Taken together, these changes reveal a deeper shift in regulatory philosophy. The priority is no longer just preventing harm, but doing so at maximum speed and scale. That may produce quicker results on paper, but it also nudges the internet toward a culture of pre-emptive silence, where platforms, creators, and users all learn that restraint is safer than expression.

A democracy as large and argumentative as India's depends on friction just as it does on debate, disagreement, and the messy process of sorting truth from error in public. Regulation has a role in protecting citizens from real harm.

But when urgency replaces judgment, and automation replaces accountability, the cure can begin to resemble a different kind of ailment. The challenge now is not just to make the internet safer, but to do so without making it thinner, quieter, and more afraid.

Narrow Survival

The most revealing moments in politics are rarely the ones that are planned. They are the ones that do not. When a leader survives a week of open dissent, hostile headlines, and whispers of rebellion, it is tempting to call it a victory. But such episodes usually mark something more ambiguous: a pause in the argument about authority, not its resolution.

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer's latest brush with political danger fits that pattern. He has emerged still in office, publicly backed by his cabinet and potential rivals, and determined to protest resolve. Yet the drama that unfolded around him was not a freak storm. It was the product of accumulated doubts - about judgement, about instinct, and about the way power is exercised at the centre.

At the heart of the crisis lay a question that modern governments keep failing to answer convincingly: how much risk is acceptable in the name of experience, loyalty, or convenience?

The controversy over a senior appointment was not just about one individual's past associations. It was about whether the government's sense of caution had been dulled by the pressure to move fast and look decisive. When assurances replace hard scrutiny, leaders do not merely gamble with reputations; they gamble with their own credibility.

The response made things worse before it made them better. Attempts to control the pace and scope of disclosure signalled evasiveness at precisely the moment when candour was needed.

When members of the governing party begin to force the issue from inside, it is usually because they believe the leadership has misread both the facts and the mood. That is not rebellion for sport; it is a warning flare.

For now, the Prime Minister survives because his colleagues have concluded that a leadership contest would be more damaging than an uneasy unity. That is a necessary, if temporary, support rooted in fear of the alternative rather than confidence in the present. Such arrangements are fragile. They depend on the absence of new shocks, not the presence of renewed trust.

Why has societal indifference become the defining trait of our times? Why do rules get broken with impunity, failures shrugged off, and dangers accepted as if they were destiny? We have stopped asking 'why' when things go wrong, and instead settle for the convenient 'because' offered by those responsible to perform. The tragedy lies not only in unresponsive infrastructure but in a deeper national insensitivity - silence, and the apathy to ask why.

Cities choke, roads crumble, water remains polluted, food is adulterated, and healthcare fails. Each crisis is explained away as an accident or inevitability. Children are bitten by stray dogs, passenger buses intimidate with blaring horn horns and reckless overtaking, and lives are lost to preventable neglect.

A child killed by a speeding car inside a gated society, an engineer drowned in a waterlogged pond near a street, families poisoned by unsafe food - these are not isolated tragedies; they are symptoms of a nation that has grown insensitive to its own pain, without asking the 'why' of it.

We see motorists racing brand-new cars over potholes without caring for fellow commuters, riders without helmets, drivers glued to mobile phones, and traffic police standing idle as chaos unfolds.

There is no justification for most of the roads including the much talked about Eastern Peripheral expressway to have dangerous and uncomfortable pot holes, rough and uneven surfaces. No suspension in any car can withstand such surfaces.

The irony is that despite this, we all pay toll tax. Yet, there is no 'why', there is no answer and there is none to take responsibility. Sadly, we neither demand nor ask 'why'.

Why do road accidents remain one of the starkest indicators of our indifference? In 2024 alone, India recorded 4.73 lakh accidents and 1.70 lakh deaths. These are not just numbers; they are families shattered, futures crused. Unsafe driving on roads has become routine. Cars and delivery motorcycles speed recklessly, residents use mobile phones while driving, and children are left vulnerable.

Yet enforcement is lax, discipline absent, and public outrage muted. Even when CCTV cameras capture violations, few societies enforce penalties. In the absence of 'why', our silence becomes complicity. Road safety mirrors this indifference.

Việt Nam News

The election of deputies to the 16th National Assembly and People's Councils for the 2026-2031 term will take place shortly after the successful 14th National Congress of the Communist Party of Viet Nam, marking an important step in translating the Congress's orientations into practice. Against this backdrop, the Viet Nam Fatherland Front is playing a central role in consultations, supervision and efforts to ensure democracy and transparency.

At present, the entire political system is actively and urgently preparing for the polling day on March 15, reflecting the principle of putting the people at the centre and the spirit of a State of the people, by the people, and for the people. The documents adopted at the 14th

National Party Congress consistently emphasise this approach. The election therefore represents the most vivid expression of citizens' democratic rights, enabling voters to choose their representatives to serve in the National Assembly, the highest State power body, and in the People's Councils at all levels.

Once elected, these representatives will participate in deciding major national issues and in instituting the Party's policies and orientations adopted at the 14th Congress. The Viet Nam Fatherland Front has eight core responsibilities in the election, among which consultations to introduce candidates for National Assembly and

People's Council positions are central. Under regulations, Fatherland Front committees at all levels organise three rounds of consultations. The first was held from December 1 to 10, 2025. The second concluded on February 2 and to compile preliminary candidate lists. The third round is scheduled for February 11, when the final list of candidates will be announced. In addition, the Front plays a key role in public communication, helping citizens fully understand their rights and responsibilities under the Constitution and the Law on Elections, and encouraging participation from the early stages through to polling day. Throughout the process, we strengthen supervision over State agencies and electoral bodies at both central and local



Unchecked vehicles and an exploited gig economy put millions at risk daily. Speed is prized over safety, exploitation over dignity, and silence over reform.

The irony is that every big town or district has sufficient staff, funds, and facilities to address these failures. Yet large areas remain covered with plastic waste, roads remain broken, drains overflow, and wires hang loose. Citizens pay tolls on expressways riddled with dangerous surfaces, but there is no why and therefore not even a 'because'.

Healthcare, education, and food safety spend the same neglect. India spends Rs 6.1 lakh crore on health - just 3.8 per cent of GDP - still far below global norms. Citizens shoulder heavy costs, and rural care remains fragile.

Education is equally troubling: nearly half of Class 5 students in government schools cannot read a Class 2 text, while private schools surge ahead. This dual system entrenches inequality and leaves millions unprepared. Why do we allow such inequality to persist without protest?

Why do rivers foam with untreated sewage, industrial discharge, poison supplies, and citizens drink without protest? Food adulteration has reached even sacred institutions - the Tirumala ghee scam revealed millions of kilos of synthetic ghee worth Rs 250 crore.

Regulators failed, faith was betrayed, and society adjusted. Power transmission and distribution losses remain at 16-17 per cent, largely due to theft and apathy. Teachers in government schools are diverted to voter list preparation, leaving classrooms empty. Police personnel are inadequately trained, often standing idle as chaos unfolds on the roads.

Citizens instead of demanding accountability, attend Jan Darbaras where officials appear more as rulers doling out favours than as service providers apologising for failures. Why do we accept this invasion of responsibility as routine?

We may walk through any market or shopping centre - the neglect is visible everywhere. Why should we not demand systems and infrastructure that work, delivering solutions rather than merely recording complaints and responding only when pushed?

Why should officials and elected representatives cling to colonial postures, serving masters instead of providing service to the very people who vote for them? True governance must mean service for all, regardless of faith, caste, or region.

It is now the duty of educated citizens to insist on transparency, to shed the layers of distance that shield officials from the public, and to reject information tailored to please superiors when governance should be about serving the nation.

Why has governance become theatre instead of service? Bureaucrats arrive with entourage, files shuffle endlessly in red tape, and senior officers avoid surprise visits - or the real picture of civic negligence is never seen, and accountability never enforced. Political interference keeps them under constant threat of transfer or suspension. Instead of serving citizens, they serve masters, never obligated to answer the why of this deviation. Defiance and disrespect to authority are not genetic traits; they reflect aculture where those expected to set examples instead display arrogance, dishonesty, and disregard for rules.

Bureaucrats, armed with extraordinary powers, behave like autocrats - insensitive to urgency or effort. Technically intensive departments are often led by officers with no expertise, sidelining qualified personnel and weakening them. Silence makes accountability disappear. Citizenship is hollowed out, reduced to casting a vote every five years while enduring failures every day.

A democracy without active citizens is a shell - and India, aspiring to be a fully developed nation, cannot risk that. Another dimension of insensitivity is moral. When we stop asking why, we stop caring about the future.

We adjust to potholes, unsafe wiring, adulterated food, polluted rivers, and plastic

waiste and broken schools. We tell ourselves it is inevitable, that nothing will change. But this resignation is dangerous. It teaches the next generation that negligence is normal, that corruption is acceptable, and that mediocrity is destiny.

Why should we pass up such a legacy of indifference? The moral cost of indifference is greater than the physical one - it is the slow erosion of hope. The way forward demands honesty and transparency in governance, discarding the colonial attitude that still lingers in grassroots administration.

Officials must shed their layers of security and distance, and instead engage directly with citizens. Service must replace servility, and accountability must replace arrogance. The system must be designed to respond on its own, not only when pushed by outrage or to answer a 'why'.

Above all, education and meaningful skill development must be the highest priority. India's young population is its greatest asset, but without quality schooling, uniform standards, and vocational training, their becoming an unemployable rather than empowered. Why do we allow this potential to be wasted?

Why do we let politics overshadow the urgent need to build a disciplined, skilled, and responsible citizenry? While winning or losing elections are inherent signatures of any democracy, building a capable Nation must remain the first priority of any government.

Only then can governance can serve the people rather than manipulate them. And yet, change is possible. A sensitive nation is not built by miracles, but by citizens who refuse to tolerate injustice, negligence, or indiscrimination. It is built by people who ask questions relentlessly, who demand accountability, who challenge failures at every level. Silence must give way to resolve.

Indifference must be replaced by courage. Why should we accept mediocrity when excellence is within reach? Why should we adjust to corruption when honesty is the rightful expectation?

We must replace resignation with resolve. Only then can we transform from an insensitive nation into a responsible one and truly become a developed nation. As Martin Luther King Jr. aptly said, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter" and today asking the 'why' makes sense.

Only then can governance can serve the people rather than manipulate them. And yet, change is possible. A sensitive nation is not built by miracles, but by citizens who refuse to tolerate injustice, negligence, or indiscrimination. It is built by people who ask questions relentlessly, who demand accountability, who challenge failures at every level. Silence must give way to resolve.

Indifference must be replaced by courage. Why should we accept mediocrity when excellence is within reach? Why should we adjust to corruption when honesty is the rightful expectation?

We must replace resignation with resolve. Only then can we transform from an insensitive nation into a responsible one and truly become a developed nation. As Martin Luther King Jr. aptly said, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter" and today asking the 'why' makes sense.

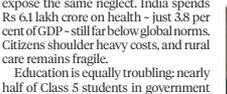
Only then can governance can serve the people rather than manipulate them. And yet, change is possible. A sensitive nation is not built by miracles, but by citizens who refuse to tolerate injustice, negligence, or indiscrimination. It is built by people who ask questions relentlessly, who demand accountability, who challenge failures at every level. Silence must give way to resolve.

Indifference must be replaced by courage. Why should we accept mediocrity when excellence is within reach? Why should we adjust to corruption when honesty is the rightful expectation?

We must replace resignation with resolve. Only then can we transform from an insensitive nation into a responsible one and truly become a developed nation. As Martin Luther King Jr. aptly said, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter" and today asking the 'why' makes sense.

Only then can governance can serve the people rather than manipulate them. And yet, change is possible. A sensitive nation is not built by miracles, but by citizens who refuse to tolerate injustice, negligence, or indiscrimination. It is built by people who ask questions relentlessly, who demand accountability, who challenge failures at every level. Silence must give way to resolve.

Indifference must be replaced by courage. Why should we accept mediocrity when excellence is within reach? Why should we adjust to corruption when honesty is the rightful expectation?



S. S. SAKENA The writer is a retired Air Commodore, VSM, of the Indian Air Force

Gamble works

Sir, I refer to 'Boost for India-Japan relations'. Japan's first female Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's gamble of a snap election has paid off. Her decisive majority of 316 seats out of 465 really augurs well for Japan's stability. Takaichi has promised to increase women participation in her cabinet and take them to Nordic levels like Norway, Finland and Iceland and introduce family friendly policies. She has an enormous task ahead of her to revive Japan's economy which has been sluggish and its public debt is the largest in the world. Rising prices are pushing Japanese people and the Bank of Japan will



forward her mentor late Shinzo Abe's legacy then not only Japan can enter an era of political stability but India-Japan ties can further strengthen. Yours, etc., Bal Govind, Noida, 10 February.

Balance

Sir, This refers to the editorial 'The Rebalance' (February 10). The piece rightly notes that emerging markets, once seen as volatile and speculative, are now becoming integral to global growth. The revival of equity and currency strength in these economies signals a shift from excessive concentration toward a healthier distribution of capital. India's example illustrates how

demographic strength and diversified activity can sustain investor confidence. Yet, risks remain - cycles are uneven, and credibility and openness will determine which markets attract durable investment. The challenge is not to chase momentum but to build frameworks that ensure stability and transparency. A constructive way forward would be for policymakers to deepen institutional reforms and for investors to adopt selective, long-term strategies that balance opportunity with resilience. This balanced approach can make the current rebalancing a lasting gain rather than a passing phase. Yours, etc., Avinashipannar Mylissami, Coimbatore, 10 February.

SATURDAY INTERVIEW

'Vital to balance population growth'

BJP MLA from the Sarojini Nagar Assembly segment in Lucknow, Dr Rajeshwar Singh, is a prominent face, because of his role in the bureaucracy and in politics. Known for his tenure as Joint Director of the Enforcement Directorate (ED) and now as the saffron party legislator from the state capital, Singh belongs to a family of top bureaucrats.

Over the past four years, his constituency has witnessed remarkable development in the fields of education, infrastructure, industry, health, transport, environment, and social welfare. Most new projects of Lucknow were established in his area.

Whether it is the BrahMos missile unit, Ashok Leyland Defence Industrial Corridor, AI City, Foreign Languages University, and several others, all came during his tenure. He has also acted in the 2011 film 'Kya Yahi Sach Hai', which talked about rampant corruption within the police force and the politician-police nexus.

Q: You have demanded that UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath bring an area-wise demography policy to control the population and spruce up developmental projects as per needs. What is this demography policy?

A: The proposal aims to promote balanced population growth, women's empowerment, and social harmony through targeted policy measures. I have called for the introduction of an Area-Wise Demographic Policy (ADP) in Uttar Pradesh, citing the growing demographic 'imbalance' between Hindu and Muslim populations in the state.

Q: You are known as a tough policeman and investigator. But suddenly you left the flourishing Civil Services and joined politics. What was the reason for the step?

A: I feel that everyone who achieves the top position in any field should join politics to serve the nation and society. Though there are several efficient politicians, there is still a dearth of expertise in several fields. It is the duty of every individual who can serve the nation with expertise to join politics and enrich the country. I never thought during my early career that I would join politics, but after achieving all my goals, I decided to join politics.

Q: Tell us about the achievements in your political life as the MLA from the most important Assembly segment of the state.

A: There are hundreds of things done during this four-year term in

my constituency, but the major achievement is that more than 20,000 new jobs have been generated with the establishment of a DRDO unit of the BrahMos Missile, a new unit of Ashok Leyland EC Bus manufacturing, and several other small and big industrial units in the Sarojini Nagar area.

Besides this, the establishment of Bharatendu Naya Academy, English and Foreign Languages University, Uttar Pradesh State Forensic Science Institute (UPSFSI), Lucknow University's Agriculture Campus, DRDO Laboratory, inclusion in the State Capital Region (SCR), launch of the Aero City concept, development of an IT Hub, and construction of Terminal 3 at Lucknow Airport, along with several others, have taken place.

Q: We also learn that you have suggested to CM Adityanath to set up a full-time Commission to regulate, monitor, and govern the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Uttar Pradesh. Tell us about it?

A: Recently I met the Chief Minister and urged him to set up an AI Commission. At this juncture, the AI Commission is required to help formulate policies/schemes by SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis for matters relating to AI and to create public awareness of both the pros and cons of artificial intelligence, with the Principal Secretary/Special Secretary/Secretary (IT) as Member Secretary of the commission.

The IT industry, which is currently valued at USD 100 billion, is predicted to rise 20-40% by 2030. AI systems can be deployed to record and maintain a database of criminals based on biometric identities/facial recognition. Improvements in fingerprint and facial recognition systems would contribute to efficient forensic analysis of crimes.

AI imaging technology can be used to monitor geographical factors and efficiently predict future disasters and timely deploy required resources for evacuation of people.

I have also suggested to the CM to include AI in the syllabus in schools for children from Standard 3 or 5, so that students get to know about this new technology from the beginning.

educated, equitable, and harmonious Uttar Pradesh.

Under the proposed policy, districts and blocks would be classified into 'Green', 'Amber', and 'Red' zones based on five key indicators: total fertility rate (TFR), child marriage prevalence, age at first birth, female education levels, and migration balance. The proposed ADP would promote data-driven governance that transcends caste and religious lines.

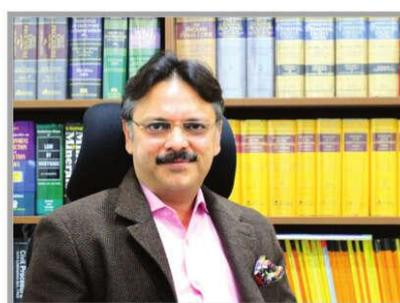
Q: We also learn that you have suggested to CM Adityanath to set up a full-time Commission to regulate, monitor, and govern the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Uttar Pradesh. Tell us about it?

A: Recently I met the Chief Minister and urged him to set up an AI Commission. At this juncture, the AI Commission is required to help formulate policies/schemes by SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis for matters relating to AI and to create public awareness of both the pros and cons of artificial intelligence, with the Principal Secretary/Special Secretary/Secretary (IT) as Member Secretary of the commission.

The IT industry, which is currently valued at USD 100 billion, is predicted to rise 20-40% by 2030. AI systems can be deployed to record and maintain a database of criminals based on biometric identities/facial recognition. Improvements in fingerprint and facial recognition systems would contribute to efficient forensic analysis of crimes.

AI imaging technology can be used to monitor geographical factors and efficiently predict future disasters and timely deploy required resources for evacuation of people.

I have also suggested to the CM to include AI in the syllabus in schools for children from Standard 3 or 5, so that students get to know about this new technology from the beginning.



Q: You have also raised the State Capital Region (SCR), similar to the NCR, for speedy development of the state capital and its adjoining districts. Please tell about it.

A: Yes, I have drafted an SCR policy for the region, and it will certainly create a developmental spree in the region like NCR. The state government is positive about this draft proposal. Lucknow is no longer an ordinary city but has become one of the fastest-growing metropolises in North India.

The city has expanded to about 900 Sq km, including the 631 Sq km municipal corporation area and peripheral gram sabhas, including suburbs like Sarojini Nagar, Mohanlalji, and Kakori, making it larger in area than Singapore and equivalent to the Singapore of Delhi-NCR. But the administrative structure is still departmental, manual, and reactive, while the need is for a data-driven, integrated, and future-oriented governance model.

Besides, Lucknow's population growth rate is 2.7 per cent per annum, but infrastructure expansion is only 1.2 per cent per annum. This difference will create serious urban pressure in the future. The current crisis facing Lucknow is that the city is expanding in an unplanned and unorganised manner, and about 45 per cent of the population lives in unauthorised or unplanned colonies.

Q: Lastly, what is your comment on the ongoing University Grant Commission (UGC) regulation issue, and what is your advice to students and youth who are agitating on the matter?

A: I have already expressed my statement in the party forum, and I am not ready to give any public statement as I am a disciplined party worker. The government will certainly look into the issue and will solve the matter soon. However, I advise the youth not to get involved in this issue, as people try to take advantage of their feelings for their vested interests. People want to divide society like the British did. Can you imagine that around 2 lakh Britishers made this huge country a slave just by creating divisions among us?



Front page of The Statesman dated 14 February, 1926

OCCASIONAL NOTE

AGAIN the Legislative Assembly has debated in its every aspect Regulation III, and everything remains as before. The feature of the discussion was the maiden speech of Mr. Donovan, showing him as a very notable recruit to the Assembly as well as adding much to the warmth of the discussion. There is one piece of advice that might be given to the opponents of the Regulation. They should cease to quote the case of Ireland—a very difficult thing for Indian legislators to do. The Irish analogy is not a good one, and it has been made ridiculous by the fact that the Free State has adopted republican measures by the side of which all the Coercion Acts of British Governments seem like the efforts of a nursery. What Indian opponents of the Regulation have to show is that the ordinary law is strong enough to deal with revolutionary crime, and that under it offenders can be certainly brought to justice. Regulation III is a distasteful measure, but the defence for it is that under existing circumstances it is a necessary measure. It will remain so until Indian opinion is so strongly for law and order that the ordinary law can be depended upon to bring offenders to justice and to protect all citizens.

News Items

AGRICULTURAL COMMISSION

LONDON, FEB. 13.—In the House of Commons Earl Winterton undertook to convey to Lord Birkenhead Sir Geoffrey Butler's suggestion that a more representative from the School of Agriculture of one of the British Universities be appointed to the Indian Agricultural Commission in view of the desirability of promoting British Universities' interest in tropical and semi-tropical agriculture.—Reuter.

MAIL TRAIN BLAZE MIDNIGHT SCENE NEAR RUGBY

(BRITISH OFFICIAL WIRELESS.) RUGBY, FEB. 13.—As the mail train from London to Manchester was rushing through Rugby Station at midnight one of the coaches was observed to be afire. The train was stopped and there followed a fight with the flames at the wayside station of Brinklow. The coach, however, was almost destroyed before the fire was extinguished, and a number of mail bags and a quantity of newspapers were lost.

BRITISH INDUSTRIES FAIR RECORD ENTRIES AND EXPECTATIONS

(BRITISH OFFICIAL WIRELESS.) RUGBY, FEB. 13.—THE Birmingham section of the British Industries Fair was opened for a preliminary Press view to-day, and will be open to the public for the next fortnight. Visitors from abroad are already arriving. Into the Exhibition buildings have been crowded a larger variety of exhibits than ever before. Extensive alterations have had to be made to accommodate the hardware, engineering, ironmongers' and electrical exhibits, the number of which exceeded expectations. Before these alterations were made the Exhibition Hall was the largest in the country. It is now far and away bigger than any other, having a floor area of over two hundred thousand square feet.

A notable feature in the Birmingham section this year, which is quite new to industrial exhibitions, is the provision by several hundred firms in the Midlands of arrangements for visitors to make a tour of their factories where they may see products shown actually in the making. These firms have provided huge fleets of private cars to convey visitors from the Exhibition to the factories and, where necessary, special trains will be chartered.

RUGBY'S TALK WITH NEW YORK WIRELESS TELEPHONY RECORD

LONDON, FEB. 13.—A FURTHER wireless triumph in the form of trans-Atlantic wireless tele-phony lasting fifteen and a half hours is officially announced by the Post Office, which states that Rugby talked with New York four from in the morning till seven thirty in the evening on February 7 under abnormally favourable conditions of ether, with very promising results. But it must be a considerable time before a commercial radio telegraph service across the Atlantic can be established, as numerous technical obstacles, must first be surmounted.—Reuter's Special Service.

J&K budget gambles on youth

ANKIT PATEL

On 6 February 2026, as Chief Minister and Finance Minister Omar Abdullah rose to present the Rs 113,767 crore budget for the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir, the atmosphere in the Legislative Assembly was one of heavy anticipation. Outside the hall, a generation of educated, digital-native, yet increasingly anxious youth looked towards the fiscal compass for a sign of direction.

For decades, the narrative of Jammu and Kashmir's economy has been one of volatility and unmet expectations. However, the 2026-27 budget represents a bold, if controversial, attempt to shift the gears from a government-dependent economy to an investment-led growth engine. But beyond the staggering spreadsheets and the 9.5 per cent projected GDP growth lies a human story, one that is defined by the struggle between the Street Vendor with a PhD syndrome and the new Nano-enterprise hope.

To understand the weight of this budget, one must look at the story of Ishrat, a 26-year-old postgraduate in Biotechnology from Anantnag. Just eighteen months ago, Ishrat's reality mirrored the alarming statistics cited in recent research. Despite her academic excellence, she found herself among the 35.3 per cent of urban youth in the region who are unemployed at a rate double the national average. "I had the degree, but the doors were locked", Ishrat recalls. In Kashmir, if you are not in a government job, you are often seen as unemployed.

create the ecosystem that Ishrat and her peers need to thrive.

For the youth of J&K, sports have always been more than a game, they are a bridge to the mainstream. The 2026-27 allocation of Rs 155 crore for Sports and Youth Affairs reflects a shift toward modernization. The proposed Digital Athlete Ecosystem will track performance via unique IDs and dashboards. This is not just about playing; it is about creating professional pathways. When elite athletes won 11 gold medals at the 69th National School Games, they proved that talent exists; the budget now provides the 'floodlighting and high-performance centres' to turn that talent into a career.

Perhaps the most debated aspect of Abdullah's budget is the mandate for industrial units to prioritize local hiring. The policy is simple: if you take government-subsidised land or electricity, you must hire J&K's youth. Critics, however, point to a structural reality. Most regional industries are small-scale and struggle with supply chain disruptions. Industry bodies like the CIC have cheered the 'visionary blueprint', but they also warn that symbolic compliance is a risk. Without a robust corporate presence, can a 'mandate' really solve the 32 per cent unemployment crisis? Research by the Jammu and Kashmir Policy

herself among the 35.3 per cent of urban youth in the region who are unemployed at a rate double the national average. "I had the degree, but the doors were locked", Ishrat recalls. In Kashmir, if you are not in a government job, you are often seen as unemployed.

Ishrat's turning point came through Mission YUVA (Yuva Udayam Vikas Abhiyan), a cornerstone of the government's youth strategy. Breaking the taboo of government job-only aspirations, she applied for a Rs 5 lakh loan under the Nano-enterprise model. With hand-holding from a Small Business Development Unit, she established a small-scale soil testing lab catering to local apple orchardists.

Today, Ishrat is not just self-employed; she employs two other graduates. Ishrat is one of the 85,000 success stories from the 2025-26 fiscal year, but she remains an outlier in a region where the Graduate Unemployment Rate has touched a staggering 46 per cent.

The 2026-27 budget is strategically bifurcated. On the one hand, it is a 'hope' document. The government has channelled the entire Rs 3,000 crore increase in the net budget into Capital Expenditure, taking the total to Rs 33,127 crore. This is a clear signal: the state is betting on infrastructure - roads, biotech parks, and Unity Malls to



Institute (JKPI) suggests that until the services sector which contributes 62 per cent to the GDP is fully integrated with modern skill-sets like AI and digital content creation, the brain drain will continue.

While the budget looks forward, it does not forget the scars of the past. The sponsorship scheme for 6,000 orphan children, providing Rs 4,000 per month via DBT, is a compassionate acknowledgement of the region's history. Combined with the increase in the State Marriage Assistance Scheme to Rs 75,000 and the expansion of the Ladli Beti scheme, the 2026-27 budget functions as a social security document for those the economy might otherwise leave behind.

Furthermore, the Street Vendor with a PhD phenomenon is a haunting reminder that a Nano-enterprise loan of Rs 5 lakh may not satisfy the aspirations of a research scholar.

The government's challenge is to ensure that Mission YUVA does not just create shopkeepers, but also innovators.

The Jammu and Kashmir Budget 2026-27 is a high-stakes gamble on the region's youth. It moves away from the old model of buying peace through government handouts and toward earning prosperity through entrepreneurship and digital literacy. Chief Minister Abdullah's fiscal compass is pointed in the right direction, but the success of this budget will not be measured by the Rs 113 lakh crore outlay. It will be measured by how many Ishrats can transition from job-seekers to job-creators. It will be measured by whether the Digital Athlete makes it to the international stage and whether the AAY student becomes a scientist.

(The writer is a student at IIMC, Jammu.)

Crossword No. 293375



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION
Across
1 Name first victim after school picnic (8)
2 Gratitude from Oscar-winner Tom? (6)
3 Right to escape the 'The Idiots' madhouse? (9,6)
4 Orange band unconvincing here at last shows bite (4)
5 Greatly increase receipts; that brings surprised reaction (6,4)
Down
13 Encounter worthless horse (4,4)
15 Busy worker recalls at first drink (4)
17 Bird or birds migrating west (4)
18 Race that celebrates more than local interest? (8)
20 Spar out in advertisement for e-mail manager (7)
21 Price of round and capacious cups? (4)

Down
22 Unusual reproduction in earphones gets distorted (15)
24 Commercial outlet in rural to Christmas (6)
25 Cultural illumination in view across France lake (8)
26 Banned cricketer over creating efforts in match? (5)
27 Intersworn material mine that captivates the French (5)
28 Pacific group about to enter 'distant races' (6,2,7)
29 Nature walks for dogs (6)
30 Some ways gathered about noon (5)
31 Member starts with three old examples (7,9)

FOCUS SUSTAINABILITY

HIGH SEAS TREATY MATTERS



Coastal and inland regions alike are vulnerable to catastrophic climate events fueled by rising ocean temperatures, and to marine exploitation from overfishing and bottom trawling

World Heritage site, ensuring that biodiversity could be conserved through consistent monitoring and community engagement. We hope this effort will serve as a model for others. Safeguarding nature must be science-based, inclusive, and designed to protect future generations. Regional networks will be essential to translate ocean goals into real-world policies, while also ensuring that ocean guardianship aligns with all countries' and regions' priorities. The Economic Community of West African States' commendable effort to protect biodiversity within the Canary and Guinea currents convergence zone (in the Eastern Atlantic) is one such example. It has already shown what is possible when cross-regional collaboration is directed toward ocean stewardship. African leaders must continue lighting the path ahead of us. African countries now represent one-quarter of the High Seas Treaty's 145 signatories, and 19 of its 95 ratifications. We must build on this momentum at the upcoming Our Ocean Conference in Kenya, placing African leadership firmly at the center of ocean governance. When Malawi became the first landlocked country to ratify the treaty, we helped redefine what ocean guardianship looks like. Our decision made clear that every country — no matter how far from the coast — has a stake in the issue. We are now urging all others to do the same ahead of the first Conference of the Parties to the High Seas Treaty (COP1), which will be held within the next year. This is a pivotal moment for the ocean's future, and for our own.

The writer is President of the Republic of Malawi.

World Heritage site, ensuring that biodiversity could be conserved through consistent monitoring and community engagement. We hope this effort will serve as a model for others. Safeguarding nature must be science-based, inclusive, and designed to protect future generations. Regional networks will be essential to translate ocean goals into real-world policies, while also ensuring that ocean guardianship aligns with all countries' and regions' priorities. The Economic Community of West African States' commendable effort to protect biodiversity within the Canary and Guinea currents convergence zone (in the Eastern Atlantic) is one such example. It has already shown what is possible when cross-regional collaboration is directed toward ocean stewardship. African leaders must continue lighting the path ahead of us. African countries now represent one-quarter of the High Seas Treaty's 145 signatories, and 19 of its 95 ratifications. We must build on this momentum at the upcoming Our Ocean Conference in Kenya, placing African leadership firmly at the center of ocean governance. When Malawi became the first landlocked country to ratify the treaty, we helped redefine what ocean guardianship looks like. Our decision made clear that every country — no matter how far from the coast — has a stake in the issue. We are now urging all others to do the same ahead of the first Conference of the Parties to the High Seas Treaty (COP1), which will be held within the next year. This is a pivotal moment for the ocean's future, and for our own.

The writer is President of the Republic of Malawi.

high seas are our global commons, belonging equally to all countries. Alongside other African countries, we have advocated for robust conservation and more just and equitable governance of humanity's common heritage. That means expanding access to, and sharing the benefits from, ocean resources, as well as building greater capacity for all countries to implement the High Seas Treaty effectively. In this spirit, Malawi's position aligns with the adage that came to define the negotiations: "nothing about us without us." Decisions affecting the ocean's future must reflect the meaningful participation of all countries, so that no one is left behind.

Ocean stewardship is not defined by proximity to the sea, but by a willingness to act in the common interest by safeguarding humanity's shared life-support system. The new treaty is a monumental step forward in this respect, as it provides the first-ever framework to create marine protected areas outside national jurisdiction on the high seas, an area covering nearly two-thirds of the ocean. We now have a path way to preserve ecosystems whose

protection promises to deliver outside global benefits. Safeguarding critical areas like the Saya de Malha Bank sea grass system in the Indian Ocean, the biologically rich Walvis Ridge off southern Africa, and ecologically significant areas in the Gulf of Guinea will allow marine life to recover and thrive, ultimately strengthening the ecosystems on which we all depend. The High Seas Treaty offers further proof of what inclusive international collaboration can achieve. But it is only a starting point. We must do more to ensure a climate-resilient future by setting more ambitious yet attainable goals. For example, the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, with its target to protect at least 30% of all land and ocean areas by 2030, offers an opportunity to aim higher. To succeed, we must harness the momentum generated by the High Seas Treaty. In Malawi, we have seen firsthand how important international cooperation is for achieving conservation goals. To safeguard Lake Malawi, Africa's third-largest lake, we protected key areas by having them recognized as a UNESCO

The world recently passed an important milestone: the agreement on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction, commonly known as the High Seas Treaty, has now come into force. The treaty enshrines a fundamental truth that: without a healthy ocean, life on this planet cannot endure. More than a thoroughfare for travel and trade, the ocean is indispensable to human lives and livelihoods, not just in coastal regions but also in landlocked communities. Globally, the blue economy employs more than 600 million people and provides food security for around three billion. The ocean influences climate and rainfall patterns around the world, even in inland countries like Malawi, where around 80% of us rely on rainfed agriculture. And crucially, the ocean absorbs 30% of human-produced carbon dioxide, making it an indispensable carbon sink. Moreover, coastal and inland regions alike are vulnerable to catastrophic climate events fueled by rising ocean temperatures, and to marine exploitation from overfishing and bottom trawling. In 2023, Cyclone Freddy, the longest-lasting tropical storm on record, hit Malawi with an unprecedented amount of "accumulated cyclone energy," owing to higher ocean temperatures. Freddy's destructive force displaced more than 659,000 Malawians, demonstrating that an unhealthy ocean threatens us all, regardless of geography. All countries have a responsibility to protect and restore ocean systems. That is why in February 2025 Malawi became the first landlocked country to ratify the High Seas Treaty. In doing so, we affirmed that the

ocean systems. That is why in February 2025 Malawi became the first landlocked country to ratify the High Seas Treaty. In doing so, we affirmed that the

ocean systems. That is why in February 2025 Malawi became the first landlocked country to ratify the High Seas Treaty. In doing so, we affirmed that the

ocean systems. That is why in February 2025 Malawi became the first landlocked country to ratify the High Seas Treaty. In doing so, we affirmed that the



Arthur Peter Mutharika

GLOBALLY, THE BLUE ECONOMY EMPLOYS MORE THAN 500 MILLION PEOPLE AND PROVIDES FOOD SECURITY FOR AROUND THREE BILLION

Consider the Divine Life as the most important thing to obtain

THE MOTHER



UPSC Draws Line

For years, the civil services examination had a convenient loophole. Crack the exam, get into the IAS or IPS, and still return for another attempt, aiming for a better rank, a preferred cadre, or simply a more strategic posting. That option is now history.

The Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) has tightened the rules, and the signal is unmistakable: if you're into the IAS or IPS, there is no second bite at the cherry. One selection, one outcome. No encore performances.

For aspirants who treated their first selection as a stepping stone rather than the destination, this is clearly unwelcome news. But from the system's perspective, the change is long overdue. Allowing already-selected candidates to reappear clogged the pipeline, distorted ranks, and kept fresh candidates waiting. UPSC has chosen decisiveness over tactical cleverness.

The new framework draws a hard line. If a candidate is appointed to the IAS or IPS before the mains of a later exam, they are barred from that attempt altogether. Even if the appointment comes after the mains but before final results, the later performance will not count for service allocation.

The IPS and other Group A services get slightly softer treatment. A one-time exemption allows candidates to defer only the foundation course and reappear, but this is strictly conditional. Failure to join training or secure a formal exemption results in the service allocation being cancelled. Even if selected again, candidates must choose one service. After that, future attempts are barred unless they resign.

The larger message is clear. The civil services are no longer a trial-and-error exercise or an optimisation game. Selection is meant to be an endpoint, not a pit stop. Aspirants may grumble, but UPSC seems intent on restoring a basic principle.



BABUDOM BYTES Dilip Cherian

Tamil Nadu's DGP dilemma

Tamil Nadu's stubborn refusal to appoint a regular Director General of Police despite having a UPSC-approved panel since September 2025 isn't just administrative sluggishness but rather strategic politicking at its finest.

According to sources, the state government is deliberately keeping G. Venkatraman as the "officiating" DGP because temporary appointments offer more control than permanent ones. With the crucial May 2026 Assembly elections looming, having a pliant police chief who serves at the government's pleasure rather than someone with the security of a regular appointment makes perfect political sense.

The Supreme Court's recent rebuke, calling such practices "unacceptable," hits the nail on the head. But this isn't just about Tamil Nadu. It's symptomatic of a broader malaise where states routinely game the system to maintain administrative control over key positions. The irony is rich: the same political class that lectures about institutional integrity regularly subverts those very institutions when it suits their electoral arithmetic. The three officers on the UPSC panel, Seema Aggarwal, Rajeev Kumar, and Sandeep Rai Rathore, are essentially being held hostage to political convenience.

The timing is telling. The state should have initiated the UPSC process three months before former DGP Shankar Jiwari's retirement in August 2025. Instead, they've created this deliberate delay, banking on the fact that courts move slowly and elections come fast.

The Supreme Court's new directive empowering UPSC to directly approach the court for contempt proceedings is a welcome move. But will it work? That depends on whether states fear judicial consequences more than they value electoral advantages.

Tamil Nadu faces a choice: respect constitutional propriety or continue this cynical game of musical chairs with crucial appointments. Given their track record, don't hold your breath for the former.

EC asserts authority over West Bengal babus

The Election Commission of India (ECI) has flat-out rejected a state government's plea to keep key officers at home, setting off an administrative standoff in Kolkata. In a move that's less "polite request" and more "final order," the EC has insisted that all 25 senior IAS and IPS officers from the West Bengal cadre, including the state's Home Secretary Jagdish Prasad Meena, must report to New Delhi for the mandatory central observer briefing ahead of the 2026 Assembly polls.

The state government had argued that sending its top brass out of the state during a crucial pre-election period could disrupt law and order and hurt administrative continuity. Nabanna even proposed alternative names, seeking exemptions for nine officers from the EC's list. But the poll panel wasn't having any of it. According to sources, multiple exemption requests were considered and rejected, with attendance at the two-day briefing declared compulsory and non-negotiable.

What's striking here isn't just the tug-of-war, but what it reveals about the evolving centre-state dance in election management. Traditionally, states could nudge who goes where and when. Not this time. The EC's firm stance signals a more assertive poll machinery, determined to keep its house in order.

There is, undoubtedly, a bit of theatre in this. With Bengal already a political eye of the storm, the optics of its own Home Secretary being dispatched out of state as an impartial watchdog is eyebrow-raising. Critics sense heavy-handedness; supporters see necessary rigour.

Share a babu experience! Follow dilipthecherian@twitter.com. Let's multiply the effect

WISDOM CORNER

A woman always has her man, but the man unconsciously leans on his roots, his heritage. He feels like an orphan without his parents

RAI KAPOOR

Nature's imagination is so boundless compared to our own meager human imagination

JAMES CAMERON

Good cinema is what we can believe, and bad cinema is what we can't believe

ABAS KHAROSTAMI

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

- 1542: King Henry VIII of England had Catherine Howard, the fifth of Henry's six wives, beheaded on charges of adultery.
1694: Following the Glorious Revolution, William and Mary were proclaimed king and queen of England. They ruled jointly as King William III and Queen Mary II until her death in 1694.
1960: France detonated its first atomic bomb in the Sahara desert.
1997: The Dow Jones Industrial Average finished above 7,000 for the first time.

SPECTRUM UNION BUDGET

Ailing health sector gets short shrift



Dhurjati Mukherjee

REDUCTION IN PRICES FOR 17 CANCER DRUGS DOESN'T SUFFICIENTLY ADDRESS THE NEEDS OF THE GENERAL POPULATION

India's large population—about 30-35% of whom live at or near the poverty line—needs strong healthcare prioritisation. However, governments have long neglected this sector, leaving many rural and underprivileged health centres without sufficient staff or basic equipment like operational x-ray machines. A thorough examination of the recent Budget is necessary to determine if the government adequately addresses the essential needs of the population.

Prior to budget, the Jan Swasthya Abhiyan (JSA) stated the Centre's health spending had stagnated at 0.29% of the GDP. It noted the central health outlay must rise at least 1% of the GDP for the country's total public health spending, including that of states, to reach 2.5%. requires the health allocation to increase to about ₹350,000 crore from roughly ₹100,000 crore in 2025-26. "We're asking for at least a doubling of the Centre's outlay for health to something like ₹200,000 crore for 2026-27", said Indranil Mukhopadhyay, a health

economist and JSA co-convener. At same time, note that economist and social activist, John Dreze has pointed out that India's public expenditure on health stood at just 1.3% of the GDP, lower than 1.9% of sub-Saharan Africa, 2% in West Asia and North Africa, 2.8% in East Asia, 4.1% in Latin America and 8% in the European Union. A dedicated ₹10,000 crore five-year programme has been allotted in the budget to the bio-pharma sector to develop the country as a global manufacturing hub through Biopharma SHAKTI, which is welcome. Additionally, there's a proposal to set up NIMHANS-II at Ranchi designed specifically for mental health and trauma care. But why just one? The government is placing particular emphasis on Ayurveda, planning to establish three All India Institutes and upgrade Ayurveda pharmacies. This initiative, it's hoped shall benefit the public. While the reduction in prices for 17 cancer drugs and import cuts on treatments for

rare diseases, alongside the promotion of medical tourism, may represent progress, these measures do not sufficiently address the needs of the general population, particularly those in lower-income segments who continue to face barriers to adequate healthcare and must often travel significant distances for specialized services. In a populous country such as India, there is a clear need to focus on rural and underdeveloped districts. Expectations existed that plans would be announced to establish 50 to 100 specialty hospitals within the next three to five years; however, no such initiatives were mentioned by Sitharaman. Furthermore, it is notable that the Health Mission's allocation of ₹39,390 crore for strengthening primary healthcare, maternal and child health services, and disease control programmes appears insufficient to meet the actual demand in a nation of this size. However, the ₹1.06 lakh crore allocation in the budget allocation, reflecting a 6% increase over the revised

estimates of the current fiscal, may sound optimistic but such increase doesn't have any meaning when considered with inflationary conditions. Health economists have calculated that the increase is in fact a decline in the government's share of health expenditure from a stagnant 0.28% of India GDP over the past five years to an estimated 0.27%. Is this adequate keeping in view the needs of the impoverished and marginalised sections, deprived of affordable healthcare? It is indeed tragic that India's low spending on public health over the past two decades or so, has been acknowledged by successive governments, but very little has been done by way of increasing allocation. It was expected that the Budget would substantially increase allocation and help in setting up at least one centrally funded hospital in each district, to start with the backward ones. But nosuch measures have been announced so far. Amends do need to be made.

estimates of the current fiscal, may sound optimistic but such increase doesn't have any meaning when considered with inflationary conditions. Health economists have calculated that the increase is in fact a decline in the government's share of health expenditure from a stagnant 0.28% of India GDP over the past five years to an estimated 0.27%. Is this adequate keeping in view the needs of the impoverished and marginalised sections, deprived of affordable healthcare? It is indeed tragic that India's low spending on public health over the past two decades or so, has been acknowledged by successive governments, but very little has been done by way of increasing allocation. It was expected that the Budget would substantially increase allocation and help in setting up at least one centrally funded hospital in each district, to start with the backward ones. But nosuch measures have been announced so far. Amends do need to be made.

estimates of the current fiscal, may sound optimistic but such increase doesn't have any meaning when considered with inflationary conditions. Health economists have calculated that the increase is in fact a decline in the government's share of health expenditure from a stagnant 0.28% of India GDP over the past five years to an estimated 0.27%. Is this adequate keeping in view the needs of the impoverished and marginalised sections, deprived of affordable healthcare? It is indeed tragic that India's low spending on public health over the past two decades or so, has been acknowledged by successive governments, but very little has been done by way of increasing allocation. It was expected that the Budget would substantially increase allocation and help in setting up at least one centrally funded hospital in each district, to start with the backward ones. But nosuch measures have been announced so far. Amends do need to be made.

Duty of advocates

Sir, The recent observations of the Supreme Court regarding an advocate's social media posts against a complainant in a pending criminal case deserve serious reflection. The right to defend an accused is fundamental to our justice system. However, that right does not extend to publicly vilifying or intimidating a survivor outside the courtroom. Advocates are officers of the court. Their primary duty is to assist in the administration of justice, not to conduct parallel campaigns in the court of public opinion. Social media cannot become a substitute for cross-examination, nor should it be used to cast aspersions on witnesses in a manner that may prejudice proceedings. While freedom of expression is constitutionally protected, professional responsibility imposes higher standards of restraint. The Supreme Court's remarks serve as a timely reminder that institutional integrity must prevail over momentary publicity. It may now be appropriate for Bar Councils to frame clearer digital conduct guidelines to preserve the dignity of the legal profession.

Gopalaswamy J. CHENNAI

Civic sense lesson

Sir, The video of an elderly woman, stopping a scooterist from using the footpath and refusing to step aside until the man takes the main road, has gone viral and making rounds in various social media platforms. The elderly citizen was being applauded and praised for her civic sense and many have described it as an exemplary act of civic responsibility. The irresponsible practice of two-wheeler riders using footpaths to bypass traffic blocks and putting pedestrians life at risk is a common sight in many of our towns and cities. The video of the elderly woman teaching basic civic sense lesson to the scooterist is not just a lesson for the rider but to every one — drivers who take short cuts risking others lives and also a lesson to civic authorities including traffic personnel to be more alert and not to forget their duty to serve the public and avoid putting citizens life at risk.

M Pradyu, KANNUR

Letters TO THE EDITOR

Readers of Orissa Post are most welcome to contribute letters (100 words), articles and columns. (Between 600-1000 words). Contributors are requested to send their contact numbers and full postal address/email ID. They may also send their valuable comments, opinion and suggestions, preferably by email, to: edit@orissapost.com

## EDITORIAL

## Afghanistan-Iran trade tops \$5 billion, boosting provincial economies

Trade between Afghanistan and neighboring Iran has surged, with officials reporting that the total volume of commercial exchanges between the two countries has reached approximately \$5 billion in the current solar year, according to a report by Tolo News. The announcement highlights the growing economic ties and the expanding role of cross-border commerce in Afghanistan's provincial markets. The figure was disclosed at an event in Herat province, where local Iranian officials gathered to mark the 47th anniversary of Iran's Islamic Revolution. At the ceremony, Iran's Consul General in Herat, Ali Reza Marhamat, emphasised the dramatic increase in trade flows, noting, "Last year, we transported about 5,000 tons of goods per month, and now this figure has reached more than 90,000 tons." This jump reflects both enhancements in logistics infrastructure and greater facilitation of customs and border procedures between the two nations. According to the Herat Chamber of Industries and Mines, the expanding commerce is driven largely by the Herat-Khad railway, which has significantly eased the movement of goods. Local officials described Iran as Afghanistan's largest trading partner, with the bulk of commercial goods either imported directly from Iran or routed into Afghanistan through Iranian territory - a trend that has become especially important in light of disruptions to trade routes with Pakistan. Economic analysts in the region say the expanding trade corridor is helping provincial economies absorb supply chain shocks and stabilise local markets. One analyst, Sayed Agha Farzan, said, "It is beneficial for both countries because we need to import certain raw materials from Iran, and Iran also needs raw materials available in Afghanistan. The border we share with Iran is considered the most independent economic border between the two countries." This uptick in trade comes amid broader efforts by provincial authorities to diversify economic partnerships and strengthen commercial links beyond traditional channels. For many provincial traders, Iranian markets now serve as key hubs for importing machinery, construction materials and consumer goods, while small amounts of Afghan products continue to find buyers across the border. Herat's trade boom also reflects a pragmatic response to shifting regional dynamics. With border crossings with Pakistan remaining closed or restricted, Afghan traders have increasingly turned to Iran and Central Asian routes for moving goods. The growth in bilateral trade serves as both a lifeline for provincial businesses and a signal of Afghanistan's adaptation to changing economic realities. Local officials and business leaders are now calling for continued investment in infrastructure, from roads to storage facilities at border points, to sustain and further expand this trade momentum. They argue that deepening these economic connections could bolster employment and generate revenue for provinces long affected by conflict and limited market access.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi who has on Friday morning tweeted his congratulations to BNP Chairman Tarique Rahman following his party's landslide victory in Bangladesh's national elections may make a personal effort to cultivate the newly minted leader.

Top Bangladesh officials said there was a distinct possibility of the two talking to each other soon, marking a new chapter in relations between the two neighbours, which have been frosty for some time.

India's discomfort with an evidently inattentive Mohammad Yunus-led government in Dhaka has been well known. Relations had dipped to a low when it was suspected that the current regime had engineered protests outside Indian missions in Bangladesh which included instances of attacks.

However, analysts do not expect an immediate rush towards bonhomie but rather a measured and structured approach.

Despite the BNP's victory, Rahman is unlikely to move too swiftly in warming ties with India.

Anti-India sentiment has long been a potent political instrument in Bangladesh's domestic politics. Any perception of being overly eager to court New Delhi could hand ammunition to his political opponents seeking to portray the new government as compromising national interests.

As a result, progress on two of the most sensitive bilateral issues, trade and river water sharing, is expected to be steady but not necessarily on the fast lane.

Bangladesh has consistently sought expanded market access and resolution of long-pending water-sharing agreements. India,



for its part, remains concerned about security cooperation and regional strategic alignment. "The negotiations are likely to proceed in a pragmatic but measured manner," top Indian officials said. Zafar Sobhan, a prominent Bangladeshi intellectual and editor, argues that the incoming BNP government faces multiple challenges beyond foreign policy recalibration.

"The relationship with India is certainly one," he notes, "but it is only one among several major tests."

A second major challenge will be managing the political future of

the Awami League. The BNP has long demanded restrictions on its principal rival. However, outright political exclusion carries risks, both domestically and internationally. Some degree of accommodation may ultimately prove necessary to preserve political stability and democratic credibility.

The most sensitive issue, however, revolves around former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

Bringing Hasina back to Bangladesh would be politically explosive. It could inflame domestic tensions, provoke street mobilisation, and complicate

Dhaka's internal politics to the extent that there could be a swift change in government.

Not to speak of complicating relations with New Delhi, where she currently resides. At the same time, the BNP cannot openly advocate her continued exile in India without appearing politically compromised.

For the new government, therefore, allowing Hasina to remain abroad may be the least destabilising option, while paying lip-sympathy to the old Yunus demand for her return.

The coming weeks will test the BNP's political dexterity. It must

reassure domestic constituencies, stabilise a polarised political landscape, and recalibrate relations with India without appearing subservient.

BNP's sagacity will also be tested on other fronts. Journalists and academics such as Shyamal Dutta, Prof Abul Barkat, who were carted off to jail on various charges ranging from murder, spying, to corruption, may not immediately be freed. But with Zheg gag earlier seen on Dhaka's media taken off, their cases may not be adjudged in the perfunctory and vengeful manner that was clearly visible.

## SKT-based exclusion an attack on Dalit and backward class rights



Dr Rajesh Vaid

disproportionately affecting Dalits and backward classes. Despite its questionable legal standing, the tag survived as a convenient method to keep posts vacant while maintaining the illusion of a fair process.

The 35 per cent qualifying criterion in the Subject Knowledge Test now appears disturbingly similar to the so-called administrative tag of "Not Found Suitable", a device historically used to deny appointments without transparent justification. In its present form, the 35 per cent rule institutionalises a modern form of caste hierarchy, concealed in the language of merit.

Public recruitment processes are meant to ensure fairness, representation and equal opportunity. However, when selection criteria function less as tools to assess competence and more as mechanisms of exclusion, they raise serious constitutional, social and ethical concerns. The mandatory 35 per cent qualifying benchmark, which is often used to justify appointments without transparent justification. In its present form, the 35 per cent rule institutionalises a modern form of caste hierarchy, concealed in the language of merit. This logic echoes the caste order,

where social position determined access to knowledge, power and profession. The instruments have changed, with score sheets replacing scriptures, but the outcomes appear alarmingly similar. Dalits and backward classes were excluded then, and they are being excluded now. The irony is stark. On one hand, the government speaks of an acute shortage of qualified teachers and professors. On the other, hundreds of posts are deliberately left vacant. Students suffer, institutions weaken, and public resources are wasted.

This claim does not withstand scrutiny. If merit were genuinely the objective, posts would not remain vacant despite a large pool of applicants. Merit cannot be divorced from social context, as centuries of exclusion, unequal access to resources and institutional discrimination directly influence examination outcomes. The mechanical application of a uniform cut-off ignores the constitutional principles of representation and social justice. What emerges instead is a hierarchy in which those who cross the 35 per cent threshold are deemed "worthy", while those who fall short, largely from SC, BC and EWS backgrounds, are silently labelled unfit.

This raises an unavoidable question: is this merely coincidence, or a structured exclusion of Dalits and backward classes? Supporters of the 35 per cent benchmark, including the HPSC leadership, argue that it safeguards academic quality.

The current three-tier recruitment process comprising a screening test with a minimum qualifying benchmark, followed by the Subject Knowledge Test with a 35 per cent cut-off, and finally an interview. On paper, this structure appears orderly. In practice, however, the Subject Knowledge Test has become a bottleneck. While candidates are shortlisted for the screening test in proportion to advertised vacancies, the Subject Knowledge Test applies an absolute cut-off. The result has been that even advertised posts remain vacant. The mechanical application of a uniform cut-off ignores the constitutional principles of representation and social justice. What emerges instead is a hierarchy in which those who cross the 35 per cent threshold are deemed "worthy", while those who fall short, largely from SC, BC and EWS backgrounds, are silently labelled unfit.

Former member, Haryana Public Service Commission

## Scientists find clue to human brain evolution in finger length: Study

Human evolution has long been tied to growing brain size, and new research suggests prenatal hormones may have played a surprising role. By studying the relative lengths of the index and ring fingers, a marker of prenatal exposure to oestrogen and testosterone, researchers found that higher prenatal oestrogen exposure was associated with larger head size in newborn boys. Human evolution is closely tied to a steady increase in brain size. New research suggests that this expansion may be partly influenced by pre-birth oestrogen levels, with an unexpected indicator in the length of our fingers. Professor John Manning, part of Swansea's Applied Sports, Technology, Exercise and Medicine (A-STEM) research team, has spent years studying what is known as digit ratio. This measure compares the length of the index finger to the ring finger, a relationship called the 2D:4D ratio. Scientists have shown that this ratio reflects the balance of

oestrogen and testosterone a fetus is exposed to during the first trimester of pregnancy. When prenatal oestrogen levels are higher relative to testosterone, the index finger tends to be longer than the ring finger. In these cases, the 2D:4D value



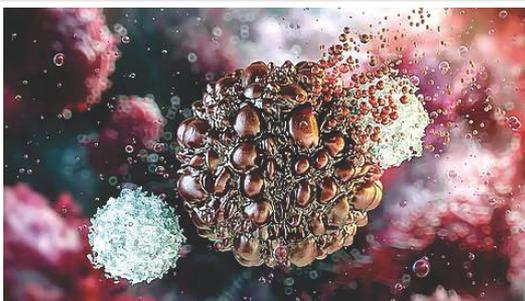
is considered high. In his latest study, Professor Manning worked with researchers from Istanbul University's Department of Anthropology. Their findings were recently published in the journal Early Human Development.

Because head circumference in newborns is strongly linked to brain size and later measures of intelligence, the research team examined both finger ratios and head size in a group of 205 newborns. The group included 100 boys and 125 girls. The results showed a clear pattern in boys. Higher 2D:4D ratios, which point to greater prenatal oestrogen exposure, were associated with larger head circumference. This relationship did not appear in girls. Professor Manning explained the broader significance of the findings.

"This finding is relevant to human evolution because increases in brain size are found alongside feminisation of the skeleton, what is known as the estrogenized ape hypothesis. High values of 2D:4D in males have been found to be related to elevated rates of heart problems, poor sperm counts and predisposition to schizophrenia. However, increases in brain size may offset these problems.

## Scientists solve a major roadblock in cancer cell therapy: Study

Researchers have found a reliable way to grow helper T cells from stem cells, solving a major challenge in immune-based cancer therapy. Helper T cells act as the immune system's coordinators, helping other immune cells fight longer and harder. The team discovered how to precisely control a key signal that determines which type of T cells form. This advance could lead to ready-made cell therapies that are cheaper, faster, and easier to create. For the first time, researchers at the University of British Columbia have shown how to consistently produce a crucial type of human immune cell, known as helper T cells, from stem cells in a controlled lab setting. The research, published on January 7 in Cell Stem Cell, removes a major barrier that has slowed the development of affordable, large-scale production of cell therapies. By solving this problem, the work could help make off-the-shelf treatments more accessible and effective for



reach for many patients around the world. One key reason is that most existing treatments rely on a patient's own immune cells, which must be collected and specially prepared over several weeks for each

individual. "The long-term goal is to have off-the-shelf cell therapies that are manufactured ahead of time and on a larger scale from a renewable source like stem cells," said co-senior author Dr. Megan Levings, a

professor of surgery and biomedical engineering at UBC. "This would make treatments much more cost-effective and ready when patients need them," added Dr. Megan. Cancer cell therapies are most

effective when two types of immune cells work together. Killer T cells directly attack infected or cancerous cells. Helper T cells, which act as the immune system's conductors, detect health threats, activating other immune cells and sustaining the immune responses over time, play a central coordinating role. While scientists have made progress using stem cells to create killer T cells in the lab, they have not been able to reliably generate helper T cells until now. "Helper T cells are essential for a strong and lasting immune response," said Dr. Levings. "It's critical that we have both to maximise the efficacy and flexibility of off-the-shelf therapies." A Key Advance Toward Stem Cell-Based Immune Therapies in the new study, the UBC research team addressed this long-standing challenge by carefully adjusting biological signals that guide how stem cells develop. This approach allowed them to precisely control whether stem cells

became helper T cells or killer T cells. The scientists found that a developmental signal known as Notch plays an important but time-sensitive role in immune cell formation. Notch is necessary early in development, but if the signal stays active for too long, it blocks the formation of helper T cells. "By precisely tuning when and how much this signal is reduced, we were able to direct stem cells to become either helper or killer T cells," said co-first author Dr. Ross Jones, a research associate in the Zandstra Lab. "We were able to do this in controlled laboratory conditions that are directly applicable in real-world biomanufacturing, which is an essential step toward turning this discovery into a viable therapy," said Dr. Ross Jones. The team also confirmed that the lab-grown helper T cells functioned like real immune cells, not just in appearance but in behaviour. The cells showed signs

of full maturity, carried a wide variety of immune receptors, and were able to develop into specialised subsets with distinct immune roles. "These cells look and act like genuine human helper T cells," said co-first author Kevin Salim, a UBC PhD student in the Levings Lab. "That's critical for future therapeutic potential." Researchers say the ability to generate both helper and killer T cells, and to carefully control their balance, could greatly improve the effectiveness of stem cell-derived immune therapies. "This is a major step forward in our ability to develop scalable and affordable immune cell therapies," said Dr. Zandstra. "This technology now forms the foundation for testing the role of helper T cells in supporting the elimination of cancer cells and generating new types of helper T cells, for clinical applications," added Dr. Zandstra.

## COMMENT

## Editorials

## Gluing Taiwan to US 'security umbrella' a recklessly dangerous political gamble

In geopolitics, narratives sometimes matter as much as numbers. Taiwan's leader Lai Ching-te understands this well. His recent high-profile interviews with Western media outlets were not simply about explaining policy. They were strategic messaging — aimed at cultivating international opinion, reinforcing external support and reframing Taiwan's trajectory in ways that fundamentally challenge the status quo in the Taiwan Strait.

The substance behind the messaging is even more consequential. Following an \$11 billion US arms sale, Lai is pushing an additional \$40 billion special "defense" budget in new commitments over coming years. The scale, pace and character of these acquisitions signal a shift from "incremental deterrence" to "structural rebalancing".

From any perspective, that shift is destabilizing. Sovereignty and territorial integrity constitute the core national interest of any state. Taiwan is an inalienable part of China. The Taiwan question concerns China's core interests. Lai's attempts to dilute the international legal and diplomatic weight of the one-China principle should be interpreted not as rhetorical nuance but as strategic provocation. His repeated false framing of Taiwan as "a de facto sovereign equal in a trilateral US-China-Taiwan relationship" represents an outlandish challenge to Taiwan's legal status as part of China, as a spokeswoman for the State Council Taiwan Affairs Office said.

At the same time, the United States' arms sales to Taiwan have evolved in both quantity and quality. More recent transfers include HIMARS rocket systems capable of striking deep into coastal mainland positions, upgraded F-16V fighters with enhanced precision-strike capabilities and advanced ISR and drone platforms. Rhetoric from Lai's Democratic Progressive Party about "preemptive strikes" reinforces Beijing's perception that the Lai authorities are gambling on changing the cross-strait status quo.

In a security dilemma, intent is less important than capability. What Taipei labels "deterrence" is

nothing but a grave provocation. The result is predictable: the spiral tightens. Beijing will not tolerate the secession of any part of China's territory. With Taipei trying to leverage US support to advance its "pro-independence" agenda, the risk of confrontation rises sharply with each arms sale.

Lai's PR tactics reinforce this perception. By seeking platforms in Western media outlets, he aims to project an image that the DPP authorities are not isolated and that Taiwan enjoys "moral" and "political backing" from "democracies". Yet, shortly before that, Lithuanian Prime Minister Inga Ruginiene told the media she regretted Lithuania's decision to allow a so-called "Taiwanese representative office" to open in Vilnius under the name "Taiwanese", calling the move "a strategic mistake". Lai's outreach to Western media at this juncture is less about transparency than about attempting to counter this trend of "decoupling".

While US support might appear to be robust, it is by no means unconditional. The Taiwan compatriots see that clearly, as the economic dimension is extremely fraught. The so-called "US-Taiwan trade arrangements" basically mean relocating leading-edge production from Taiwan to the US that will shake the foundation of the island's economy.

In effect, the Lai authorities are ready to pay a double price: massive arms purchases and far-reaching industrial concessions, all to tie the US to their "Taiwan independence" agenda. Yet this is a pure illusion. The US only cares about profit. Keeping Taiwan insecure is simply how it does business.

Some in Washington still view Taiwan as leverage in broader China-US relations. Although that creates incentives for Lai's gamble, he and his cohorts should be cognizant of the consequences. Once strategic equilibrium tilts too far, it does not restore itself gently.

In this sense, the debate unfolding in Taiwan's regional "legislature" about the \$40 billion "political capital contribution" to Washington is far more than a budget dispute. It represents a choice: allowing Lai to lead Taiwan further to disaster, or making a pause on the brink of a precipice.

## Top nuclear power obliged to cut its arsenal

The specter of nuclear weapons remains one of the most daunting challenges to global peace and security, with recent developments casting a glaring spotlight on the United States. The country's irresponsible actions, including its refusal to extend the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty after its expiration early this month, threaten to dismantle decades of progress in nuclear nonproliferation.

Yet in order to justify its renegeing on nuclear nonproliferation commitments, the US has made unfounded accusations against China regarding nuclear testing to pave the way for its own resumption of nuclear tests. "Because of other countries' testing programs, I have instructed the Department of War to start testing our Nuclear Weapons on an equal basis," the US leader said last October in a post on his Truth Social site. "That process will begin immediately."

US Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Thomas DiNanno, too, made unwarranted remarks at the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva recently, accusing China of having conducted a nuclear explosive test in June 2020. This prompted Robert Floyd, executive secretary of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization, to clarify in a statement that the International Monitoring System of the organization did not detect any event consistent with the characteristics of a nuclear weapon test explosion at that time.

The remarks made by the US in regard to nuclear testing are nothing but lies told to serve the country's own dangerous agenda at the cost of other nations' security and global stability.

The baseless claims that China is conducting "covert" nuclear tests serve as a pretext for the US to abandon a moratorium on nuclear testing it has upheld since 1992.

As Foreign Ministry spokesman Lin Jian pointed out, the US' distortion and slander of China's nuclear policy are essentially "political manipulation", through which it aims to evade its own nuclear disarmament responsibilities. In fact, it is the US that is "the biggest source of disruption to both the international nuclear order and global strategic stability".

Indeed, the US has consistently undermined international efforts to promote nuclear disarmament. Its reluctance to ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, as well as its recent threats to resume testing, stands in stark contrast to the global consensus on the

need to prevent nuclear proliferation.

By refusing to adhere to the nonproliferation framework, the US is effectively dismantling the very architecture that has constrained the nuclear threat for decades.

The series of US maneuvers, which portend a significant shift in its nuclear policy, threaten to reignite a nuclear arms race that the world can ill afford. The narrative that the US propagates — of needing to resume testing to match the capabilities of other nations — is not only false and misleading but also dangerous.

The implications of this are profound, as it paves the way for an unrestrained arms buildup, not only by the US, but also by other nuclear powers, thereby increasing the risk of nuclear conflict.

Independent estimates clearly show that the US and Russia possess the largest nuclear arsenals, each having an inventory of around 5,500 nuclear warheads, with China maintaining a significantly smaller stockpile.

Meanwhile, the US has spent trillions of dollars upgrading its nuclear triad and maintains a first-use policy. The country also applies double standard when it comes to nuclear nonproliferation, seriously disrupting global strategic balance and stability. The rhetoric of "nuclear parity" is only a smokescreen designed to obscure the US' true intention of achieving unchallenged nuclear dominance.

The international community must recognize the US' actions for what they are: a strategic ploy to destabilize global security and maintain its hegemony through an arms race it hopes will be debilitating for other countries. This ambition poses a direct threat to the delicate balance of power and undermines the collective efforts of nations committed to peace and security.

It is thus imperative that countries join hands in opposition to the US' actions. Diplomatic efforts should be intensified to hold the US accountable and to reinforce the importance of existing treaties and agreements that promote nuclear disarmament. The international community should also work together to establish new frameworks that address the evolving challenges of nuclear proliferation in the 21st century.

With the US prioritizing national supremacy over global stability, the shadow of nuclear conflict once again threatens to loom over the world. For the world to be free from the fear of nuclear apocalypse, it is crucial for the international community to stand firm in opposing the US' nuclear agenda.

Cai Meng



## Opinion Line

## Jiaolong rose of remembrance is more than a mere tribute

On Feb 2, a touching flower-giving ceremony was held in Kunming, capital of Yunnan province. The event was aptly titled "Blossoms link two lands, sentiments travel a thousand miles" as it celebrated the bonds between Yunnan province and the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region. After the event, a new rose variety, named "Jiaolong", left Yunnan and departed for Zhaosu county in Xinjiang, carrying with it public affection, a pioneering spirit and a promise to maintain cross-regional agricultural cooperation.

The rose was independently bred by the researchers of the Yunnan Academy of Agricultural Sciences. During a public naming campaign, netizens chose to name it "Jiaolong", in memory of He Jiaolong, a government official-cum-social media influencer held in high esteem by the people of Xinjiang for her dedication to rural vitalization in the autonomous region.

He Jiaolong died last month at the age of 47 following a severe head injury after falling from a horse while filming a work-related program.

She rose to national prominence in 2020 while serving as deputy head of Zhaosu county in the Ili Kazak autonomous prefecture, where she livestreamed sales of local agricultural products. The rural county is known for its scenic grasslands and horse industry. In November 2020, a

short video showing her wearing a red cloak riding a horse and galloping across a white snowfield to promote local tourism went viral.

Reports say the clip accumulated more than 600 million views across multiple platforms helping Zhaosu, the "Hometown of Heavenly Horses", gain nationwide fame.

The new flower symbolizes "Where there is devotion, nothing is invincible" — adapted from Jiaolong's last social media post, reflecting her fearless commitment to her hometown and its people.

The remembrance rose aside, the event also signaled deeper cooperation between Yunnan and Xinjiang. At the ceremony, the institute of the YAAS that developed the rose signed a framework agreement on flower industry collaboration with the authorities in Zhaosu. The two sides will carry out in-depth cooperation in flower variety introduction, technical exchanges and industrial development, joining efforts to boost the flower business in both regions.

As a major hub of horticultural innovation, Yunnan enjoys world-renowned advantages in flower breeding and cultivation. Zhaosu, in turn, boasts unique plateau ecology and cultural tourism resources. This partnership allows high-quality flower varieties and advanced technologies from Yunnan to take root in Xinjiang, while pro-

moting the integrated development of flower planting, cultural experience and tourism across the two regions.

The Jiaolong rose is more than a new flower cultivar — it is a living monument to public service and dedication and a living bridge between the mountains of Yunnan and the Tianshan Mountains in Xinjiang. As it takes root and blooms in Zhaosu, a heartfelt tribute to a woman devoted to her homeland will be a vanguard driving force for the region's development.

A flower that never fades carries the spirit of love forward, connecting two lands of beauty with resilience and hope. He Jiaolong is not alone; she is the epitome of countless grassroots civil servants who silently dedicate themselves to their posts. They leave their comfort zones, immerse themselves in remote areas, take root among the people, and turn "impossible" into "possible" with perseverance. Like He, they fight day and night for rural vitalization, go all out to boost local economies, and spare no effort to improve people's livelihoods, devoting their lives to interpret the responsibility of "serving the people wholeheartedly". Their dedication is not as magnificent as a monument, but as warm and enduring as the Jiaolong rose, blooming silently and bringing hope and prosperity to the land and people they love.

— LI YINGQING, CHINA DAILY

## What They Say

## Superintelligence development: Better slow than sorry

**Editor's note:** As tech giants and research institutes across the world are racing to develop artificial general intelligence and even aiming to usher in the future of superintelligence, an open letter issued months ago and calling for temporary "prohibition" on the development of superintelligence has garnered support from some scientists, including artificial intelligence pioneers. Zeng Yi, a researcher at the Institute of Automation of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, spoke to Peng Fei, a commentator of People's Daily, about the impact that superintelligence could have and why safety should be the top priority. Below are excerpts of the interview. The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.

Artificial general intelligence generally refers to an information processing tool that approaches or reaches the level of human intelligence and boasts broad application prospects.

Artificial superintelligence, by contrast, refers to intelligence that surpasses human intelligence in all aspects and is regarded as a life-like entity. This means it would develop autonomous consciousness, and many of its thoughts and actions would likely be incomprehensible to humans, and therefore less controllable. It is hoped that superintelligence will be "super-altruistic", but what if it turns out to be "super-malevolent"? It is this sense of uncertainty that causes concern.

Superintelligence cannot be simply compared to any technological tool in history, as the possibility of it possessing independent cognition and surpassing human intelligence presents an unprecedented challenge. If the goals of superintelligence are inconsistent with human values, even minor deviations could be amplified by its capabilities and lead to catastrophic consequences.

Safety must be the first priority for the development of superintelligence. That is to say, it should be embedded in its "genes". Safety guardrails should not be lowered simply over concerns

that they may affect the model's capabilities. Comprehensive assessment is needed to identify as many potential hazards as possible and strengthen the model's safety.

Typical security issues such as privacy leakage and disinformation can be effectively addressed and short-term risks properly handled through the technical cycle of "attack-defense-evaluation" and the continuous upgrading of the model.

But in the long run, the real challenge lies in aligning artificial superintelligence with human

expectations. Reinforcement learning from human feedback, the current approach that embeds human values into AI through human-machine interaction, will likely prove ineffective for superintelligence.

Given that superintelligence may develop self-awareness, an ideal vision is to make it develop moral intuition, empathy and altruism on its own, rather than merely relying on values and rules imposed from the outside. Risks can only be minimized when AI evolves from being ethically compliant to having morality.

Humanity needs to prevent the development of AI from turning into an "arms race". The creation of the world's first superintelligence might not require international cooperation,

but ensuring that superintelligence is safe and reliable for all humanity will require global collaboration.

The world needs an efficient and effective international institution to coordinate the governance of AI and ensure its safety. In August 2025, the United Nations General Assembly decided to establish the Independent International Scientific Panel on AI and the Global Dialogue on AI Governance to promote sustainable development and bridge the digital divide. Explorations in this regard should be further deepened and continued.

Those countries with advanced AI technologies bear a greater responsibility and obligation to prevent the reckless development of superintelligence in the absence of rules.

China advocates building a community with a shared future for humanity and a community with a shared future in cyberspace. Emphasizing the coordination of development and safety, the country has put forward the Global AI Governance Initiative. These initiatives deserve global promotion and implementation in relation to AI as well.

It is better to slow down a bit to lay a solid foundation for safety, than to seek quick success and instant benefits that might lead human society into an irreversible and perilous situation.

## CHINA DAILY WORLDWIDE

Contact us at:

**China Daily**  
15 HuiXin DongJie Chaoyang District,  
Beijing 100029

News: +86 (0) 10 6491-8366  
editor@chinadaily.com.cn

Advertisement: +86 (0) 10 6491-8631  
ads@chinadaily.com.cn

Subscription: +86-400-699-0203

subscription.chinadaily.com.cn

App: www.chinadaily.com.cn/mobile/daily.html

**China Daily UK**  
90 Cannon St, London EC4N 6HA, UK  
+44 (0) 207 398 8270  
editor@chinadailyuk.com

**China Daily Asia Pacific**  
**China Daily Hong Kong**  
Unit 1818, Hing Wai Centre, 7 Tin Wan  
Praya Road, Aberdeen, Hong Kong

+852 2518 5111  
editor@chinadailyhk.com

editor@chinadailyasia.com

editor@chinadailyasia.com

**China Daily USA**  
1500 Broadway, Suite 2800,  
New York, NY 10036  
+1 212 537 8888  
editor@chinadailyusa.com

**China Daily Africa**  
P.O. Box 27281-00100, Nairobi, Kenya  
+254(0)20 692 0900 (Nairobi)

editor@chinadailyafrica.com

enquiries@chinadailyafrica.com

subscription@chinadailyafrica.com

# VIEWS

Wu Yin

## Harnessing the horse's power in new year

In Chinese culture, the horse symbolizes forward momentum and resilience. As the Year of the Horse approaches, the metaphor feels apt for China's economy at a time of mounting global and domestic pressures.

Globally, economic recovery remains fragile and growth continues to slow. "De-risking" narratives are accelerating the fragmentation of global supply chains, while geopolitical tensions and volatile energy prices are reshaping trade and capital flows. Export-oriented firms face shrinking orders and rising costs. At home, China still confronts a mismatch between strong supply and weak demand, constraints in key technologies, uneven regional growth, insufficient consumption activation, lingering real estate and local fiscal risks and persistent bottlenecks in the construction of a unified national market. These challenges are overlapping and mutually reinforcing.



Against this backdrop, structural transformation is not optional but the only path forward. Sustained policy discipline and determined action, like a powerful horse pressing on with endurance, are essential to stabilizing growth and breaking through constraints.

First, China must act with the speed and precision of a fleet-footed horse to tackle core technologies. Innovation is the engine of structural upgrading. Just as a galloping horse relies on strong legs, economic transformation depends on the technological foundation.

Persistent efforts in strategic fields such as new energy, quantum technologies and embodied intelligence are critical to overcoming bottlenecks and shifting from traditional manufacturing to intelligent manufacturing.

Second, domestic demand must be steadily cultivated with a long-term commitment. Consumption and investment are the anchors of economic stability. Expanding demand requires disciplined policies — from upgrading county-level commercial infrastructure and smart community services to promoting green appliances and new consumption scenarios. By combining effective investment with consumption activation, policies should align with real household needs and create a virtuous cycle between supply and demand.

Third, China must expand high-level opening-up with the collective momentum of "ten thousand horses galloping". Openness is essential to countering the global "de-risking" narratives. China cannot prosper in isolation, nor can global growth stabilize without China's participation. Through cross-border industrial

chain coordination and multilateral trade cooperation, pragmatic partnerships can align global resources with real market demand and lead to shared benefits.

Across the country, regions are pursuing tailored transformation paths. Shenzhen in Guangdong province is advancing embodied intelligence and scaling AI-driven robotics in smart factories, strengthening links between universities and industry to accelerate technology transfer. Zhejiang province is promoting large-scale deployment of general-purpose AI models, targeting over 20 percent revenue growth in the AI core industry while fostering clusters in new materials and the low-altitude economy. These examples show that targeted strategies can turn momentum into tangible outcomes.

Yet deep bottlenecks remain. Advanced chips and specialty materials still have to be imported, and many enterprises face "chokepoints" in key components. The link between innovation and industrialization is incomplete, and the full potential of the new national innovation system has not been realized.

Domestic demand also faces structural constraints. Smart consumption infrastructure remains inadequate in lower-tier and rural markets, new consumption supply lags behind demand, and policy frameworks lack long-term design. Coordination between urban and rural consumption systems is still limited.

Regional growth has also been uneven. In central and western regions, upgrading often remains at the low end of the value chain — such as Guizhou province's Zheng'an guitar industry, which holds a big global market share but largely operates as an OEM (original equipment manufacturer) base, or Yunnan province's Pu'er tea industry, which remains focused on primary processing. Innovation resources remain concentrated in the east, and cross-regional coordination policies are insufficient.

Breaking through these barriers requires renewed policy resolve. First, reforms to the national innovation system should deepen, with increased basic research investment and full-chain policies from laboratories to pilot testing and industrialization. Integrating innovation, industrial, supply, and value chains will help turn scientific breakthroughs into industrial drivers.

Second, a long-term mechanism is needed for stimulating domestic demand growth. Strengthening county-level com-



MA XUEJING / CHINA DAILY

mercial systems, fostering green and smart consumption scenarios, and optimizing trade-in programs can align short-term measures with long-term structural policies. Third, regional coordination mechanisms must also improve. Transferring innovation resources from the east to central and western regions, supported by targeted policies and cross-regional innovation communities, can enable a more balanced transformation.

Ancient wisdom holds that horses are a vital asset of the nation. Today, the metaphor applies to economic development. Global risks and opportunities coexist, and pressure is accelerating China's structural shift. Policy discipline and endurance are indispensable for high-quality growth.

China's GDP surpassing 140 trillion yuan in 2025 and contributing roughly 30 percent to global growth underscores the importance of transformation and policy

resolve. International institutions, including the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the Asian Development Bank, have raised their growth forecasts for China.

Looking ahead to 2026, China will rely on niche-sector innovation as the legs of its fleet-footed horse, people-centered policies as its endurance, and openness as the momentum of "ten thousand horses galloping".

By addressing weaknesses and strengthening advantages, China can mitigate risks through transformation, achieve growth through progress, and continue to inject stability and certainty into the global economy.

*The author is a professor at the School of Economics, Southwestern University of Finance and Economics. The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.*

Mike Bastin

## Whatever the season, China will keep tourists busy

China's rich diversity, showcased in its national and local festivals, is sending inbound tourist figures soaring to unprecedented levels across China.

China's unique history and heritage blended with rapid modernization — increasingly futuristic, and cashless city environments and a high speed rail network that leads the world — are providing a perfect platform for international tourists to flock to all parts of China's vast and diverse geographical landmass.

The modernization apart, it is just important to highlight the exponential growth in eco and rural tourism across China.

The rapid increase in flights to different parts of the Chinese mainland from overseas is also worth noting. International airports offering direct international flights are now situated well beyond tier-I cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou.

Southwestern Chinese cities such as Chongqing, Chengdu and Kunming, as well as northwestern Xi'an, all cater to direct flights from overseas.

Even the east coast city of Qingdao and cities as far afield as Urumqi, capital of Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region, now get direct international flights.

Visa-free travel to China has also contributed to this exponential rise in inbound tourism. As of now, travelers from a staggering 74 countries enjoy visa-free stay in China for up to 30 days. The United Kingdom is among the recent additions to this golden travel bonanza.

And right now, of course, with winter underway and the Spring Festival holiday around the corner, it is just the season to visit China. Ski resorts and other winter sports venues are aplenty across northern China and in and around Beijing and neighboring Hebei province.

China's Harbin Ice and Snow festival has

### Springtime tourist attractions also feature heavily across China.

for quite a while being a magnet for international tourists. As the Year of the Horse sets in on Feb 17, there is a steep rise in inbound travel, not surprising for this time of the year.

International flights to China for this year's Chinese New Year holiday season are up by approximately 400 percent, a significant surge.

Apart from the famous Harbin Ice and Snow festival, with its incredible ice sculptures, there are lesser known but just as spectacular international tourist attractions across North China.

Wusong Island in Northeast China's Jilin province fits perfectly into the category of a yet-untapped tourist destination with stunning ice scenery along the Songhua River.

Not that winter tourism is restricted to China's northern and northeastern provinces, such is the breadth and diversity of China's vast landmass.

Hainan Island, southern China's sunshine tourist hotspot, is the perfect winter escape with its year-round tropical climate and superb, sandy beaches.

Springtime tourist attractions also feature heavily across China. Eastern China's city of Hangzhou stands out as a "must see" destination, with its scenic West Lake surrounded by beautiful Buddhist temples and wonderful pagodas.

Summertime also offers major attractions to international tourists in China, be it in the lush, grasslands of Inner Mongolia autonomous region, or the year-round moderate climate in Kunming in southwestern China's picturesque Yunnan province.

And autumn is not to be outdone either, from Beijing's crimson-leaf-coloured Fragrant Hills to South China's Guilin city, places where time stands still and very pervasive tranquility permeates the landscape.

From China's increasingly urban landscapes to bucolic, rural scenery and year-round festivals and attractions, it should come as no surprise that China is fast becoming the magnet for international tourists.

Equally important is its enviable 5,000-plus-year history and cultural heritage that few countries can rival.

Given the number of arrivals this season, international tourists might sometimes have to exercise patience, but not for too long.

The high-speed rail network is an example of the speed with which modernization is taking place across the country.

*The author is a senior lecturer at the UK's University of Southampton. The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.*

Wang Jiahua

## Is Spring Festival without fireworks applaudable?

As the Spring Festival draws near, the debate over whether China should ban or allow the use of fireworks is once again in the spotlight. The "ban or allow" question got a fresh lease of life at the end of 2025 when Shanxi province withdrew its decade-long prohibition on fireworks. Fireworks may appear trivial, yet they sit at the intersection of tradition and modernity, identity and regulation, public order and private emotion.

For centuries, fireworks have marked the ritual transition from one year to the next. In Chinese culture, there is something symbolic about the thunderous sound and flash of light that accompanies fireworks: it is believed that the loud noise drives away evil spirits and bad luck, while the bright light illuminates the year ahead.

For many people, the sensory experience — loud enough to startle, bright enough to astonish — is something inseparable from their memories of "celebrating the New Year".

But the realities of modern urban life have unsettled this tradition. The effects of smoke and noise get multiplied in dense megacities, increasing safety risks. The risk to public safety and the cost to the environment are immense. Faced with multiple pressures, many local governments adopted the simplest answer: a blanket ban. The result? The air became

cleaner and there were fewer accidents. But the cultural implications were not small. In a survey among Jinan residents in Shandong province, nearly one-third said that the ban diluted the festive atmosphere. Without the sound and spectacle, the holiday felt incomplete — like New Year's Eve without dumplings.

The Spring Festival holiday is China's most important traditional holiday, combining harvest celebration, ancestral ritual, respect for elders, family reunion, social interaction and leisure. It holds the emotional DNA of Chinese society: harmony, kinship, peace, gratitude, forgiveness and reunion. "Whether rich or poor, go home for the New Year" is not a slogan — it reflects a deep cultural impulse.

Today, roughly one-fifth of the world's population celebrates Lunar New Year in various forms. Nearly 20 countries, from Vietnam to the Republic of Korea to Singapore, recognize it as a public holiday. In 2023, the Spring Festival became an official UN holiday; in 2024, it was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Beyond being a cultural anchor for Chinese communities worldwide, it has become a showcase for China's cultural vitality and soft power. To safeguard and transmit it is both an honor and a responsibility.

Given the tension between cultural protection and social governance, a more bal-

anced approach is needed. Instead of asking whether to "ban or allow" fireworks, policymakers should ask "how to manage" it. A uniform ban is rarely optimal. Shifting toward a model of "targeted restriction plus limited allowance" could create a workable compromise. Some cities have already tried it: in Guyuan, Ningxia Hui autonomous region, fireworks are prohibited near government offices, hospitals and forests but allowed at designated sites during specific hours on New Year's Eve, Lantern Festival and other traditional dates. These measures preserve both tradition and safety.

Technology can also offer solutions. Fireworks manufacturers could reduce explosive intensity, lower polluting emissions and develop cleaner, more controlled forms of fireworks.

Electronic firecrackers — sound without smoke — have become increasingly popular. Ensuring safety requires compliance with uniform standards and product specifications. Improving realism and user experience would further expand consumer acceptance.

At the same time, society should discourage competitive displays and extravagance. The spirit of the holiday is not in the decibel level but in the warmth of reunion and the hope for a better year.

Fireworks are a prism through which we see the complex struggle between old and new, emotion and rationality, individual

desire and collective responsibility in a rapidly changing society. Precision governance requires balancing enforcement costs, public compliance, emergency response and environmental objectives. Total prohibition cannot capture the full meaning of the practice; complete freedom cannot accommodate today's realities.

The goal is not to "win" but to seek a wiser balance. At the policy level, there is a need to refine and humanize regulation; draw boundaries without erasing tradition.

At the technological level, entities should innovate toward cleaner and safer products. At the societal level, sustainable forms of celebration should be promoted. At the individual level, we should rediscover the emotional core of the holiday — family, reunion, remembrance and hope.

Only through such balance can we protect our blue skies and quiet nights while allowing the essence of Spring Festival — its symbolism of renewal, its celebration of kinship and its belief in a brighter year ahead — to endure and be passed down from generation to generation.

*The author is a professor at the Advanced Institute for Confucian Studies, Shandong University; and vice-chairman of the China Folklore Society. The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.*

## OPINION

## Teachers Unions Get Desperate



**POTOMAC WATCH**  
By Kimberley A. Strassel

If at first (and in many ways) you don't succeed, sue, sue again. That's the scorched-earth strategy animating opponents of the school-choice revolution sweeping the country. It's about all they've got left. The question now is how many elected Democrats the teachers unions take down with them.

After decades of swaggering political power, of lording it over parents and legislatures, the education monopoly overplayed its hand during Covid, and the losses are piling up. The biggest government reform story in recent years has been the explosive growth of school choice. Some 34 states now offer vouchers, scholarships or savings accounts, 19 of which have universal choice programs. At the federal level, Donald Trump's administration is breaking the stranglehold the unions held over the Education Department money box, while a new federal tax-credit scholarship program will further fuel the choice movement. Unions are losing their grip over local school boards. And the Supreme Court's decision in *Janus v. Afsome* (2018), which allowed teachers to opt out of unions, is producing steadily declining membership and fewer dues.

Worse yet for the union

bosses, they have lost the voting public, and with it their cast-iron control over the Democratic Party. Colorado Gov. Jared Polis recently announced he'll opt his state into the new federal tax-credit scholarship program. That followed a surrender by North Carolina Gov. Josh Stein, who loudly vetoed a GOP bill requiring the state to join the program, only to say quietly he intends to opt in anyway. Can you blame them? School choice is growing more politically powerful and popular by the day. Both men fear voter blowback from denying parents donor-provided scholarship money for choice programs they love.

Only four Democratic governors have officially refused to take part in the federal program (in Hawaii, New Mexico, Oregon and Wisconsin), a number the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers view in outright panic. Especially as unions made opt-out a litmus test of good Democratic governance. It's one thing for purple-state governors to remain on the fence. But when even California, New York and Illinois are debating whether to give their parents access to choice dollars—in a nod to the danger of giving the GOP a wedge issue—the unions have a big problem.

Hence their increasing—and increasingly nasty—use of lawfare—attempting to impose via judicial decree what they can't win from voter sentiment or whip politics. Active

cases now rage in Arkansas, Missouri, Ohio, Tennessee, Utah and Wyoming, with past cases in many more states. The legal attacks vary, though most come down to a variant of the argument that choice somehow violates a state's duty to provide a “uniform” education.

Another aspect of much of the litigation: It aims to cause damage even when the unions are unlikely to prevail in court. Gov. Brad Little signed legislation creating Idaho's universal choice program in February of 2025. A coalition

### Lawsuits against school choice are meant to stir up trouble, not succeed.

including Idaho's union didn't sue until September—getting headlines alongside the start of school, and ensuring the litigation was raging when the sign-up period began in January of this year. Plaintiffs in Wyoming last year got a court to impose an injunction only after the sign-up period for the state's new choice program, leaving 4,000 applicants in limbo this school year. Wyoming's case came to a head this week in oral arguments in front of the state supreme court, but the litigation and continued injunction cast a shadow over the most recent sign-up period. Utah families are in a similar legal limbo.

Antichoice plaintiffs “usually file lawsuits right before families sign up for the program just to be particularly cruel. They know they'll lose nearly every case, but delaying or enjoining the programs in any way is the last-ditch effort to slow maximum uptake for families,” says Tommy Schultz, CEO of the American Federation for Children.

Many suits are striking out. Idaho's high court just ruled 5-0 in favor of the state choice program. Top courts in Arizona, Florida, North Carolina and West Virginia have upheld choice programs. The U.S. Supreme Court has continued to issue beneficial rulings. Yet the legal threat is real, and unions, often accompanied by local school districts, continue to throw millions at litigation and disruption, forcing states to spend huge amounts to defend against them. Then the unions and the districts claim schools are underfunded.

Democrats will have to decide how much longer to stick with this unraveling cartel. School choice is out of the bottle, experiencing exponential growth. Union demands that Democrats actively stand athwart this public tide have already become politically untenable, their rearward actions are further stoking public discontent. It's past time for Democrats to innovate on the education front; and that's going to require a new relationship with an outdated and rusty union machine.

Write to kim@wsj.com.

BOOKSHELF | By Bill Heavey

## The Problem With Parlays

### Everybody Loses

By Danny Funt

Gallery, 320 pages, \$30

You can tell a lot about a book by the people who want nothing to do with it. In Danny Funt's “Everybody Loses: The Tumultuous Rise of American Sports Gambling,” that includes the commissioners of the MLB, NBA, NFL and NHL, as well as the top executives at the sportsbooks FanDuel and DraftKings, which control three-quarters of the \$150 billion yearly sports betting market. These people would prefer that the boat not be rocked.

Americans have always been of two minds about gambling, writes Mr. Funt. On the one hand, it's a “relatively harmless, wholesome form of entertainment.” On the other, it's “an addictive and potentially ruinous vice that shouldn't be encouraged in a progressive society.”

George Washington called gambling “the foundation of evil, and the cause of many a brave and gallant officer's ruin.” When eight members of the Chicago White Sox were banned for life from baseball after accepting bribes to throw the 1919 World Series, Babe Ruth—nobody's idea of a prude—said “it was like hearing that my church had sold out.”

For decades, the heads of amateur and professional sports leagues unanimously opposed sports betting. Then in 2014 Adam Silver, the commissioner of the National Basketball Association, wrote that gambling “should be brought out of the underground and into the sunlight where it can be appropriately monitored and regulated.” A cynic might say the same logic could be used to justify

the sale of machine guns to children. This was at a time when the NBA was focused on expanding its global reach, and everybody knew that bettors watch more games than nonbettors. In 2018 the Supreme Court ruled that the federal prohibition against sports betting was unconstitutional. The other commissioners quickly fell in line.

Legalized betting invites corruption. In January, 26 men were indicted in a scheme to bribe and manipulate college basketball games.

Another issue is that gamblers who lose can be unpleasant people. They have stalked athletes at home and motels. The FBI has investigated death threats. A security consultant for the National Football League tells Mr. Funt it's only a matter of time before “there's some terrible act of violence committed by somebody who's lost their mind because they lost a bet.”

Cellphones and online sports betting were made for each other, because you now have a casino in your pocket. The problem is that casinos always stack the odds in their favor. This built-in profit is the vig, or vigorish. Bet a dollar on an even game and you can only win 90 cents. In props and parlay bets, the vig might be 25% or higher. Prop bets are made on a team's or player's individual statistics in a game, like whether LeBron James will score more than 25 points, while parlays combine multiple bets—that four teams will all win their games, for instance—into one bet. Both are attractive. Casinos appreciate the higher vig and gamblers love the prospect of a big payout on a small bet. Never mind that the odds amount to a tax on people who can't do math.

As Mr. Funt reminds us, gambling addiction is more about the dopamine hit than the money. “Dopamine,” he writes, “the chemical in the brain that causes a gratifying, potentially addictive emotion, is triggered by the pursuit of a reward,” not the winning itself. Actually winning releases serotonin, a neurotransmitter associated with stabilized mood and feelings of calmness. Young men, “who are predisposed to reward seeking and compulsive behavior,” are lucrative targets for sportsbooks. One NCAA survey found that 44% of college students report betting on sports at least monthly. The addiction hijacks the brain's chemistry. “Your brain no longer thinks rationally,” one expert tells the author. “Your dopamine, your serotonin—all your neurotransmitters—have been impacted by gambling. Nothing can replace that high.”

### Online sports betting means that you now have a casino in your pocket. The issue is that casinos stack the odds in their favor.

“You can shear a sheep for life, but you can only slaughter it once” goes an old saying that sportsbooks seem to have heeded. If you lose enough money, you're invited into the VIP club; you might even get to announce, “drivers, start your engines!” at a Nascar race. Big VIPs get paired with “hosts.” These are “sociable, bro-ey men in their twenties and thirties,” Mr. Funt explains, “the kind of guys who have matured since their fraternity days but can still let loose on a bachelor party.” Sportsbooks promote the prospect of “life-changing piles of cash,” but win too often and your account will be severely limited or closed outright. It's not a business for the tenderhearted. One former sportsbook executive couldn't take it any more. “My job was to basically slowly bleed someone dry.”

Beau Wagner knows about the bleeding. The attorney won \$50,000 by putting down \$1,000 and predicting the top scorer in an NBA game. That night DraftKings tweeted “Beau knows betting.” The next day Mr. Wagner was told that he could wager no more than \$100 on the winner of an NBA game. Other winners have been banned outright. Jason Robins, the chief executive of DraftKings, has said that “people who are doing this for profit are not the players we want.”

Mr. Funt, a journalist, keeps a reporterly distance throughout most of the book. It's only in the final pages that he opines about what gambling is costing society: our belief that sports are clean, that the sports media is independent, and that politicians will put the well-being of their constituents above that of gambling lobbyists. As it is, more people are becoming addicted, more games are being compromised and more kids are gambling. The “benefits” are few: richer television deals for the leagues, astronomical profits for a few companies and a politically convenient revenue stream for states.

Sports betting has indeed been brought out of the underground and into the sunlight. It's quickly becoming the default way we relate to athletic competition. And the outcome is predetermined. Everybody loses.

Mr. Heavey is the editor at large of *Field & Stream* magazine.

### Coming in BOOKS this weekend

Julius Erving, Moses Malone and the Philadelphia 76ers • How Communism conquered China • The toymakers who created an American industry • Revisiting the Hundred Years' War • Spielberg, Coppola and Lucas • & more

## Ash Wednesday and Our Shared Dust

**HOUSES OF WORSHIP**  
By T.R. Reid

Like most Americans, I've grown a little relaxed about church attendance. Some Sundays I get up and go to Mass. Other Sundays I sit around reading the papers or head out to the ski slopes. And I don't feel particularly guilty about it, as I surely would have decades ago when our Catholic family religiously avoided meat on Friday and attended church every Sunday morning.

But even with this more laid-back attitude, there's one service I always attend. That's the morning Mass on Ash Wednesday, which falls on Feb. 18 this year. The day marks the beginning of Lent, the most solemn season of repentance in the ecclesiastical year.

The Gospel reading for Ash Wednesday is from the sixth chapter of Matthew—the chapter in which Jesus teaches the disciples to recite the Lord's Prayer: “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.” But, in the reading, Jesus goes beyond simply telling us what words to say. The passage teaches us how to pray, and that's a lesson that seems particularly important these days.

“When you pray,” Jesus

says, “do not be like the hypocrites, who love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on street corners so that others may see them. . . . But when you pray, go to your inner room, close the door and pray to your Father in secret.”

Jesus sets the same rule of secrecy for charity and fasting: “When you give alms, do not blow a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, to win the praise of others. . . . But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing, so that your almsgiving may be secret. . . . When you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you may not appear to be fasting, except to your Father who is hidden.”

In the Ash Wednesday Mass, this bracing mandate is followed by a homily from the priest. And then the Ash Wednesday service adds a ritual that seems to run counter to Jesus's admonition to practice faith in private, not on the street corners.

This is the Blessing and Distribution of the Ashes. Parishioners proceed to the front of the church, where a priest or deacon marks a black cross on their foreheads. The mark is made with the moistened ashes of

palms that were burned after the previous year's Palm Sunday. And while that ashen cross is being applied, the priest reminds us of a stark biblical lesson: “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

### Each Lent, I reflect on the apparent contradiction the day seems to hold.

The result is that all those who go to Mass on Ash Wednesday leave the church with a prominent symbol of religious faith marked on their faces, “so that others may see them.” Over the years, many Catholics have wondered about the apparent contradiction between this open display of faith and the Gospel's call for secrecy and public reticence in matters of religion.

I find one of the pleasures of the Ash Wednesday Mass each year is watching the pastor's attempts to reconcile the Gospel lesson with the distribution of ashes.

One common answer notes that sackcloth and ashes have been since biblical times a sign of repentance.

So that ashen cross proves an appropriate start to Lent's season of repentance: a time to get things right in your life. The ashes don't say, “What a great Christian I am” but rather “I must become a better person.”

Another explanation is that the ashes aren't meant to be a billboard aimed at others. They serve instead to remind Catholics that they are members of an enormous community. We are not isolated from one another in our faith. And perhaps more to the point, we aren't isolated from the whole of God's creation. The ashes are delivered with a reminder of mortality. No matter how important or successful we imagine ourselves, no matter how much we act as though we rise above the rest of the created world, one message remains true: ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

That has always seemed to me a good message to take away as we walk out of the church at the end of the Ash Wednesday Mass. A good message as we travel ever further down the ultimate dusty path.

Mr. Reid is author of “A Fine Mess: A Global Quest for a Simpler, Fairer and More Efficient Tax System.”

## Munich Is the Davos of Tomorrow

By Marco Vicenzino

If you want to know where the world is headed, forget about Davos. Watch Munich instead.

For decades after the end of the Cold War, the World Economic Forum served as the pre-eminent annual gathering of global business and political elites. Its premise was simple: Markets could be optimized through globalization and co-operation. Davos attendees didn't see hard geopolitics and national-security issues as the primary constraints on global economic growth.

That premise no longer holds. Today, markets are shaped by war, sanctions, industrial policy and geopolitical tension. These forces are discussed far more candidly in security forums. Chief among them is the Munich Security Conference.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine demonstrated this shift. Europe lost access to cheap Russian gas, defense spending surged, and inflation rose. Energy-intensive sectors such as chemicals, fertilizers and aluminum cut production or relocated outside Europe. These outcomes were driven by state decisions

about force, sanctions and alliance commitments.

The U.S. and China are in a similar situation. Export controls, investment restrictions and technology bans have transformed semiconductor production, artificial intelligence and advanced manufacturing into instruments of national power. Taiwan is no longer a distant geopolitical risk. It is a central variable in long-term investment decisions.

### Global consensus has taken a back seat to national security.

Yet much of the global business conversation remains anchored in an outdated framework. Davos still speaks the language of consensus, stakeholder capitalism and coordination. It excels at producing reassuring narratives. What it does less well is grapple honestly with countries' use of coercion, deterrence and escalation—the forces that now determine many economic outcomes.

Munich is better suited to the current geopolitical envi-

ronment. It isn't a business forum. It convenes heads of state, defense ministers, intelligence chiefs and senior military leaders who decide when to impose sanctions, use force, and tolerate escalation. The discussions are unsentimental because the consequences are real. Failure in this domain produces actual conflict. Prior to the Russia-Ukraine war, Munich panels repeatedly debated Europe's energy dependence on Russia and the credibility of North Atlantic Treaty Organization deterrence—issues rarely given priority elsewhere.

What is discussed seriously in Munich often becomes policy within a few years. Sustained debates over NATO burdensharing and deterrence preceded actual NATO-member defense-budget expansion. The shift led to a structural re-rating of European defense stocks. Mispricing occurs when investors treat geopolitical risk as temporary, only to revalue the securities sharply once sanctions, export controls or defense commitments harden into long-term policy. Paying attention to Munich helps prevent geopolitical events from catching investors off guard.

## OPINION

## REVIEW &amp; OUTLOOK

## Trump's Climate Liberation Act

The Environmental Protection Agency on Thursday at long last repealed Barack Obama's so-called endangerment finding that declared greenhouse gas emissions a threat to public health and safety. Cue the apocalyptic warnings unhinged from reality. What progressives really fear is that they won't be able to dictate the energy supplies, cars and appliances that Americans can buy.

Progressives recognize the importance of Thursday's news. A New York Times headline says "Trump Allies Near 'Total Victory' in Wiping Out U.S. Climate Regulation." That could be true if the Administration prevails against the inevitable legal challenges.

As a refresher, in 2007 a 5-4 majority of the Supreme Court ruled in *Massachusetts v. EPA* that greenhouse gases qualify as pollutants under the Clean Air Act. The law requires the EPA to regulate pollutants if it determines they can "reasonably be anticipated to endanger public health or welfare." Thus arose the Obama endangerment finding, which established the legal basis for the EPA to regulate CO<sub>2</sub>, which wasn't mentioned in the Clean Air Act.

But greenhouse gases aren't toxic and don't affect air quality, unlike pollutants that the law expressly directs the EPA to regulate. The Obama endangerment finding claims this distinction doesn't matter because CO<sub>2</sub> contributes to rising temperatures, which could indirectly result in downstream harms such as more wildfires, storms and disease.

Most of the "science" in the Obama finding is debatable, as the Trump team notes. The impact of greenhouse gases on global temperatures is intermediated by such factors as cloud cover and urbanization, and the effect on storms is disputed. In any event, curbing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in the U.S. will have scant impact on climate because emissions are rapidly rising in China, India and developing countries.

The real import of the finding was to give the

### Removing Obama's 'endangerment' finding makes it harder to ban fossil-fuel energy.

Obama and Biden teams legal license to mandate electric cars and force fossil-fuel power plants to shut down. Trump EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin has moved to roll back the Biden regulatory overreaches. But as long as the endangerment finding is in effect, a future Democratic President could reimpose the Biden climate diktats and go even further—say, by banning petroleum-powered lawn mowers and gas space heaters or stoves.

Repealing the endangerment finding could stop this regulatory ping-pong. The climate lobby is sure to challenge the rescission, which could then tee up a case for the Supreme Court to revisit its misconceived *Massachusetts v. EPA* precedent. Chief Justice John Roberts and Justices Antonin Scalia, Clarence Thomas and Samuel Alito dissented in that case, and Justice Anthony Kennedy, who supplied the fifth vote, has retired from the Court.

The Great Scalia observed in dissent that "regulating the buildup of CO<sub>2</sub> and other greenhouse gases in the upper reaches of the atmosphere . . . is not akin to regulating the concentration of some substance that is polluting the air." As the Trump team notes, the endangerment finding also violates the Supreme Court's major questions doctrine.

That doctrine holds that express authorization from Congress is required for economically and politically significant executive actions. A 6-3 majority invoked the doctrine in *West Virginia v. EPA* (2022), which struck down the Obama-era CO<sub>2</sub> emissions limits for power plants. EPA's arrogation of sweeping authority to regulate CO<sub>2</sub> is without doubt a major question.

The scope of CO<sub>2</sub> regulation is a decision for Congress. It's richly ironic for Democrats who denounce Mr. Trump as an authoritarian to howl that he's relinquishing power to regulate all corners of the economy under the guise of climate that the Biden and Obama administrations unilaterally claimed.

## A Little Tariff Rebellion in Congress

It wasn't a revolution, and it wouldn't survive a presidential veto, but mark Wednesday as an important date in the political rebellion against President Trump's tariffs. May it be the start of a larger revolt.

Six Republicans joined 213 Democrats to terminate his emergency tariffs on Canada, 219-211. The GOP defectors were Don Bacon (Neb.), Kevin Kiley (Calif.), Thomas Massie (Ky.), Jeff Hurd (Colo.), Brian Fitzpatrick (Pa.) and Dan Newhouse (Wash.) Messrs. Bacon and Newhouse aren't seeking re-election. Mr. Massie has already drawn a Trump-backed primary challenger. Under California's new gerrymander, Mr. Kiley's seat looks like a goner.

But swing districts held by Messrs. Fitzpatrick and Hurd will be difficult to keep as independent voters sour on the President in part owing to the economic impact of tariffs. According to a recent Economist/YouGov poll, three times as many voters favor reducing tariffs as favor increasing them. The Republican renegades may fear losing the general election more than a primary.

Mr. Trump tried to prevent more defections on Wednesday by threatening Republicans with a primary challenge, and he may have succeeded. But don't be surprised if Democrats use the vote against vulnerable Republicans in cam-

paign ads. That's no doubt why House Speaker Mike Johnson tried to use a procedural maneuver to block a vote.

Republican Sens. Mitch McConnell, Rand Paul, Susan Collins and Lisa Murkowski voted last year with Democrats to end the Canada tariffs. But there aren't enough votes in either chamber to override a presidential veto, which underscores a point that Justices Neil Gorsuch and Amy Coney Barrett raised during oral arguments when the Supreme Court considered the legality of Mr. Trump's "emergency" border taxes last fall.

The President says the 1977 International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) gives him broad latitude to impose border taxes, even though the Constitution gives Congress the power to tax and regulate trade. His Solicitor General John Sauer told Justices that Congress could reclaim these powers anytime it wants by voting to end the tariffs.

But as Justice Gorsuch noted, "Congress, as a practical matter, can't get this power back once it's handed it over to the President. It's a one-way ratchet." The Justices are expected to issue a decision soon. Many Republicans are hoping Mr. Trump loses at the Court so they don't have to defend his unpopular border taxes on the hustings.

## NewsGuard Punches Back at the FTC

Lina Khan may have left to advise Zohran Mamdani in New York, but her ghost still animates the Federal Trade Commission under new Chair Andrew Ferguson. That explains how the agency has now drawn a First Amendment challenge for allegedly targeting a media outfit.

NewsGuard, which rates the credibility of press outlets, sued the FTC recently in federal court. The suit claims the agency has targeted NewsGuard for punishment for giving a low credibility rating to Trumpian news outlets like Newsmax.

"Under the guise of a supposed antitrust investigation," the complaint says, the FTC issued a civil investigative demand that sought "all documents that NewsGuard has created or received since its founding in 2018." The demand included everything from reporters' notes to company finances and subscriber lists.

The lawsuit claims the FTC targeted NewsGuard in the merger between Omnicom Group and the Interpublic Group of Companies. Under a draft order, the FTC barred the combined company from using services that judge "viewpoints as to the veracity of news reporting" and "adherence to journalistic standards or ethics established or set by a Third Party." That sounds like NewsGuard.

The FTC justifies its action on grounds that NewsGuard is itself engaging in censorship. Mr. Ferguson has said NewsGuard "led collusive ad boycotts—possibly in violation of our antitrust laws—to censor the speech of conservative and independent media in the United States."

But Mr. Ferguson misreads the law in going after NewsGuard, a private outfit. The First Amendment protects private actors against censorship by the government.

We're not fans of media rating shops, since they typically have their own mostly leftward biases. PolitiFact is Exhibit A. NewsGuard's James Warren once sent us an importuning

query objecting to something in an op-ed we had published. But we thought it was a matter of opinion and ignored Mr. Warren, a former political columnist.

NewsGuard's reliability index, which gives organizations a score from one to 100, puts Newsmax (20) in the lowest tier—above the Chinese government's New China News Agency (Xinhua) (7.5). But it also rates Fox News (69.5) ahead of MS NOW (49.5), and National Review (92.5) above CNN (80). We certainly agree with that last one, but in any case NewsGuard can say whatever it wants under the First Amendment.

NewsGuard says its criteria are nonpartisan and it publishes them to ensure transparency. The site uses nine factors to judge reliability, including whether an organization publishes material that is "significantly false or egregiously misleading." It also analyzes whether an outlet acknowledges and corrects errors, reveals conflicts of interest, and distinguishes news reporting from opinion.

NewsGuard's founders are the decidedly liberal Steven Brill of American Lawyer magazine and the conservative former Wall Street Journal publisher and columnist L. Gordon Crovitz. The duo said in a statement that the FTC's campaign against NewsGuard was "instigated in large part by Newsmax," which is run by Trump ally Christopher Ruddy.

In April Mr. Ferguson spelled out the pressure the government can put on private actors. The government says, "we have a tremendous array of investigative tools," the FTC Chair said. "Those tools are expensive when applied to you even if we don't win at the end of the day, so knuckle under." He added that he "generally think[s] the government should not threaten private people with punishment because of things they're saying . . . unless they are criminal."

Mr. Ferguson seems less concerned now that the FTC is using its knuckles to chill private speech. This lawsuit could be interesting.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Charter Schools Are More Bang for Your Buck

Jason Riley points out in his column "New York's Charter Schools Live Up to Their Promise" (Upward Mobility, Feb. 4) that charter schools often outperform their traditional counterparts.

He leaves out that in New York charter schools receive far less funding per pupil than district schools. I'm leaving the Democratic Party because the politicians who say they're helping people exit poverty do all they can to block the most effective pathways to success—better schools.

The school district of Rochester, N.Y., claims a budget shortfall of more than \$50 million while spending about \$36,000 per student, by our analysis. Rochester's charter schools operate on budgets of less than \$17,000 per student, including federal grants, yet have double the percentage of students achieving at or above grade level. That's double the performance for about half the cost.

One-third of all K-12 students in Rochester now attend charter schools, and thousands more are on waitlists. Taxpayers could save more than \$400 million and students would do better if all the schools were charter schools. We are close

to the day when urban voters will catch on.

BRYAN HICKMAN  
Vice president, EDceptional Inc.  
Rochester, N.Y.

By ignoring clear data showing that New York City charter schools outperform district schools in reading, writing and math, Mayor Zohran Mamdani—who has snubbed charter school leaders—is acting irresponsibly.

Allow me to draw a comparison to the field of medicine. If this were a clinical trial and one cohort clearly outperformed another in measurable outcomes, it would be wrong to disregard the data. It would be unethical to withhold access to the successful "treatment" from the failing cohort. Yet this is precisely what Mr. Mamdani appears to be doing. His refusal to engage with charter-school leaders suggests that political alliances matter more than outcomes for the New York families he claims to champion.

In any other data-driven field, such deliberate disregard of evidence would be indefensible.

VALERIE SCHADLOW VAN BEEK, M.D.  
Ridgefield, Conn.

## An Onslaught of Climate Change Litigation

Your editorial "A Failed Climate Coup in the Courts" (Review & Outlook, Feb. 9) highlights an important issue that could have unintended consequences.

Over 3,000 climate change cases had been filed globally by mid-2025, more than 60% of which were being litigated in the U.S. As a recent United Nations Environment Program and Columbia University report states, "climate litigation may play a role in accelerating the adoption of mitigation and adaptation strategies and may lead to an increase in the ambition of such efforts."

Addressing climate change is an important goal, but that shouldn't be directed by the courts regardless of whether science supports one argument or another.

Running an economy is a balancing act. It's important to consider not only environmental goals but also the

economic wellbeing of a nation's citizens. Creating uncertainty via courts and punishing companies for their products that are vital to the economy affects those companies' investment and production. Runaway climate litigation could also lead to increased prices (on energy, for instance), which in turn could lead to public backlash against climate change policies.

Litigation serves essential purposes, including enforcing environmental laws and providing avenues for redress. But when it expands beyond those functions and becomes the primary mechanism for shaping national energy, climate and economic policies through state and local courts, it becomes a problem.

PINAR CEBI WILBER  
Chief economist, exec. vice president  
American Cncl. for Capital Formation  
Washington

## The World Takes a Page out of America's Book

We keep hearing that the world is angry with the U.S. in general and Donald Trump in particular. Yet, in recent free and fair elections around the world, people have often voted for new leaders who have similarities to Mr. Trump and seek closer relations with the U.S. Exhibit A: Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi just led her party to a sweeping victory, as your editorial notes ("Takaichi Rolls to a Landslide in Japan," Review & Outlook, Feb. 9).

Voters in Costa Rica and Chile recently chose right-wing leaders. Argentina and Ecuador have similarly lurched right in recent years. Even some European governments are also experiencing a notable rightward

shift, with conservative or nationalist parties growing in influence.

These movements reflect that voters have been giving priority to national security, economic stability and immigration control. If imitation truly is the sincerest form of flattery, perhaps Americans should take a bow.

JOHN FORTUGNO  
Olympia, Wash.

## Root Canals Aren't So Bad

I laughed when I read Joseph Epstein's "Press Secretary? I'd Rather Do Root Canals" (op-ed, Feb. 2). As a retired general dentist, I can say it's the only job I've ever held where very frightened people came to me seeking treatment, I hurt them (just a little bit), they thanked me profusely when treatment was finished, and then they paid me. Mr. Epstein is right—it sure beats being the president's press secretary!

CONI DOBYNS WHISLER, D.D.S. (RET.)  
Danville, Calif.

Presidential press secretaries have traditionally represented a president's views, policies and priorities while maintaining professional composure. Mr. Epstein rightly criticizes the defensive tone that now characterizes some exchanges at White House briefings. But that tone didn't arise in a vacuum.

When journalists adopt a prosecutorial posture, press secretaries respond in kind. Today's sharper tone reflects a broader shift toward performance and partisanship in political media, not simply the temperament of one spokesperson. Civility at the podium will return when civility in questioning does as well.

CAPT. MARK DRAKE, USN (RET.)  
Amherst, N.H.

## CORRECTION

Saudi Arabia has scaled back plans for Neom and The Line, a 105-mile-long city. This was misstated in the Feb. 11 op-ed "The Saudi Crown Prince Taps the Brakes."

## Free Expression From WSJ Opinion

A daily newsletter on life, politics and culture. Edited by Matthew Hennessey and featuring columnists Matthew Continetti, Kyle Smith, Louise Perry, Ben Sasse, James B. Meigs, John J. Miller, Meghan Cox Gurdon and other contributors.



Scan the QR code or visit [wsj.com/opinion/free-expression](https://www.wsj.com/opinion/free-expression)

Letters intended for publication should be emailed to [wsj.letters@wsj.com](mailto:wsj.letters@wsj.com). Please include your city, state and telephone number. All letters are subject to editing, and unpublished letters cannot be acknowledged.

## Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"The tiny one is for humility."

## OPINION

## NATO Has Seen the Future and Is Unprepared

By Jillian Kay Melchior

Russia and Ukraine have shown the world the future of warfare—and America and its allies aren't ready for it. That's the lesson of a major exercise that North Atlantic Treaty Organization members conducted in Estonia last May. What transpired during the exercise, with the details reported here for the first time, exposed serious tactical shortcomings and vulnerabilities in high-intensity drone combat.

The exercise, known as Hedgehog 2025, involved more than 16,000 troops from 12 NATO countries who drilled alongside Ukrainian drone experts, including soldiers borrowed from the front line. It simulated a

### A simulation of drone warfare shows how far the alliance has to go to learn the lessons of Ukraine.

"contested and congested" battlefield with various kinds of drones, says Lt. Col. Arbo Probal, head of the unmanned systems program for the Estonian Defence Forces. "The aim was really to create friction, the stress for units, and the cognitive overload as soon as possible," he says. That tests the soldiers' ability to adapt under fire.

In Ukraine the front line is largely frozen, but Hedgehog envisioned a battlefield where tanks and troops still have some ability to move. During one scenario, a battle group of several thousand troops, including a British brigade and an Estonian division, sought to conduct an attack. As they advanced, they failed to ac-

count for how drones have made the battlefield more transparent, several sources say.

The NATO battle group was "just walking around, not using any kind of disguise, parking tents and armored vehicles," recalls one participant, who played an enemy role. "It was all destroyed."

During Hedgehog Ukrainians used Delta, their sophisticated battlefield-management system. It collects real-time battlefield intelligence, uses artificial intelligence to analyze huge amounts of data, identifies targets, and coordinates strikes across command and units. That enables a fast "kill chain": See it, share it, shoot it—all within minutes or less.

A single team of some 10 Ukrainians, acting as the adversary, counterattacked the NATO forces. In about half a day they mock-destroyed 17 armored vehicles and conducted 30 "strikes" on other targets.

Aivar Hanniotti, an Estonian Defense League unmanned aerial systems coordinator, led an adversary unit of about 100 that included Estonians and Ukrainians. Mr. Hanniotti, who has since left the regular military, describes how they deployed more than 30 drones against NATO troops in an area of less than 4 square miles. That's only about half the drone saturation Ukrainians currently see at the front, though Col. Probal says the Hedgehog umpires sometimes offset that discrepancy by recording the drone strikes as twice as damaging or more. But even with less reconnaissance than in real life, "there was no possibility to hide," Mr. Hanniotti says. "We quite easily found cars and mechanized units, and we were able to take them out quite fast with strike drones."

Overall, the results were "horrible" for NATO forces, says Mr. Hanniotti, who now works in the private sector



An Estonian soldier with a drone during last year's Hedgehog exercise.

as an unmanned systems expert. The adversary forces were "able to eliminate two battalions in a day," so that "in an exercise sense, basically, they were not able to fight anymore after that." The NATO side "didn't even get our drone teams."

Credit the Estonians for forcing NATO partners to confront these weak spots. Hedgehog was also an example of how Ukrainians can contribute to overall European security. There's only so much you can learn from watching online footage or reading about what's transpiring in Ukraine, says Sten Reimann, a former commander of Estonia's Military Intelligence Center who helped bring in Ukrainian drone experts for Hedgehog. He said the results of this exercise were "shocking" to military officials and troops on the ground.

Hedgehog didn't deal with political or strategic issues like drone procurement. Estonia is small, and land-use limitations sometimes

constrained how troops could move. No single exercise can reflect how quickly drone technology evolves during an actual war. Still, Hedgehog showed how visible the battlefield has become—and how vulnerable that makes anyone or anything moving on it. NATO will need to adjust its tactics and find better ways to protect its tanks and armored vehicles.

Another lesson is the need for a faster kill chain, which requires more efficient cooperation on strikes. During a future war game, NATO might consider pitting Delta against a similar battlefield-management platform developed by the U.S. to see how they stack up. There's also room to improve communication and coordination between units. Ukrainians accelerate attacks by sharing large amounts of data between command and units. But that runs counter to NATO's instinct to restrict sensitive information.

## Hurrah! Europe Is Fighting Over Economic Policy



**POLITICAL ECONOMICS**  
By Joseph C. Sternberg

Guess what: Europe has a unique opportunity to become a serious place again. Yes, really. The European Union finds itself in the middle of an enormous fight over how to repair the Continent's ailing economy and restore its global stature. Leaders were set to gather in the Belgian countryside this Thursday for a "competitiveness retreat" focused on boosting economic productivity. This confab is supposed to set the stage for a formal summit next month that might generate some real policy ideas. Brussels already is pushing ahead with snippets of deregulation here and there.

Give credit where it's due. Inertia is the easiest and most likely choice in any polity, and sometimes not even a crisis is enough to dislodge a dysfunctional status quo. This is a particular risk in Europe for two reasons.

First, the Continent's economic crisis—chronically anemic growth, sagging productivity and innovation, demographic decline, looming wel-

fare-state bankruptcy—still doesn't feel all that crisis-y to the ordinary voter. Europe's decline is obvious in comparison with the U.S. or Asia, if you happen to be a European who travels to either of those places. The decline is less noticeable if you live your daily life in a relatively clean, safe and functional German, Italian, Czech or Spanish town.

Second, fixing most of Europe's economic problems will require a painful overhaul of European politics. Institutions will have to change, particularly at the pan-European level, as national governments cede some new powers to Brussels but reclaim other responsibilities. More to the point, European voters will have to become accustomed to realistic trade-offs between national economic security and defense on the one hand and the welfare state on the other.

If anyone anywhere in Europe is willing to touch that third rail, give them a round of applause. But with that faint praise out of the way, here's the scoffing: Europe's unfolding debate about economic revival is more exciting than it should be precisely because even at this late date there's more debate than is reasonable about the nature of Europe's problems. Those troubles boil down to the

fact that it is too hard to start and run a business in Europe. It is too difficult to secure regulatory approvals to open the business and regulatory permits for whatever product or service the business wants to sell, too difficult to raise capital, too difficult to trade across European borders, and too difficult to earn an economic return after taxation.

### The Continent's inertia is carrying it toward a serious crisis—and leaders are finally facing that reality.

This has been the gist of every serious analysis of Europe's economy for the past several decades, the most recent of which was prepared in 2024 by former European Central Bank President Mario Draghi. It's the gist of every serious attempt at a solution, such as Brussels's decision last year to narrow the scope of various environmental regulations to reduce their effect on business. Momentum is growing for something

called the "28th regime": A single pan-EU law governing business incorporation to operate alongside the existing 27 different national rules, vastly simplifying business formation.

If Europe's economic problem is well-defined, the political fix hasn't been. So the important positive development now is the emergence of a political alliance in support of the reform Europe needs—between German Chancellor Friedrich Merz and Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni. They head into this spring's European economic negotiations focused on deregulation, slim-lined bureaucracy and freer trade with the rest of the world.

Such an agenda suits Mr. Merz's natural freer-market instincts. It also responds to the central demand of his base among German businesses for relief from red tape, and it would align Europe's policy priorities with his aspirations for Germany's economy, which is Europe's most important. Ms. Meloni's participation suggests euroskeptic insurgent-right politicians can be persuaded that a more modest, growth-focused EU is politically saleable to their voters. It's an intriguing prospect.

"Lessons are not learned when they are identified," says retired Gen. David Petraeus. "Rather, they are only learned when you develop new concepts, write new doctrine, change organizational structures, overhaul your training, refine leader development courses, set out new materiel requirements that drive the procurement process, and even make changes to your personnel policies, recruiting, and facilities."

Estonia is trying to implement such major changes. It has updated its training, tactics and military doctrine for the drone era. It is also increasing defense spending and building deeper relationships with its vibrant private tech industry to work on drones and other military innovations.

Yet too many NATO members continue to show "a fundamental lack of understanding of the modern battlefield" and train their soldiers "based on doctrines and manuals that are not adapted to today's realities," says Maria Lemberg of the Ukrainian nonprofit Aerorozvidka, which supported Delta's development. She helped coordinate Ukraine's participation in Hedgehog and hopes it can serve as a wake-up call and basis for more knowledge-sharing between Kyiv and its partners.

Multiple sources told the story of one commander, who observed the drill and concluded, "We are f—." I asked Estonia's Col. Probal about this reaction. He said that one aim of the exercise was to help participants "think more, to make them critical toward themselves, to make sure they are not complacent in what they are doing right now." Was it a success? "From my point of view, mission accomplished."

*Ms. Melchior is a London-based member of the Journal's editorial board.*

## DEI Is a Threat to Americans' Health

By Stanley Goldfarb

President Trump's crusade against DEI has brought to light another crisis: the dramatic decline of medical education. For years, medical schools have emphasized discrimination and indoctrination at the expense of merit and excellence, to the detriment of patients. While the Trump administration has taken steps to right this wrong, a more far-reaching response is needed. For the sake of every American's health, the president should reform the accreditation system for medical schools.

The crisis in medical education is directly connected to DEI. For years, the Liaison Committee on Medical Education, which accredits M.D.-granting programs, required medical schools to establish programs

"aimed at achieving diversity."

Medical schools responded by embracing diversity in hiring and admissions. They changed their curricula to teach economic and social lessons that ladder up to the false claim that America is systemically racist. The LCME has tacitly approved this shift by issuing vague standards that give medical schools far too much leeway. The resulting lack of rigor allows unprepared students to slide through undemanding courses while undercutting the preparation needed to become excellent doctors.

The traditional two years of pre-clinical education required to become a doctor has been significantly reduced at more than a third of medical schools. This gives short shrift to the foundational curriculum in genetics, biochemistry, biostatistics and epidemiology. A senior associate dean at

Rutgers told the American Medical Association in 2021, "It's better, to me, to shorten the foundational science curriculum." That leaves students with a diminished ability to understand medical literature and make health recommendations.

At 80% of M.D.-granting schools, the foundational courses in basic science and clinical skills are now graded pass/fail, discouraging the pursuit of excellence. The first part of the national licensure exam that determined residency placement has also been changed to pass/fail, further blurring the distinction between mediocre and excellent. Unsurprisingly, a growing number of medical students lack a strong grasp of basic medical knowledge.

At UCLA's David Geffen School of Medicine, according to reporting based on interviews with faculty members, more than 50% of students failed basic tests on family medicine, pediatrics and emergency medicine. Nationwide, the percentage of medical students who pass the first part of the licensure exam has fallen every year since 2020, dropping from 97% to 89% for students pursuing an M.D. Clinical skills have declined for years, made worse by DEI's distraction from clinical education.

Even liberal medical journals have begun to question the state of medical education. A 2025 New England Journal of Medicine article on the use of pass/fail in medical school asked, "Is 'Good Enough' Good Enough?" Yet the expert class still refuses to identify the ideological corruption of medical education.

Mr. Trump recognizes the problem. In April he signed an executive

order that called out the LCME by name. The committee responded by formally abandoning its diversity mandate.

Unfortunately, the LCME has kept a separate mandate that medical schools teach students to "recognize and appropriately address biases in themselves, in others, and in the health care delivery process." The committee is sponsored by the American Medical Association and

### The Trump administration should seek to establish an alternative accreditor for medical schools.

the Association of American Medical Colleges, both of which continue to champion DEI. Almost every medical school still promotes that ideology to the detriment of real medical expertise.

Mr. Trump's executive order directed the Education Department to consider revoking recognition of accreditors with DEI requirements, which could be used against the LCME. But the committee would still have leverage, since no future medical-school graduates could practice medicine without having gone to an accredited school. So instead, or in addition, the Trump administration should foster establishing an alternative accreditor—one that's freed from ideological control and committed to stronger educational standards.

A new accreditor can't be created out of thin air, but the Education De-

partment can solicit applications. Once a strong application comes through, due diligence could be performed and a new accreditor recognized.

States would have to recognize the new accreditor and instruct their medical licensing boards to recognize degrees from schools that use it. The medical licensing exam and graduate medical education programs would also have to acknowledge the new accreditor. Otherwise, graduates of medical schools using a new accreditor wouldn't be able to practice medicine except in limited circumstances. Federal and state authorities would have to exert pressure to secure these reforms.

The road forward is complicated but worth taking. Last year, Florida and five other states established the Commission for Public Higher Education to accredit their public university systems. It could add a medical school accreditation component. Florida's public medical schools are the best candidates for ditching the LCME. They've largely rejected DEI and embraced merit. That's exactly what a new accreditor should do—for the benefit of physicians, patients and public health.

Ultimately, this is about ensuring Americans have the best physicians providing the best care. DEI has distracted medical schools from their purpose, and while it's vital to cure the ideological disease, it's just as important to refocus medical education on its lifesaving mission.

*Dr. Goldfarb is chairman of Do No Harm and a former associate dean at the University of Pennsylvania Perelman School of Medicine.*

## THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

PUBLISHED SINCE 1889 BY DOW JONES & COMPANY

**Lachlan Murdoch**  
Executive Chairman, News Corp

**Rupert Murdoch**  
Chairman Emeritus, News Corp

**Emma Tucker**  
Editor in Chief

**Liz Harris**, Managing Editor  
**David Crow**, Deputy Editor in Chief  
**Aja Whitaker-Moore**, Deputy Editor in Chief  
**Sarah Ball**, Features; **Elena Cherney**, Senior Editor; **Dan Colarusso**, Business, Finance, Economics; **Chip Cummins**, News; **Taneth Evans**, Digital; **Gordon Fairclough**, World; **Alex Martin**, Print & Writing; **Bruce Orwall**, Enterprise; **Damian Paletta**, Washington; **Philana Patterson**, Audio; **Christopher S. Stewart**, Investigations; **Maral Usefi**, Video

**Paul A. Gigot**  
Editor of the Editorial Page  
**Gerard Baker**, Editor at Large

**Robert Thomson**  
Chief Executive Officer, News Corp

**Almar Latour**  
Chief Executive Officer and Publisher

DOW JONES MANAGEMENT:  
**Mae M. Cheng**, EVP, General Manager, Events and Luxury Portfolios; **Jason P. Conti**, General Counsel, Chief Compliance Officer; **Dianne DeSevo**, Chief People Officer; **Artem Fishman**, Chief Technology Officer; **Lisa Fitzpatrick**, General Manager, Dow Jones Industries; **M. Scott Havens**, Chief Growth Officer; **Dan Shar**, EVP, General Manager, Wealth & Investing; **Ashok Sinha**, Chief Communications Officer; **Josh Stinchcomb**, EVP & Chief Revenue Officer, WSJ | Barron's Group

EDITORIAL AND CORPORATE HEADQUARTERS:  
1211 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y., 10036  
Telephone 1-800-DOWJONES

DOW JONES | News Corp

# The FT View



**FINANCIAL TIMES**

"Without fear and without favour"

[ft.com/opinion](https://ft.com/opinion)

## Undermining democracy to promote Maga to the world

### America is adapting older tools to spread a cynical worldview

The job of US under-secretary of state for public diplomacy, created in 1999, was intended to shape foreign publics' understanding of America and what it stood for. For much of the past quarter-century, that meant democratic values. Today the same post, and US funding, are being used to promote the Maga worldview, support rightwing populist groups and oppose EU tech regulation.

As the FT has reported, the latest under-secretary, Sarah Rogers, met influential rightwing think-tanks during a December trip to Europe. Social media posts revealed that the former New York lawyer also met a lawmaker from Germany's far-right AfD. Rogers has spoken to senior figures in Nigel Farage's populist Reform UK about using a State Department fund to spread

the Trump administration's concept of US values. While older US democracy-promotion efforts in Europe mostly targeted the former communist bloc, an official said the new programme was likely to focus on London, Paris, Berlin and Brussels.

When JD Vance accused European leaders at the Munich Security Conference a year ago of running in fear from voters' real beliefs, suppressing speech and failing to curb immigration, it was unclear if the US vice-president intended just to provoke. But a new US national security strategy codified Vance's views, calling for "cultivating resistance" to a European path to potential "civilisational erasure". Funding populist rightwing groups and Rogers' activities seem part of that strategy.

Other parts of the Washington machine are pursuing a similar agenda. An interim report from the House Judiciary Committee last week alleged that the European Commission had conducted a "decade-long campaign" to

cancel free speech — including within the US itself. Brussels had used regulation such as the EU Digital Services Act to press US social media platforms to change their global content moderation, the report claimed. Its findings are intended to help shape legislative solutions to counter this "existential risk". In December, secretary of state Marco Rubio announced US visa bans on five high-profile Europeans that he called "agents of the global censorship-industrial complex", including former EU tech commissioner Thierry Breton.

Such steps dovetail, too, with the priorities of US tech billionaires close to the administration. Elon Musk has used his X platform to support far-right parties such as the AfD, and addressed a far-right rally in London. The Trump administration and Big Tech have moved beyond claiming that European regulation aims to throttle US companies to allege that the laws interfere in America's democratic affairs.

While rules are occasionally overzeal-

**European countries need to overcome fears of riling the White House and strengthen their defences**

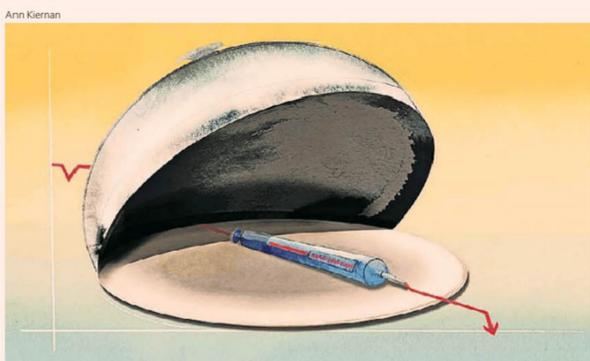
ously framed or enforced, EU and UK regulation rightly aims to provide protection against hate speech, misinformation and exploitation.

The worries the US proclaims about Europe form a distorted mirror image of exactly the concerns — over the undermining of the rule of law, free expression and democratic safeguards — that Europeans express, with far greater justification, about Trump's America.

European countries need to overcome fears of riling the White House and strengthen their defences. That means deploying against misinformation from US sources, initiatives first set up to counter "fake news" from Russia. They should boost their own tools for the promotion of democracy. Above all, as Canada's prime minister Mark Carney has argued, they need to club together with like-minded democracies. America is embracing an Orwellian definition of freedom. The rest of the west will survive only if it can muster the courage to defend freedom's true form.

## Opinion Health

### The slimming revolution as curves on a graph



Soumaya Keynes

Last summer I decided that I didn't want to buy a new and larger post-partum wardrobe, and so tried to lose some weight. It was utterly ghastly. I suffered from overwhelming brain fog, deafening "food noise", and mind-numbing tedium as I weighed out all my meals. So forgive me if I sound a little jealous as I engage in one more measurement exercise: where are we exactly in the weight-loss drug revolution?

For a start, it would help to know how many people are actually taking these GLP-1 drugs. According to the pollster Gallup, over the second and third quarters of 2025, roughly one in eight Americans were active users. In other countries where wallets — and waistlines — aren't quite as thick, that share is lower. According to the market research company Kantar, earlier

### There's no question that GLP-1 drugs can help you shed weight while you're on them

last year the share of British adults using the drugs was only 4 per cent.

There's no question that GLP-1 drugs can help you shed weight while you're on them. And since Americans both started off as heaviest, and adopted them earliest, it shouldn't be much of a surprise that as of December 2024, they were among the biggest losers, according to figures shared with me by Leigh O'Donnell of Kantar.

Those weight losses are among users. But are they big enough to make a dent in national obesity statistics? In England the answer is no, at least up to 2024. In the US, it's "maybe", depending on the source, and when exactly you reckon the revolution arrived. According to Gallup, obesity has fallen markedly since 2022; the health research company Epic Research finds that it has essentially plateaued since 2020; and according to the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey it may have peaked in the late 2010s.

If the results aren't more obvious, it could be because usage simply wasn't high enough up to the point at which we have decent data. That's probably what's going on in England, thanks partly to its relatively restrictive drugs regime. More generally, many people don't stick with the drugs once they start. According to one study, only

around 65 per cent of Americans prescribed GLP-1 drugs between 2016 and 2023 stuck with the treatment for at least three months.

As we get more data, and as treatments become better and cheaper, I suspect that the effects of these drugs will show up in the aggregate statistics more clearly. Until then, economists have been busy studying two more areas where the GLP-1 revolution is showing up: healthcare costs, and food spending.

The first was motivated by the hope that weight-loss drugs could pay for themselves. Obesity is expensive, as it raises the risk of heart attacks and other ailments. If GLP-1 drugs cut the risk of those catastrophic events enough, then those in charge of healthcare budgets should be investing big, not balking at the high cost.

But a study of GLP-1 users between 2016 and 2023 failed to find evidence of these cost savings. If anything, healthcare spending rose, as patients had to be monitored and the drugs' side effects managed. Admittedly, they only had five years of data, and two for the newest generation of semaglutide drugs. Still, they were sadly sceptical that the results would change dramatically, pointing out GLP-1 drug users in the wild tend to be healthier than clinical trial participants, reducing the scope for big savings.

Other studies find that GLP-1 users buy less food overall, particularly the ultra-processed sort. In Britain, it's worth putting the magnitudes in perspective. A survey by Kantar suggested that Brits on the drugs spend roughly 2 per cent less on groceries than non-users. So if 4 per cent of adults are spending 2 per cent less, that's a 0.08 per cent aggregate change, easily swamped by other shifts.

For individual companies, this might not be particularly soothing, particularly as GLP-1 prices plunge, new formulations reduce the side effects, and usage rises. How much they should worry depends on the effects of the drugs on taste for their products (crisp makers should face a crunch) and how diversified they are (alcohol sellers should feel anxious).

The better news for retailers is that GLP-1 users might be willing to pay more for their grub. One study found higher willingness to pay per pound of protein, to the tune of between 10 and 40 per cent, comparing users with otherwise similar non-users. And once people stop taking the drugs, their old desires return. One seems to come back stronger: former GLP-1 users see their demand for chocolate and candy 7 per cent higher than it was before the drug-taking. Perhaps, having slimmed down a bit, life tastes sweeter.

[soumaya.keynes@ft.com](mailto:soumaya.keynes@ft.com)

## Letters

### Private credit can ride out the tech storm

The Lex column on the "SaaSocalypse" ("Private equity's software bets are caught in the maelstrom", Lex, February 11) rightly highlights the valuation shock facing software-heavy private equity portfolios, but it risks overstating the implications for private credit.

For lenders active in European private markets, the disruption caused by artificial intelligence is neither especially new nor unpriced.

AI risk has been a core underwriting consideration since late 2022, particularly for software and technology businesses. With the

greater influence of AI, narrow tech solutions face genuine displacement risk, while broader platforms, so-called ERP cloud-based systems and bundled services that integrate AI are often net beneficiaries. Treating "software" as a monolith obscures this distinction.

Private credit's relative resilience also reflects the asset class's structure. Technology businesses typically carry the largest equity cushions in the market, offering meaningful downside protection even as enterprise value multiples compress. Private credit has both the flexibility and capital to support fundamentally sound

companies through periods of volatility.

AI will undoubtedly create further moments of market noise as the technology evolves. But for disciplined private lenders focused on cash flow durability rather than exit timing, the challenge is one of selectivity rather than systemic stress.

In that sense, today's repricing looks less like a reckoning for private credit and more like a long-anticipated sorting process.

**Nick Baldwin**  
Managing Director, Valuations & Opinions,  
Lincoln International, London WC2, UK

### Costa's 'masterclass in political rebranding'

António Costa's call for a "big bang" to ignite European competitiveness ("Europe needs a 'big bang' moment to boost growth, says António Costa", Interview, February 12) is a masterclass in political rebranding. While his rhetoric on slashing red tape is welcome, it stands in stark contrast to his record as Portugal's prime minister.

Costa warns against the "dead hand of national regulators", yet he presided over a decade of chronic indecision. A glaring example is the cancellation of critical water management infrastructure, such as the dams in the Mondego basin. These projects were sacrificed to appease his far-left parliamentary partners, leaving the region vulnerable. The devastating floods in Portugal that recently made European headlines are a direct consequence of the very "national inertia" and political hedging he now decries in Brussels.

Furthermore, his plea for companies to "scale up" globally rings hollow when one considers his interventionist stance on TAP Air Portugal.

While the rest of Europe moved towards market consolidation, Costa's government injected €3.2bn of taxpayer money to re-nationalise a legacy carrier, often clashing with the EU competition rules he now suggests reforming.

This, coupled with the decade-long paralysis over Lisbon's new airport, paints a picture of a leader who prioritised short-term political survival over strategic national interest.

The European Council may find Costa's pragmatism appealing, but European leaders should be wary. There is a profound gap between the "reformist" persona he projects in Brussels and the legacy of state interventionism and infrastructure neglect he left behind in Lisbon.

Europe needs a "big bang", but it requires architects who have proved they can build, not just those who excel at managing expectations while the foundation crumbles.

**Antonio Vieira Lima**  
Beja, Portugal

### How Carney channelled his inner Quintilian

Stephen Bush's column on the power of a good speech acknowledges that Mark Carney is not only a better central banker, political campaigner, prime minister and university ice hockey player than he is but your columnist is humble enough to admit he is probably a better writer too.

Bush speculates that Carney was himself the guiding hand behind "The Davos Speech 2026" and points out the Canadian prime minister's unique



career experiences were on display.

As Quintilian (Marcus Fabius Quintilianus), the Roman educator and rhetorician, guided: "The perfect orator is formed by education and experience."

It was perhaps his spell at Goldman Sachs that "educated" Carney to take informed, high-stakes risk for maximum impact.

As a central bank governor — most recently at the Bank of England — he knows how to articulate a robust independence of view without causing explicit offence and the need for balance in a message so as to not to rock global financial markets.

Finally, as a Canadian, he knows how to land a strong domestic message, while laying the ground for other international politicians to "break free" too.

So perhaps we can comfort ourselves that, with the same education and experience, the list of jobs that we are worse at than Carney would be a somewhat shorter list.

**Sonya Branch**  
London TW10, UK

### A valuable insight into why China backs Putin

Professor Eric Golson's letter from January 30 entitled "The scenario that economic warfare experts fear the most" was enlightening.

His assertion that China aids Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine in order to gain a foothold in the energy-rich regions of far-east Russia, and that prolonging the war will weaken Putin and thus China might move in, makes a lot of sense.

The chaotic nature of news is what makes the Letters section of the FT so valuable. We have access to ideas from distinguished thinkers that otherwise would be hidden. His letter was much appreciated.

**Jon Johannessen**  
Venice, CA, US

### An opportunity where AI, drones and satellites meet

John Gapper is right to ponder the costs of competing with European neighbours to establish a sovereign satellite launch capability (Opinion, February 11). The problem is that the UK risks entering the wrong race, for the wrong reasons.

As the war in Ukraine has demonstrated, the 21st-century battlefield is won through information advantage derived from satellites, drones and digital networks. This plays to the UK's genuine world-leading strengths in AI and data services.

Rather than trying to launch rockets — a crowded market where our allies already offer cost-effective capacity — the government should focus on procuring the downstream services that integrate these tools. There is a massive security benefit and a significant market opportunity at the intersection of drones, satellites and AI — in "downstream" integration. We should leave the heavy lifting to others and focus on the intelligence necessary for modern defence.

**Will Marshall**  
Co-founder & CEO, Planet,  
San Francisco, CA, US

### The case for taking direct equity stakes in companies

The new CBI president may not be convinced by the government's strategy of taking direct stakes in companies (Report, FT.com, February 11), but I am — provided the correct businesses are beneficiaries.

Kraken, the technology spinout from Octopus Energy that recently received a £25m investment from the British Business Bank, suffered from no obvious funding gap that this state institution is mandated to plug. The transaction did, however, signal that the government is open for business, supporting homegrown winners in a deliberate way that we have been allergic to for too long.

Many winners and potential winners populate the London stock markets but, for various reasons including an overweening regulatory regime, small-caps in particular suffer from low liquidity. A sustained intervention by the BBB, investing directly in some of these stocks, would jump-start growth and catalyse further investment.

Singapore's S\$5bn equity market development programme is not dissimilar. One year from launch, this initiative is already broadening market liquidity and improving price discovery for smaller companies. Despite familiar misgivings, the UK should be equally bold.

**James Ashton**  
Chief Executive, Quoted Companies Alliance, London EC1, UK

### Poland's education system

Your magazine piece on China's network of ultra-competitive high-school talent streams has been turning out the leading lights of science and tech (January 31) reminded me of the Polish education system.

While entrance to primary school is based on location — to ensure diversity between social classes, talents etc — admission to high school and university is merit-based. Most talented children from the best primary schools enter into the best classes in the best high schools and so on.

There are two pathways to enter high school and then university. One is similar to *gaokao*, China's feared college admissions exams. Poland has national exams both at the end of primary school and high school, with Polish, English and Maths being mandatory subjects. However, there is a parallel track of "Olympiads", organised at primary and high school levels. Those with the best scores — winning prizes at national level — get to choose any high school or university. Two of my daughters did just that, skipping the need for *gaokao*.

I was born in 1980, attending schools in Poland and then universities in the US and Italy. What struck me then was that the Polish system was very competitive. The paradox is that during communism, students were competing through their entire education (17 years to obtain master's degree) only to end up in a completely non-competitive system, which Poland and the whole Soviet bloc had until 1989. While studying in the US and Italy I observed the opposite was true. There, students spent their 17 years in a relatively non-competitive system, only to end up in a fully competitive situation — ie the capitalist economy.

China seems to have created a competitive system from cradle to grave. One starts in a fully competitive education system to end up in a fully competitive economy. The results are for all of us to see.

**Pawel Konzal**  
Warsaw, Poland

### America is not, and never was, a socialist country

I couldn't agree more with Rana Foroohar in her column ("Trump is the wrong answer to right questions", Opinion, January 26).

However, if by stating that Democrats need to reclaim their populist tradition, she means the embrace of socialism, which is where the party seems to be headed, they will never be successful in winning national elections. The US is not, and never was, a socialist country. Quoting Elizabeth Warren, of all people, kind of gives the plot away.

**David Spirakis**  
Venice, CA, US

### It looks like these turkeys are voting for Christmas

The latest British Social Attitudes survey has shown that a record 19 per cent of the public favour reducing taxes and spending less on health, education and social welfare ("Record share of public wants to see cuts in tax and spending", Report, February 10).

This outcome might be viewed as surprising when considering that approximately one-third of adults do not pay income tax, and half receive more in benefits than they pay in taxes.

Normally, turkeys do not vote for Christmas.  
**David Starkie**  
Andover, Hampshire, UK

Email: [letters.editor@ft.com](mailto:letters.editor@ft.com)  
Include daytime telephone number and full address  
Corrections: [corrections@ft.com](mailto:corrections@ft.com)  
If you are not satisfied with the FT's response to your complaint, you can appeal to the FT Editorial Complaints Commissioner: [complaints.commissioner@ft.com](mailto:complaints.commissioner@ft.com)

## Opinion

## The exorbitant privilege of the US brain gain is fading

## TECHNOLOGY

John Thornhill



One of the not-so-secret ingredients of Silicon Valley's success is that the US has for decades been running a flourishing brain import business.

From Hungarian-born Andy Grove, the late chief executive of Intel who built the world's biggest semiconductor company, to the Taiwanese-born Jensen Huang, the co-founder of Nvidia (which has now overtaken Intel), thousands of immigrants have driven and enriched the US tech industry.

Some 44 per cent of the 1,078 founders who created a US tech start-up valued at more than \$1bn between 1997 and 2019 were born outside the country, according to a Stanford Graduate School of Business study. The top five grey mat-

ter exporters to the US were India, Israel, Canada, the UK and China.

To a lesser extent, the US tech sector has also been in the brain re-export business, sowing its magic beans around the world. Over the past decades, thousands of foreign-born researchers and entrepreneurs have returned home and have had a huge impact on developing the tech industries in their native countries.

Perhaps the most notorious returnee was Qian Xuesen, the Hangzhou-born Caltech professor who was deported from the US in 1955 during the anti-communist hysteria of the Red Scare. On returning to China, Qian masterminded the Dongfeng ballistic missile programme, becoming the "father of Chinese rocketry".

In the 1980s, the Taiwanese poached the Chinese-born electrical engineer Morris Chang from the US to help develop the country's semiconductor industry. Chang founded TSMC, which has become the world's leading chip manufacturer.

This century, many thousands of Chinese-born researchers and entrepreneurs have been encouraged to return

home armed with US credentials, contacts and start-up playbooks. One of the most successful of these sea turtles, as they are called, is Robin Li, co-founder of the multinational technology giant Baidu.

A similar pattern has been observable in India, albeit to a lesser degree. But, intriguingly, the success of these so-

**India's homegrown heroes are now outpacing the prodigal sons returning after a stint in Silicon Valley**

called boomerang entrepreneurs now appears to be falling short.

New research on 596 high-tech start-ups founded in India between 2016 and 2023 reveals that those created by purely domestic teams outperformed those launched by returnee entrepreneurs in terms of funding, valuation and revenue. "The results are largely unexpected," the report's four authors candidly conclude.

India's homegrown heroes are now outpacing India's prodigal sons, as the authors put it. The currency of time spent at Stanford University or Google in the US has been devalued.

The explanations for this reversal are not definitive. But the supposition is that it is because networks are increasingly digital, venture capital funding is now global and tech skills are more easily transferable.

India's domestic tech ecosystem has now matured sufficiently to enable local founders, embedded in domestic markets, institutions and networks, to flourish without returnee expertise, write Vivek Wadhwa, AnnaLee Saxenian, DPK Muthukumaraswamy and MH Bala Subrahmanya. The liability of localness has flipped into the liability of foreignness.

The report's findings are somewhat galling for Wadhwa for two reasons. First, they contradict some of his earlier research on the advantages of "brain circulation" he conducted as a US academic with Saxenian, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley. Second, the Delhi-born Wadhwa is himself

a boomerang entrepreneur, having returned to India to build a biotech start-up, Vionix Biosciences.

"The locals do better than we do," jokes Wadhwa. "When it comes to core entrepreneurship, the foreign advantage doesn't exist."

If these research findings are matched in other countries — and Wadhwa strongly suspects they would be — then this may have big implications for investors and policymakers around the world.

Most importantly, it means countries should do everything they can to retain their best homegrown entrepreneurs. This is especially true in India, which has the world's largest diaspora of 35m people, many of them boasting STEM qualifications.

The other big factor is clearly that the US has become a lot less welcoming to foreign workers. If the best foreign entrepreneurs conclude they are better off staying at home anyway, the exorbitant privilege of the US brain gain will fade.

[john.thornhill@ft.com](mailto:john.thornhill@ft.com)

## Labour has become devoid of purpose

Sharon Graham

By the turn of the 20th century, the trade unions in Britain had decided that they needed a political voice. And so the Labour Party was born. It was built to ensure that the workers had an organisation that would fight for a better deal, and when a Labour government came to power, deliver on that. But the shame and shambles of recent weeks, coupled with the lack of change over the past 18 months, has shown those ideals have been corrupted, most likely irretrievably.

My union, Unite, is historically the biggest affiliate to Labour and still its biggest union funder. If that were not the case, and if a Labour agent arrived tomorrow at our Holborn HQ inviting us to affiliate, we would say "No thanks". We would tell the messenger we need a Labour government that shakes the pillars of the status quo so everyday people are better off. Clearly this government doesn't do that. And without a clear change in policies, who the leader is won't matter.

Since the New Labour takeover of the 1990s, the Labour Party has become rootless and devoid of purpose. The pendulum has swung wildly depending upon which faction is in charge. There is no soul, just warring tribes and power struggles. There is nothing that holds it together other than the electoral system and dislike of the Tory party. As time moves on, it seems inevitable that it will become further disconnected from any central purpose — even more hollowed out. It's already a family heirloom that no one really wants to keep.

Next year, Unite's conference will con-

**There is nothing that holds the party together other than the electoral system and dislike of the Tories**

## Starmers critics prefer to live in Little England

## POLITICS

Philip Stephens



Well, no one promised a quiet life. Keir Starmer's week started with the threat of a Labour coup to replace him as prime minister. It ends at the Munich Security Conference, as European leaders struggle to shore up the continent's security against a US president tearing down the postwar international order and a Russian leader waging war against Ukraine.

Starmer's counterparts in Berlin, Paris and beyond are baffled by his political troubles. The question they ask comes in two parts. What on earth has he done to provoke such a backlash within the Labour Party? And how is it, in a world so imperilled by Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin, that his internal critics are so relaxed about triggering fresh instability? Surely Labour learnt something from the change-the-leader psychodramas that felled the Conservatives?

In other European capitals, the picture is of a prime minister who looked set to make the UK an anchor of stability in a sea of political upheaval. France's Emmanuel Macron is hanging on by his fingernails. Likewise Spain's Pedro Sánchez. Friedrich Merz's Berlin coal-

ition looks anxiously over its shoulder at the advance of the Alternative for Germany. Starmer, by contrast, sits on a seemingly impregnable parliamentary majority with three-and-a-bit-years of breathing space before the election.

Beleaguered as he is at home, the prime minister has won plaudits abroad for his approach to the global tumult threatening Europe's and Britain's security. He has made a start on rebuilding the bridges blown up by Boris Johnson and the Tory Brexiters when Britain left the EU. All sides agree that striking a new bargain with the EU27 will be a bumpy process. But Johnson's grandiloquent nonsense about "global Britain" has been consigned to the dustbin. Starmer understands that British and European security and prosperity are indivisible.

Talk to officials in Berlin and the message is that Anglo-German co-operation is strong. On the big judgments — Trump, Putin, China, the Middle East — Starmer and Merz are as one. Views of the British in Paris will never be quite so unvarnished but, yes, you hear diplomats say, Macron and Starmer trust each other. And the Franco-German-British troika is the foundation of European efforts, so far successful, to check Trump's inclination to grab Greenland from Denmark or hand victory to Putin in Ukraine.

Starmer's government has indeed stumbled at home. It was unprepared for power. It underestimated the fiscal squeeze needed to deal with the unsustainable levels of borrowing and debt



Ellie Foreman-Peck

left by the outgoing Conservatives. It had not thought through how to deliver a pledge to rein in unauthorised migration. Starmer and chancellor Rachel Reeves have made a series of unforced errors on tax and spending. Most recently, the appointment of Peter Mandelson as ambassador to Washington in spite of his known ties to Jeffrey Epstein was a grave mistake.

His party critics would add that Starmer, a lawyer by training who came late to parliament, has failed to command the political stage. In an age where "storytelling" is deemed the sine qua non of effective political communication, he has struggled to find a narrative.

Such criticisms cannot be brushed aside. Where the prime minister's European colleagues have cause for confu-

**Their indifference to anything happening beyond the Channel is depressing**

sion is that, given the dire inheritance from the Conservatives, it is hard to see how Starmer's mis-steps justify the inevitable instability that would follow the defenestration of a sitting prime minister. The more so since no would-be successor is proposing anything resembling a radical change of course.

Wes Streeting, the health secretary and favourite of the party's centrists, wants a faster pace of "modernisation" of public services and a more coherent strategy to promote economic growth. The left-leaning Angela Rayner and Andy Burnham say they would build more public housing and adopt a softer stance towards welfare. These are shifts in tone. A new leader would face the same real-world constraints on borrowing and debt. None of the candidates is calling for a big increase in taxes to pay for more public spending.

In truth, Starmer's problems have little to do with ideology. The rebellion among backbench MPs is being driven by opinion polls. Labour's standing is just about as low as it has ever been and lags well behind Nigel Farage's Reform

UK. Labour promised change and the electorate's present judgment is that it has failed to deliver it.

There was a time when a 10-point deficit in the polls some three years out from a general election would have been regarded as unfortunate but readily recoverable. But we live in an age of impatience — voters are unhappy, Starmer has not worked, so let's try someone else. Never mind that a fight for the leadership would leave the party badly divided.

As for the seeming indifference to anything happening beyond the Channel, what's depressing is that it is real rather than apparent. Brexit, Covid, Putin and Trump might have been adequate testimony to the extent that Britain's fortunes are shaped abroad. Yet neither Streeting, Rayner, Burnham nor rebellious MPs have as much as nodded to the epochal challenges to Britain's security. Starmer's party has long prided itself on its internationalism. Now, it seems, Labour prefers to live in Little England.

The writer is an FT contributing editor

## Decision to sell Schroders is wrenching but inevitable

Philip Augar

worked at Schroders in the 1990s and was closely involved in the sale of the investment bank to Citigroup in 2000. It was a hard-headed business decision by the board and the Schroder family, who control the company, but I could see at first hand the angst it caused everyone close to it.

The decision to sell the remaining asset management business for £9.9bn to the US-based Nuveen, part of Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association of America, must have involved a similarly difficult reckoning.

The old Schroders was a business with a heart and soul. It had a culture deeply rooted in the City of London. There was a staff canteen. Bruno Schroder, the patriarch, would often join us there for a self-service lunch. Although there were outside shareholders, the family still owned its controlling interest and it felt like a

family business. Letting go was difficult for everyone despite the money on the table but there was a strategic view that it was the right time to sell. In the end, there was no room for sentiment.

It was another chapter in the progressive demise of London's independent investment banks and the replacement of old City values — not all of which were admirable — with what was sometimes characterised as harder-charging Wall Street practices. I wrote about it in my first book *The Death of Gentlemenly Capitalism*. Reading today about the proposed sale of Schroders, by now a pure asset management business, I wonder if we are seeing history repeat itself.

There are similarities. As before, this will not have been an easy decision for the Schroder family. Family board representation is through Claire Fitzalan Howard and Leonie Schroder: both are descendants of John Henry Schroder, co-founder of the Schroders business in 1804. Their fathers were closely involved in the business and there is a sense in which they are selling the family birthright. I do not know either personally but I would be surprised if these

considerations have not weighed on them over the past few weeks.

But just as with the sale of the investment bank, there are industry trends in asset management that are hard to resist. Whereas it was the demand for capital in investment banking that led to that decision to sell in 2000, in asset management the threat of index-tracking asset managers, the rise of private markets and the transformative

**Just as with the sale of its investment bank, there are trends in asset management that are hard to resist**

threat of AI are a challenge to Schroders' existing business model. It has tried to keep up with these trends but some of its acquisitions, for example in private equity, look poorly timed and the scale required to compete in the new world is daunting.

And as before, it's another American buying up a venerable City institution.

Nuveen is a very different style of institution to Sandy Weill's Citigroup and is not much larger than Schroders, with assets under management of \$1.4tn compared with £824bn for the UK manager. But it is hard to ignore the domicile of Schroders' new prospective owner. Active fund management at scale is at risk of becoming a US-dominated industry in just the same way that investment banking did at the end of the last century. Yet again, Schroders is just another brick in the wall.

This matters for the status of the City, just as did the sale of the investment bank. Assuming it goes ahead, the London Stock Exchange would lose a prominent listing. Both companies say that London would have the combined group's largest office and that the Schroders brand would be retained. But while Schroders would exist as an identifiable London entity, it would not be the seat of power in the combined business. That's what happens if you sell to a foreign business.

Beyond nostalgia, does any of this matter? The sale of the investment bank worked out well for the acquiring share-

holders and for most of the Schroders staff who went across to Citigroup. The selling shareholders, both family and institutional, also felt happy with that deal — the way the industry shaped up would have made it hard for Schroders to compete without complete restructuring. The City had long since gone American and survived the loss of its independent merchant banks.

I have a feeling, and I sincerely hope, that the same will prove to be true of the latest proposed deal. The die has already been cast in the direction of US domination of the financial services industry. The City of London has a role to play in a hub-and-spoke model centred on New York and a vital role to play as Europe's financial services capital. An independent Schroders could have been a part of that. But irresistible trends in the asset management industry, just as in investment banking a quarter of a century ago, make the decision to sell inevitable.

The author has written several books about the City and Wall Street and is a former investment banker

sider our current affiliation to the Labour Party; the mood music right now is to depart. The questions being asked are: what is Labour for and who is it for?

The disgrace of the Mandelson affair will only increase the despair. It symbolises how Labour now stands with the elites in the UK and beyond. It's another sign of how the party has changed. Peter Mandelson was not leaking secrets to Jeffrey Epstein about a better deal for workers but a better deal for the elites — for City bankers.

But the other outrage is how this dreadful debacle has plunged us into a debate dominated by personalities and not policies. It is action that is crucial, not just the leader. That is merely a cherry on top. This has been forgotten by the Labour Party.

At the start of this week, unity around Starmer seemed to have broken out. It will prove to be a delusion. If the government does not understand that it is real change, and real Labour, that ordinary people want, then the rot will continue.

Rachel Reeves' Budget spoke volumes. No vision. It delivered for the bond markets and once again for the bankers, while increasing stealth taxes for millions of workers. The Treasury seems mesmerised by so-called fiscal rules — as British industry is left to wither on the vine and our public services face austerity by another name.

The Treasury tells us that we can't afford investment to save our critical infrastructure — that would jeopardise our fiscal rules. And so, reducing the debt we hold as a percentage of GDP goes before building British industry and our public services. Would we ever have had an NHS if the 1945 Labour government had adopted this worship of fiscal rules? Labour appears to now be Labour in name only.

Whatever the future holds, it seems inevitable that there will be further fundamental shifts in our politics. The collection of parties that broadly adhered to neoliberal policies for decades has failed to deliver on the expectations that they set in the giddy 1990s. An entire generation is left with their aspirations spurned. Overpromising and underdelivering has been the name of the game. Everyday people always pay the price and that is now writ large.

If Labour fails to grasp that basic point and doesn't move decisively to change course, it will be swept away on the tides of history and trade unions will chart their own course.

The writer is general secretary of the Unite union

مَنْ لَمْ يَصْبِرْ عَلَى الْبَلَاءِ، لَمْ يَرْصُ بِالْقَضَاءِ  
(من الموال العرب)

**YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB**  
*He who does not endure hardship will not accept fate's decree.*  
An Arab maxim

# Opinion

## Saudi Arabia's AI moment

DR. AZEEM IBRAHIM



Dr. Azeem Ibrahim is the director of special initiatives at the Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy in Washington. X: @AzeemIbrahim

For full version, log on to [www.arabnews.com/opinion](http://www.arabnews.com/opinion)

For the past two years, the global conversation on artificial intelligence has been framed almost entirely as a duel between the US and China. Europe, meanwhile, has cast itself as referee, debating guardrails, ethics and regulatory frameworks while struggling to convert process into capability. Lost in this binary is a more consequential development. Saudi Arabia is executing one of the most ambitious national AI strategies in the world — and doing so at scale. This is not rhetoric. It is infrastructure, capital, talent and governance moving in concert. While many advanced economies are still arguing about how to regulate AI, Saudi Arabia is building the physical, human and institutional foundations needed to deploy it across an entire society. Nowhere is this clearer than in human capital. In late 2024, the Kingdom launched the "One Million Saudis in AI" initiative, an effort to rapidly build AI literacy and

capability across the workforce. Within a year, more than 1.2 million Saudis completed certified AI training, exceeding the original three-year target. This is not about producing elite researchers overnight. It is about creating a society that can absorb, deploy and adapt AI across sectors, from healthcare to logistics to public administration. Infrastructure is the second pillar. Generative AI is not constrained by ideas but by compute, energy and data. Saudi Arabia has all three. Over the past two years, the Kingdom has seen an unprecedented build-out of cloud and data center capacity. As of 2025, the Kingdom had built more than 30 data centers, with dozens more under development, adding over a gigawatt of IT capacity. This is where Saudi Arabia's energy advantage becomes strategic. As AI workloads become increasingly energy-intensive, access to abundant low-cost power is no longer peripheral. It is

decisive. The Kingdom's ability to pair hyperscale compute with reliable energy, including solar, gives it leverage that few countries possess. As PIF officials have noted, AI consumes energy and Saudi Arabia is a global energy leader. Capital completes the triangle. The PIF, now managing more than \$900 billion in assets, has made AI a priority investment theme. Plans for a \$40 billion global AI investment fund signal Saudi Arabia's intent not merely to import technology but to shape the ecosystem by backing chips, data centers and frontier startups. The contrast with Europe is stark. While the EU leads on AI regulation, it lags on compute, talent mobilization and large-scale deployment. Decision-making is fragmented, investment cautious and timelines slow. Saudi Arabia, by contrast, is pursuing a whole-of-nation approach, with centralized strategy, rapid execution and a willingness to place big bets. This is not about bypassing ethics or governance

— Saudi officials actively participate in global AI governance discussions. It is about sequencing, with capability first and guardrails alongside, not paralysis before progress. None of this guarantees success. Execution risk remains high. Talent depth, global competition and the challenge of translating state-led investment into private sector innovation will test the model. But the direction of travel is clear. Saudi Arabia is not trying to out-Silicon Valley Silicon Valley or to replicate China's techno-state. It is carving out a third path: a capital-rich, energy-powered, strategically governed AI ecosystem focused on scale, language and applied impact. As the world fixates on Washington and Beijing, it is easy to miss this quiet reordering. Yet, by the end of this decade, the question may no longer be whether Saudi Arabia is an AI player, but whether global AI governance, standards and markets can be shaped without it.

**The Kingdom's ability to pair hyperscale compute with reliable energy gives it leverage that few countries possess**



**The rise of alternative suppliers has tempted some countries to consider new alliances in pursuit of diversification**

## MENA's defense diversification and autonomy challenge

ZAID M. BELBAGI



Zaid M. Belbagi is a political commentator and an adviser to private clients between London and the Gulf Cooperation Council. X: @Moulay\_Zaid

For full version, log on to [www.arabnews.com/opinion](http://www.arabnews.com/opinion)

As countries across the Middle East and North Africa region increasingly seek strategic autonomy, a delicate balance must be struck between enhancing local production capabilities and engaging in international partnerships. As regional militaries gathered for the World Defense Show in Riyadh this week, it was clear that dependence on foreign powers, especially in sectors critical to their security and technological future, was the ultimate strategic priority. This drive is often coupled with a desire to diversify partners, with some turning toward emerging industry players like China and Russia. However, while such diversification may appear to offer new opportunities, it carries significant risks that could affect these nations' long-term autonomy and security. Historically, MENA countries have forged close partnerships with Western nations, particularly the US, the UK and European

NATO members. These long-standing ties have been foundational in shaping the region's security architecture. In addition to military hardware, these partnerships provide training, doctrine and access to advanced software. However, the rise of alternative suppliers to MENA defense markets has tempted some countries to consider new alliances in pursuit of diversification. These countries present an alternative to traditional Western suppliers, with their offerings often marketed as cheaper, faster to procure and politically more flexible. However, financial savings often come with hidden dependencies. Chinese and Russian defense systems tend to use proprietary software and encryption, making it difficult for local authorities to perform necessary upgrades or maintenance. Moreover, the lack of transparency in how data is handled and the risk of backdoors being built into the systems pose a serious cybersecurity threat. Another significant risk is the lack of genuine technology

transfer and integration expertise. These challenges are not just affecting the choice of international partners, they also have tangible implications for local production strategies in the region. Strategic autonomy is not achieved through simple diversification of suppliers, but through the ability to integrate and maintain control over the systems that drive a country's defense and technological infrastructure. The push for local production, as seen in Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, is essential for achieving strategic autonomy. However, this autonomy can only be realized if local production efforts preserve interoperability with existing Western technologies. Similarly, Morocco's adoption of local defense manufacturing initiatives, including the establishment of Tata Advanced Systems Maroc and partnerships with Turkish and Israeli firms, signals the importance of building domestic capabilities while still maintaining compatibility with existing international standards. To preserve the benefits of these

partnerships, regional countries must structure their contracts in a way that allows for knowledge transfer, sustainable capability growth and long-term collaboration. As such, the quest for autonomy is not just about diversifying international partnerships, but about carefully selecting those that strengthen, rather than compromise, long-term goals. Diversification of international partnerships may seem like a viable path to strategic autonomy, but MENA countries must be cautious of the risks associated with Chinese and Russian systems. To achieve true strategic autonomy, the region's countries must prioritize partnerships that preserve interoperability with existing Western systems, ensure access to continuous upgrades and training, and protect against cyber and data risks. By focusing on partnerships that build local capacity within proven, interoperable systems, they can secure their autonomy without sacrificing long-term stability and security.

## Opinion

## A strategic shift in the global race to the moon

KHALED ABOU ZAHR

The global race to the moon just got a little more interesting. Elon Musk this week announced on X that SpaceX is shifting its focus from Mars to building a "self-growing" city on the moon. In his post, he explained that a lunar base could be achieved in under 10 years, whereas going to Mars would take more than 20 years. We must remember that, when founding SpaceX 25 years ago, Musk's stated goal was to extend human life to Mars.

Why is this meaningful? 2025 witnessed a new record for orbital launches. SpaceX, with its Falcon 9 launch vehicle, holds an 82 percent share of the commercial market. SpaceX last year flew 165 missions, more than the rest of the world combined. But the global increase was also driven by China, which conducted 93 orbital launches. There is hence growing competition between the US and China, and Beijing has announced its goal to settle the moon. This is an important element in Musk's shift.

The space landscape is also transforming. SpaceX's foundation and early growth were

built on massive US government support. However, Musk recently stated that NASA contracts will make up only about 5 percent of SpaceX's revenue this year and that Starlink represents the future of its income.

The strategic shift toward commercial services, as stated by Musk, even though government funding remains important, becomes reality with the project to build settlements on the moon. Musk's growing focus on artificial intelligence and large-scale computing infrastructure is reshaping his space ambitions. With SpaceX and xAI now merged, orbital data centers and massive energy systems in space are becoming key elements. The moon, with its low gravity and oxygen potentially accessible from its rocks, is better suited to industrial-scale construction than Mars.

What is being witnessed is the birth of the orbital, or in-orbit, economy. This means we are at the dawn of a new age for space business and geopolitics. The moon is becoming a source of geopolitical competition, as countries and companies race to control satellites, orbital infrastructure and emerging space businesses.

The moon is poised to play a critical



Khaled Abu Zahr is the founder of SpaceQuest Ventures, a space-focused investment platform. He is CEO of EurabiaMedia and editor of Al-Watan Al-Arabi.

For full version, log on to [www.arabnews.com/opinion](http://www.arabnews.com/opinion)

role in the development of the orbital economy, serving as a source of strategic resources and a hub for space operations. The moon can enable cheaper satellite launches, orbital servicing and deep-space missions. It could also host research facilities, manufacturing platforms and logistics hubs that support activities in Earth orbit and beyond. Control over lunar locations, resources and infrastructure is becoming a key element of geopolitical competition, especially between China and the US.

So, US federal investment returning to the moon under the Artemis program represents an interesting opportunity. The Artemis mission is aimed at a sustainable human presence and it has been estimated to have already cost about \$93 billion. NASA Administrator Jared Isaacman has confirmed that the US aims to return to the moon during President Donald Trump's second term.

Isaacman has often highlighted the opportunities on the moon, such as building bases, mining helium-3 for fusion power and investing in nuclear propulsion. NASA is collaborating with SpaceX, Blue Origin and Boeing under the

Artemis program, funded by \$9.9 billion from Trump's One Big Beautiful Bill Act. Private companies are directly helping the US secure a foothold and gain defense, strategic and commercial advantages.

What sets the US apart from China is this unique ecosystem, in which private enterprise thrives alongside government support — a spirit that has allowed SpaceX to grow and innovate rapidly.

Even when initially fueled by government budgets, I believe that private sector competition tends to yield better results than a purely government-led and executed approach. A clear example of this dynamic is Blue Origin, which has begun making tangible progress with its New Glenn rocket and is going all in on lunar exploration. The company is developing crewed lunar systems that may not require orbital refueling, raising the possibility that Blue Origin could land humans on the moon before SpaceX.

Just as the US once expanded westward through a mix of government support and private enterprise, today a new race to the moon is unfolding with the same competitive spirit and the supreme goal of keeping America in the lead.

**There is growing competition between the US and China, and Beijing has announced its goal to settle the moon**

**Musk's growing focus on AI and large-scale computing infrastructure is reshaping his space ambitions**

## Why Middle East's CEOs are backing their own markets

DR. MAJID RAFIZADEH

Across much of the Western world, economic narratives have become increasingly cautious. Rising public debt and slowing productivity are eroding the chances of medium-term growth in several advanced economies.

In Europe in particular, economic optimism has given way to domestic introspection, with a growing recognition that sustained growth will remain elusive without deep structural reforms and a reset of national economic strategies. Business confidence across the Middle East, meanwhile, is at a record high. Almost nine in 10 regional CEOs expressed "exceptional confidence" in economic growth within their own territories, according to PwC's latest annual "Global CEO Survey," which was published last month. In the Gulf, CEOs are even more bullish, with 93 percent confident that growth would continue at pace over the near to medium term.

The Middle East is no longer simply an attractive destination for global capital, it is an increasingly important contributor to global growth. And the contrast with many

European economies is now hard to ignore. What sets the Middle East apart, particularly the Gulf countries, is the scale of ambition of national economic strategies and the speed with which they are being executed relative to their peers.

Both the UAE and Saudi Arabia rank among the world's top 10 destinations for international investment, according to PwC. They are also both guided by state-led agendas focused on the development and

facilitation of the technologies that are expected to drive the next wave of global economic transformation.

Artificial intelligence sits at the heart of these plans, with increased investment in the development of AI infrastructure seen as critical.

A separate PwC survey published in December showed that the Middle East is seeing a higher rate of AI integration into business practices than the global average. Seventy-five percent of the region's employees are using AI tools at work, compared to an average of 69 percent worldwide.

What this has created across the Middle East is an ecosystem that retains capital and compounds its own momentum. Ambition fuels ambition and regional economies are



Dr. Majid Rafizadeh is a Harvard-educated Iranian-American political scientist. [X: @Dr\\_Rafizadeh](https://x.com/Dr_Rafizadeh)

For full version, log on to [www.arabnews.com/opinion](http://www.arabnews.com/opinion)

beginning to benefit from that dynamic.

The effects on capital markets are becoming clearer, with technology and AI driving increasing activity. Mergers and acquisitions activity in the Middle East saw a rise of 19 percent in the first half of 2025 — a trend that is set to continue, as 72 percent of Gulf CEOs say they are planning a major acquisition in the next three years. Initial public offering markets have also strengthened. Saudi Arabia raised \$4.1 billion through listings in 2025, while the Muscat Securities Market recorded a 28.1 percent year-on-year gain.

The Gulf is also emerging as a significant anchor for global venture capital flows. It is competing more directly with the traditional hubs in the US and Europe. Venture capital funding in the Middle East reached record levels in 2025, with \$3.8 billion raised for the region's expanding startup ecosystem.

Careem, Noon and fintech platforms like Tamara suggest the Gulf is not just home to new companies but increasingly competitive ones. A top-down culture of consistent regulation and business-friendly economic frameworks is attracting companies and

capital to the region. Fundamentally, capital follows consistent execution.

While 57 percent of CEOs did express concern about the region's geopolitical situation, the prevailing narrative remains one of economic momentum tempered by risk awareness.

The contrast between the European and Middle Eastern narratives is clear. Allianz Trade predicts that European growth will be "weak" and limited to between 1 percent and 2 percent in 2026. The Gulf, by contrast, is expected to expand its collective gross domestic product by an average of 4.5 percent.

PwC's survey is also telling in this regard. Seventy-two percent of Middle Eastern CEOs planned investments outside their home countries are set to stay within the regional market, while only 6 percent of outbound investment will go to Western Europe.

What PwC's survey reveals is that the Middle East's economic story has captured the attention of investors through a combination of ambition, execution and policy clarity. That combination helps explain why the Middle East is emerging as one of the world's major economic hubs.

**What sets the Middle East apart, particularly the Gulf countries, is the scale of ambition of national economic strategies**

**What this has created across the region is an ecosystem that retains capital and compounds its own momentum**

**srmg**  
Saudi Research & Media Group

Established in 1987 by  
Prince Ahmad bin Salman bin Abdulaziz

CEO  
Jomana Raahid Alraahid

**ARAB NEWS**  
is a daily international newspaper published by the  
SAUDI RESEARCH & PUBLISHING COMPANY

Founded in 1975 by  
Hisham & Muhammad Ali Hafiz

Editor-in-Chief  
Faisal J. Abbas

Deputy Editor-in-Chief  
Noor Osama Nugall

ARAB NEWS WELCOMES  
FEEDBACK FROM READERS

Letters sent from within the Kingdom should include the writer's name, address, phone and ID numbers. E-mails from readers abroad should include a name and city. Letters should be mailed to P.O. Box 478, Riyadh 11411, Saudi Arabia. Tel: +966112128000 • Fax: +966114418071 • E-mail: [general@arabnews.com](mailto:general@arabnews.com)

EDITORIAL: [general@arabnews.com](mailto:general@arabnews.com)  
MARKETING: [marketing@arabnews.com](mailto:marketing@arabnews.com)

TOLL FREE NUMBER: 8002440076

PRINTED AT: HALA PRINTING CO., RIYADH

Bahrain 200 Fils; Iran 200 R; Egypt LE 3;  
India 12 Rs; Indonesia 2000 R; Japan 250 Y;  
Jordan 250 Fils; Kuwait 200 Fils; Lebanon 1000

L; Morocco 2 D; Oman 200 P; Pakistan 10 Rs;  
Philippines 25 P; Qatar 2 QR; Singapore \$3; Syria  
20 L; Thailand 40 BHT; UAE 2 AED; UK 50 P; US  
\$1.50; Republic of Yemen R 50; Sudan 25 P.

SRPC AND AFFILIATED AGENCIES

JEDDAH: Tel: (966-12)283-0200, Fax: (966-12)283-6228. RIYADH: Tel: (966-11)212-8000, Fax: (966-11)442-9094. DAMMAM: Tel: (966-13)835-3838, Fax: (966-13)834-0489. ABU DHABI: Tel: (971-2)681-5999, Fax: (971-2)681-7595. CAIRO: Tel: (202-3)749-2775, (202-3)749-2996, (202-3)338-8654, Fax: (202-3)749-2884, (202-3)749-2855. MOROCCO: Tel: (212-537)262-616, Fax: (212-537)683-919. JORDAN: Tel: (962-6)553-7101, (962-6)551-7102, (962-6)553-9409, Fax: (962-6)553-7103. LONDON: Tel: (44-20)7631-8181, Fax: (44-20)7631-2310.

ADVERTISING:  
SAUDI RESEARCH AND MEDIA GROUP  
KSA: +966-11-294 0500  
UAE: +971 4 3918500  
E-mail: [revenue@srmg.com](mailto:revenue@srmg.com)  
Website: [www.srmg.com](http://www.srmg.com)

DISTRIBUTION AGENT  
TOLL FREE: (866)800-244-0076  
Head Office: (Riyadh): P.O. Box 82116, Riyadh 11585  
Tel: (966-11)4419933, Fax: (966-11)2121774  
E-mail: [info@saudi-distribution.com](mailto:info@saudi-distribution.com)  
Western Region: Tel: (866-12)653-0909  
Eastern Region: Tel: (866-13)847-3569  
Southern Region: Tel: (866-17)221-8693  
Northern Region: Tel: (866-16)324-3070  
Dubai: Tel: (971-4)381-6503, Fax: (971-4)381-6354  
Abu Dhabi: Tel: (971-2)673-3555, Fax: (971-2)673-3384  
Kuwait: Tel: (965)483-4822, Fax: (965)483-4719  
Manama: Tel: (973-17)61770

SUBSCRIPTION  
Head Office: (Riyadh):  
P.O. Box 22304, Riyadh 11495  
Tel: (966-11)4419933 Fax: (966-11)4429555  
TOLL FREE: +866-800-244-0076  
Email: [info@arabmediaco.com](mailto:info@arabmediaco.com)  
Web: [www.arabmediaco.com](http://www.arabmediaco.com)

PRINTING CENTER  
Riyadh: P.O. Box 212  
Riyadh 11383, Tel: (966-11)2657000  
Fax: (966-11)2658000  
Sales: Tel: (966-11)4708807  
Fax: (966-11)4708526  
[www.halaprintpack.com](http://www.halaprintpack.com)

DISCLAIMER  
Views expressed by writers  
in this section are their  
own and do not necessarily  
reflect Arab News' point of view.